NO DEMOCRACY IN QUALITY: ANSEL ADAMS, BEAUMONT AND NANCY NEWHALL, AND THE FOUNDING OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degreed at the University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

In 1940 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, (MoMA) became the first major American art museum to establish a curatorial department dedicated exclusively to photography. From the perspective of the photographers, curators, and critics who had sought institutional legitimacy for the medium, the founding of the Department of Photographs was a watershed event, marking the moment when photography finally came to be recognized as a museum subject equal to painting and sculpture. Although the department has since had a pervasive influence on the field and on the history of photography, surprisingly little scholarship has addressed its contentious formation. This dissertation seeks to fill this significant gap in the literature by examining the department's inception and the six years Beaumont Newhall served as its curator.

Of particular concern are the ideological battles waged over how photography would be presented at MoMA by Newhall, his wife Nancy—who served as acting curator when her husband enlisted in the army during World War II—and the department's co-founder and key advisor, Ansel Adams. As acolytes of the photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz, who himself had long fought for the recognition of photography as a medium of art, the Newhalls and Adams took aesthetic quality as their guiding metric, asserting that in order to raise the profile of photographers, educate the public, and improve standards of taste, the museum should show only the very best work ever created—the "heavy cream" of photographic production. Their vision for photography at the museum was counterbalanced by that of the photographer Edward Steichen and many prominent writers and critics, who argued that MoMA should treat photography as a

broad-ranging cultural phenomenon and means of communication, rather than merely as a medium of self expression. The debate between these two camps illustrates the considerable philosophical, interpretive, and museological challenges raised by photography's introduction into the museum, issues that remain as contentious as ever.

INTRODUCTION

In 1940 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, (hereafter MoMA) became the first major American art museum to establish a curatorial department dedicated exclusively to photography. From the perspective of the photographers, critics, and curators who had sought institutional legitimacy for the medium, the founding of MoMA's Department of Photographs was a watershed event, marking the moment when photography finally came to be recognized as a museum subject alongside painting and sculpture. Under its first curator, Beaumont Newhall, the department established a curatorial model based largely upon accepted principles of art history that has widely influenced museological practice and provided the foundation for the academic study of the history of photography.[1] The department would later become the most influential institution in the field, acting as what Christopher Phillips, glossing Walter Benjamin, would dub the "judgment seat of photography," the medium's ultimate arbiter of taste.[2]

Considering the department's pervasive influence and the fact that its founding is widely regarded as a seminal event in the history of photography, it is surprising that its origins and early years have to date been the subject of only summary research and analysis. This dissertation seeks to fill this significant gap in the literature by examining

[1] Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October* 22 (Fall 1982): 27-63

[2] Ibid., 21. Phillips writes: "To a remarkable degree, the program of nearly thirty exhibitions mounted by the MoMA Department of Photography from 1940-47 anticipates what has emerged in the last decade as the standard practice of other American museums. The exhibitions centered on historical surveys…the canonization of masters…and the promotion of selected younger photographers." Douglas Nickel similarly contends that Newhall's book, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*—an exhibition catalogue that was reissued as a comprehensive history of the medium the year before the department was founded—is the "English-language text that has shaped thinking on the subject more permanently than any other." Nickel, "The History of Photography: The State of Research," *The Art Bulletin* LXXXIII, no. 3 (September 2001), 550.

the history of the department's inception and the six years Beaumont Newhall served as its curator. Of particular concern are the ideological battles waged over how photography would be presented at MoMA by Newhall, his wife, Nancy—who served as acting curator when her husband enlisted in the Army during World War II—and the department's co-founder and key advisor, Ansel Adams.

From the start, photography's integration into the museum was fraught with conflict. Acolytes of Alfred Stieglitz, who himself had long fought for the recognition of photography as a medium of art, Adams and the Newhalls espoused an exhibition philosophy that privileged the expressive over the vernacular. Taking aesthetic quality as their guiding metric, they asserted that in order to raise the profile of photographers, educate the public, and improve standards of taste, the museum should show only the very best work ever created—-the "heavy cream" of photographic production.[3] Their plan to show only this select body of work sparked debate among critics, both within and outside the institution, who held, conversely, that the museum should show all kinds of photographs, and not just those that could be labeled "expressive" or "creative," terms often used by the Newhalls and Adams to characterize aesthetically superior works. In imposing this qualitative system they sought to assert the medium's parity with painting, yet their detractors argued that the two genres were fundamentally incomparable, insisting that photography was not simply a fine art, but also a multifarious and popular means of communication that should be treated in all its diversity at the museum.

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[3] "From the Birdie's Nest," *Time* (January 6, 1941), 32. In this anonymous article about the founding of the department, the author stated that Newhall planned to show the "heavy cream of camera craft." Using the same metaphor, Adams wrote to Stieglitz that same year: "it is high time that the cream of photography in this country be put together as some sort of bulwark against the rising tide of baloney." Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, April 13, 1940, Center for Creative Photography (CCP)/Ansel Adams Archive (AAA).

The history of the founding of MoMA's department of photographs is of contemporary relevance because the semantic, ontological, taxonomic, and museological debates in which the Newhalls and Adams found themselves embroiled seventy years ago continue to challenge curators and art historians today. In particular, the story of the department's early years illustrates the difficulty of squaring the history of photography with a traditional history of art, a problem that has been a focus of extensive scholarship in recent decades.[4] It has been widely observed that photography's history does not map neatly onto the history of art, and that its inclusion in a museum organized around traditional principles of art history thus poses thorny curatorial and philosophical questions, including: How is photography best presented in a museum? Which types of photographs are appropriate for exhibition in a museum of modern art? Can the history of a medium with such diverse applications be properly addressed in a museum context? Does the museum model allow for an adequate accounting of photography's unique history? Adams and the Newhalls were the first to address these complicated issues, and the solutions they proposed have influenced the manner in which photographs have been exhibited at museums ever since. It is therefore worth critically analyzing their tenure at MoMA.

Although the Newhalls were responsible for the day-to-day operation of the department and deserve most of the credit for its myriad early achievements, Adams was their primary advisor, and his philosophy on photography and its relationship to modern

[4] Examples include Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," *Parachute* 22 (Spring 1981): 8-12; Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985): 131-150; and the various essays by Abigail Solomon-Godeau anthologized in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

art was central to the department's mission. More importantly, perhaps, he acted as a lightning rod in the broader cultural debates concerning photography, attracting attention for his outspoken opinions about the nature of the medium and its place in the museum. The contentious role he played both within and outside the museum in the department's early years is a primary focus of this dissertation.

Despite Adams's great fame he has only rarely been the subject of critical study. Speaking to the reasons behind the paucity of scholarly inquiry into Adams' career, Andy Grunberg wrote in his 1993 introduction to *Ansel Adams: New Light*:

> [t]he visibility and celebrity of Ansel Adams and his work have largely served to ward off scholarly inquiry into his achievements…there remains a glaring disparity between the public adulation of his work and the apparently benign neglect of his career by many of today's active scholars and critics.[5]

With some exceptions, the tentative steps taken in *New Light* have been followed by little research that challenges established accounts of the photographer's life and career.[6] Adams himself is largely responsible for this lack of critical inquiry; through careful maintenance of his image, he determined during his life how he would be represented, and since his death his advocates have assiduously continued to promote his legacy on those same terms.

This dissertation offers a new contribution to Adams scholarship by undertaking a careful analysis of Adams's views on photography within the context of arguments made by his contemporaries. My aim here is not to debunk or discredit the version of Adams's

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[5] Andy Grundberg, in Robert Dawson, ed., *Ansel Adams, New Light: Essays on His Legacy and Legend* (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1993), 5.

[6] Exceptions include Anne Hamond's *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and Rebecca Senf's recent dissertation "Ansel Adams's 'Practical Modernism" (Boston University, 2008).

biography established during his lifetime, but to approach his career from a different angle, analyzing and contextualizing the ideological motivations behind his work as curator and promoter of photography. I explore how his desire for artistic recognition and the institutional legitimacy of his chosen medium drove Adams to become involved at MoMA, and consider his aims in relation to larger cultural trends in the period. Seeing photography as a means of visual expression, and considering himself an artist, Adams fought to ensure that his work and that of his peers would be recognized at the museum alongside that of artists working in more traditional media. His resolve was counterbalanced by the equally firm convictions of the photographer Edward Steichen and many prominent writers and critics, who emphasized that MoMA should treat photography as a broad-ranging cultural phenomenon and means of communication, rather than merely as a medium of art. As we will see, the Department of Photographs at MoMA became the physical and symbolic site of this debate.

Although photography's disputed place in the museum has been a central topic in academic studies of the medium undertaken in recent decades, with much of the literature focusing on MoMA's role in photography's institutionalization, most critics and scholars have neglected earlier periods and concerned themselves exclusively with the tenure of John Szarkowski, who became director of the department in 1962. In the 1980s and 90s, the department was the emblematic battleground in a struggle that eventually led to calls for the radical realignment of the study of the history of the medium. Critics such as Rosalind Krauss, Christopher Phillips, Douglas Crimp, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and others assailed Szarkowski for his formalist approach, charging that by considering only

the aesthetic components of photographs, and not their intended social function, the curator leveled any cultural distinctions between them. To this way of thinking, they argued, snapshots and survey photographs made in the nineteenth century speak the same visual language as photographs by self-proclaimed artists such as Stieglitz, Walker Evans, and Man Ray. This dissertation demonstrates that such criticism of the application of formalist art history to photography actually originated around the department's founding under Newhall, and establishes that the postmodern critique of the department under Szarkowski had clear and largely unacknowledged antecedents in the 1940s.

The department's founding itself has been the subject of little critical treatment in the literature. Most accounts have been first-person narratives, such as the one included in Beaumont Newhall's memoir, *Focus: A Life in Photography*. In it, Newhall provides a useful outline of events, and excerpts of correspondence in which he, his wife Nancy, and Adams discuss the business of the department and their struggles with their critics. Adams's autobiography likewise covers the founding of the department, but only superficially.[7] Conger Goodyear's *The Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years* helpfully situates the inauguration of the department within the history of the museum's early years. Russell Lynes's unofficial history of MoMA, *Good Old Modern*, provides details missing from the first-hand accounts of Newhall and Adams, and instructively treats the internal politics that directly affected their tenure at the museum.[8]

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[7] Beaumont Newhall, *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1993). Ansel Adams, *Autobiography* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1985).

[8] See Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), and Conger Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943).

The only comprehensive account of the department's origins is contained in a two-part biography of Adams written by Nancy Newhall. The first volume, *The Eloquent Light*, recounts Adams's life until 1938, detailing his relationship with his mentor, Stieglitz, and the years before the department was formed.[9] The second volume, provisionally titled *The Enduring Moment*, contains the only complete chronological record of the department's history. Although the manuscript was never completed, fragments of a draft are held in the Nancy Newhall Collection at the Center for Creative Photography. In concert with the voluminous extant correspondence exchanged amongst the primary actors in this story, Newhall's draft provided the narrative scaffolding for this project.

Most critical essays that address the founding of MoMA's photography department have done so primarily in the context of assessing Newhall's famous survey exhibition *Photography 1839–1937*—the first large scale presentation of photography at MoMA—and its impact on subsequent histories of the medium. Notable examples include Douglas Nickel's "History of Photography: State of the Research" (2001), Marta Braun's "A History of the History of Photography" (1980), and Mary Warner Marien's "What Shall We Tell the Children: Photography and its Text (Books)" (1986).[10] The most comprehensive analysis of the department's import to the larger history of the medium is to be found in Christopher Phillips's "The Judgment Seat of Photography" (1982), a study to which this dissertation owes a great debt. Phillips argues that the

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[9] Nancy Newhall, *An Eloquent Light* (New York: Aperture, 1980).

[10] Marta Braun, "A History of the History of Photography," *Obscura* (Winter 1981): 24-7. Mary Warner Marien, "What Shall We Tell the Children? Photography and Its Text (Books)," *Afterimage* 13, no. 9 (April 1986): 4-7. Nickel, "The History of Photography: The State of Research," *The Art Bulletin* LXXXIII, no. 3 (September 2001), 550.

Department of Photographs at MoMA is significant to the history of the medium because it was the primary site for the institutionalization of photography, its "transformation… into a museum art."[11] He contends that in their efforts to assimilate photography into modern art and make it a viable museum subject, the Newhalls, Adams, and MoMA's director, Alfred Barr, divested it of its use value and potential to disrupt conventional notions of art, investing it instead with "what Walter Benjamin called the 'aura' of traditional art."[12] Phillips emphasizes the significance of Newhall's *Photography 1839–1937,* using it to illuminate the department's efforts to contruct a history of the medium along traditional art historical lines.[13] Like many other postmodern critiques of the department's curatorial practices, Phillips's study bemoans the department's legacy of decontexualization, of ignoring the intended social function of photographs in favor of presenting them as purely aesthetic objects. Although this curatorial tendency famously reached its zenith at the museum under the auspices of John Szarkowski, Phillips rightly contends that Newhall and Adams had actually established it when the department was founded.

My concerns here are rather more local than Phillips's. His study is a metahistory that compares and contrasts the department's production during the tenures of its first three curators: Newhall, Edward Steichen, and Szarkowski. In order to synthesize more than forty years of curatorial history in twenty-three pages, his treatment of that history is necessarily summary. For example, he alludes to but does not directly address the

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[11] Phillips, 17.
[12] Ibid., 16-42.
[13] Ibid., 20.

ideological and political disconnect between the strategy Newhall and Adams developed for the department and the approach to the medium promoted by others at the museum as well as significant figures in the larger world of photography, a subject I explore here in depth. Further, in service of his argument Phillips tends to elide the museological strategy employed by MoMA's director, Alfred Barr, with that of Newhall and Adams. In the following chapters I will demonstrate that in fact the approach espoused by the Newhalls and Adams conflicted not only with Barr's plans for the medium but also with contemporary trends in photography and, most importantly, with the agenda of the museum's Board of Trustees.

As the secondary literature on the subject is sparse, this project has largely been dependent on archival research, which was aided considerably by the fact that the main actors in this story were avid letter writers who took pains to preserve their correspondence for posterity. Although I have relied on first-hand accounts to piece together the outline of the narrative, I have remained cognizant throughout my research of the hazards of depending on primary sources, sensitive to bias as well as to intentional and unintentional omission. Primary sources were found in the papers of Ansel Adams, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, Willard Van Dyke, and Edward Weston housed at the Center for Creative Photography; the papers of Beaumont Newhall, Alfred Barr, and James Soby in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art—as well as in the extensive curatorial and registration records held there; the Beaumont and Nancy Newhall papers at the Getty Research Institute; and the Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe archive at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. These collections contain vast amounts of related

correspondence and institutional documents that together reveal the largely untold story of the transformation of photography into a museum subject.

My study begins with an analysis of Ansel Adams's attempts in the mid-1930s to define what "expressive photography" is. This definition is key to comprehending his involvement in the founding of the Department of Photographs at MoMA, as his efforts to equate "straight" photography with modern art are directly related to his desire to determine which types of photographs would be exhibited at the museum, and which would not. Chapter One surveys the history of the idea of "straight" photography as defined by figures ranging from Peter Henry Emerson to the Stieglitz circle to Adams, and examines the semantic and philosophical contortions required to differentiate expressive photography from other uses of the medium. Drawing on Adams's exchanges in the journal *Camera Craft* with pictorialist photographer William Mortensen, this section deconstructs Adams's motivations for restricting the scope of what should be considered "art" in photography.

Before he met Adams, Newhall's curatorial tendencies were rather less Stieglitzian than they would later become. For instance, when he organized *Photography 1839–1937*, the first large-scale exhibition of photography at MoMA, Newhall approached photography as a broad cultural practice, rather than simply as an expressive art. Chapter Two looks at exhibitions of photography produced in New England by Newhall's classmates from Harvard, particularly Julien Levy and Lincoln Kirstein, examining how Newhall's 1937 exhibition reflected previously established curatorial trends inspired by the model of the Bauhaus. It also establishes a baseline from which to

determine how Newhall's approach to the medium changed as he began to work with Adams.

Following Stieglitz's lead, Adams rejected calls from his Depression-era peers to use photography to promote a social agenda. Holding firm to his conviction that art and propaganda shouldn't mix, Adams refrained from creating work with an explicit political message, choosing instead to use photography as a means of personal expression. An exploration of Adams's concerns about propaganda and documentary photography is critical to understanding his agenda for the department at MoMA. The analysis in Chapter Three provides background for discussion in subsequent chapters of the political minefields Adams and the Newhalls were forced to negotiate at the museum during World War II.

Chapter Four recounts the story of the founding of the department, situating it within the larger history of the museum, and relating it to Alfred Stieglitz's fight for the recognition of photography as an expressive art. It details the quest of three Stieglitz acolytes, Adams, Newhall, and Rockefeller heir and MoMA Trustee David McAlpin, to secure the philosophies of their mentor as the founding principles of the department. As it involves many of the most significant figures in American photography of the period, including Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Newhall, Adams, Walker Evans, Edward Steichen, and László Moholy-Nagy, the narrative provides a compelling frame for the analysis of the ideological debates that surrounded the institutionalization of photography in the 1930s and 40s.

If the founding of the department had not coincided with America's entry into World War II, the complement of exhibitions produced by the Newhalls and Adams at MoMA would certainly have been different. As the museum became what Russell Lynes has dubbed a "minor war industry," however, the founders of the department were forced to compromise their ideals in order to accommodate the institution's wartime mandate. [14] As a result, Adams began to reconsider his previously unwavering stance against using his work for political ends, and experimented with documentary photography. Chapter Five recounts the efforts made by Adams and the Newhalls to balance their desire to maintain high aesthetic standards with the imperative to satisfy the museum's appeals for war-related exhibitions.

When Beaumont Newhall enlisted in the Army, his wife Nancy became acting curator. Working closely with Adams, she strove to further the agenda they had collectively established for the department. Despite the fact that Nancy Newhall was curator for almost as many years as her husband was, and organized some of the most important exhibitions mounted by the department in its early years—including retrospectives of the work of Paul Strand and Edward Weston—her contribution to the department and the history of photography has been largely overlooked in the literature. Chapter Six takes steps toward redressing this lack by analyzing her tenure as curator. Also considered here is the brief period in which Willard "Herc" Morgan served as director of the department, with particular attention to the failure of his efforts to broaden

[14] Lynes, 237.

the museum's purview to include photographs made by amateurs, exemplified by an exhibition of snapshots he organized in 1944.

After several failed attempts to attach himself to a military unit or to otherwise meaningfully contribute his photographic skills to the war effort, Adams accepted an offer to photograph the Japanese American internees at the Manzanar relocation camp in California's Owens Valley. The photographs in the resulting book, *Born Free and Equal*, and the exhibition at MoMA, *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams of Loyal Japanese American Relocation,* represent a major stylistic and philosophical departure from the work for which Adams is best known. Chapter Seven investigates the photographer's rationale for abandoning his previous stance against political engagement, and situates his efforts within the context of MoMA's war efforts.

Upon returning to his job at the museum, Beaumont Newhall had great expectations for the future of photography at MoMA. He planned to one day assume the directorship of the department, to perhaps join the Museum's Board of Trustees, and to continue to promote the work of expressive photographers, such as Adams, by organizing major retrospective exhibitions of their work. Mere months after his return, however, these aspirations were irrevocably dashed. When Edward Steichen was asked to become director of the department, Newhall resigned, asserting that he could not work under a man whose views on photography were so patently antithetical to his own. Chapter Eight looks at how popularizing pressures finally pushed the Newhalls and Adams out of MoMA, and how the illustrative and communicative use of photography became the new focus of the department.

The fact that elements of the curatorial model the Newhalls and Adams established seventy years ago has remained the museum norm alone makes it worth investigating its origins and ideological underpinnings. But what makes their efforts at MoMA especially relevant today is that the considerable philosophical, interpretive, and museological challenges with which they grappled while advocating for photography's inclusion in a museum of modern art are as contentious as ever. Photography remains, as it was from the start, an awkward fit in the museum, and its place there is still the focus of considerable disagreement. Reconciling the medium's unruly identity and history with the traditional history of art and the attendant aims of an art museum continues to pose philosophical problems for museum curators and academics alike, who will likely see their own experiences and struggles mirrored in the story of MoMA's early years.

CHAPTER ONE

"STRAIGHT" IS AN ATTITUDE: ANSEL ADAMS AND PHOTOGRAPHY AS MODERN ART

> "If 'f/64' means a pedagogic inflexible system of thought and action, then I am through with it completely. But if it signifies an *attitude* towards a clean, straightforward approach to photography, I am all for it. The latter is what it was supposed to be, but a lot of people are trying to break it down into a mere technical aspect habit."
>
> –Ansel Adams, letter to *Camera Craft*, January 1940[15]

> "The curious thing is that photographers of every kind, from the veriest amateur to the most highly skilled professional, accept the word ''straight'' as describing a particular *attitude*, yet almost no one if challenged could give an acceptable definition of the concept."
>
> –Berenice Abbott, *A Guide to Better Photography,* 1941[16]

In the decade leading up to the founding of the Department of Photographs at MoMA, Ansel Adams expended considerable energy attempting to define and categorize what he called "straight" or "pure" photography—terms he used interchangeably—in order to set this category apart from other uses of the medium, and to elevate it to the status of an expressive art alongside painting.[17] This chapter explores what "straight" signified for Adams, why its definition was of such importance to him, and how it relates to his quest for the recognition of photography as a legitimate museum subject. While

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[15] Ansel Adams, "Letter to the Editor," *Camera Craft* XLVII no. 1 (January 1940), 44.
[16] Berenice Abbott, *A Guide to Better Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1941), 158.
[17] Adams does not use "straight" until mid-1934, preferring "pure" instead. He uses the terms interchangeably in the late thirties, and then abandons "pure" altogether. Members of the Stieglitz circle used both words as well. For purposes of clarity I use the term "straight" throughout this dissertation to denote the kind of photography Adams advocated. Straight became, and continues to be, the preferred term.

Adams considered straight photography to be synonymous with modern art, he characterized its antithesis, Pictorialism, as lowbrow, popular art, or kitsch. The maintenance of a dichotomy between fine and popular art was key to Adams's philosophy throughout his life, but in the 1930s and 1940s in particular, the separation of art photography from other uses of the medium was central to his writing, exhibition philosophy, and photographic practice. It is the ethic upon which he and Beaumont Newhall established the Department of Photographs at the Museum of Modern Art, and, as will become clear, it is the position that eventually doomed their tenure there.

By the 1930s, "straight" had become a general term denoting a type of photography that involved minimal darkroom manipulation and handwork, as exemplified by the contact print. It also signified an aesthetic apart from the stylistic tradition of Pictorialism. Proponents claimed that straight photographs embraced the mechanical nature of the camera and eschewed the imitation of painting or other media, using terms like "clean" and "direct" to describe it, and disparaging Pictorialism with opposing characterizations such as "muddy," "fuzzy," and "sticky." Straight photography was seen as a reaction to the supposedly baroque excesses of Pictorialism, a return to a "truer," more "pure" and "photographic" use of the medium. Clearly glossing Strand, Berenice Abbott wrote of this type of photography:

> It affirms again, as history and tradition do, the essential photogenic quality of photography and calls for the use of the medium without the perversion of its true character. [18]

[18] Abbott, 161.

Pictorialism, Abbott implies, was a bastardization of the medium, which cloaked photographs in ink and gum in order to pass them off as something they weren't, namely, paintings. Straight photography, on the other hand, strips away all that is not essentially "photographic," and embraces the true nature of the medium. Abbott invokes history to suggest that straight photography was in line with a long tradition that Pictorialism subverted, a return to a pure and classical use of the medium, a reformist mode of photographic production. Though derived from ideas first articulated by the Photo-Secession, Abbott's views, shared by Adams and many contemporary practitioners of straight photography, are not generic to photography, but mirror many of the dominant tenets of modernism in circulation in the period. Truth to medium and the embrace of first principles, which Abbott and others advocated for photography, were common to many modernist strains of thought articulated in the 1920s and 30s.

Where Pictorialism was seen as a vestige of Victorian romanticism or symbolism, a relic from a past age, straight photography was considered contemporary, of the moment. Most photographers equated straight with "modern." The term had multiple, and sometimes conflicting, usages, however, complicating any simple or single definition. Although straight photography was generally considered modern, in the sense that it was of the moment, it was not always "modernist," in the sense that it adhered to theories of modern art. To confuse matters, in terms of technique, any kind of photograph, be it a commercial portrait, a document of a crime scene, a newspaper photograph, a photomicrograph, or a snapshot, could be characterized as straight, so long as the negative and print were not obviously manipulated in the darkroom.

For the small cohort of photographers who considered themselves modern artists equal to their peers working in traditional media, however, the application of modernist principles to the practice of straight photography—which included a variety of differing styles—signaled membership in the ranks of modern art. Their straight photographs were more than just snapshots, or "modernistic" advertising photography. For those photographers with high art ambitions, "straight" denoted a philosophical position, or an "attitude," as Adams termed it, rather than defining a specific aesthetic.[19] In order to distinguish their work from Pictorialism, the dominant genre of "art" photography, these photographers felt that straight photographs had to be demonstrably technically different, signaling their philosophically disparate approach to the medium.

Adams's theory of straight photography, which he began articulating in print in the early 1930s, is a third-generation pastiche of photographic theories, some originally conceived in the 1880s. Adams was something of a theoretical *bricoleur*, what Mary Warner Marien characterizes as a "sequential borrower."[20] As other historians have previously established, Adams appropriated ideas from various sources, the most significant of which for the purposes here are Peter Henry Emerson, Alfred Steiglitz and his circle, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston.[21] The details of how and when Adams became aware of the writings of these other photographers have been well documented in the literature, and are largely irrelevant to the concerns here. Instead, this chapter

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[19] Photographers as diverse as Walker Evans, Alexander Rodchenko, László Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Berenice Abbott, Dorothea Lange, and Ralph Steiner were all considered "straight" photographers.
[20] See Mary Warner Marien, *Photography and Its Critics: A Cultural History 1839-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 151.
[21] In particular, see the essays in Therese Heyman, ed., *Seeing Straight*: *The f.64 Revolution in Photography* (Oakland, CA: The Oakland Museum, 1992), and Anne Hammond, "Ansel Adams and Objectivity: Making a Photograph with Group f64," *History of Photography 22*, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 169–178.

considers how these earlier photographers characterized the relationship between straight photography and modern art, and, ultimately, how their ideas shaped Adams's thinking and guided his efforts at MoMA.

Peter Henry Emerson

Several central tenets of Adams's philosophy of straight photography appear to originate with the British photographer Peter Henry Emerson, who was active at the end of the nineteenth century. Assessing Adams's true debt to Emerson is complicated by the fact that later photographers and historians adopted Emerson as a progenitor of the straight school, much as they had Eugène Atget, Mathew Brady, and Timothy O'Sullivan.[22] As Bonnie Yochelson notes, Emerson's significance to that movement is often exaggerated, and it is difficult to disentangle his theories from their interpretation by sympathetic scholars, as most histories of photography written between the 1930s and 80s have had a straight bias.[23] Contrary to the contentions of many prominent historians of photography, including Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, Yochelson argues that when it comes to technique there is in fact no direct ancestral line connecting Emerson to Steiglitz to Adams, and that Emerson's theory of "pure" photography "played no part" in the straight movement begun by Stieglitz.[24] Although I concur with Yochelson that

[22] For an elaboration on the problematic adoption of Timothy O'Sullivan and Eugene Atget as forefathers of photographic modernism, see Rosalind Krauss "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in Richard Bolton, ed*., The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989): 287–299.

[23] Bonnie Yochelson, "Peter Henry Emerson: An Art Historical Study of a Victorian Photographer*"* (PhD diss., New York University, 1985), 4-6. She names Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, Helmut Gernsheim, Richard Wood, and Peter Turner as examples of historians who have reductively characterized Emerson's work as a precursor to "straight" photography.

[24] Ibid., 9. Yochelson contends that Emerson's theory of "pure" photography was not, as it often has been portrayed by historians, "the rallying cry of a new aesthetics," but instead, "the signal of his lost faith in

Emerson cannot rightly be considered the first straight photographer, I would argue that when it comes to what Adams termed "attitude"—the defining characteristic of straight photography, and the basis for its high art aspirations—there is, indeed, a theoretical continuity linking the three generations.

Whether Adams read Emerson in the early 1930s is not documented. As he never mentions Emerson by name, it is most likely that he absorbed the Englishman's ideas secondhand through the many books, articles and essays written by members of the Steiglitz circle who had earlier appropriated them, rather than from Emerson's own writings.[25] However he acquired them, Adams shared three significant beliefs with Emerson: that photography could be an expressive medium equivalent to painting, that art photography was of a different class from the "vulgar" productions of popular photographers, and that photography could be equivalent to modern art. Although Emerson and Adams share little commonality in style or subject matter, and Emerson never used the term "straight," what is germane to this inquiry are the ideological similarities of their respective theories about photography's relationship to modern art, and not the specifics of their stylistic and technical differences.

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photography as an art." Her dissertation was the first work on Emerson that attempted to overcome the "straight" bias that caused many historians to overlook the discrepancies between Emerson's theories and those of later "straight" photographers.

[25] Adams likely read essays published in *Camera Work* by Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Marius De Zayas, Charles Caffin, and Sadakichi Hartmann that referred to and appropriated ideas from Emerson. When he first visited New York in 1933, Stieglitz gave him several issues of the magazine, as well as *The Letters of John Marin*, to take back to San Francisco (see Adams to Stieglitz, June 22, 1933, as published in Mary Street Alinder and Andrea Gray Stillman, eds., *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images* (Boston: Little Brown, 1988), 51. Adams wrote to Stieglitz on July 6, 1933, that he owned numbers 25, 34-5, 36, 42-3 (which included De Zayas' essay "Photography and Artistic Photography") and 49-50 (the last issue, which featured Strand). There were certainly many sets of *Camera Work* in the Bay Area, and it is likely that Adams had access to at least one complete set through Albert Bender, William Dassonville, Edward Weston, or some other contact.

A prolific polemicist in British photographic circles in the 1880s and 90s, Emerson argued his theory of "naturalistic photography" in a vituperative debate in the specialized press with Henry Peach Robinson, a highly respected photographer and author.[26] Strangely, at a time when photography's status as fine art was disputed by the likes of James McNeill Whistler, Charles Baudelaire, and John Ruskin, Emerson and Robinson did not present a united front against the many detractors of their chosen medium. Rather, they waged petty battles against one another in photographic journals, often elevating fine stylistic differences to near life-or-death matters. Adams and his nemesis, William Mortensen, would later do the same.

While both Emerson and Robinson advocated for what is now known as "truth to material" or "medium specificity"—emphasis of the supposedly essential characteristics of a particular medium or material, rather than the imitation of those of another—Emerson and Robinson disagreed as to which qualities one ought to hold true.[27] Robinson argued it was sharpness of focus and the resulting acuteness of detail that set photography apart from other media and defined what was essentially photographic. He further contended that composite printing techniques and any variety of darkroom

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[26] Articles by Emerson and Robinson appeared in various publications, including: *The Journal of the Photographic Society, The Photographic News, The British Journal of Photography, The Amateur Photographer, The International Annual of Anthony's Photographic Bulletin*, and *The Photographic Journal.*

[27] Before Clement Greenberg articulated the modernist concern for "medium specificity" in "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), "truth to material" was a rallying cry of nineteenth-century design reformists such as John Ruskin, William Morris, and Richard Redgrave. See E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 37. There can be little doubt that both Emerson and Robinson read Ruskin *et al*, despite the reservations these authors had about photography. Jan Baetens and Heidi Peeters note that "controversies on medium specificity are as old as modern Western art: from the Renaissance 'paragone' discussion…to Clement Greenberg's Hegelian speculations on painting and sculpture in the heyday of abstract expressionism…" Baetens and Peeters, "Hybridity: The Reverse of Photographic Medium Specificity?" *History of Photography* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 4.

manipulation that would ensure a better end product were legitimate uses of the medium.[28] For Emerson, on the other hand, whose theory of "differential focus" was based on Hermann von Helmholtz's contemporary findings in optical physiology, staying true to the medium entailed the emulation of what the human eye actually sees, a field which is not everywhere in perfect focus.[29] Hence, Emerson's photographs tend to be in sharp focus at the center of the composition and more diffusely focused at the edges. More importantly for later straight photographers who adopted him as a forefather, Emerson argued that most composite printing and other extreme forms of darkroom manipulation were "un-photographic," and further that only straight prints—contact prints made directly from the negative—were true to the medium's essential qualities.[30]

In a review of Emerson's *Naturalistic Photography* (1889), Robinson rebutted his theory of differential focus, contending that human beings do in fact see an entire scene in focus, and that Emerson "willfully ignores the fact that the eye changes its focus so automatically and instantaneously to adapt itself to vision that we are not conscious of it."[31] In a letter to the editor of *The Photographic News*, Emerson, who was trained as a medical doctor, snappily rejoined, "Indeed! And when did the critic become an authority

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[28] H.P. Robinson, "Fog or Focus?" *The International Annual of Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (1889), 196.

[29] P.H. Emerson, *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (New York: Amphoto, 1972), 97. Mary Warner Marien contends that Emerson has an almost semiotic understanding of the nature of vision. "Relying on Helmholtz, Emerson attempted to disprove the idea that art was simply a transcription of physical reality in the way that camera vision was thought to be. The work of art should aspire to be a translation of optical impressions. In a remarkably postmodern passage, Emerson concluded that 'the human eye does not see nature exactly as she is, but sees instead a number of signs which represent nature, signs which the eye grows accustomed to, and which from habit we call nature herself.'" Marien, *Photography and Its Critics*, 149-50.

[30] Emerson, *Naturalistic Photography*, 197-9. Emerson allows for printing in clouds: "if well done, a true impression of the scene is rendered." Combination printing as practiced by Oscar Gustave Rejlander, however, he characterized as "the art of the opera bouffe."

[31] Emerson, "Dr. Emerson's 'Naturalistic Photography,'" *The Photographic News* (June 7, 1889), 380.

on physiology?"[32] In a characteristically petulant and mean-spirited retort, Emerson pilloried Robinson for his supposed ignorance and simple-mindedness, particularly when it came to science, writing "he seems incapable of understanding anything out of the beaten track," and, "so imperfectly educated does this reviewer appear to be, that he sees no difference between principles and rules."[33] The younger photographer accused Robinson of being unaware of contemporary trends not only in science but also in art, contending "the superior tone of this reviewer is a huge joke when you consider the ignorance he displays of all the aims and workings of modern art."[34]

Fancying himself an educated, modern gentleman, Emerson looked down his nose at Robinson, whom he characterized as an old man with old-fashioned ideas, someone out of step with current intellectual discourse. His attacks on Robinson, who was, in fact, educated in both contemporary art and science, reveal a hidden subtext. Much as art critic Sadakichi Hartmann would write some twenty years later of the fight between the Photo-Secessionists and the Pictorialists, the argument between Emerson and Robinson was, at its core, a fight for "modern ideas against tradition."[35] In other words, the debate wasn't really about focus or composite printing. As would Adams in his attack on William Mortensen some forty years later, Emerson wrote about technique in an attempt to elaborate concretely what was a rather nebulous ideological argument about the difference between elite and popular art. His embrace of differential focus was a signifier

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 381.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Sadakichi Hartmann, "The Photo-Secession Exhibition at the Carnegie Art Galleries, Pittsburgh, Pa.," in Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, eds., *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre: Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 99.

of his awareness of modern trends in science and art as much as it was an indicator of how his style differed technically from Robinson's. In other words, it functioned as a "signal value," a stylistic or technical marker denoting his work as modern.[36] Technique was something of a red herring, and Emerson's theories can be seen as examples of what Peter Galassi has called "veiled artistic manifestoes," polemical tracts written by a photographer "whose aesthetic position has masqueraded as a technical creed."[37]

Rationality, positivism, and modern art converge in Emerson's theory of Naturalistic photography, of which he later wrote: "I had attempted to reduce naturalistic teachings (which I said were as old as ancient Greece) to scientific first principles, and to apply those teachings to photography."[38] It was this rational scientific basis that he claimed separated his work from that of Robinson and his ilk, which was based instead on imagination, romantic literary tropes and symbolism, the remnants of a bygone era.[39] It is also what aligned his work with modern art and justified its display in museums alongside paintings. As he wrote:

> Thus we see that art has at last found a scientific basis, and can be rationally discussed, and that the modern school is the school which has adopted this rational view; and I think I am right in saying that I was the first to base the claims of photography as a fine art on these grounds, and I venture to predict that the day will come when photographs will be admitted to hang on the walls of the Royal Academy.[40]

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[36] Ulrich Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography: An Iconographical Analysis," *History of Photography* 9 (January/March 1985), 21.
[37] Peter Galassi, "Henrich Kuhn, 1866-1944," in *Photo-Secession Catalogue 6* (Washington D.C: Lunn Gallery, 1977), 42. Galassi writes that the veiling of artistic manifestoes in the guise of technical tracts is a "tradition that stretches from P.H. Emerson to Ansel Adams."
[38] Emerson, "The Storm in the Naturalistic Crater," *The Photographic News* (April 3, 1891), 273.
[39] Emerson, "Photographing: A Pictorial Art," *The Photographic News* (March 19, 1886), 187.
[40] Ibid., 188.

Robinson's work, on the other hand, like "nine-tenths of photographs," was, Emerson claimed, "no more works of art than the chromos, lithos and bad paintings which adorn the numerous shops and galleries."[41] It was, in other words, "vulgar" art, based on *retardataire* romantic conceits and designed to please the market. "The days of metaphysics are over," Emerson writes of the Romantic era, taking a page out of Comte, "and with them, we hope has died all that class of pernicious illogical literature, evolved from the inner consciousness of man."[42] Rationality was the modern way, he argued, the way of the future, and it offered him a means to elevate art photography, and the status of art photographers in the process, by situating it "at the cutting edge of human knowledge."[43]

Emerson's derogation of Robinson's work as "vulgar" or popular is reflective of predominant aesthetic concerns in nineteenth-century England. According to E.H. Gombrich, this term was at the time "one of the most powerful words in the armor of criticism," and, due to the unprecedented social leveling that occurred with the Industrial Revolution, "the contrast between respectability and vulgarity became one of the polarizing issues of the period."[44] Although the line between the two is essentially impossible to draw—based as it is on subjective and constantly changing notions of taste and decorum—it became a matter of national concern that a line be drawn, as it was believed that England's art and design had become inferior to that produced in other

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[41] Ibid. According to Lawrence Levine, "By the 1890s the term 'chromo' had come to mean 'ugly' or 'offensive'," and to many symbolized "pseudo-culture." *Highbow/Lowbrow*: *The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 160

[42] Ibid. Also see Marien, 151. Marien discusses Emerson's liberal borrowings from Comte and other Positivist thinkers.

[43] Marien, 147.

[44] Gombrich, 37.

countries. Due to this "crisis of good taste," critics and artists went to great lengths in their attempts to educate British designers and artists about standards of good design.[45] Relatedly, in an effort to overcome what Emerson termed the "bane of English art," namely, its sentimentality and affectation, he encouraged students of photography to educate themselves about the history of art, advising them to:

> …remember that the original state of the minds of uneducated men is vulgar...vulgar and commonplace works please the majority. Therefore, educate your mind, and fight the hydra-headed monster—vulgarity.[46]

Significantly, Emerson's definition of "vulgar" is similar to the German *kitsch*, a term that Gombrich contends was just beginning to be used in England during the period. Describing *kitsch* as "the vulgarity appealing to an uneducated taste," Gombrich argues that it "was to become the great bogey" of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.[47]

The primary legacy Emerson handed down to later straight photographers is not his theory of the relationship between focus and the physiology of vision, for his technical conception of photography was quite unlike theirs. In fact, he would have considered Adams's sharp focused landscapes far too "topographical" to be considered art.[48] They are indebted to him, rather, for the idea that photography could be considered modern art, and for the belief that expressive uses of the medium were distinct from popular or utilitarian ones. He also shared with them an elitist sense of the nature of

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[45] The Great Exhibition and the subsequent establishment of the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) were both outcomes of the national concern for promulgating good design, as the British felt their artists and designers had become inferior to those in other countries. See Michael Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts," in *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1993): 23-75.
[46] Emerson, *Naturalistic Photography*, 254.
[47] Gombrich, 36.
[48] Emerson wrote, "Topography is the registration of bald facts about a place; it is sometimes confounded with art." P.H. Emerson, "Hints on Art," in Allan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 103.

artistic genius, attaching it to what Mary Warner Marien describes as "an anti-commercial thrashing of mass culture" embodied by figures such as Whistler and Baudelaire.[49] As Marien notes, Emerson conceived of the artist as:

> …a similar figure to Whistler's dandy, a person of taste, not unlike Emerson himself...Emerson extolled the delicate, more evolved sensibilities of the artist and contrasted these with the sensibility of that ever-available Victorian lunk, the Philistine.[50]

It makes no difference that the "modern" art with which Emerson aspired to be affiliated, that of the British Impressionists and Millet, was hardly cutting-edge in the 1890s, or that his view of what qualified as "modern" art was very different from that of Stieglitz or Adams. What connects Emerson to these later photographers is that he envisioned himself as an artist in the modern mode, and conversely, characterized popular photographers as retrograde and sentimental, nostalgic for upholding the ideals of a previous age.[51] Emerson was the first in a long line of photographers, including Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, and Adams, who would fight for the recognition of photography as a fine art by separating art photography from other genres based on technique, when his underlying concern was in fact artistic intent.

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[49] Marien, 150.
[50] Ibid., 159.
[51] Shelley Rice, "Parallel Universes," in Ellen Handy, ed., *Pictorial Effect/Naturalistic Vision: The Photographs and Theories of Henry Peach Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson* (Norfolk, VA: Chrysler Museum, 1994), 60. Rice emphasizes the fact that Emerson's models were not avant-garde. I would argue that it doesn't really matter here—what is significant was that he was aligning himself with what he considered "modern" painting in a bid for acceptance as an artist.

Alfred Stieglitz and His Circle

In 1887, after winning a medal in a contest judged by Emerson, Alfred Stieglitz wrote to the editor of *The Amateur Photographer* that the award was doubly pleasing for him, as he considered himself a "great 'Emersonite.'"[52] He admired the older man both for his photographs, which some of Stieglitz's early work closely resembled, and for his desire to legitimize photography as an expressive medium of art. In the decades that followed, Stieglitz would make Emerson's dreams for museum acceptance of photography a reality. It is largely because of his tireless efforts in the early years of the twentieth century that photographs are considered art and exhibited in museums today.

Beginning in the late 1890s, while Emerson was still active, Stieglitz used his formidable personality to gather a circle of artists and critics who would support his efforts to win acceptance for photography as an independent expressive medium of art. The various salons, galleries, magazines and organizations that Stieglitz led were all dedicated to that goal. Partly in reaction to the growing popularity of Kodak cameras and the resulting flood of snapshots, Stieglitz published an essay in *Scribner's* in 1899 that clarified what he saw as the difference between art photographs and those made for popular use. Following Emerson, who in *Naturalistic Photography* separates the medium into three divisions, "art," "science" and "industrial" (or utilitarian), Stieglitz argues that artistic photographers are of a different class than creators of the other two kinds of photographs:

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[52] Alfred Stieglitz, "Letter to the editor," *The Amateur Photographer* (December 16, 1887), 291.

> ...there are three classes of photographers—the ignorant, the purely technical, and the artistic. To the pursuit, the first bring nothing but what is not desirable, the second, a purely technical education obtained after years of study; and the third bring the feeling and inspiration of the artist, to which is added afterward the purely technical knowledge.[53]

Later in the essay, he grouses that photography's "fatal facility" had led some to argue that photographic art was not possible, as photography was technically easy and difficulty was the *sine qua non* of art. Countering such a view, Stieglitz equates photography with writing, arguing that art is based on ideas, not difficult technique:

> The originality of a work of art refers to the originality of the things expressed and the way it is expressed, whether it be in poetry, photography, or painting. That one technique is more difficult than another to learn no one will deny; but the greatest thoughts have been expressed by means of the simplest technique, writing.[54]

Taking a cue from Lawrence Levine, Keith Davis contends that Stieglitz's concern with separating art photography from other uses of the medium is reflective of the "broad movement in the last half of the nineteenth century toward the 'sacralization of culture,'" wherein "clear distinctions were drawn between elite and common tastes."[55] Davis writes:

> The movement to 'purify' photographic exhibitions by separating artistic images from those made for scientific, documentary, or technical reasons was an integral part of this larger movement toward establishing cultural hierarchies. The problem was particularly acute with photography since the medium itself was widely viewed as mimetic rather than creative. Thus, to argue that a fine photograph was akin to an original sculpture rather than a soulless plaster cast (merely a copy of something real), art photographers had to establish a difference in kind between their work

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[53] Stieglitz, "Pictorial Photography," (1899) in Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writing* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983), 185.
[54] Ibid., 186.
[55] Keith Davis, *The American Century of Photography: From Dry Plate to Digital, The Hallmark Collection* (New York: Hallmark Cards, Inc., in association with H.N. Abrams, 1995), 45. Davis notes that the term "sacralization of culture" was a chapter title in Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow.*

and the medium's many other reproductive and utilitarian applications.[56]

In keeping with this larger stratification of cultural forms, Stieglitz sought to elevate the status of expressive photography by aligning it with elite pursuits such as poetry and painting, and in the process, to raise the social status of art photographers by considering them artists on a par with poets and painters. In the early years of the struggle, the barometer Stieglitz used to measure success in achieving parity with painting was whether photography was exhibited in art museums, bastions of elite culture. As museums and academies did not recognize photography as a fine art, Stieglitz and his peers created their own institutional infrastructure for the medium, modeled on the existing one for painting, which would sanction certain photographs as art.[57] As Ulrich Keller notes:

> [T]heir basic project became the transformation of an informal amateur movement into a 'high art' enterprise complete with social rituals, exhibitions, publications and aesthetic doctrines molded after the example of the established media of painting and sculpture.[58]

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[56] Ibid., 46. John Raeburn writes of the relationship between the promotion of photography as an expressive art and sacralization: "The ubiquity of reproduction and promiscuity of display practices clashed with principles fiercely upheld by proponents of a fine-arts approach—that an original print alone adequately represented its maker's genius and that Gresham's Law [that "bad" currency will win out over "good" in the marketplace] required that artistic photographs appear only in consecrated settings sanitized of inferior work." *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties' Photography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 9

[57] Ulrich Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis," *History of Photography* 8, no. 4 (October-December 1984), 253-6. Keller contends that Stieglitz's "main contribution to the history of photography was not the production of pictures, but the construction of an institutional framework which certified these pictures as 'art.'" Later in the essay Keller gives members of the Photo-Secession short shrift, contending that Stieglitz and members of his circle made photographs solely for the purpose of becoming famous and being considered artists.

[58] Ibid., 253.

Eventually, Stieglitz succeeded in gaining entry for photography into a prestigious art museum. He wrote that the Photo-Secession exhibition held at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo in 1911 was:

> …without a doubt the most important that has been held anywhere so far...The Albright Gallery is the most beautiful gallery in American and also one of the most important. The exhibition made such a strong artistic impression that the management bought 12 pictures...and has dedicated a beautiful gallery for these pictures...this gallery will be maintained permanently for artistic photography. In short the dream I had in 1885 in Berlin has been realized—the full recognition of photography by an important art museum![59]

After the Albright Gallery exhibition, the doctrine of straight or "pure" photography became increasingly central to Stieglitz's assertion that photography was an art worthy of museum attention. As Maria Morris Hambourg has observed, the Pictorialist work Stieglitz and his peers had created a decade earlier began to appear "regressive," she wrote:

> [P]hotography must advance with the moment, not settle into anachronism. With the advent of fauvism and cubism, the distance suddenly widened between the time-worn conventions of pictorialism and this new burst of freedom…Since the new painting had been freed from the obligation of representation, Stieglitz reasoned, the task of seizing objective reality had passed to photography.[60]

Several critics in Stieglitz's circle agreed with him, outlining the merits of straight photography and linking it to modern art. In 1901, Charles Caffin wrote what was likely the first article in America to set down in print the difference between "straight" and "manipulated" photography, contending that Stieglitz was the straight photographer *par*

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[59] Alfred Stieglitz to Ernst Juhl, January 6, 1911, in Greenough and Hamilton*, Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings*, 193.

[60] Maria Morris Hambourg, "From 291 to the Museum of Modern Art: Photography in New York, 1910-1937," in *The New Vision*: *Photography Between the World Wars* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 8, 11.

excellence.[61] In 1904, Sadakichi Hartmann, a prolific art critic and sometime member of the Stieglitz circle, went further in defining the term, contending in his article "A Plea for Straight Photography" that straight photographers do not emulate the look of other media, but remain true to what is essentially photographic.

> We expect an etching to look like an etching, and a lithograph to look like a lithograph, why then should not a photographic print look like a photographic print? ...legitimate photographic methods are the great expressional instrument for a straightforward depiction of the pictorial beauties of life and nature, and to abandon its superiorities in order to aim at the technical qualities of other arts is unwise, because the loss is surely greater than the gain.[62]

Hartmann's essay was a call to arms, a "plea" for an antidote to fuzzy, imitative, un-photographic Pictorialism. As was the case with Emerson and Robinson, however, the primary concern behind this argument was not, in fact, what the photographs looked like, or whether they were true to the medium, but, rather, what their style or technique signified. In characterizing the conflict between modernist photographers and the Pictorialists, from whom he believed the modernists needed to distance themselves, Hartmann cuts to the heart of the matter.

> Why, then, all this mockery, noise, and opposition? Because it is a fight, after all. It is a fight of modern ideas against tradition, or, more modestly expressed, a fight for a new technique...The whole trouble is that the two parties can't agree on the mediums of expression. It is a fight about conception, theory and temperament.[63]

The debate between straight and manipulated photography was not about technique, Hartmann here asserts, but about ideas. He contends that straight photography was

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[61] Charles Caffin, *Photography As a Fine Art* (Hastings-on-Hudson: Morgan and Morgan, Inc., 1901).
[62] Hartmann, "A Plea for Straight Photography," *American Amateur Photographer* 16 (March 1904): 101-109.
[63] Hartmann, "The Photo-Secession Exhibition at the Carnegie Art Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA," in *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre*, 99.

modern photography, requiring a certain "temperament," or attitude, to create. One had to be an artist to make modern, or "straight," photographs. Hartmann recognized early on that the battle for straight photography was largely ideological, writing, "it sometimes seems to me as if this fight were not at all about esthetics."[64] Adams would later come to the same conclusion.

Paul Strand

Adams's definition of straight photography most closely resembles that articulated by Stieglitz's protégé, Paul Strand, in a 1917 *Camera Work* article simply titled "Photography."[65] Strand, whom Adams later credited as the primary inspiration for his own adoption of straight photography, pushed the medium in a new direction.[66] Objectivity, according to Strand, was the unique purview of photography; it followed that the medium's purity was sullied by Pictorialist handwork and diffuse focus. In Strand's view this was a serious problem, as he believed that staying true to the essence of the medium was the only means of creating art. Strand did not abandon the idea of artistic subjectivity altogether, but rather, inspired by the writing of Marius de Zayas, another member of the Stieglitz circle, he saw the purpose of photography as something beyond

[64] Ibid.
[65] Strand, "Photography," *Camera Work* (June 1917), 3-4
[66] The possibly apocryphal story of Adams's conversion to modernism upon seeing Strand's negatives in Taos in 1930 has become legend. It is recounted in numerous places, including *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), 109-110. On October 31, 1933, Adams wrote to Strand, "I believe you have made the most perfect and complete definition of photography," in Alinder and Stillman, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images*, 67

traditional notions of individual expression, even beyond the conventional notion of art making.[67]

> It is in the organization of this objectivity that the photographer's point of view toward Life enters in, and where a formal conception born of the emotions, the intellect, or of both, is as inevitably necessary for him, before an exposure is made, as for the painter, before he puts brush to canvas...Photography is only a new road from a different direction but moving toward the common goal, which is Life.[68]

Strand here equates the goals of photography with those of modern painting, attributing to it an elevated, almost mystical purpose. Sarah Greenough characterizes this conception of photography as a Bergsonian "synthesis of the object and their sense of its intellectual and emotional significance,"[69] which de Zayas earlier described as:

> [D]etermining the objectivity of form, that is to say, in obtaining the initial condition of the phenomena of form, phenomena which under the domain of human thought gives birth to emotions, sensations, and ideas.[70]

It is in the merging of man and machine that photography, according to de Zayas, surpasses mere art and approaches "objective truth."[71]

As a member of the Stieglitz circle, Strand was exposed not only to the work of writers and artists based in New York, such as de Zayas, but also to avant-garde modern art arriving from Europe for exhibition at Stieglitz's 291 gallery. Contact with this work, the artists who created it, and the theories upon which it was based, was instrumental to his artistic development and identity. He later wrote of this experience:

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[67] De Zayas wrote several articles on photography for *Camera Work* that appear to have directly influenced Strand. In "Photography" (January 1913) and "Photography and Art Photography" (November 1913), de Zayas presents his philosophy of what he termed "pure" photography, and which Strand later called "straight."
[68] Strand, "Photography," *Camera Work* (June 1917), 3.
[69] Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings*, 21.
[70] De Zayas, "Untitled," *291* nos. 7-8 (September-October 1915), unpaginated.
[71] Ibid.

> I was learning from these people what photography was, and what painting was, and so on. And all the abstract things I did were consciously directed at finding out what these fellows were talking about, and seeing what relationship it had to photography.[72]

Strand felt a kinship to the artists whose work he encountered at 291, and particularly to Cezanne, Picasso, Brancusi, and Kandinsky, whose quest for recognition and legitimacy resonated with the battle that Strand and his fellow photographers were waging. As he observed:

> There was a fight going on for the integrity of a new medium and its right to exist, the right of the photographer to be an artist, as well as the right of Picasso and other artists to do the kind of work they were doing, which was a form of research and experimentation into the very fundamentals of what is, and what is not, a picture.[73]

Informed by the example of his mentor, Alfred Stieglitz, who had demonstrated photography's relevance to contemporary art at 291 and in his journal *Camera Work*, Strand believed the aims of photography were in line with the aims of modern art created in other media. This link between straight photography and modern art would become central to Adams's theories as well.

Edward Weston

Due to their close physical proximity and friendship, it was perhaps Edward Weston who had the most direct influence on Adams's early theoretical education.[74] In the many letters they exchanged in the early 1930s, Weston and Adams debated the fine

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[72] Strand, "Photography," in Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, eds., *Dialogue with Photography* (NY: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1979), 5.
[73] Ibid., 4.
[74] For an in depth study of Weston's philosophy and its influence on Adams, see Anne Hamond, "Making a Photograph with Group f.64," *History of Photography* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 169-178.

points of their respective philosophies, using each other as a sounding board for clarifying and honing their respective ideas.[75] Although constitutionally dissimilar, and in many respects an unlikely pair, Weston and Adams forged a close friendship, based on shared devotion to the expressive potential of photography, that lasted until Weston's death in 1958.

As early as 1916, the year Strand's work was featured in *Camera Work*, Weston began writing and lecturing about straight photography and its potential as expressive art. According to Van Deren Coke, Weston embraced Modernism after seeing an exhibition of paintings at the Los Angeles Museum in 1920 that, consequentially, included the work of Charles Sheeler, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Joseph Stella, and John Marin, artists who were all members of the Stieglitz circle.[76] Like Stieglitz, whom Weston traveled to New York to meet in 1922, and Strand, whose work and writings were intimately familiar to him, Weston's conviction that photography was a form of modern art was paired with a belief in the need to consider the medium's unique strengths and limitations, and appreciate it on its own merits, rather than in comparison to other media.[77]

As it was with Strand, his almost exact contemporary, modern art and modernist theory had a profound impact on Weston's self-conception as an artist. In the brochure text for his 1932 exhibition at the Delphic Gallery, for instance, Weston wrote in terms

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[75] See the many letters between Weston and Adams held at the CCP in the archives of each photographer.
[76] Van Deren Coke, "The New Vision in Europe and America: 1920-1930," in James Enyeart, ed., *Decade by Decade: A Survey of Twentieth-Century American Photography from the Collections of the Center for Creative Photography* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, 1989), 22.
[77] Edward Weston, "Photography as a Means of Artistic Expression," a lecture originally given in Los Angeles for the College Women's Club on October 18, 1916, in *Afterimage* (January 1976), 14. Weston writes extensively in his daybooks about Stieglitz's importance to his development as an artist. Although Stieglitz never embraced him and Weston was put off by his tyrannical attitude, he essentially remained a Steiglitzian photographer throughout his life.

clearly influenced by the formalist theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, referencing what Bell termed "significant form."[78] That same year, when he and Adams established Group f.64 and were corresponding regularly, he wrote to Adams comparing his work to that of Constantin Brancusi, whose sculpture resonated deeply with him:

> Take the extreme abstractions of Brancusi: they are all based upon natural forms, I have been accused of imitating his work,—and I most assuredly do admire, and may have been 'inspired' by it,—which means I have the same kind of (inner) eye, otherwise Rodin or Paul Manship might have influenced me! Actually, I have proved through photography, that Nature has all the abstract (simplified) forms that Brancusi or any other artist could imagine. With my camera I go direct to Brancusi's source. I find ready to use,—select and isolate, what he has to 'create.' One might as well say that Brancusi imitates nature, as to accuse me of imitating Brancusi...just because I found these forms first hand. [79]

As evinced by this passage, Weston compared his work not only to that of other photographers, but to that of sculptors and painters as well. Two years later, Adams would draw a similar connection between modern art and straight photography, emphasizing a link to contemporary intellectual discourse.

> We have not based our work on photographic precedents alone; we are attempting to define photography as a fine art, and we embrace the motives and accomplishments of all contemporary art in relation to the thought (and thought processes) of the times.[80]

Perhaps defining best what Adams referred to as "attitude," Weston wrote, "it is not certain subject matter that makes one contemporary, it is how you see any subject

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[78] Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913).
[79] Edward Weston to Adams, January 28, 1932, in Alinder and Stillman, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images,* 48.
[80] Adams, "Letter to the Editor," *Camera Craft,* (April 1934), 183.

matter."[81] He argued that photography required a modern mindset antithetical to that of the Pictorialist:

> Photography is not for the escapist, the 'mooning poet,' the revivalist crying for dead cultures, nor the cynic—a sophisticated weakling: it is for the man of action, who as a cognizant part of contemporary life, uses the means most suitable for a clear statement of his recognition.[82]

For Weston, "modern" denoted a new way of seeing, his sense of which shares much with de Zayas' and Strand's Bergsonian theories. Writing to Adams, Weston explains what he means by "seeing":

> [B]ut it is not 'seeing' literally, it is done with a reason, with creative imagination. No—I don't want just seeing—but a presentation of the significance of facts, so that they are transformed from things (actually) seen, to things known: a revelation, so presented—wisdom controlling the means, the camera—the spectator participates in the revelation.[83]

Adams clearly embraced this characterization of the power of photographic seeing, as he often wrote in Westonian terms about the transformation of "things seen into things known," or of photographing a "thing-in-itself."[84]

Throughout his life, Weston was committed to disinterested art, to art-for-art's sake, contending that it was a rarified calling, and that artists were different from the rest of society. Employing Emerson's favored derogation, he wrote: "Today the artist is forced into an isolated, unappreciated existence, unless he caters to popular vulgarity."[85]

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[81] Edward Weston in Nancy Newhall, ed., *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1973), 241.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Weston to Adams, January 28, 1932, in Alinder and Stillman, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images*, 48.
[84] For a discussion of Weston's use of this terminology, see Hammond, "Ansel Adams and Objectivity," 171-2.
[85] Weston, *Daybooks*, 243. In his eloquent introduction to the work of Harry Callahan, John Szarkowski proposes that the opposite of vulgarity is economical precision. His definition is equally applicable to Weston's work. "If the essence of vulgarity, as the word is used here, is a straining for expressive effect, its opposite is not refinement but precision—the exact and economical solution. Such work is identified by a

For mass taste, and radical leftist politics that called for the creation of popular art, Weston had nothing but disparagement.[86] He believed that high art necessarily appealed only to a certain sector of the population, and that any attempt to cater to a wider populace, to educate the masses to better taste, was in vain. That art and artists occupied a certain "aristocratic" place in society, as Weston termed it, was something Adams and Weston discussed in many letters. In 1934 Adams wrote to Weston, highlighting their philosophical congruence on the matter of disinterested art, of art created solely for aesthetic purposes.

> You and I differ considerably in our theory of approach, but our objective is about the same-to express with our camera what cannot be expressed in other ways—to trust our intuition in respect to what is beautiful and significant—to believe that humanity needs the purely aesthetic as much as it needs the purely material. [87]

Ansel Adams

Although he had himself once produced Pictorialist photographs—romantic, soft-focus, still life compositions and portraits [Fig. 1.1]—Adams abandoned in the late 1920s what he termed the "sticky muck" of his Pictorialist past for cleaner lines and sharp focus, and began formulating his own version of straight photography [Fig. 1.2].[88] Like Emerson or Stieglitz, in his earliest published writings Adams argues that pure (or

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quality of disinterestedness, suggesting that the artist is the superintendent of a process that is almost automatic, requiring only gentle orientation and adjustment, in contrast to the image of the artist as one locked in heroic struggle with intractable materials." John Szarkowski, *Callahan* (New York: Aperture and the Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 25.

[86] Weston, *Daybooks,* 243. "Can the masses be educated, really acquire good taste, appreciation of the fine expressions in painting, literature, music, theater, so that these things become more than a veneer, a false front? I sincerely doubt it, yet there might be room for debate."

[87] Adams to Weston, November 29, 1934, in Alinder and Stillman, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images*, 73.

[88] Andrea Gray, *Ansel Adams: An American Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1982), 18.

straight) photography is of a different, and elevated, class, and must be considered separate from other genres of the medium.[89] He contends that art photography is rare, and distinct from the multitude of photographs produced every day for commercial and domestic purposes. Even in his earliest writings it was important to Adams to distinguish the kind of photographs he made from those created by snapshooters and commercial photographers, as he wanted his chosen *métier* to be taken seriously.

> I am going to re-state a manifesto of independence—I demand, as a photographer, that the public recognize the fact that the camera is more than an amusing toy, and that photography is more than a penny postcard. Photography, when true to itself, is as much an art as painting and sculpture.[90]

From very early on, in other words, Adams wanted to be considered a modern artist, and, like Steiglitz and Emerson before him, felt that "Kodakers" and a general misconception of the potential of the medium as an expressive art form, stood in his way.[91]

In the early 1930s, Adams became a fervent modernist, taking part in the 1932 formation of Group f.64, the first West Coast photography group devoted to the aesthetic. He penned the group's manifesto, written for their now famous exhibition at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco that same year—its key themes closely echoing those previously laid out by Emerson, Stieglitz, and Strand before him.

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[89] Adams, "Photography," *The Fortnightly* (December 18, 1931), 21

[90] Adams, "An Exposition of My Technique: Portraiture," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 3 (March 1934), 114. Throughout his life, Adams would promote photography as an exalted profession. For example, in a film about Adams written by Nancy Newhall (*Ansel Adams, Photographer,* Larry Dawson Productions, 1957. Videotaped copy held in the Adams archive at the CCP), the narrator, Beaumont Newhall, states, "photography, to Ansel Adams, is a profession as well as an art, and his standards are as high as those of an architect or an engineer."

[91] Having chosen photography over a career as a concert pianist, Adams likely felt his middle-class family would be more approving if he were an aspiring "artist" rather than just a photographer.

> Group f.64 limits its members and invitational names to those workers who are striving to define photography as an art-form by a simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods. The Group will show no work at any time that does not conform to its standards of pure photography. Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technic [*sic*], composition or ideas, derivative of any other art-form. The production of the "Pictorialist," on the other hand, indicates a devotion to principles of art, which are directly related to painting and the graphic arts. The members of Group F. 64 believe that Photography, as an art-form, must develop along lines defined by the actualities and limitations of the photographic medium, and must always remain independent of ideological conventions of art and aesthetics that are reminiscent of a period of culture antedating the growth of the medium itself. The Group will appreciate information regarding any serious work in photography that has escaped its attention, and is favorable towards establishing as a Forum of Modern Photography.[92]

There is nothing original to Adams or Group f. 64 in this statement, and the sources from which he borrowed his ideas should by now be clear. Like the writings of Emerson, Stieglitz, Strand, and Weston, the manifesto isolates straight or pure photography from other genres, highlights the importance of truth to medium, and equates this type of photography with modern art. Adams contends that Pictorialism is dependent upon ideas about art developed before photography was invented, and was thus neither modern nor true to the inherent qualities of the medium.

Two years later, Adams wrote a series of articles titled "An Exposition of My Technique" for the San Francisco-based photography magazine *Camera Craft*, in which he attempted to articulate a definition of straight photography in technical and stylistic terms. Following the lead of Weston, who had written a denunciation of Pictorialism for the magazine in 1930, Adams determined to make his own case against those he derided

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[92] Adams, "Group f.64 Manifesto, 1932," in Heyman, *Seeing Straight*, 53.

as "fuzzy-wuzzies."[93] "An Exposition of My Photographic Technique" makes a case for sharp-focused, bold compositions devoid of what Adams considered un-photographic manipulation. He defines his approach in opposition to Pictorialism, and presents a highly circumscribed interpretation of "straight."

> I have nothing in common with 'Pictorial' aims and means...Photography, as a pure medium of art, does not admit conceptions that are reminiscent of other mediums—painting, lithography, aquatone, etc. Perhaps unconsciously in most cases, the Pictorialist has inclined towards the effects of these various other art-forms and has failed to achieve the substance of them or of photography itself.[94]

By defining his technique primarily in terms of what it was not, Adams aimed to critique Pictorialism as much as to establish his own position, adopting a radically purist stance that most of his own work did not actually live up to. A polemic true to the definition of the term, the series was an extremist critique of Pictorialism and everything it signified.

William Mortensen

The figure Adams adopted as his Pictorialist bête noir was William Mortensen, a regular contributor to *Camera Craft* who published in the same issues of the magazine a series of response articles under the title "Venus and Vulcan."[95] The debate that ensued between them has been addressed frequently in the literature, particularly with reference to the rise of Group f.64. On the surface, the dispute appears relatively transparent,

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[93] "Fuzzy-wuzzy" was a common derogation of soft-focus photography. See *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, 110.
[94] Adams, "An Exposition of My Photographic Technique," *Camera Craft* (January 1934), 19.
[95] Mortensen, "Venus and Vulcan: Part I," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 3 (March 1934): 102-111; "Venus and Vulcan: Part II," *Camera Craft* XLI, no 4 (April 1934): 152-62; "Venus and Vulcan: Part III," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 5 (May 1934): 205-15; "Venus and Vulcan: Part IV," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 6 (June 1934): 256-65.

leading few historians to probe the material beyond the superficial.[96] None has asked: Why did Adams and the other members of Group f.64 find it necessary to define straight photography in technical terms? Why did they feel they needed a theory and a manifesto? And why write a manifesto to which your work does not adhere? What were Mortensen and Adams really fighting about? In other words, what concerns lie beneath the polemics and the technical proscriptions?

As Douglas Nickel writes, "...it is important to recognize the inseparability of ideology from style: style and ideology commingle as form and content, alloyed carriers of a work's meaning."[97] Close scrutiny of the exchange between Adams and Mortensen suggests that their iteration of the internecine squabble between proponents of straight and manipulated photography, like those that came before, was as much about ideology as it was about differences in style and technique.[98] As one penetrates the rhetorical veneer of their articles, it quickly becomes evident that the debate was only superficially about sharp versus soft focus, or straight versus composite printing—what was truly at issue was what the practices of soft-focus Pictorialism and hard-edged straight photography had come to signify.

A photographer of some repute in California in the 1930s and 40s, Mortensen honed his craft shooting studio portraits and production stills for films in Hollywood. His style borrowed heavily from the production design of silent films of the 1920s, such as

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[96] Exceptions include Anne Hammond, Michel Oren and Shelley Rice, who have contributed considerably to the literature on Group f.64 and Adams.

[97] Douglas Nickel, "Art, Ideology, and the West," in William Deverell, ed., *Companion to the American West* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 370

[98] Ibid., 367. I am using the term "ideology" in the sense Nickel outlines, as "the systems of representations that relate the individual (his or her lived experience) to some sociohistorical context."

Cecil B. De Mille's *King of Kings*, for which Mortensen shot stills that were later published in a limited-edition book.[99] In order to achieve the results he desired, Mortensen, like Robinson, employed a wide range of darkroom techniques and other forms of print manipulation. Theatrical and mannered, his compositions, like the bold gestures of silent film actors, were designed to communicate clear, readable messages. Subtlety did not figure heavily in Mortensen's aesthetic, rather, he sought in his work an assertive, graphic punch [Fig. 1.3].

After a decade in Hollywood, in 1931 Mortensen moved south to Laguna Beach and opened the Mortensen School of Photography, where for more than thirty years he trained legions of amateur photographers.[100] The ranks of his students did not produce any photographers of note, but he did train a number of famous Hollywood figures, including Rock Hudson.[101] Mortensen was probably best known in his day as the author of several popular books on photography, including *Projection Control* (1934), *Monsters and Madonnas* (1936), *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (1937), and *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (1940).[102] As a regular contributor to *Camera Craft* from the early 1930s to the 50s, he authored numerous articles that were, judging from letters to the editor of the magazine, extremely popular with its readership. Mortensen imitators abounded in the regular contests in *Camera Craft*, as well as in camera club salons mounted across the country.

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[99] Michael Dawson, "William Mortensen: Gothic Modernist," in *William Mortensen: A Revival* (Tucson: The University of Arizona, 1998), 17.
[100] Amy Rule, "William Mortensen Chronology with Related Cultural and Photographic Events," in *William Mortensen: A Revival*, 115-130.
[101] Dawson, 17.
[102] All of Mortensen's books were published by *Camera Craft*.

In his response articles, Mortensen staked out a more democratic and inclusive terminological position than did Adams. In his view, "Pictorialist" was a general term that described all photographers devoted to creating art for art's sake. The Pictorialist was:

> The man whose interest is in the picture itself...He may prefer straight contact prints, paper negatives, fresson, or bromoil transfers. But, when all is said and done, his basic interest is the picture itself. Not how it was secured, or what process was used in making it, or what it may accomplish; but simply and solely the picture.[103]

It was not the means that were of importance to Mortensen, but the ends, and he condemned Adams and the other "purists" for imposing undue limitations on the medium. He acknowledged that straight prints in themselves could be beautiful and artistic, but maintained that in limiting photography to straight prints, the purist stance was unreasonably restrictive.[104] Such an insistence on purity, Mortensen argued, resulted in work that was not only shallow, but also lacking in emotional impact. Group f.64's insistence on objectivity, he contended, added up to no more than an "exercise in technique." As he explained:

> Most aspiring pictorialists don't give themselves half enough hard, grinding work of this sort. But the purists (and here is my ultimate quarrel with them) insist emphatically that their finger exercises merit artistic consideration. Such consideration, I feel, cannot be given them until they are through with ostentatiously playing scales in the key of C.[105]

An accomplished pianist, Adams must have been particularly incensed by this characterization.

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[103] Mortensen, unpublished manuscript, as quoted in Dawson, 26.
[104] Mortensen, "Venus and Vulcan: Fallacies of Pure Photography," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 6 (June 1934), 258.
[105] Ibid., 263.

When he penned his own series of articles for *Camera Craft* in 1934, Adams was still a relatively unknown photographer, even in his hometown of San Francisco. A pilgrimage to New York in 1933 to show his work to Stieglitz had buoyed his hopes for future success, but Adams was still struggling to find himself as an artist. Judging from the hegemonic hold Pictorialism continued to exert in the pages of *Camera Craft* throughout the 1930s and 40s, Weston's 1930 article, "Photography, Not Pictorial," seems to have had a negligible impact on photographic trends in the Bay Area. Due to the vitality of the native Pictorialist movement, which was an even more powerful force there than it was in the East, modernist photography was slow to gain a toehold in California.[106] What was needed to shake things up was a battle royale, a no-holds-barred fight. Mortensen, sensing stagnation in California photography, called for some healthy dissent in the ranks, writing:

> A well-managed riot at the London Salon would be a good beginning, with jeers and cheers from opposing factions, stones thrown and heads broken, and jury-members tossed into the Thames.[107]

As he began to refashion himself as a modern artist, Adams sought distance from Pictorialism, which he considered outdated, derivative and mannered. One possible source for these characterizations is R. H. Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art* (1926), to which Adams refers in several of his articles.[108] Wilenski condemns much art of the nineteenth century as "degenerate" or "derivative," emphasizing originality of

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[106] Naomi Rosenblum, "Group f.64 and Modernism," in Therese Heyman, ed., *Seeing Straight*, 39
[107] Mortensen, "Venus and Vulcan: A Manifesto and A Prophesy," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 7 (July 1934), 309.
[108] Adams, "An Exposition of My Technique," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 1 (January 1934), 24. Also in "The New Photography," in *Modern Photography 1934-5, The Studio Annual of Camera Art* (London: The Studio Ltd., 1935), 10. (Adams refers to the author as "Wilensky").

vision and authenticity as the key components of modern art. He considered an artistic "attitude" an important determinant of original work, asserting:

> [T]he originality of a work of art consists in the attitude, motives, and procedure of the man who made it; that if the artist sets out to enlarge his experience by his work, and in fact does so, his work is original.[109]

In a section entitled "The Camera's Vision," Wilenski berated painters for copying photographs and photographers for copying paintings, positing a dichotomy between modern art, which is original, and popular art, which is derivative. Of Pictorialists, "artistic" photographers who imitate romantic painting, he wrote:

> 'Artistic' photographers are all derivative; and like derivative popular artists they are of two kinds. They are either disinterested or venal. In the first case they are addle-pated, in the second they are tradesmen working to achieve contact with the average 'artistic' spectator's familiar experience of romantic popular art. In both cases they refuse to accept the camera's records, preferring to distort them into hybrid imitations of various forms of art.[110]

Like Emerson and Stieglitz, Wilenski condemns photographers who cater to popular taste by emulating Romantic painting. Such work, in his unblinking appraisal, is unoriginal, cloying, or simply bad. In his estimation, the worst photography was the result of a circular pattern of copying. As he explained, "many 'artistic' photographers imitate the pictures of Corot's middle period, which as I shall show later...were produced when he began to imitate photographs. A singular example of a vicious cycle."[111] Although he does not elaborate what modern photography should look like, Wilenski suggests it should adhere to what is essentially photographic, and not become "hybrid abominations

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[109] R.H. Wilenski, *The Modern Movement in Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1926), 41.
[110] Ibid., 80
[111] Ibid., 79n1.

that are not true photographs and not works of art."[112] In other words, he felt that modern photography should be pure.

Although Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was not published until 1939, and Adams never articulated his position against Pictorialism in strictly Greenbergian terms, the subtext of his contentions is that it was not fine art, but popular art, or *kitsch*. Adams would have taken issue with the materialist roots of Greenberg's theory, but he likely would have embraced the underlying premise of a dialectic between fine art and *kitsch*, wherein fine art is superior, and *kitsch* is defined as derivative, academic, and ersatz culture, such as "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc."[113] Much in this vein, Adams characterized Mortensen as a popular artist and an "imitator," and excoriated his "romantic" sensibilities. He later noted:

> Mortensen represented about the lowest ebb of pictorialism, a very literary approach...He was imitating some of the worst of the Romantic painting...It just seemed to be as far from photography as possible. He still is very popular in some circles, but for us he was the anti-Christ. We stood for exactly the opposite of everything he represented.[114]

In many respects, Mortensen did represent values antithetical to those Adams held dear. For Mortensen, a self-proclaimed failed draftsman, photography was a creative outlet with commercial potential that did not require drawing.[115] He considered photography one of the "graphic arts," often employing calligraphic text and other effects to give his

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[112] Ibid., 79
[113] Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34-49.
[114] Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun, *Conversations with Ansel Adams* (Berkeley, Ca: University of California, Regional Oral History Office, 1978), 121.
[115] Dawson, 12.

prints the look of illustrations or etchings.[116] He believed that the medium had its own unique strengths, but photography was in Mortensen's view a lesser art than painting. It did not matter to him whether or not photography was considered an art. As he explained:

> I do not propose at this point to add another chapter to the already lengthy and inconclusive argument on the theme: 'Is Photography an Art?' Perhaps it is an art. (Personally, I believe that it belongs in the same category as the lesser graphic arts, such as etching and lithography). Perhaps it is only a pseudo-art.[117]

Other writers for *Camera Craft*, such as Sigismund Blumann, then the magazine's editor, openly admitted to having what the straight photographers considered retrograde taste. He was aware of modernist photography and understood what Group f.64 was trying to achieve, but he preferred romantic and sentimental Pictorialist photography, bourgeois or not. In his review of the 1933 Group f.64 exhibition, Blumann wrote:

> Sentimentalists that we are, we shall never forgive these fellows for shattering our pet traditions...There, you have a confession. We are bourgouis [*sic*]. We are beggar in artistic breadth. We can understand only illustration and genre. And not always what passes for these. We are so many evil things, amongst them hide-bound to the last century and the centuries preceding that. True.[118]

According to Christian Petersen, many influential photographers of the period considered Pictorialism a popular art designed to appeal to the masses, and not a fine art destined for the museum.[119] To this end, Adolf Fassbender, another highly respected Pictorialist teacher and author, wrote that in order to be accessible to the average person, Pictorialism

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[116] Mortensen, "Venus and Vulcan: An Essay on Creative Pictorialism, A Manifesto and a Prophesy," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 7 (July 1934), 310.
[117] Dawson, 26.
[118] Sigismund Blumann, "The f.64 Group Exhibition," *Camera Craft* XL, no. 5 (May 1933), 199-200.
[119] Christian Petersen, *After the Photo Secession: American Pictorial Photography 1910-1955* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1997), 101-130.

must stick to "traditional" styles and subject matter.[120] Accessibility, universality, idealism, and escapism are the themes Petersen contends predominated the contemporary literature on Pictorialism.[121] It was, he suggests, "a sort of technological folk art" intended to be accessible to everyone. Conversely, Adams, who embraced Emerson's and Stieglitz's desire for photography to be accepted on equal footing with painting, had elite aspirations. He was thus not in direct competition with Mortensen, as his work was intended for a different audience, and by writing his articles in *Camera Craft* Adams likely did not seek to usurp Mortensen's dominant position in the magazine, but rather to demonstrate that his own work was of a different order.

According to Greenberg, avant-garde art emerges as a purist reaction to the "Alexandrianism" of culture represented by *kitsch*. The avant-garde artist, seeking a return to pure forms,

> [S]ought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. 'Art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry' appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.[122]

Such a characterization nicely mirrors the philosophy Adams elaborates in *Camera Craft*, wherein he advocates an extreme purist position defined in opposition to popular forms, and aspires to return to the essence of the medium, to its "truth." Perhaps his series of articles is thus best understood as a polemical call to arms, and not an "exposition" of his

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[120] Ibid., 111.
[121] Ibid., 101.
[122] Ibid.

"technique." Of the title, "An Exposition of My Technique," and the discrepancy between it and the actual content of the articles, Adams wrote:

> I beg belatedly for the indulgence of the reader; I have not kept strictly to the title of the series. I have projected my discussion from the technicalities to the fields of the intellectual and aesthetic. I discovered, in attempting to define technique, that technique does not exist in itself; it is only the substance of the creative machinery...Perfect technique is really more an attitude than a command of apparatus and chemicals.[123]

Here he conflates "technique" with "art," averring that the two are neither definable nor teachable. "Attitude," as he uses it here, suggests the traditional art historical notion of artistic genius—the idea that artists are born, and not made. By stating that what he does is not teachable, that it requires genius to create straight photographs, Adams is fashioning himself an artist in the traditional mode descended from Vasari, a position that had previously been adopted by Emerson and discussed and endlessly debated by Stieglitz and his circle in *Camera Work*. Of this artistic genius to which Adams obliquely refers, Nancy Newhall, his future collaborator and kindred spirit, wrote: "The bitter truth that real photography, like all art, comes from within and cannot be taught, has always been hard to swallow.[124] "Real" photography, thus, which is here synonymous with straight photography, is art, whereas other forms, such as Pictorialism, are imitations, mere photographic doggerel that could be made by anyone.

In an article on the serial recurrence of this debate throughout the history of photography, Shelley Rice asserts that it was "imagination" against which Adams, Newhall and the rest of the straight photography contingent were reacting when they

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[123] Ansel Adams, "An Exposition of My Technique," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 4 (April 1934), 182.
[124] Nancy Newhall, "What is Pictorialism?" *Camera Craft* XLVII, no. 11 (November 1941), 660.

vilified Mortensen and his ilk.[125] Rice suggests that their hatred of the work of Hollywood and of advertising photographers such as Edward Steichen was related to this aversion to imagination and fantasy, and had some bearing on their condemnation of Mortensen.[126] She contends that for Mortensen, a man who embraced Hollywood fantasy, Pictorialism was "a method that would allow photography to compete in the society of the spectacle," in other words, with popular culture.[127] Rice glosses over, however, what advocates of the straight idiom—be they of the Photo-Secessionist, Group f.64, or Photo League variety—were actually reacting against. "Imagination," "narrative," "emotionality," and "sentimentality" were buzzwords used by straight photographers and the historians who championed them to signify the values of Pictorialism and link those values to Victorian Romanticism, popular culture, or *kitsch*. It was not against narrative or imagination per se that they were railing, but against the values they represented. In a letter to Mortensen, unpublished until 1985, Adams summed up his complaint with his Pictorialist foe, explicitly linking style and taste:

> In photography, I would say that the sincere realist is the creative artist; the non-realist is vague and muddling in his synthetic manipulation of the camera and the subsequent processes. He is guilty of the major crime of Art—bad taste....Your photographs appeal to the masses through its psychological addiction to the facile-sentimental tangibilities, the pseudo-Victorian dramatic qualities, and the superficial glamours of imitation 'period' art.[128]

Soon after his articles were published in *Camera Craft*, Adams realized he had philosophized himself into a corner with his strict interpretation of straight photography,

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[125] Rice, *Parallel Universes*, 65.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Adams, "An Article in the Form of a Letter to William Mortensen," (1933), 2, 8. Getty Research Institute [GRI], Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Archive [Newhall].

and he began to step off of his puritanical soapbox and soften his rhetoric. In a letter to the editor of *Camera Craft* in 1940, he wrote:

> We all write too much, speak too much, preach too much. It would be better if we just said what we have to say in photography. After all, we are photographers; if our work has 'what it takes' it will not need the embalming of words to perpetuate it.[129]

By this time, Adams's reputation was all but secured, and he likely felt less of a need to prove himself to the audience of *Camera Craft*, as he now had bigger fish to fry. He had become more sophisticated in his thinking, more Stieglitzian, perhaps—less concerned with strict objectivity as such, and more focused on personal expression.[130] In the same letter, he wrote of his earlier attempts to define straight photography, arguing that his call to break free from the constraints of Pictorialism was misunderstood as the simple adoption of another style. He feels that his enthusiasm for the cause led him to be mistakenly characterized as doctrinaire and intolerant. He contends that it was never his desire to straightjacket the medium, only to suggest an alternative. "Believe me," he wrote, "the Purist (awful term) is really trying to get photography out of pigeon-holes rather than in them."[131]

Decades later, Adams contended that the polemic had succeeded, if the linking of art to technique had not:

> The 'purist' or 'straight' mode of photography cleared the art of a lot of Romantic trash (at least, this was its objective.) We did err in associating obvious variations of technique with creative expression.[132]

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[129] Adams, "Letter to the Editor," *Camera Craft* XLVI, no. 1 (January 1940), 43.
[130] Hammond, "Ansel Adams and Objectivity," 175-6.
[131] Ibid., 44.
[132] Ansel Adams to Hilton Kramer, August 14, 1977, in Michel Oren, "On the Impurity of Group f/64 Photography," 125n38.

Looking back on the debate, Adams acknowledged that not all Pictorialism was worthy of scorn, but he never changed his mind about Mortensen, writing:

> There is talk of a 'return to Pictorialism;' it is forgotten that a lot of pictorialism was quite beautiful. It was the Mortensen goo (and such tribal clones) that we really objected to. I have always claimed that there is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.[133]

In the same letter he came to the conclusion Sadakichi Hartmann had reached some sixty-five years earlier, that the debate with the Pictorialists was not about technique at all, that straight was just a state of mind, an ineffable "attitude." He wrote to Willard Van Dyke, a founding member of Group f.64:

> But even if you use a soft-focus lens and a paper negative it would be OK—because you think, feel and 'do' straight![134]

In sum, like Peter Henry Emerson, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston before him, Adams in the early 1930s employed technique as a signifier of difference between high art and popular or commercial photography. By defining himself in opposition to Mortensen, a popular artist, Adams attempted, in effect, to demonstrate that he was a modern artist. In the end, however, he discovered that such differences were not definable in technical terms. As Beaumont Newhall later wrote, "The matter could not be settled by accepting this or rejecting that technique; what mattered was the photographer's intent, his taste and his vision."[135] Adams would come

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[133] Adams to Willard Van Dyke, May 22, 1977 as quoted in Oren, 125n.38.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 131.

to embrace Newhall's view that "any mechanistic explanation of an art, however valuable to the artist, is a fallacy."[136]

Although he abandoned efforts to define philosophical differences in technical terms, Adams throughout his life insisted on the hierarchical distinction between expressive and popular photography. This belief would guide him in his curatorial efforts at MoMA, where Pictorialism and other popular genres would be excluded, and in his later battles with Edward Steichen, a commercial photographer whose work often resembled Mortensen's in its exploitation of fantastical props and darkroom manipulation. Steichen would ultimately become an even more threatening nemesis than Mortensen ever had been, as he possessed something Adams wanted, namely, national recognition. As we will see, when Adams set his sights on MoMA Steichen assumed the role Mortensen had in previous years, becoming the figure against whom Adams compared himself.

[136] Beaumont Newhall, "Frederick H. Evans and Edward Weston on Pure Photography," in *Edward Weston Omnibus: A Critical Anthology* (Salt Lake City: G.M. Smith, Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), 126.

CHAPTER TWO

NEWHALL BEFORE ADAMS: THE HARVARD MODERNISTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

In 1937, four years before he and Adams founded the Department of Photographs at MoMA, Beaumont Newhall organized *Photography 1839–1937*, the museum's first exhibition dedicated exclusively to the medium. The exhibition is significant here primarily for the ways its methodological and philosophical underpinnings differ from those of the shows Newhall would later co-organize with Adams, and for what those differences in approach reveal about the founding ethos of the department the two men built together. This chapter examines the roots of Newhall's methodology for the 1937 exhibition, as well as the historical and institutional context in which it was developed, in order to establish a baseline from which to determine how Newhall's curatorial practice was affected by his collaboration with Adams.

When he organized *Photography 1839–1937*, Newhall did not make his mark on a clean slate. Although it was the first large-scale historical survey of photography held anywhere in the United States, Newhall's organizational methodology had nevertheless been informed by established curatorial precedents. While he often credits European historians such as Heinrich Schwarz, Joseph Maria Eder, and Georges Potoniée as key influences on the development of the exhibition and catalogue text, it is less commonly

acknowledged—either by Newhall or subsequent historians—that several exhibitions held on the East Coast in the early 1930s prefigured his curatorial methodology.[137]

Two trailblazing institutions organized exhibitions of photography before Newhall's show opened at MoMA: the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art and the Julien Levy Gallery. Significantly, these institutions were led by former classmates of Newhall's at Harvard who, like him, had been inspired by the example of Alfred Stieglitz, and were also intimates of Alfred H, Barr, Jr., the founding director of MoMA. As much as Newhall deserves credit for organizing that seminal museum exhibition in 1937, these other Harvard men had broken the ground necessary to make such an endeavor conceivable. This chapter considers how exhibitions of photography organized in the early 1930s by Levy and Lincoln Kirstein set the stage for and informed *Photography 1839–1937*.

According to Christopher Phillips, Newhall's 1937 exhibition is "usually cited as a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as a full-fledged museum art."[138] The catalogue written to accompany it, still in print in a heavily revised version, has since become canonical, and the methodology devised to organize the material continues to underpin the study of the history of photography to this day.[139] For better or worse, the version of the history of photography Newhall constructed for the 1937 exhibition

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[137] Maria Morris Hambourg implies this, but does not state it outright, in "From 291 to MoMA: Photography in New York 1910–1937," in *New Vision*: *Photography Between the World Wars* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 52. It is her outline of the history of photography in New York in the 1920s and 30s that most informs this chapter. Newhall discusses influences in *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1993), 48–50. John Raeburn also investigates these influences in his chapter on MoMA in *A Staggering Revolution.*

[138] Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," 17.

[139] See Nickel, "History of Photography: The State of Research," *The Art Bulletin LXXXIII,* No. 3 (September 2001): 548–58.

essentially became *the* history of photography upon which most subsequent scholarship has been based. Douglas Nickel argues that analyzing its roots is a worthwhile historiographic endeavor, as the catalogue is "the English-language text that has shaped thinking on the subject more permanently than any other."[140] Investigating its history, he contends, might lead to a greater understanding of the foundations that underlie the discipline, foundations that Nickel asserts are fundamentally flawed and in need of reevaluation. Such an inquiry is also critical to this dissertation, as these are also the foundations upon which Newhall and Adams constructed the department of photographs at MoMA.

Alfred Stieglitz

Before Newhall, Levy, or Kirstein left Harvard, and until at least the late 1920s, Alfred Stieglitz was the most significant force in American photography, and it was with his model that every curator or gallerist interested in photography had to contend.[141] Stieglitz's enormous shadow hovered over all the Harvard Modernists. Although there had been annual salons and camera club exhibitions in New York for many decades before he opened his first gallery in 1905, it was Stieglitz who was primarily responsible for establishing photography as a legitimate medium of modern art, and for exhibiting it regularly on equal terms with painting and sculpture. For this reason, every gallery and

[140] Ibid., 550.
[141] This would later be true of Newhall as well. As Alison Bertrand writes, "his conception of how one evaluated the medium and his selection of early twentieth century as well as historic 'masters' of photography established a canon for the English speaking world that every subsequent historian has had to either assimilate or challenge." Alison Bertrand, "Beaumont Newhall's 'Photography 1839–1937': Making History," *History of Photography* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 137.

museum in the region that exhibited photography in subsequent years owed a certain debt to his pioneering efforts.[142]

Over the course of its twelve years in operation, Stieglitz's first gallery, The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession—also known as "291" for its address on Fifth Avenue—was a venue for art created in a wide variety of media, from painting, drawing, and sculpture, to photography, etching, lithography, book illustration, watercolor, and caricature.[143] The exhibition program was eclectic and highly experimental, featuring work by avant-garde European artists such as Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Constantin Brancusi; as well as photographs by members of the Photo-Secession; nineteenth-century photographs by D.O Hill; work by young American painters such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and John Marin; wood carvings from Africa; art by children; autochromes; lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec; and even Japanese prints.[144] It was what Stieglitz termed a "laboratory," a place for experimentation with a panoply of new ideas and forms.[145] Such an embrace of both traditional and alternative media would become a touchstone of Modernism in the years to follow, a core value shared not only by Barr, but by Newhall, Kirstein, and Levy as well.

Although photography was the raison d'etre of 291, it was not the gallery's exclusive focus. While its first three years were dedicated primarily to photography, in subsequent years the gallery became a launching pad for European Modernism in

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[142] Hambourg, 52
[143] See list of exhibitions held at Stieglitz's various galleries in Greenough*, Modern Art in America: Alfred Stieglitz and His Galleries* (Washington D.C: National Gallery of Art, 2000), 543–53.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Following Stieglitz's lead, Alfred Barr frequently characterized MoMA as a "laboratory."

America. Picasso had his American debut at 291, for example, as did Matisse, Cezanne and Rousseau.[146] Most of the exhibitions Stieglitz presented featured works by one artist, sometimes in several media, or were organized thematically around several artists working in the same medium or closely related modes. In other words, paintings were shown with paintings, and works on paper with other works on paper. In only one instance were photographs and paintings shown simultaneously at 291.[147] In 1924, Stieglitz would exhibit his own photographs in concert with paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe at the Anderson Galleries.[148] The following year, he included his own photographs as well as those of Paul Strand in an exhibition with paintings and work in other media by the artists he would champion in the years to come: O'Keeffe, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, and Charles Demuth.[149] These exhibitions were the exception, however. Although he considered photography equivalent to painting, Stieglitz did not see fit to combine it with other media in exhibitions. Conversely, in later exhibitions held in New York but organized by others, particularly those inspired by the

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[146] Greenough, "Alfred Stieglitz and the 'Idea of Photography,'" in Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz Photographs and Writing*, 12.

[147] Greenough, *Modern Art in America,* 300. Although is unclear to which exhibition she refers, it occurred in 1909. Perhaps it was *The Younger American Painters*, which may have included photographs as well as paintings by Edward Steichen.

[148] *Alfred Stieglitz Presents Fifty–One Recent Pictures, Oils, Water–Colors, Pastels, Drawings by Georgia O'Keeffe* held concurrently with *The Third Exhibition of Photography by Alfred Stieglitz: Songs of the Sky—Secrets of the Sky as Revealed by my Camera and other Prints* at the Anderson Galleries, March 3–16, 1924.

[149] Greenough, *Modern Art in America*, 548. This exhibition, *Seven Americans*, marked a shift in Stieglitz's interests from an eclectic mix of artists and styles towards the promotion of a small cadre of young American artists.

melting pot aesthetic of the Bauhaus, photography would be shown side-by-side with work made in other media.[150]

What Stieglitz termed "the idea photography" and its relationship to modern theories of seeing was, as Sarah Greenough contends, as important to him as was the practice of photography itself.[151] Photography was a symbolic screen upon which Stieglitz and members of his circle projected their ideas about modern art and life. Particularly for Marius de Zayas and Paul Strand, two core members of the Steiglitz circle during the 291 years, photography defined the essence of the modernist project itself, embodying its core values and ideals. Wrote de Zayas:

> Modern art is analytical…it proceeds toward the unknown, and that unknown is objectivity. It wants to know the essence of things; and it analyzes them in their phenomena of form, following the method of experimentalism set by science…[Objectivity] culminates, so far as related to plastic representation by man, in photography.[152]

Even when actual photographs were not on view, such a conception of photography was central to the ethos of 291. *Camera Work*, the magazine Stieglitz published from 1903–17, was similarly dedicated as much to the idea of photography as it was to the actual medium, featuring poetry, critical writing, and illustrations of works of art created in a variety of media. This belief in the centrality to Modernism of both the idea and the

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[150] As will be noted later, examples include the *Société Anonyme* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1926, and exhibitions organized by both Levy and Kirstein.

[151] Stieglitz writes of his efforts to "establish, once and for all, the *meaning* of the *idea* photography," in Greenough, "Alfred Stieglitz and the 'Idea of Photography,'" in Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz Photographs and Writing,* 197–8.

[152] De Zayas, "Modern Art—Theories and Representations," *Camera Work* (March 1914), as quoted in Helen M. Shannon, "African Art, 1914: The Root of Modern Art," in Greenough, ed., *Modern Art and America,* 169–83.

practice of photography would be embraced by all of the gallerists and curators discussed in this chapter.[153]

Newhall *et al* would also share with Stieglitz an interest in establishing historical roots and sources for photography and modern art. Four years before Van Wyck Brooks enjoined the search for a "usable past," Stieglitz and members of his circle were already investigating historical sources for modern art.[154] Like Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Paul Rosenfeld, and Randolph Bourne, Brooks was a member of the so-called Young Americans, many of whom were, in the years after World War I, satellites of the Stieglitz circle.[155] According to Brooks, "root" was a particularly important word during the period. He later wrote of his group that, "no other word was more constantly on their lips unless it was native 'soil' or 'earth.'"[156] Sarah Greenough writes that the Young Americans, like many of the artists represented by Stieglitz, "sought to come to terms with both their European heritage and their American experience and to construct an art that was intimately a part of their time and place."[157] Because he believed Americans had no "cumulative culture," Brooks encouraged artists and writers to seek models wherever they might be found, even if they had to be invented.

It was this desire for roots, for a legitimizing history, that incited photographers to seek nineteenth-century forebears, and led painters to look to "primitive" art for

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[153] Russian, German, and Eastern European proponents of Modernism, such as El Lissitsky, Alexander Rodchenko, and László Moholy–Nagy also saw photography as the defining medium of the era. See Christopher Phillips, "Resurrecting Vision: The New Photography in Europe Between the Wars," in Hambourg and Phillips, *The New Vision:* 65–108.
[154] Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial LXIV* (April 11, 1918), 337–41.
[155] Greenough, "Alfred Stieglitz, Facilitator, Financier, and Father, Presents Seven Americans," in *Modern Art in America*, 293.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 280.

inspiration. An exhibition of African art that Stieglitz presented at 291 in 1914 reflects this interest in alternative sources. The masks and carved wooden objects included in the show, amassed by de Zayas in Europe, were similar to those housed at the Musée du Trocadero in Paris that several years earlier had inspired Picasso and the *Fauves* to experiment with simplified "primitive" forms.[158] *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art* is credited as the first exhibition to present African sculpture as "art," as opposed to ethnographic material. It was certainly the first held at an avant-garde gallery, preceding similar exhibitions in Paris by two years.[159] While African sculptural form was inarguably an important source for the *Fauves* and other modernist painters, Helen Shannon contends that it also had a significant influence on modernist photographers.

> While a source for artists of all media, the sculpture at Stieglitz's gallery may have had its most immediate innovative impact on the development of American modernist photography. Stieglitz's clouds and Paul Strand's bowls and fences could count their genesis in the Negro statuary at 291.[160]

While the degree of influence African art had on Stieglitz and Strand in that period is debatable, Shannon's contention certainly speaks to the eagerness of photographers and other artists to escape the constraints of artistic convention and find fresh sources of inspiration wherever they could be found.

Photographers were perhaps more concerned with constructing a usable past, however, than with finding non-traditional sources of inspiration. Since photography did not have a long and illustrious history to legitimize it, as did painting or sculpture, one

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[158] Shannon, 169.
[159] Ibid., 169–70.
[160] Ibid., 179.

essentially had to be invented.[161] In this vein, Stieglitz proclaimed Scotsman David Octavius Hill the first art photographer, and forefather of the Photo-Secessionists.[162] Although they had not been a direct inspiration to the group in its early years, Hill's photographs were published in *Camera Work*—as well as exhibited at both 291 and in the landmark 1910 Photo-Secession exhibition held at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo—as evidence that art photography indeed had a history.[163] Alvin Langdon Coburn, a member of the Photo-Secession and a frequent contributor to *Camera Work* in its early years, expanded upon this idea in 1915 when he organized a touring exhibition entitled *Old Masters of Photography* which featured the work of Hill, Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Carroll, and William Keith.[164] A thinly veiled attempt to demonstrate that like painting, photography had a long tradition complete with "Old Masters," the exhibition posited a plausible artistic heritage for modern photography.[165]

Such a desire for origins, for a continuous history from which modern art and photography could be seen to have descended, would also be central to Barr's early curatorial strategy at MoMA, as well as to that of the Julien Levy Gallery. MoMA would follow Stieglitz's precedent some twenty years later by exhibiting African art, Meso-American art, folk art, and early American paintings as modernist sources. In much the

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[161] In "A Mnemonic Art? Calotype Aesthetics at Princeton," *October 26* (Fall 1983), 37. Christopher Phillips discusses Newhall's adoption of nineteenth-century photographers as ancestors for Modernist photographers, but does not mention that this move was first made by Stiegltiz and his circle.
[162] Greenough, *Modern Art in America*, 543. *First Exhibition of British Photographers* held February 21, 1905 to March 7, 1906, included work by J. Craig Annan, Frederick Evans and portraits by D. O Hill and Robert Adamson.
[163] Jay Bochner, *An American Lens: Scenes from Alfred Stieglitz's New York Secession* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 40–43.
[164] Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Catalogue of An Exhibition of the Old Masters of Photography Arranged by Alvin Langdon Coburn* (Buffalo: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy/Albright Art Gallery, 1915).
[165] Coburn remarks, "It is quite astonishing how 'modern' in tendency the work of this little gathering of workers really is." Ibid., 3.

same fashion, Newhall would include "primitive" photographers from the nineteenth century in his 1937 exhibition to provide a lineage for photographic modernists.[166]

Alfred Barr

By the mid 1920s, as new exhibition strategies and photographic styles migrating from Europe became more pervasive, 291 was no longer the only venue for photography or modern art in New York. [167] In 1926, Katherine Drier, an artist and patron of modern art, organized the first large-scale exhibition of modern art in the city since the 1913 Armory Show. Mounted at the Brooklyn Museum, the *Société Anonyme* exhibition included work by artists from twenty-three countries, and highlighted figures as diverse in approach as Giorgio De Chirico, Marsden Hartley, Georges Vantongerloo, Ferdinand Leger, and El Lissitsky.[168] In addition to painting and sculpture, the exhibition featured tapestries, examples of American folk art, two Rayographs by Man Ray, and eight photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, including four prints from his *Equivalents* series.[169] For Dreier, and for many of the European modernists featured in the exhibition, photography, film, architecture, and design were as important to the modern project as were painting and sculpture. Although she was not convinced, as were Alexander Rodchenko or Lázsló Moholy-Nagy, of the utter centrality of photography, Dreier nevertheless exhibited the

[166] I am indebted to Douglas Nickel for elucidating this connection between Stieglitz and MoMA. In "A Mnemonic Art? Calotype Aesthetics at Princeton," *October* 26 (Fall 1983), 35–62, Christopher Phillips discusses how Newhall and Adams adopted Timothy O'Sullivan as a forebear to Adams, and how John Szarkowski categorized nineteenth-century photographers with no knowledge of art traditions as "primitives."
[167] See Hambourg, *New Vision*, for a thorough accounting of the various galleries and venues for modernist photography in New York in the period, as well as of the different approaches to the medium that emerged.
[168] Ruth Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 51.
[169] Ibid., 57.

work of Man Ray and Alfred Stieglitz alongside that of Kandinsky, Leger, and Duchamp.[170] The inclusion of photography in the Brooklyn exhibition is significant, as it was a rare early instance where photographs were hung alongside paintings in an exhibition. Photography had not been part of the Armory Show, and as discussed above, Stieglitz and other gallerists had before that time tended to segregate photographs from works created in other media.[171]

Not surprisingly, the Brooklyn exhibition was not well received by the public—it did not herald the widespread embrace of modern art in America as Dreier had hoped.[172] However, one attendee in particular—the young Alfred Barr—was enthralled by what he saw in Brooklyn.[173] Then a professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, Barr had discovered modern art in the early 1920s, and encouraged his graduate advisor at Harvard, the eminent Paul J. Sachs, to take an interest in it as well.[174] By 1926 Barr was well acquainted with American and French proponents of Modernism, but it was in Brooklyn that he first became aware of the Bauhaus and was exposed to the work of Lissitsky, Rodchenko, and Moholy-Nagy.[175] Inspired by Dreier's model, Barr organized his own exhibition of modern art at Wellesley in 1927.[176]

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[170] Hambourg, 38.
[171] David Travis, *Photographs from the Julien Levy Collection Starting with Atget* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1976). Travis includes in his appendix a list of all exhibitions of photographs in New York between 1929 and 1940.
[172] Bohan, 123.
[173] Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of MoMA* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 112.
[174] Elisabeth Sussman, "Taking a Risk: The Blueprint for a MoMA," in *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 10.
[175] Kantor, 112.
[176] Ibid., 117.

Around the same time, Sachs's younger students at Harvard began following Barr's lead and discovering modern art for themselves. Among the vaunted cohort that studied in the Fine Arts Department at Harvard in the late 1920s and early 30s, two of the most notable to the history of photography (besides Beaumont Newhall) were Lincoln Kirstein and Julien Levy.[177] While undergraduates, both men were introduced to Barr, who had remained close to Sachs after completing his coursework. The younger men admired Barr, who advised and tutored them in modern art.[178] Crucial to the instruction they received from him was the concept of interdisciplinarity, which Barr had appropriated from a professor of medieval art at Princeton, and applied to Modernism.[179] Of his embrace of non-traditional media, Maria Morris Hambourg writes:

> Barr became convinced that he must study not just modern painting, but the entire bazaar of contemporary art, and he accepted without hierarchical distinction architecture, design, decorative art, sculpture, painting, prints, typography, photography and film.[180]

Visiting Dreier's *Société Anonyme* exhibition had redoubled Barr's enthusiasm for the interdisciplinary model, as it was the first time he had seen this concept, so integral to his own thinking, put to practical use in an exhibition.[181] Both Kirstein and Levy also embraced the multimedia approach, and believed that film and photography were especially suited to modernist aims. In an essay about the Harvard Modernists, Steven

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[177] Hambourg writes, "In the early thirties others organized major exhibitions that demonstrated the multivalent tendencies of the medium; it would be difficult to overstate the importance of Lincoln Kirstein and Julien Levy in this regard." Hambourg, 52.
[178] Kantor, 86
[179] The influence of this medieval course on Barr's philosophy, taught by Charles Rufus Morey, is mentioned in most of the literature on the Harvard modernists, including Steven Watson, "Julien Levy: Exhibitionist and Harvard Modernist," Ingrid Schaffner and Lisa Jacobs, eds. *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), 86, and Hambourg, 41.
[180] Hambourg, 41.
[181] Kantor, 112.

Watson argues that such a holistic approach to modern art corresponds with values the young men acquired in college.

> In our age of blinkered fiefdoms, the Harvard modernists' collaborations across disciplines and across professions are striking. They were not strenuously aspiring to be 'interdisciplinary,' knowing about art, literature, and music was part of being a modern gentleman, and Harvard provided a milieu (not in its formal curriculum, but in the circle of modernists) that superseded strict professional divisions.[182]

Bolstered by the model of the Bauhaus, whose precepts were then gaining currency in America, the Harvard Modernists' interest in non-traditional media went beyond that which Stieglitz had promoted in the early days of 291. Unlike Barr, Kirstein, and Levy, Stieglitz was concerned primarily with expressive art—he had little interest in functional or popular art, what contemporary cultural critic Gilbert Seldes termed the "lively arts," and by the 1920s had narrowed his focus to a small group of artists working largely in painting and photography. Although they were all initially inspired by Stieglitz, the Harvard Modernists' interests quickly extended beyond his narrow purview to include photographs made for purposes beyond "art."[183]

When Barr became director of MoMA, his dedication to interdisciplinarity was inscribed in his goals for the museum's future. In his so-called 1929 plan, Barr wrote that as the museum grew it would eventually house curatorial departments of photography, film, industrial art, commercial art, graphic design, dance, and architecture, in addition to

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[182] Watson, 88.

[183] This is particularly significant, for, as it will be come clear in a subsequent chapter, Ansel Adams and Beaumont Newhall purposefully rejected the Bauhaus approach and followed a Stieglitzian paradigm in their early exhibitions at MoMA, rankling many in the New York photography world who considered such a stance to be retrograde.

painting and sculpture.[184] He remained true to his word: by 1942, four of these proposed areas had their own departments, and the other three were the subject of frequent exhibitions and growing collections. As early as 1930, Barr had lobbied to feature photography in an exhibition of American art at the museum, but he was overruled by the Board. Despite his efforts to bring in photography sooner, it was not included in an exhibition at MoMA until 1932, after Kirstein had joined the museum's Junior Advisory Board and helped Barr convince the Trustees that it was a worthy museum subject.[185]

Lincoln Kirstein

To counter the disinterest Harvard's Fogg Museum showed towards modern art, in 1928 Lincoln Kirstein and two friends started the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art (hereafter HSCA).[186] Although both Sachs and the Fogg were supportive of their efforts, the HSCA was not allowed to exhibit at the museum, as the museum could not be seen as condoning the controversial new art for fear of alienating its more conservative patrons.[187] Kirstein was the driving force behind the HSCA. Having started the much-touted "little magazine" *Hound and Horn* as a freshman, he had the skills and connections necessary to secure loans from artists and collectors. His interest in photography is evident in the magazine, in which he published reproductions of

[184] A. Conger Goodyear, *MoMA, The First Ten Years* (New York: Privately published, 1943), 137–39. By 1942, the museum had departments of architecture, film, industrial art, and photography.
[185] Ibid., 139. Goodyear does not explain why the Board did not allow Barr to show photography in the Museum's second exhibition.
[186] Sussman, "Taking a Risk: The Blueprint for a MoMA," 10. Kirstein's partners at the HSCA were John Walker III and Edward [Eddie] M.M. Warburg.
[187] Ibid.

photographs by Ralph Steiner and Walker Evans, among others, as well as several historically significant articles on photography.[188]

The HSCA's exhibitions are often characterized as a blueprint or dress rehearsal for later programming at MoMA, as many of its first exhibitions were eventually reprised in revised form at the museum.[189] While the HSCA prefigured MoMA in many crucial respects, it was, in fact, Barr who had inspired the founding of the HSCA. Ingrid Schaffner writes that Barr and Sachs had instilled in their students a recognition of the need to reconceptualize the traditional museum model in order to accommodate Modernism, and it was Kirstein who first put these ideas into practice.

> The interdisciplinary interests articulated by Barr and Sachs established a distinct direction for the Modernist institution that was not present in a traditional art museum. Without presenting in-depth exhibitions, the Society more importantly outlined a blueprint for coverage that a full-fledged modern museum might provide.[190]

Thus, the HSCA demonstrated to the founders of MoMA what a modern museum might look like, what it might exhibit, and how the public might receive it. Upon seeing the HSCA's inaugural exhibition, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, one of the three founders of MoMA, is said to have told Sachs, then a trustee of that fledgling museum, that she

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[188] In 1931, the year after the *International Photography* exhibition at the HSCA, Kirstein published Walker Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound and Horn* 5, no. 1, in Alan Trachtenberg, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*, 185–188), and in 1933, Charles Flato's "Matthew B. Brady 1823–1896," *Hound and Horn* 6 (October–November 1933), 35–41. Both articles suggest the move away from Stieglitz then taking place, and the search for other traditions besides that of the Photo-Secession.

[189] Kantor, 197, and Sussman, 10.

[190] Ingrid Schaffner, "Alchemy of the Gallery," in *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*, in Schaffner and Lisa Jacobs, eds. *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), 11.

wanted him to "copy in New York '*en gros*' what they were doing" at Harvard.[191] Thus, in a circular fashion, Barr's own pupil had paved the way for his future career at MoMA.

As with Katherine Dreier's show in Brooklyn, the HSCA's first exhibition also included photography, albeit only one print. In a nod to Stieglitz's influence on American Modernism, Kirstein featured a photograph Stieglitz took of his wife Georgia O'Keeffe, along with the work of many of the artists he had introduced at his various galleries.[192] The exhibition was intentionally conservative; as Barr would write, it was "admirably calculated not to offend even the most backward."[193] In an effort to establish trust between the HSCA and its potential visitors and patrons, the first exhibition presented what Kirstein and his peers considered a welcoming and unchallenging selection of modern art. That Stieglitz was the only photographer included is thus telling: while Kirstein considered him the "dean" of American photography, he also felt that his work had ceased to define the cutting edge.[194]

In 1930, Kirstein upset the applecart and moved beyond Stieglitz's example by presenting at the HSCA a survey exhibition of photography that featured some of the most avant-garde work created in the United States and Europe.[195] According to Maria Morris Hambourg, it was the first exhibition to "demonstrate the confluence of European, utilitarian, and artistic trends that was beginning to occur in photography in the United

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Hambourg, 43. Artists represented from the Stieglitz circle included O'Keeffe, Marin, and Sheeler. Hambourg writes that Kirstein, "singled out Marin and O'Keefe as the most original artists. These remarks indicate Kirstein's debt to Stieglitz, which he later acknowledged."
[193] Kantor, 204. *Film und Foto* was the first major Bauhaus–style photography exhibition. It was international, and included hundreds of photographs by contemporary photographers from around the Western world.
[194] Kirstein, "Photography in the United States," in Cahill and Barr, eds., *Art in America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1935), 145.
[195] *International Photography*, HSCA, November 7–29, 1930.

States."[196] Although Kirstein had not visited the groundbreaking Bauhaus-inspired *Film und Foto* exhibition mounted in Stuttgart the year before, he had devoured the related books by Moholy-Nagy, Franz Roh, and others that made their way across the Atlantic.[197] Through these books, and with the encouragement of Barr, who had seen *Film und Foto* while on a research trip, Kirstein had become versed in the most current photographic trends emerging from Europe. Taking a cue from the exhibition in Stuttgart, he featured both photography consciously created as art, such as the work of Edward Weston, Charles Sheeler, and Paul Strand, and other applications of the medium, including x-rays, scientific photographs, news photographs, portrait daguerreotypes from the 1850s, and advertising photographs.[198]

Although Newhall failed to mention the HSCA in his memoirs, it is quite likely he was aware of the group's photography exhibition, as it was held soon after he had begun his Masters program at Harvard. When the exhibition opened, he was enrolled in Sach's now famous course, "Museum Work and Museum Problems," and it is doubtful that Sachs would have neglected to inform his students about the exhibition, especially when they were, as was Newhall, expressly interested in photography.[199] Further, structural similarities in the HSCA show and Newhall's 1937 exhibition suggest that he had seen it. For instance, the "Contemporary" section of Newhall's exhibition and catalogue featured many of the photographers and photographic applications first shown by Kirstein. In fact, Newhall included two-thirds of the individual photographers

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[196] Hambourg, 44.
[197] Ibid., 43.
[198] Ibid., 44. Also, Sussman, 12.
[199] Newhall discusses his experience in Sach's course in *Focus*, 26–29.

Kirstein had exhibited, omitting only one who is well known today.[200] In addition, he dedicated sections in his exhibition and catalogue to each of the individual photographic applications Kirstein highlighted.

Kirstein established curatorial precedents that were also followed by some of Newhall's other Harvard classmates who organized exhibitions of photography at museums on the East Coast in the early 1930s.[201] For example, a version of the HSCA exhibition traveled at the end of 1930 to the Wadsworth Atheneum, which was directed by another high-profile Harvard modernist, Everett "Chick" Austin. It also inspired exhibitions organized in 1932 at the Brooklyn Museum and at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo, the latter run by Gordon Washburn, another of Newhall's Harvard classmates. Of the significance of these exhibitions, Maria Morris Hambourg writes:

> These three exhibitions [at the HSCA, the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Brooklyn Museum] were precursors of the inclusive, nonsectarian attitude toward contemporary photography and its antecedents at MoMA.[202]

Hambourg suggests that in 1937 Newhall adopted a methodological approach similar to these earlier Bauhaus-inspired exhibitions, which featured a mélange of styles and photographic applications. Although she does not mention whether Newhall had seen the earlier exhibitions—or whether they directly influenced his work—it can be inferred that at the very least he was cognizant of the manner in which these exhibitions were organized and the artists that were included. If he didn't see any of these exhibitions in person, perhaps Newhall learned of them from brochures or catalogues donated to

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[200] Newhall omitted Arthur Gerlach, Pirie MacDonald, Tina Modotti, Sherril Schell and Doris Ulmann.
[201] Hambourg, 52
[202] Ibid.

MoMA's library by museum patrons.[203] Whatever the case, it is highly unlikely that Newhall was not influenced in some fashion by the HSCA exhibition or its progeny, as he would have been the only Harvard-trained art historian of that era interested in photography who was not.

Julien Levy

Another Harvard Modernist instrumental to the promotion of photography in the 1930s was Julien Levy. After dropping out of college and abandoning the prospect of joining his father's lucrative real estate business, Levy went to Paris with Marcel Duchamp, whom he had met at a Brancusi exhibition Duchamp organized in New York.[204] In Paris, Levy's already heightened interest in photography and film came into full flower when he befriended the American expatriate Man Ray, and through him met the elderly photographer Eugène Atget, whose prints Levy would purchase in great numbers and later exhibit in the United States.[205] Returning to New York with an invaluable background in contemporary European art and photography, Levy took a job in 1927 at the Weyhe Gallery in Manhattan with the influential art dealer Carl Zigrosser, whom he soon persuaded to publish a book on Atget and organize an exhibition of the

[203] The Brooklyn Museum, the Albright Gallery, and the HSCA all produced brochures of their photography exhibitions. The library at MOMA was started from collections donated by several Trustees and benefactors.
[204] Travis, *Photographs from the Julien Levy Collection Starting with Atget,* 11. Levy purchased a piece of Brancusi sculpture from Duchamp on behalf of his father, and struck up a friendship with the French artist.
[205] Travis, 11–14. Levy would help Berenice Abbott purchase Atget's archive after his death in 1929, and was instrumental in organizing the first exhibitions of Atget's work in the U.S.

Frenchman's work.[206] A close friend of Stieglitz's, Zigrosser was the primary American source for information on the Bauhaus. He was a central figure in the New York art scene and an appropriate mentor for an aspiring gallerist with a keen interest in Modernist photography.[207]

Convinced that photography was undervalued and in desperate need of a promoter, Levy made it the focus of his own gallery, which he started in 1931.[208] He planned to champion not the "straight" photography of the likes of Stieglitz and Strand, but the more experimental avant-garde work beginning to appear in other galleries in New York, some of which he had encountered in Paris.[209] Nevertheless, to celebrate the opening of his gallery, Levy mounted an homage to Steiglitz and his generation, a selection of historical and contemporary photographs entitled *American Photographs: A Retrospective Exhibition*.[210] The exhibition acknowledged the debt contemporary photographers owed to the Pictorialists and Photo-Secessionists, who had fought for the acceptance of photography as an art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[211] Levy felt that young photographers were particularly indebted to Stieglitz, who had championed art photography when it was an unpopular cause. Levy himself admired Stieglitz, and asked for his counsel as he made plans for the exhibition, writing:

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[206] Schaffner, *Alchemy of a Gallery*, 26. The book was *Atget: Photographe de Paris* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1930). The exhibition was held in November and December of 1930 at the Weyhe Gallery.
[207] Hambourg, 38.
[208] Schaffner, 30.
[209] Ibid., 21. According to David Travis's list of photography exhibitions in New York, before Levy opened his gallery in November of 1931, the Delphic Studios had shown the work of Moholy–Nagy, Doris Ullmann, Edward Weston, Anton Bruehl, Cecil Beaton, and others, and the John Becker Gallery had a group show featuring Ralph Steiner, Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke–White. Travis, 90.
[210] Schaffner, 32.
[211] Travis, 15.

> I have so much to tell you, and to ask you, and many pictures to show you. I am more anxious for your approval than that of any man I know...all my exhibitions are planned except the first. For that I am awaiting your orders. How about calling the show 'Retrospective Exhibition of American Photography'? Will you let me know as soon as possible whom you wish included and whom excluded? [212]

By celebrating Stieglitz and his circle, Levy shrewdly sought to gain credibility for his fledgling project.[213] However, as Stieglitz's influence had waned considerably by 1930, mere association with him would not have insured success for Levy's gallery.[214] Further, his true passion was for the work of photographers such as Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Berenice Abbott, all of whom Stieglitz had dismissed as second-rate.[215] What celebrating the work of Steiglitz and his circle could accomplish, however, was the establishment a foundational lineage for the more avant-garde work Levy was planning to exhibit in the future, even if the artists he represented had never heard of Stieglitz. Thus, by associating his gallery with Stieglitz, Levy attempted to demonstrate that the work of the contemporary photographers he promoted had not appeared from out of nowhere, but had descended from a tradition with an illustrious history—a usable past.

Levy's interest in history was unusual for a gallerist at the time.[216] In his review of the inaugural exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery, which he mistakenly writes was organized by Stieglitz, *New York Times* art critic Edward Alden Jewell remarked that it was "probably the first really successful attempt to give a synthetic picture of

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[212] Levy to Stieglitz, September 11, 1931, Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University [YCAL].
[213] Schaffner, 34.
[214] Hambourg. 52
[215] Ibid.
[216] Travis, 15.

photography's development in America, and as such deserves wide public attention."[217] It is in this uncommon concern for lineage and history that Levy's *American Photography* exhibition most clearly prefigures Newhall's 1937 exhibition. Unlike Kirstein's exhibition at the HSCA, which was an ahistorical Bauhaus potpourri of photographic applications old and new, Levy's inaugural exhibition strived to historically ground both his gallery and the work of the young photographers he intended to promote. Even if, as Steven Watson contends, "Levy may have been the least interested [of the Harvard Modernists] in academic art history," he was nevertheless acutely aware of the benefits of establishing a history for photography and Surrealism, his twin passions. Writes Watson, "…older art interested him primarily as a possible precursor of Surrealism, for instance, sixteenth-century Giuseppe Arcimboldo as a model for Dali."[218]

Levy may indeed have been uninterested in academic art history, but he certainly was not a member of the ahistorical school that considered Modernism a profound break from the past. Like Stieglitz before him, Levy recognized that history could be employed to legitimize contemporary photography by demonstrating that even the work of the most radical Modernists could be traced to earlier models. Writes Watson:

> The Harvard Modernists did not employ exclusively the avant-garde's model, which cast modernism as a break with the past, minimizing historical precedents. Regarding Modernism as part of art historical progression, the Harvard group explored the links between the past and

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[217] Edward Alden Jewell, "Synthetic View on Photography," *New York Times,* November 11, 1931, 33. Stieglitz wrote to O'Keeffe that Levy, who had consulted closely with him on the exhibition, had "certainly made a mess of things—being not quite accurate in his statements trying to make it look as if I were running his first show—It is getting him into trouble but I told him to go ahead—he should stick to facts and not be afraid of the mistakes he has made—so he is going ahead." Stieglitz to O'Keeffe, October 28, 1931, YCAL.

[218] Watson, 92.

> present. This reflected, to an extent, the historical emphasis that dominated all academic training, not only Harvard's.[219]

Like Barr, and later Newhall, in their exhibitions at MoMA, Levy was concerned with demonstrating how historical progression and stylistic precedent could account for current trends in modern art. At his gallery he promoted the work of the avant-garde as well as that of photographers who came before them, such as Atget, Félix Nadar, and Mathew Brady, whose work Levy saw as prefiguring, and thus legitimizing, Modernism. Although he did not develop this line of thinking into a fully-realized academic theory, as would Newhall, Levy appears to have been one of the first to apply such an art historical attitude to exhibitions of photography in America.[220]

Establishing a historical lineage for Modernist photography was central as well to Newhall's exhibition strategy in 1937. As had Levy and Kirstein, he chose to feature earlier photographers whose work could be seen as proto-modern, prefiguring the concerns of the best contemporary photographers. Douglas Nickel writes that these photographic ancestors were cherry-picked as representatives of the past because their work appeared to affirm the concerns of the present:

> Newhall saw his delineation of history leading directly to what he considered the best work being done by his modernist peers. Their aesthetic idea was monolithic: sharp focus, a full range of tones, clarity of detail, no darkroom trickery. [221]

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[219] Ibid., 90.

[220] Kate Ware writes: "…what looks to our present day eyes to be a safe course of action was, in fact, quite extraordinary. Exhibitions of historic photographs were even rarer then those of contemporary work in the 1920s and early 1930s." Kate Ware, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2006, 33.

[221] Nickel, "The History of Photography: The State of Research," 552

Significantly, of the four photographers Newhall would choose to highlight in the section of his catalogue entitled "Early Photography, 1851-1914," Atget, Nadar, André-Adolphe-Eugène Disderi, and Brady, three had previously been included in exhibitions organized by Levy and Kirstein. In fact, Levy had organized the first U.S exhibition of photographs by Nadar and Atget, and in 1933 Kirstein had published an influential article by Charles Flato about Brady in *Hound and Horn*. It is likely that Atget, Brady, and Nadar would have been unknown to Newhall if not for the interest Levy and Kirstein had taken in them several years earlier.

In Atget and Brady, whose work was known to only a handful of people in the early 1930s, Kirstein and Levy, following the lead of their friends Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans, found affirmation for the emerging types of Modernist photographs that deviated from Stieglitz's model**.** Critically, and in stark contrast with his later work at the museum, Newhall in his 1937 catalogue appears to have followed Kirstein, Abbott, Evans, and Levy in promoting Brady and Atget at the expense of Stieglitz's previously monolithic position in the history of American photography. Newhall dedicates discreet sections to Brady, Disderi, Atget, and Nadar, but gives short shrift to Stieglitz, mentioning him only in relation to the Photo-Secession, which he characterizes as unduly "guided by the example of painters and draftsman," rather than by photography itself.[222] Although Newhall's neglect of Stieglitz in the catalogue and exhibition can partly be attributed to the fact that Stieglitz had rejected Newhall's request to serve as an adviser on the project and refused to lend any prints to the exhibition, it is also likely the case that

[222] Newhall, *Photography 1839–1937*, 64.

Newhall, inspired by the work of his Harvard classmates, was emboldened to look beyond Stieglitz for models and predecessors whose work was more in line with the concerns of contemporary photographers. [223]

Due largely to Levy and Kirstein's efforts, in the early 1930s Stieglitz began to see Atget as something of a threat to his legacy, as the Frenchman came to be widely considered an unsung master. For example, in a review of an exhibition of Stieglitz's photographs at An American Place, *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell piqued Stieglitz and members of his circle by writing "Mr. Stieglitz sticks to 'straight' photography, thus carrying on the great tradition of the Frenchman, Atget and others."[224] Stieglitz and a devotee, the writer Herbert Seligmann, wrote defensive letters to the newspaper attempting to remedy what they saw as an egregious error. Stieglitz wrote:

> Until seven years ago I never knew of Atget's existence and that is forty-three years after I had begun to photograph…Atget I doubt ever knew of my existence—and yet he may have—I don't know. My being of the Atget tradition is rather misleading.[225]

Printed in the same edition of the paper was a significantly less polite response from Seligmann, who strenuously attempts to bolster Stieglitz's legacy.

> [I]t is idle, I suppose, to expect intelligence from any one who can write of Stieglitz that his is "carrying on the great tradition of the Frenchman Atget and others.' As a matter of history and fact this statement is false. As a characterization of Stieglitz's photography it is imbecile. Stieglitz's early photography preceded Atget in point of time. In achievement, Stieglitz has formulated and kept on formulating and solving problems Atget never dreamed of.[226]

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[223] See next chapter for details of Stieglitz's rejection of Newhall in 1937.
[224] Edward Alden Jewell, "The Week in New York: A Roster of Recently Opened Shows," *New York Times,* February 21, 1932, 10.
[225] Alfred Stieglitz, "Correspondence," *New York Times,* February 28, 1932.
[226] Herbert Seligmann, "To the Art Editor," *New York Times,* February 28, 1932.

After Newhall's exhibition opened at MoMA in 1937, critic Lewis Mumford, a close friend of Stieglitz's who was clearly unaware that the photographer himself had insured that his more recent work would be absent from the show, questioned why he was so woefully underrepresented:

> …the most important modern photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, is not represented in this show by any of the work he has done in the last twenty-five years. An amazing omission that at least called for explanation in the catalogue.[227]

In defending the threatened reputation of his friend, Mumford felt the need to characterize Stieglitz categorically as "the most important modern photographer," implying that there existed not a pantheon of photographic masters, as Newhall's exhibition suggested, but a single one: Stieglitz.

Levy's embrace of Atget and Brady in addition to Stieglitz reflects his exceptionally catholic tastes, which allowed him to appreciate the work of a wide range of artists, styles, and media. Perhaps the best indication of Levy's flexibility as it pertains to photography is the statement he wrote for the first exhibition in the United States of the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, which was held at his gallery in 1933.[228] Using the nom de plume Peter Lloyd, Levy addresses the challenge of exhibiting Cartier-Bresson's photographs, certain as he was that the photographic triumvirate formed by Stieglitz, Strand, and Charles Sheeler would disapprove. In the guise of Lloyd, he wrote that it would appear out of character for the Levy Gallery to show Cartier-Bresson:

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[227] Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker,* April 3, 1937, 38.
[228] *Photographs by Henri Cartier–Bresson and an Exhibition of Anti–Graphic Photography*, Julien Levy Gallery, September 25–October 16, 1933.

> [B]ecause you have championed, since the beginning of your Gallery, the cause of photography as a legitimate graphic art: because you may bring down upon your head the wrath of the great S's of American photography whom you so admire.[229]

Nevertheless, he argues, Cartier-Bresson's work was worth promoting, as there was no reason to choose sides between what he termed "septic" and "antiseptic" photography. Levy thus proclaimed it possible to appreciate the work of "the great S's of photography"—Strand, Sheeler, and Stieglitz—while at the same time giving equal attention to figures such as Cartier-Bresson, Evans, and Abbott, who had chosen a different path. "There is no reason why your gallery would not fight for both sides of a worthy cause," he wrote, suggesting that in order to best champion the cause of photography as a "legitimate graphic art," he would need to exhibit both the "antiseptic" work of the straight photographers who followed the lead of the "Great S's" as well as the "septic" photographs by the likes of Cartier-Bresson. Whereas some would have considered this a heretical position, Levy saw it as an ideal towards which to strive. In *A Staggering Revolution*, John Raeburn argues that Levy "meant to advertise that he had 'thrown the S's over'" with the exhibition and the accompanying statement.[230] Levy's own writings suggest, rather, that he embraced both "straight" and more experimental photography simultaneously. He considered Stieglitz and Marcel Duchamp his spiritual "godfathers," and such a dualism was part and parcel of his modus operandi for the

[229] Travis, 20.
[230] Raeburn, 55.

gallery.[231] He later wrote that even Stieglitz understood, though "in a grumpy way," what he was trying to achieve.[232]

Newhall's wife, Nancy, would later write that her husband had a similarly open-minded curatorial philosophy, noting that he felt it "the duty of a MoMA to present clearly and vividly the work of both the living masters and of the young insurgents," even if that meant alienating members of both camps in the process.[233] Although it would be a stretch to claim that Newhall had adopted a non-partisan approach after Levy's example, it is worth noting that despite his later devotion to Stieglitz and his curatorial philosophy, Newhall included the work of Bresson in his 1937 exhibition, and continued throughout his life to embrace a wide range of photographic styles and practices, many of which Stieglitz had shunned. Levy had set a precedent for such an exhibition strategy, and Newhall, directly or not, followed.[234]

In 1932, three years before Newhall joined MoMA's staff, Kirstein and Levy worked together on the first exhibition at the museum to include photography. Kirstein, who had been asked by the museum's trustees in 1930 to join their Junior Advisory Board, had proposed that MoMA reach out to struggling American artists by sponsoring a competition, the prize for which would be a high-profile commission for a mural at Rockefeller Center, which was then under construction.[235] As the exhibition was to include work by both painters and photographers, Kirstein asked Levy to enlist the

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[231] Peter Barberie notes that the use of dialectical pairs was a common surrealist trope. Barberie, "Found Objects, or a History of the Medium, to No Particular End," in Katherine Ware, ed., *Dreaming in Black and White,* 124.
[232] Archives of American Art oral history interview of Julien Levy by Paul Cummings (May 30, 1975), 13.
[233] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, unpublished manuscript, CCP/Newhall, 23.
[234] Phillips, "The Judgment Seat," 22.
[235] Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1977), 114.

photographers in his stable to participate. Unrelated to the fact that photographs were included in the exhibition, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* was an unmitigated critical and political disaster. Expressing the opinion shared by most reviewers, one critic wrote that "in sheer dismal ineptitude the exhibition touches bottom."[236] The internal reaction to the exhibition was no better, as the inclusion of a painting by Hugo Gellert depicting John D. Rockefeller, President Hoover, and Henry Ford alongside a machine-gun toting Al Capone, standing behind stacks of money bags, infuriated the museum's exhibition committee, from which several members threatened to resign.[237]

Levy considered the exhibition a failure for more personal reasons. Although he later acknowledged "not only did my photographers have good exposure, but the show was to give a considerable boost to the cause of photography as an art," he was appalled by Kirstein's duplicitous behavior in relation to the competition.[238] In his memoir, Levy recounts that Kirstein had assured Edward Steichen the prize before asking Levy to recruit other photographers to contribute, neglecting to inform him that the winner had been decided in advance. Upon discovering the truth, Levy found himself in the unfortunate position of having advanced considerable expenses to several photographers towards the creation of murals that had no chance of winning the contest.[239] Despite his frustrations with Kirstein, Levy was buoyed by the fact that photographers had finally been given an opportunity to exhibit at MoMA.

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[236] Royal Cortissoz, as quoted in Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 38–9.
[237] Lynes, *Good Old Modern* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 100.
[238] Levy, 114.
[239] Ibid., 114–115.

Despite the bad press, Barr also felt that the exhibition marked a significant milestone, as it was not until Kirstein had joined the Junior Advisory Board that Barr found the support he needed to convince the Trustees that photography was worthy of inclusion at the museum.[240] Although it was hardly an auspicious maiden voyage for photography, the exhibition provided a platform from which Levy and Kirstein would set precedents for future exhibitions of the medium at MoMA. In the essay about photomurals he penned for the catalogue, Levy constructs his own brief version of a progressive history of photography, suggesting that the medium had only recently evolved to the point of being an art form on a par with painting, an idea Stieglitz had elaborated as early as 1899.[241]

> The history of the photo-mural repeats in a condensed span of time the history of photography, first as a primitive in the service of economic realism, then self-consciously imitating painting and the graphic arts; yesterday using the actual photographic medium as basis for expression, and only today in this present exhibition inviting recognized artists in the medium to study the new problem and contribute to their projects.[242]

Making a case for the advantages of photography, Levy contends that photomurals were particularly suited to the decorative needs of the "modern architect and builder," as they were inexpensive, quick to make, and easy to remove, unlike painted murals.[243] He ends his essay by asking a question central to photographic Modernism both of the Stieglitzian

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[240] Hambourg, 55.
[241] Stieglitz, "Pictorial Photography," *Scribner's Magazine* 26 (1899), in Greenough and Hamilton, eds., *Alfred Stiegltiz: Photographs and Writings*, 185. Stieglitz details the evolution of photography from mere craft to expressive art form, perhaps taking a cue from Peter Henry Emerson, who was apparently enamored of Darwin's evolutionary model. For an explicit connection to Darwinism, see also J.C. Warburg, "Photography and Natural Selection," *Camera Work* 6 (1904), reprinted in Jonathan Green, *CameraWork: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Aperture, 1973), 40.
[242] Levy, "Photo–Murals," in Lincoln Kirstein, ed. *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 12.
[243] Ibid.

and Bauhaus variety: "what can the photograph present that is not better rendered in paint?"[244] Speaking to the Modernist concern with truth to medium, he essentially advocates employing the unique characteristics of photography to solve a given artistic problem, rather than imitating painting. Although he was certainly not the first to articulate such a concern for "straight" photography, Levy essentially codified the approach at MoMA, establishing it as the ethos that would shape exhibitions of photography at the museum in the future. He argued, in sum, that photography could hold its own at the museum only if it stayed true to what the camera did best—that it was only by being different from painting that photography could be its equal.

Although he came to it largely on his own, this was to become Newhall's philosophy as well.[245] Following Levy, and guided by precedents Barr had established in previous exhibitions at the museum, Newhall carefully constructed a past from which Modernist, "straight," photography could be seen to have evolved.[246] Although it was a past full of gaps—completely devoid of early material from Germany, for example—it nonetheless proved sufficient to his agenda.[247] On how this concern with truth to medium fit into Newhall's methodological scheme, Douglas Nickel writes:

> The operative principle was what came to be a hallmark of formalist criticism, namely, that each medium had its own unique properties and should be judged according to its fidelity to internally specific criteria… The net effect was a history constructed as a teleology. If the only good or true photography was 'straight,' then the history of photography would be

[244] Ibid.
[245] Newhall, *Focus*, 33.
[246] Nickel, 552
[247] Due to the escalation of the war in Europe, Newhall was unable to visit Germany to acquire work for the exhibition**.** Newhall, *Focus*, 49.

> a chronicle of the medium's erratic climb from primitive intuition to modern day aesthetic self-knowledge.[248]

In other words, unlike Kirstein and Levy, who had proclaimed Mathew Brady and Eugène Atget progenitors of Modernism and left it at that, Newhall took Van Wyck Brooks's idea of a usable past to the extreme, constructing an entire history of photography designed to make contemporary trends appear inevitable. In order to do so, he downplayed or eliminated aspects of the history that did not fit his needs, and chose to highlight the work of photographers who did.[249]

Two years after the *Murals* debacle, Kirstein wrote a brief history of photography in America that was included in *Art in America: A Complete Survey*, co-edited by Barr and Holger Cahill, who was then National Director of the Federal Arts Project.[250] Alan Trachtenberg writes that Kirstein's essay was "the first serious effort to describe American photography as a subject in its own right."[251] As such, Kirstein seems to have followed the lead Levy established with his 1931 *American Photographs* exhibition. In the essay Kirstein argues that Brady was "America's first great photographer," but at the same time he acknowledges Stieglitz's importance to the medium's history. He characterizes Stieglitz as the "dean of American photographers," but suggests, as would Newhall in 1937, that Stieglitz's Photo-Secession was less than fully liberated from nineteenth-century aesthetics than others had suggested. Although they had mostly abandoned soft-focus Pictorialism, Kirstein contends, the Photo-Secessionists still

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[248] Nickel, "The History of Photography: The State of Research," 552.
[249] Ibid.
[250] The essay was also presented by Kirstein in 1935 as a radio Address on NBC. Raeburn, 27n15.
[251] Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 232.

"played heavily on atmospheric effects and sentimentalized subjects."[252] Newhall would similarly downplay the group's importance, writing in 1937 that they were "guided by the example of painters and draftsman," rather than by photography itself.[253]

Beaumont Newhall

When a trustee gave MoMA five thousand dollars in 1936 to produce an exhibition of photography, why did Barr choose Newhall, then the museum's librarian, to organize it, instead of Kirstein or Levy, who had vastly more curatorial experience and a longer history at the museum? Like Barr, Levy, and Kirstein, Newhall had studied with Sachs. Although he had attended Harvard in the same years as Kirstein and Levy, he does not seem to have been part of their elite clique, a member of their so-called family.[254] Like the other two, Newhall had taken an early interest in photography, aiding his mother in her darkroom when he was a boy.[255] He was more bookish and serious in his study of art history than were Levy and Kirstein, who admitted they were involved in the arts as much for the fame and proximity to important people, as for their dedication to the avant-garde. On this subject Kirstein would later write:

> As an adventurer…I embraced the advance-guard taste of Alfred Stieglitz and progressive Manhattan galleries. Essentially this was opportunism. The fun was in the energy expended in a crusade, and the opportunities this afforded to have contact with movers and shakers. [256]

On Levy's own desires for notoriety Ingrid Schaffner writes:

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[252] Kirstein, "Photography in the United States," in *Art in America: A Complete Survey*, 145.
[253] Newhall, *Photography 1839–1937*, 64.
[254] Steven Watson, "Julien Levy: Exhibitionist and Harvard Modernist," in Ingrid Shaffner and Lisa Jacobs, eds., *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998),82.
[255] Newhall, 10.
[256] Kantor, 126.

> [B]y his own account, Levy, a young man from New York's upper middle class who had been happily seduced from the family business by bohemia, was in it for fame.[257]

Newhall was more concerned with the scholarly than the social. He also had more at stake than did either Kirstein or Levy, who were both independently wealthy and did not depend on employment for their survival.[258] Unlike the others, Newhall was primarily concerned with pleasing Barr, whom he greatly admired, and with ensuring himself a job during those lean Depression years. It is not surprising, then, that the exhibition of photography he organized at MoMA would be more art historical than those produced by Levy and Kirstein a few years earlier. Barr wanted an art historical exhibition, and Newhall was an art historian on his staff who had the background and interest necessary to organize it. Barr recognized that Newhall was essentially his man, whereas Kirstein and Levy were fiercely independent and not easily managed. Further, by 1937 both were less interested in photography than they had been in the early years of the decade.[259]

Some of the main differences between Newhall's exhibition and those organized by Levy and Kirstein can be attributed to the fact that MoMA was a different species of institution than were either the HSCA or the Julien Levy Gallery. The priorities and goals of museums are obviously different from those of galleries, and although Levy contends that Barr was jealous of the flexibility and nimbleness of galleries such as his—

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[257] Schaffner, 26.
[258] Beaumont Newhall, 30–31. Before going back to graduate school in 1933, Newhall lost a job at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and then one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art due to budget cuts.
[259] Levy had difficulty making any money selling photographs, and Kirstein became increasingly more interested in Latin American art and ballet than in photography.

that they stole his thunder[260]—Barr felt that galleries did not have what his biographer Sybil Gordon Kantor characterizes as the "institutional strength to fulfill the purposes he envisioned."[261] Barr addressed a profoundly larger and more mainstream audience than did either Levy or Kirstein, and unlike the other two he considered public education one of his top priorities. As with Katherine Dreier before him, Barr's goal was to proselytize about Modern art to as wide an audience as possible. Accordingly, Russell Lynes writes that Barr approved of Newhall's plans for the 1937 exhibition because of its didactic slant:

> [S]uch a (historical) program fitted precisely with Barr's scheme of using the museum as a means of educating the public not merely in what was new in the arts but in how they had evolved and where they seemed to be heading. This was the approach he had used in the Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism show with such success.[262]

Newhall's exhibition was thus keenly in accord with Barr's goals for the museum. It was historical and didactic, and presented the history of photography in a manner comprehensible to a general audience, not just to connoisseurs. Where Levy and Kirstein had offered avant-garde art in small-scale exhibitions to elite patrons, Barr presented comprehensive, scholarly, and didactic exhibitions to the masses that effectively institutionalized what was once considered avant-garde. Barr made Modernism a part of the history of art, and Newhall aligned photography to it.

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[260] Levy, *Memoirs*, 137. "First of all, he resented a gallery that had more mobility than his museum, that could move faster in making finds and decisions. He complained to me about it. He wanted to give novelty shows, but a gallery like mine took the novelty out of his hands by giving the shows before he did. He might have been envious, but not rightfully so, because the gallery is traditionally supposed to be more experimental and temporary, the museum slightly slower, more permanent."
[261] Kantor, 366.
[262] Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 156.

Although Kirstein and Levy were among his most illustrious peers, Newhall rarely refers to Levy, and only mentions Kirstein briefly in his memoirs.[263] In a 1986 article entitled "The Challenge of Photography to This Art Historian," Newhall makes one of his few references to Levy:

> I also learned a great deal about the early days of photography from the extraordinary exhibitions held by Julian [sic] Levy in his New York art gallery. He had been inspired by Alfred Stieglitz, and it was his hope to create a small gallery along the lines of '291.' There I saw original prints for the first time of Eugene Atget and Nadar.[264]

He writes in the same article that he was uncomfortable being labeled the "Father of the History of Photography," because his work was indebted to so many other historians who had come before him. In retrospect, it is clear that he also followed precedents set by Levy and Kirstein, establishing the foundations for a wider photographic canon as well as a curatorial philosophy that, although inspired by the Bauhaus, emphasized the historical lineage of Modernism in photography. As will be explored in subsequent chapters, Newhall's methodology moved away from that of Levy and Kirstein and back toward Stieglitz when he began working with Ansel Adams to devise a plan for a department of photography at the museum.

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[263] Ibid., 43.
[264] Newhall, "The Challenge of Photography to This Art Historian," in *Perspectives on Photography: Essays in Honor of Beaumont Newhall* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 4.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE IN A ROCK: ANSEL ADAMS ON DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY AND POLITICS

"The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude."[265]

—George Orwell

At the turn of the twentieth century Alfred Stieglitz carefully marked off expressive photography as a genre above and separate from vernacular uses of the medium, particularly the political.[266] Freedom from quotidian social or political purpose was a key quality he used to differentiate "art" photography from popular forms. This was in large part a strategic move, motivated by the rapid proliferation of the medium that had been sparked in the 1890s by the introduction of Kodak snapshot cameras. Once developments in photographic technology enabled anyone with opposable thumbs to operate a camera, Stieglitz sought to secure elite status for expressive photography by designating it as a realm specially reserved for artists. Like many artists and intellectuals of his generation in the years following World War I, Stieglitz similarly disparaged art with an explicit political message, favoring the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of artistic expression and generally disavowing politics out of disillusionment resulting from the failure of liberalism during the war.

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[265] Orwell, "Why I Write," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 4.
[266] Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writing*, 237.

In the 1930s, following Stieglitz's lead, Ansel Adams maintained that politics had no place in art. Unlike his friends and fellow San Franciscans Willard Van Dyke and Dorothea Lange, who felt morally obligated to address in their work the social injustices they witnessed during the Depression, Adams clung tightly to the apolitical Stieglitzian ideal. In this period it was impossible to avoid the political, however, and Adams soon discovered that denying political causes drew as much attention to them as does embracing them outright would—a realization that led him to soften his stance against political engagement. In order to assess how Adams's values informed the exhibition program of the Department of Photographs at MoMA in the early years, as well as how his experiences at the museum shaped his own views, this chapter examines his fraught engagement with leftist politics and "documentary" photography before the department's founding.

Adams and Weston on Politics

As early as 1931, Adams expressed concern over the intersection of politics and photography. In an article about Edward Weston published in the *Fortnightly* he wrote categorically, "photographic conceptions must be unencumbered by connotations—philosophical, personal, or suggestive of propaganda of any form."[267] Three years later, however, he recognized the restrictive limitations of his earlier stance and substantially softened his rhetoric. Although he maintained that "all art is delicate propaganda of some sort," he qualified that statement by concluding: "but I do not feel that direct propaganda

[267] Adams, "Photography," *The Fortnightly,* December 18, 1931, 21-2.

succeeds except in the injury to the aesthetic potentials."[268] Adams believed that art and politics had to remain separate or art would suffer.

Adams differentiates between two kinds of propaganda: an indirect variety, which he elsewhere characterizes as "comment," and a direct sort—the explicit promotion of a particular political agenda. These are, of course, subjective categories—one man's comment is another man's propaganda—but of primary interest here is not his definition of the terms themselves but the fact that he insists on their polarity. As we have seen, throughout his career Adams tended to conceptualize difference in opposing terms: Pictorialism versus straight photography, art versus document, or creative versus commercial photography. Although he occasionally acknowledged that most photographs did not fit neatly into a single category, Adams's discomfort with ambiguity generally led him to compartmentalize. For example, writing under the heading "Photography as an Instrument of Social Progress," he argued for a narrow interpretation of expressive photography that obviated any indistinctiveness, suggesting that it was a lack of clear definitions that caused ambiguity about the nature of photography, and not vice versa. He wrote:

> First, we have two opposing statements:
> Photography is a form of art
> Photography is not a form of art
>
> Second, we have two more opposing statements:
> Propaganda is a function of art
> Propaganda is not function of art

[268] Adams, "An Exposition of My Photographic Technique," *Camera Craft* XLI, no. 4 (April 1934), 180.

> Third, we have another set of oppositions:
>
> Social significances are more important than aesthetic significances
> Aesthetic significances are more important than social significances
>
> I shall establish my argument on the acceptance of photography as a form of art, on the conviction that propaganda is not a function of art, and on the belief of the supremacy of aesthetic significances [*sic*] in all art expression. I suppose this brands me as a complete conservative. So be it. However, before final judgment is passed and the Guillotine of disapproval is tripped, let me present a timid fact—all photography need not have purely aesthetic intentions.[269]

As he felt it was crucial to establish the difference between art and non-art in order to ensure public acceptance of photography as a medium of personal expression, he zealously argued for the codification of these differences, even at the risk of self-contradiction.

Adams's views on the separation of art and politics were shared by many artists and writers from the end of World War I into the early 1930s. As Richard Pells writes in *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, after the war many artists felt that "liberalism had been irrevocably shattered by its support of the war and Versailles, [and] renounced political action altogether."[270] Pells contends that many saw art as a "sanctuary for pure ideas and feelings which would be invulnerable to political manipulation."[271] He uses the credo of *Hound and Horn*, the "little magazine" founded by Lincoln Kirstein in 1927, to evoke the formalist, apolitical ideals shared by many artists and writers in the period.

> Criticism has no meaning and no value until a work of art has first justified itself esthetically, until it is accepted as a work of art. A sound philosophy will not produce a great work of art and a great work of art is

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[269] Adams, "Photography as an Instrument of Social Progress," in Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, CCP/Newhall. Unpaginated section of excerpts drawn from Adams's correspondence.
[270] Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), 11.
[271] Pells, 34.

> no guarantee that the ideas of the artist are sound. Consequently, our standard for judging the art is technical. We demand only that the given work should be well done….[272]

Pells writes that "this tendency to assess works of art primarily in aesthetic terms was part of a general revolt against ideology" that instead advocated valuing form over content. Proponents of this movement such as Adams and Stieglitz would certainly have agreed with the cultural critic Gilbert Seldes when he wrote "it is the passion itself, not the object of passion, which counts."[273]

Concern over the destructive potential of propaganda was shared by many liberals in the 1920s. As Pells has observed:

> Behind the desire to discuss art apart from its social consequences lurked the belief that, in America at least, conditions were relatively stable. Ideology was therefore unnecessary. 'Propaganda' seemed not only harmful to culture but irrelevant to society. Yet this may have been less an objective appraisal of contemporary possibilities than a reflection of the intellectual community's own state of mind during the 1920s. For much of their approach toward art was shaped by the experiences they had undergone since 1917.[274]

The use of progressive ideals to justify the war as a moral cause had left many creative people disillusioned with politics, causing them to seek refuge in the "purer" realm of arts and letters. Again using Kirstein's *Hound and Horn* as an example, Pells writes that many liberal magazines suggested the artist's postwar role was critical to shaping the future of American society. He contends that these magazines,

> [I]nsisted on the intellectuals' almost messianic responsibility to save civilization, to stimulate in their readers a moment of mystical conversion in which each man became a part of an 'organic' society, to nourish a prophetic

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[272] Kirstein, "Comment," *Hound and Horn* 3 (October-December 1929), quoted in Pells, 34.
[273] Gilbert Seldes, "Letter on Russian and American Movies," *New Republic* (August 7, 1929), 317. Quoted in Pells, op cit.
[274] Pells, 35.

> vision of the new commonwealth based not on political intelligence but on art and the moral imagination.[275]

Like Stieglitz, Kirstein, Seldes, and countless other intellectuals of the period, Adams shared this belief that art was a spiritual practice capable of transforming society for the better.

During the Depression, however, many artists came to feel that creating art devoid of social meaning was irresponsible. Considering the suffering of their fellow Americans and the dire economic and political situation facing the nation, many photographers broke out of their apolitical cocoons in the early 1930s to lend their cameras to the purpose of reform, if not revolution. By bearing witness to the injustices of the system and documenting the conditions under which their fellows suffered, these photographers believed they could contribute to the eventual amelioration of the crisis. Many, like Adams's friend Dorothea Lange, worked for reform-minded government agencies such as the Farm Security Administration or the Soil Conservation Service. Others, such as Paul Strand and Willard Van Dyke, embraced Marxism, blaming the ills of the nation on the capitalist system, and called for revolution.

According to Pells, during the Depression moderates like Adams "would find themselves increasingly doomed to irrelevance," condemned by radicals for clinging to outmoded nineteenth-century values and "obsolete Jeffersonian ideals."[276] Criticized by radicals for creating work without a social message, Adams vented his frustration in letters to Weston, who held similar beliefs about maintaining a barrier between art and

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[275] Ibid., 38.
[276] Ibid., 53.

politics. Regarding calls to contribute his photographic skills to alleviating the profound humanitarian crises of the period, Adams famously wrote to his friend in 1934:

> I still believe there is real social significance in a rock—a more important significance therein than in a line of unemployed. For that opinion I am charged with inhumanity, unawareness—I am dead, through, finished, a social liability, one who will be 'liquidated' when the 'great day' comes.[277]

He concludes by referring to Stieglitz's position on the subject and enumerating his own opinion of art's true purpose, which he contends is strictly expressive and aesthetic.

> You and I differ considerably in our theory and approach, but our objective is about the same—to express with our cameras what cannot be expressed in other ways—to trust our intuition in respect to what is beautiful and significant—to believe that humanity needs the purely aesthetic just as much as it needs the purely material. Stieglitz has dynamically maintained this point of view. Your shells will be remembered long after Evans's picture of two destitutes in a doorway.[278]

Adams retained a Keatsian sensibility, continuing despite the social and economic turmoil to believe that art should fundamentally be about beauty and truth.[279] He averred that it should embody universal values and provide aesthetic pleasure, as did Weston's shell pictures, rather than trafficking in quotidian misery, as did much of the work created under the banner of "documentary," such as Walker Evans's photographs of "destitutes." Like Stieglitz and many members of his circle, Adams maintained what Wanda Corn terms an "idealistic belief in art, both for the maker and the audience, as an inward and

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[277] Adams to Weston, November 29, 1934, CCP/Edward Weston [EW].
[278] Ibid.
[279] In a letter to Adams written in 1963, Dorothea Lange gibes him, asking whether he was "still worshipping the same Gods of Beauty and Truth." Quoted in Sandra Phillips, "Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams," in *Ansel Adams, New Light: Essays on His Legacy and Legend*. (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1993), 51.

upward journey out of the prosaic and ordinary."[280] Many of Adams's peers, however, considered such a stance to be shortsighted—if not misanthropic—and they negatively compared his disinterested photography to the socially engaged variety.

Robinson Jeffers, whom both Adams and Weston knew intimately, expressed in his poetry and fiction a worldview that appears to have furnished Adams with a philosophical basis for arguing that his work was, in fact, humanistic. After meeting the writer in 1927 through his early patron, Albert Bender, Adams took to quoting the poet in his own writing, a practice that would continue throughout his life.[281] For example, soon after he met Jeffers, Adams wrote to Bender, "I have been reading a good deal of Jeffers whenever I have the chance…the power and vitality of his verse blends so perfectly with the rugged mountains, I think he is great."[282] Anne Hammond contends that reading Jeffers helped Adams wrestle with the existential anguish he experienced as a young man attempting to reconcile what she terms a "seemingly meaningless universe" with "the underlying unity in the human construct of beauty," and that Adams found comfort in Jeffers's assurances that there existed a greater, cosmic order.[283]

In 1948, Jeffers put a name to the congeries of ideas he long had been addressing in his work, describing it as:

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[280] Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 29-31. She is referring here to the so-called second circle, namely Dove, O'Keeffe, Hartley, Marin, Demuth, and Strand.
[281] Jeffers used a portrait by Adams as the frontispiece to his 1928 *Poems*, and Adams used a quote from Jeffers as wall text for the opening of his gallery in 1933.
[282] Ansel Adams to Albert Bender, July 25, 1927, as published in Mary Street Alinder and Andrea Gray Stillman, eds., *Ansel Adams: Letters 1916–1984* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1988), 35.
[283] Hammond, 18.

> [A] certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to notman; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence…. This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimistic…. It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.[284]

In many respects, Adams's infamous quote about the transcendental significance of a rock dovetails with Jeffers's philosophy of inhumanism. Raised an agnostic, Adams was drawn to spiritual teachings that emphasized human unity with nature, rather than the traditional Christian duality.[285] In his autobiography he wrote glowingly of the poet's views on the subject: "Jeffers saw man as inseparable from nature; thus man must conduct himself accordingly or he is doomed. Jeffers was a prophet of our age."[286]

"The Answer," written by Jeffers in 1936, perhaps best expresses the monistic sensibility that attracted Adams to his work, as well as to that of Edward Carpenter and the Theosophists, who similarly wedded ideas taken from various Eastern religions to an idiosyncratic variety of Whitmanesque transcendentalism.

> The Answer
>
> Then what is the answer?—Not to be deluded by dreams.
> To know that great civilizations have broken down into violence,
> and their tyrants come, many times before.
> When open violence appears, to avoid it with honor or choose
> the least ugly faction; these evils are essential.
> To keep one's own integrity, be merciful and uncorrupted
> and not wish for evil; and not be duped
> By dreams of universal justice or happiness. These dreams will
> not be fulfilled.

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[284] Jeffers, *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 1948), vii.
[285] See Hammond, *Divine Performance* for a discussion of Adams's theosophical leanings.
[286] Adams, *An Autobiography* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), 87.

> To know this, and know that however ugly the parts appear
> the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand
> Is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth and stars
> and his history....for contemplation or in fact...
> Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,
> the greatest beauty is
> Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty
> of the universe. Love that, not man
> Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions,
> or drown in despair when his days darken.[287]

Jeffers's admonition against considering man "apart" from nature, as well as his rejection of utopian or revolutionary fantasy clearly resonated with Adams. When his stance against political art is read through Jeffers's poetry—particularly the poet's warnings against becoming mired in human misery, utopian fantasy, or factionalism—Adams's belief that Weston's shells would have more long-lasting significance than Evans's "destitutes" can no longer simply be seen as a symptom of misanthropic insensitivity, as some critics have charged.[288] With Jeffers's words as his guide, Adams would argue that photographing rocks was a humanist endeavor, contending that contemplation of the scale and eternal verities of the natural world could provide solace to the tortured human soul.

Weston, a close friend and neighbor of Jeffers, similarly averred that landscapes were inherently humanistic. In 1938, after he and Adams had been negatively compared

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[287] Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1936).

[288] In several letters to Stieglitz, Adams either quotes Jeffers or encourages his mentor to read the poet's work. It is unclear whether Stieglitz ever did. Paul Rosenfeld wrote of Jeffers to Stieglitz on October 3, 1930: "Please tell Georgia that [Lewis] Mumford thinks that a period which produced Robinson Jeffers cannot be considered anything but a great one. I was so shocked that I borrowed *The Women At Point Sur*…and am going to force myself to read it." Stieglitz wrote back on October 5, 1930, "As for Jeffers—I told Georgia what Mumford says. She laughed." Stieglitz/O'Keeffe/YCAL. It is unclear whether Mumford actually liked Jeffers's work, or was simply mocking it.

to their more socially engaged peers for avoiding human subjects, Weston wrote to Van Dyke of his conviction about the value of landscape.

> It seems so utterly naïve that landscape is not considered of 'social significance' when it has a far more important meaning to the human race of a given locale than excrescences called cities. By landscape I mean every physical aspect of a given region—weather, soil, wildflowers, mountain peaks—and its effect on the psyche and physical appearance of the people."[289]

Such a belief in the social import of nature was also central to the ideals of the Stieglitz circle, whose "own identity was derived, above all," writes Celeste Connor, "from the American landscape."[290] The Stieglitz circle's "democratic New Realism," argues Connor, "encouraged artist and audience to identify with the land and to imagine being an integral part of it, rather than take the detached stance conventional in Renaissance art."[291] Following the example of Henry David Thoreau and his Walden, most members of the circle adopted rural redoubts with which they personally identified: Stieglitz with Lake George in upstate New York, Arthur Dove with Connecticut, John Marin with Maine, and Georgia O'Keeffe with New Mexico.[292] In like fashion, Adams and his work would become synonymous with Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada, as would Weston's

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[289] Edward Weston to Willard Van Dyke, April 18, 1938, CCP/Willard Van Dyke [WVD]. Sandra S. Phillips writes that this letter refers to an introduction to a book that was to be called *Five American Photographers*. Though the text is now lost, Phillips writes that in it Weston and Adams were characterized by the author as "old-fashioned mystics, not truly contemporaneous as was Lange because of their unwillingness to take on contemporary events in a political framework." Phillips erroneously states that the author was Ben Maddow, when it was, in fact, David Wolff. "Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange," in *Ansel Adams, New Light,* 56. Letter published in its entirety in *The Letters Between Edward Weston and Willard Van Dyke* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, 1981), 34-6. Weston sent a copy of this letter to Adams, who wrote "Your analysis of what 'Landscape' means to you is masterful." Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, April 25, 1938, CCP/EW.

[290] Connor, *Democratic Visions: Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 111.

[291] Ibid., 112.

[292] Ibid., 116.

photographs with the rugged Carmel coast. Of course, as Leo Marx has demonstrated, this desire for retreat from the modern world into a pastoral realm has roots stretching back to the origins of American arts and letters.[293] Marx lists James Fenimore Cooper, Thoreau, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, and Ernest Hemmingway as examples of American writers who have been moved by this "pastoral impulse."[294] Inspired by the examples of Whitman and Thoreau in particular, many members of the Stieglitz circle should also be considered part of this tradition.

Adams's resistance to engaging with contemporary issues also stemmed, at least in part, from his rejection of radical politics, which he felt motivated the creation of much so-called documentary photography. In 1934 and 1935, he and Weston exchanged numerous letters on this subject. Adams wrote to Weston of his distaste for and distrust of leftist rhetoric, particularly the expectation that artists should automatically embrace Marxist dicta. Although his political opinions were inarguably lacking in nuance—again, he was something of an absolutist—Adams was not, as Lange and others would have it, a complete political naïf.[295] In a letter to Weston he wrote:

> I've been thinking a lot of your attitudes towards the people who expect you to be a good Bolshevik and photograph all the plants in the vestibule of revolution. Goddam. I am getting tired of just the same thing— of being called 'dead' because I do not include social material and subjects of 'class significance.' I want to tell you I feel as you do about it— I am sore all over at what I consider to be a major example of 'duping.' The 'Intelligensia' have proven a swell tool for 'left' political activity— and swallow the thing whole.[296]

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[293] See Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
[294] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 10. Also see Connor, *Democratic Visions*.
[295] Sandra Phillips, "Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange," in *New Light*, 58, n23.
[296] Adams to Weston, postmarked August 6, 1935, CCP/EW.

The above passage demonstrates that he had at least a superficial understanding of the basic concepts and terminology of Marxism, if only because he had repeatedly heard them from leftists bent on his conversion.

Such a vehement reaction raises the question: why—particularly when a great many of their close friends and colleagues embraced it in some fashion—did Weston and Adams, who were, relatively speaking, politically liberal, so heatedly reject Marxism?[297] After due consideration, Weston—who had many friends in the movement and agreed with some of the fundamental tenets of Communism—asked himself the same question in his daybooks. "What has conditioned me to draw back from Communism?" he wondered, responding:

> It might be easier if I had been born under a czar, but living in a democracy, watching the antics of popular rule, people fooled by demagogues, bullied by their own paid hirelings, police, soldiers, politicians: the destruction of personal liberty by mass minds, the perpetuation of the weakling, the vulgarization in every walk of life, the cheapening by popular approval. A sensitive person is either swallowed and lost in the grey dead level, or becomes militantly an individual, or retires to an ivory tower….I realize that I have been so conditioned by my fight as an individual in a back-slapping, mob-spirited, intolerant, self-righteous, familiar, evangelistic, regulating, leveling 'democracy,'—that the very thought of collectivism, community ownership, of one another actually sickens me, literally….I believe, I know, that the mass, the proletariat, hates the artist, the intelligensia,—would gladly tear him to pieces.[298]

Significantly, Weston here relates "mass," "popular," "cheap," "vulgar," and "leveling" with collectivity; for him Communism represented a leveling down that he believed

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[297] See Anne Hammond, *Divine Performance*, 17.

[298] Edward Weston, *Daybooks*, 256. Earlier in the same entry he lists the ideals with which he agreed: "Is Communism the solution? Despite the splendid arguments in its favor, many of which I can agree to, indeed have always held to,--equal opportunity for all, not admitting that all are born free and equal,--the destruction of money value, doing away with the need for making money,--the shortening of necessary working hours by collectively owned machines, leaving time for the individual to develop himself."

would spell the death of expressive art. Weston, like Adams and Stieglitz, disparaged mass taste as "vulgar," considering it adverse to the kind of art he aspired to create. For example, in 1932 he wrote of popular art:

> [B]etter chance the taste of a temporary figurehead than that of the 'sovereign people' which is always bad en masse. Today the artist is forced into an isolated, unappreciated existence unless he caters to popular vulgarity.[299]

Weston saw Communism and its promotion of mass art as antithetical to his strongly held belief in individualism. He felt that revolutionary ideals posed a threat to his freedom to produce art as a form of personal expression, and was willing to risk ridicule from his peers in order to maintain his artistic autonomy.

Adams was similarly inclined, but his concerns appear to be more deeply inflected with class anxiety than were Weston's. Raised in a politically liberal upper-middle-class family that had recently become downwardly mobile, Adams clung tightly to bourgeois values.[300] Throughout his life he took great pains to ensure that he was considered an artist, and not just a lowly commercial photographer.[301] This desire to be recognized as an artist—a member of the elite—was threatened by the revolutionary dream of a classless society, where there would be no distinction between artists and other types of photographers. Adams was distressed that many of his peers were willing to surrender their autonomy and privileged status to such a cause:

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[299] Ibid., 243.
[300] On the family's economic status, see John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams at 100* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2001), 19-20.
[301] The structure and content of his autobiography, which was left uncompleted at his death, demonstrates that his desire to be recognized as an artist was truly life long.

> I think we have to stand up for the rights of the artist, and condemn the real exploitation of the artist by political and social powers. It's not that we would refuse to apply our work to the general good—but I feel that the work of the creative artist—the free and intimate expression—is much more important than any phase of direct propaganda in an artistic medium. I hate to see so many good artists going goofy over the vaguely understood future 'order'....I feel that all propaganda-expression is transitory anyway. But a rock seems to last some little time![302]

He also was clearly leery of the practical implications of revolutionary talk:

> You and I have much the same point of view on such matters; I cannot accept the 'collective' basis of art and life. There is a hell of a lot wrong with the present system, but I would rather see it worked out along reasonable lines that by violent upheaval.[303]

A firm advocate of Jeffersonian democracy, he believed that although the American system was far from perfect, it was as close as any other had come to being fair and equitable.[304] While he acknowledged that the country was experiencing a difficult period in the 1930s and expressed sympathy for those who were suffering, he did not believe the system was so irretrievably damaged that it needed to be overthrown.[305]

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[302] Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, postmarked August 6, 1935, CCP/EW. Adams later wrote: "How the American artist with an ounce of logic and objective thought in his head can dream of an individualist's Paradise under contemporary Communism remains a mystery to me; Shoshtakovich 'apologizing' for expressing himself; scientists presenting their theories to the political bureau before submitting them to their colleagues, painters being castigated for producing 'decadent imperialist abstract art,' etc.--such travesties of logic and spirit should clearly show the artist that Utopia does not lie in the direction of State control of thought and expression." Undated essay by Adams, CCP/AAA. The essay must have been written after 1936 when Shoshtakovich was denounced.

[303] Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, September 4, 1935. CCP/EW.

[304] Adams, "Letter to the Editor," *Photo Notes* (January 1948), 5. He writes, "I am no 'Communist' or 'fellow-traveler.' I don't like the domination of any creed, theory, party, or fashion. I detest fascism. I think of myself as a liberal—perhaps close to a Jeffersonian democrat. My family comes from New England; my name is not a new one to American ears—especially to Washington ears. My clan produced a couple of Presidents a long time ago!"

[305] Adams elucidates his position in a later letter to Edward Steichen: "[H]opes and dreams [of young artists] for a perfect society are in some way directed towards the mirage of Moscow. Many an artist has nourished such dreams because, as an artist and a perfectionist, he sees the lack of perfection in our social structure, and turns automatically to the hope of a greater perfection in some other political-social system. He is completely unrealistic in his interpretation of perfection. No society in history approached it, no society ever will. But how are we to present that fact that the U.S.A. presents the opportunity for perfection

In contrast, Van Dyke, a friend of Adams, a protégé of Weston, and a founding member of Group f.64, became politically active during the Depression, embracing Marxism and abandoning still photography for documentary filmmaking. In his infamous letter about the "social significance in a rock," Adams wrote to Weston of his concern over Van Dyke's conversion:

> Both you and I are incapable of devoting ourselves to contemporary social significance in our work; Willard is gifted in this respect. I have come to think of him more as a sociologist than a photographer. His photography seems to be turning into a means to a social end, rather than something in itself. I will regret it if it becomes that entirely, for he is too damn good a photographer to submerge it in anything else.[306]

A few years later, he and Van Dyke exchanged a series of letters in which they attempted to explain their beliefs to one another. Van Dyke wrote to Adams:

> But I do know that about the Marxian business you may be quite wrong. Here I feel that you are expressing an opinion that is hardly based on knowledge. Whether or not I am confused on the issue is something that you will better understand after you have spent a little time familiarizing yourself with the concepts of Dialectical Materialism. Doesn't it seem possible, Ansel, that the confusion you feel may be in your own mind? ....The talk about fresh air is only to say that the out-of-doors means a great deal to you. It doesn't mean that it is necessary for all photographers or all people. It would be nice if people could be out in the country more often. But I doubt the emphasis you place on it.[307]

Following this letter, Van Dyke attempted to expose Adams to Marxist thought by sending him issues of *USSR in Construction* and *New Theater*. In response, Adams

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and has gone further than any society towards this objective?...In other words, the fluid Jeffersonian concept of Democracy is one thing, and the sometimes static political interpretation of it is another thing. It seems to me that we have failed to make this clear to our people." Ansel Adams to Edward Steichen, July 8, 1950, CCP/AAA.

[306] Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, November 29, 1934, CCP/EW.

[307] Willard Van Dyke to Ansel Adams, March 2, 1936, CCP/Willard Van Dyke Archive. Unfortunately, the letter to which this is a response is missing.

thanked Van Dyke for the magazines, and agreed with his friend that he needed to educate himself:

> I have wanted to write you or talk to you seriously about my interpretation of your tendencies and about whatever tendencies I have myself towards a social rehabilitation. Why are you so far to the left—and why am I quite a bit farther in that direction than even you might suppose? And why do I argue about it and express what you undoubtedly think a conservative viewpoint? I don't know. I am anxious to advise you that I am really miserably impatient and worried over the conditions of contemporary life. I grant the basic logic of the Marxian doctrines (although I frankly am not in a position to discuss it clearly, as I do not 'live in it' as you and others do). That, perhaps, is my fault; I should make myself more aware of impending change—more aware of the admittedly universal thought.[308]

Like Weston, Adams concurred with many of what he understood to be the basic tenets of Marxism, and expressed his dismay at being branded a conservative simply because he refused to address social issues in his photography. He writes that his main contention with photographers who used their work to promote leftist causes was not with their political beliefs per se, but with the fact that their photographs were usually uninspired, or simply doctrinaire:

> And more power to those who are working for a betterment of the social order. My argument concerns artists who I do not think have achieved awareness of the immense force of comment based on understanding and who are satisfied with the superficialities of doctrine. To me, a large part of contemporary art is adulterated with the products of confused concept-ions and motivations. I think it is just as bad to approach economics emotionally as it is to approach emotion economically.[309]

Art and "sociology," as Adams termed it, should not be intermixed, as one would pollute the other. He was well aware that because of this personal interdiction against social

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[308] Ansel Adams to Willard Van Dyke, March 16, 1936, CCP/AAA. I thank Bill Turnage for bringing this letter to my attention.
[309] Ibid.

engagement some of his peers considered his work disconnected from modern life, and while he acknowledged that his work could benefit from a stronger link to the contemporary world, he maintained that such a connection would have to be ever so subtle, or the photographs would become two-dimensional or pedantic. He explained:

> For me, art is a means of interpretation of things which possibly cannot be interpreted in a "practical" dialect. When it attempts expression of 'practicalities it seems as futile as a mathematical analysis of a nude. Art is limited; so are philosophy, mathematics, sociology. I think the intermarriage of these classifications of human activity can easily produce shallow bastard-expressions that never clearly resolve the problem.[310]

Mixing art with practical concerns produced "bastard-expressions," he argued, which were neither artistic nor socially relevant. Social causes were best promoted through other avenues, Adams concludes, and art should remain pure and untainted, left to express ineffable, universal truths.[311]

Neither Adams nor Weston was much concerned if their friends on the left considered such an attitude bourgeois. Acknowledging that it was "about the most damning label a communist can give,"[312] Weston once jokingly wrote to Adams, "it's good to know there is another 'bourgeois liberal' in the photographic world."[313] They were not, however, the only 'bourgeois liberal' artists working in the 1930s. Throughout the Depression, Stieglitz and many members of his circle—excluding, of course, Paul

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[310] Ibid.
[311] Nancy Newhall contends that Adams experienced that "contact with life" when he had an affair with a young assistant in 1936. She suggests that the emotional repercussions led him to "see" more intensely. *Eloquent Light*, 129. This was perhaps not the kind of contact with life that Van Dyke felt Adams lacked. In his unpublished autobiography written in 1985, Van Dyke wrote that in retrospect, Adams's letter to him about politics "remains a poignant statement of the kind of perplexity that many of us felt." Willard Van Dyke, unpublished autobiography, CCP/WVD, 98.
[312] Edward Weston to Ansel Adams, undated letter from 1935, CCP/AAA.
[313] Edward Weston to Ansel Adams, April 22, 1938, CCP/AAA.

Strand—also abjured from creating baldly political work, maintaining that art should exist on a plane above politics and other quotidian human transactions. Like Adams, they were pilloried by the left for such views.

Both Stieglitz and O'Keeffe had dabbled in radical politics in the years before and immediately following World War I—as had many of their friends and fellow artists involved in the Greenwich Village scene—but had retreated from the radical movement when it became increasingly anti-intellectual in the mid-1920s.[314] O'Keeffe, who had been an avid reader of *The Masses* when it featured cutting-edge modernist art and literature, later was condemned for creating work of "social irrelevance" and "exaggerated individuality" by its replacement, the *New Masses,* which was founded in 1926 and dedicated to "proletarian realism."[315] Stieglitz and O'Keeffe were bohemians from the old school, from a time when radicalism and avant-garde expression fit hand in glove. As the movement became progressively more reactionary, however, they recoiled from it, unwilling as they were to subjugate their art to any political cause, particularly one that encouraged what they considered to be cultural philistinism.[316]

According to Sarah Greenough, for Stieglitz "art put at the service of anything but the expression of the artist's spirit was a corruption," and his unbending stance against mixing art and politics eventually caused many of his acolytes, most notably Paul Strand

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[314] Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 44-53.
[315] Connor, *Democratic Visions,* 16. Includes no reference to the exact articles in *New Masses*. Christopher Lasch writes, "*The Masses,* in many ways the highest product of prewar rebellion, owed its distinctive vitality to a combination of Socialism and 'paganism,' as Max Eastman called it. Wedded to no cultural orthodoxy, genteel or revolutionary…[it] consistently upheld a high standard of artistic excellence." Laasch, *The Agony of the Left,* 47.
[316] Ibid., 53.

and Elizabeth McCausland, to break from him.[317] The Romantic ideal of the expressive artist that Stieglitz held so dear led him to condemn art created during the period under government sponsorship, much of which was politically inflected. Despite the fact that Adams himself had actively sought government commissions and many of his closest friends, including Edward Weston and his son, Brett, had benefited from federal sponsorship during the Depression, he too bemoaned the political nature of much of the work funded by the government, writing to Stieglitz of his frustrations with "soap-box art."[318]

Walker Evans

In fall 1938 Adams was devastated to learn that Walker Evans was to be the first photographer honored with a one-man exhibition at MoMA. Beaumont Newhall was not consulted on the project, which was organized by two longtime promoters of Evans's work: Thomas Mabry, the museum's executive director, and Lincoln Kirstein, a key member of its Junior Advisory Committee and curator of the controversial exhibition

[317] Greenough and Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 236-7 n50. In a memo grouped with her letters from Stieglitz, Elizabeth McCausland wrote that she had broken from him in 1938 after he "attacked the Federal Art Project." She wrote that she had ended the friendship because she found his attacks "uncalled for from a man who lived on an unearned income." Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of Americn Art. According to Richard Whelan, Strand came to believe "a purely aesthetic approach to photography was socially irresponsible—a case of fiddling while Rome burned." *Alfred Stieglitz: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), 535.

[318] Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, May 20, 1934, Stieglitz/O'Keeffe, YCAL. "I am getting dreadfully tired of being used as a tool for radical interests—artists in the main are asked to do "Proletarian" work, photographers are asked to photograph May Day celebrations, old human derelicts in a dingy doorway, evictions, under-paid workers, etc. etc. I grant that the times are portentious, but I'll be damned if I see the real rightness of being expected to mix political economy and emotion for a purpose. I am ready at any time to offer my services to any governments-Right or Left, but I do not like being expected to produce propaganda. Half my friends have gone frantic Red and the other half have gone frantic NRA. The artist occupies a sort of No-Man's-Land. I can imagine it is much worse in New York."

Murals by Painters and Photographers.[319] *Walker Evans: American Photographs* was accompanied by the publication of an eponymous catalogue that Evans and Kirstein collaboratively sequenced, and which was supplemented with an essay by Kirstein, who used Evans's photographs to present his own highly personal and polemical critique of Depression-era America.[320]

The book and the exhibition are significant to this discussion because they appear to have spurred Adams to work with Newhall to found a department of photographs at MoMA. By giving Evans precedence, it appeared to Adams that the museum intended to favor politically motivated documentary photography over the more transcendentalist Stieglitzian branch of Modernism to which his own work belonged.[321] His anger over the museum's sponsorship of the book and exhibition stemmed in part from the fact that *American Photographs* was ideologically and stylistically anti-Stieglitz—expressly so—and from his distaste for the manner in which Evans's work was presented in the catalogue. Adams disapproved of the way in which Kirstein coyly blended art and

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[319] John Stomberg, "A Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary," in *Beautiful Suffering*, 47n 49. By 1938, Mabry and Kirstein had promoted Evans's work for many years. Kirstein had introduced Evans to Mabry, who organized a show in 1933 at the John Becker Gallery of work by Evans, Ralph Steiner, and Margaret Bourke-White. In an oral history interview conducted in 1971 Evans said he regretted locking Newhall out when the exhibition was installed. He claimed that he did so because he "didn't feel he had any need for him," and because Nancy Newhall wanted a hand in the project, and Evans "wasn't going to have any of that." Walker Evans, oral history interview with Paul Cummings, 1971, Archives of American Art, 31.

[320] *Walker Evans: American Photographs*, September 28-November 18, 1938. For extended discussion of Kirstein's use of Evans's work see Nickel, *"American Photographs* Revisited," *American Art* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 78–97.

[321] In *Divine Performance,* Hammond writes: "MoMA, he felt, was playing at social documentary without deep moral commitment, unlike his friend Dorothea Lange, who pursued documentary work without artistic pretensions but went beyond the elementary aims of the picture story." Hammond, 50–1.

politics, fact and opinion, blurring boundaries whose maintenance was fundamental to his own rigidly structured artistic philosophy.[322]

Adams saw a copy of *American Photographs* soon after it was published, and in letters to McAlpin, Weston, O'Keeffe, and Stieglitz he vented his anger over its content and what it portended for photography at MoMA. The primary objects of his ire were Kirstein's essay and the sequencing of the images, rather than Evans's photographs as such, some of which Adams characterized as "beautiful things."[323] For example, he wrote to O'Keeffe:

> I think the book is atrocious. But not Evans's work in the true sense. I agree with you that some of the pictures are magnificent—I have only seen them in reproduction, but there is a quality of photographic seeing and doing that is most agreeable and very sincere.[324]

In a letter to McAlpin, Adams lists the photographs in the book he liked the best: plates four, fifteen, twenty-seven, twenty-eight and thirty-three from Section One, and three, seven, twelve, nineteen, twenty-five and thirty from Section Two.[325] Some of his choices are difficult to fathom, such as *New York State Farm Interior*, 1931 [Fig. 3.1], which has distinctly political overtones. But if we compare some of Adams's other selections to his own work from the same period, it becomes evident that he had experimented with similar themes and subject matter. His *Ghost Town, Bodie, California,* 1938 [Fig. 3.2], and Evans's *Main Street Block, Selma, Alabama,* 1936 [Fig. 3.3], are both frontal studies of vernacular architecture. Likewise, his *Itinerant, Merced, California*, 1936 [Fig. 3.4],

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[322] Ibid.
[323] Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, November 7, 1938. As quoted in Nickel, *American Photographs Revisited*, 86.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, November 4, 1938, CCP/Newhall.

an atypical portrait by Adams, can be compared to Evans's *Coal Dock Worker*, 1932 [Fig. 3.5]. Like Evans, who was famously interested in signage, Adams photographed text and commercial lettering in his *Political Sign and Circus Posters, San Francisco,* 1931 [Fig. 3.6]. Adams's *Architecture, Laurel Hill Cemetery,* 1936 [Fig 3.7] and Evans's *Greek Revival Doorway, New York City*, 1934 [Fig. 3.8], have stylistic similarities, as do his *Courthouse, Mariposa, California,* ca. 1933 [Fig. 3.9] and Evans's *Negro Church, South Carolina,* 1936 [Fig. 3.10], over which Adams rhapsodized in his letter to McAlpin, writing that it was:

> [M]agnificently seen and photographed, apparently with magnificent technique and print quality. Evans felt something there—I am more interested in what he felt than in the building. And he felt something in terms of photography—light, placement, scale. It's wonderful.[326]

This reaction is understandable, as it is a quintessentially "straight" photograph, stylistically similar to the work produced by members of Group f.64.

Nevertheless, Adams detested the book as a whole, writing to O'Keeffe that it wasn't the photographs that irked him, but "the putting of it all in a book of that kind—mixed social meanings, documentation, esthetics, sophistication (emotional slumming), etc."[327] Adams felt that Kirstein had transformed Evans's otherwise aesthetically interesting photographs into vehicles for leftist propaganda, astutely recognizing that the political slant of the book did not represent Evans's own political views, but rather those of Kirstein, who, as Douglas Nickel has argued, co-opted Evans and his work to his own

[326] Ibid.
[327] Ansel Adams to Georgia O'Keeffe, November 11, 1938, CCP/AAA.

ends.[328] Although never a member of the Communist party, Kirstein was, as Nickel writes, "sympathetic to its humanitarian social aims, but not to its quest for power."[329] His was an "idiosyncratic political philosophy," Nickel contends, a "humanist amalgamation of the Marxist and Agrarian critiques of American society."[330] According to his biographer Martin Duberman, Kirstein's fling with socialism was a brief but intense interlude that peaked in 1932 and 1933. He suggests that Kirstein's admiration for Russia was bound to falter as "there was always the lurking, elitist suspicion that a classless society was incompatible with his highest priorities: the production of 'art' and 'taste,'" which he had promoted in *Hound and Horn*.[331] To those seriously committed to revolution, Kirstein was a parlor Bolshevik, one whose interest in Marxism was merely a passing intellectual fancy, rather than a heartfelt dedication. This distinction appears to have been obvious even to the more conservative Adams, who found Kirstein's political message to be equivocal, rather than overtly Marxist.

> But see what happens—the 'esthetes' who are mostly pink because they lack the guts to be truly red, build up a good bit of smoke about a rather damp fire. Afraid of honest sunlight, they draw comparative conclusions on the art value of document and the documentary value of art, and true art gets all mixed up with doctrine and example and 'facts.'[332]

His primary complaint, thus, was that *American Photographs* mixed art and politics, diluting both in the process.

Despite the assertion that he was angered less by Kirstein's views than by the fact that they were dishonestly coded in vague, "pink" language, Adams did, in fact, take

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[328] Ibid., 87.
[329] Ibid., 91.
[330] Ibid., 93.
[331] Martin Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 120.
[332] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, 11/4/1938, CCP/Newhall.

issue with his politics, particularly their negative cast. For example, he wrote to Weston of his distaste for the book's message, "Saw Walker Evans new book and don't like it. Same old pointed stuff—America is NOT a dump-heap."[333] In a letter to McAlpin, Adams likewise writes of his particular displeasure with the title of Evans's book:

> I have no idea but that Evans had a conception that was very subtle about the whole thing, but it does not come through. America is not that way; some of it is, but not all of it. And this 'some of it' loses impact when separated from its whole. Had the title been 'Photo-Documents of some phases of the American Scene' it would have been more logical.[334]

Although the alternative title Adams suggests is inarguably ridiculous, his point is clear: Evans had denigrated the country by implying that he had represented it as a whole. Others agreed that the book accentuated the negative. For example, Charles Sheeler wrote to Weston that there were aspects of the country that Evans neglected that were not, "all wooden gothic and sordid squalor."[335] A reviewer in the *Washington Post,* who characterized the book as an "impressive document," nevertheless wrote of it:

> Viewed in sequence the pictures present a parade of dreary, drab and depressing scenes. Holding a mirror to the face of America, Mr. Evans finds a pathetic people who seem to be listlessly content in decaying surroundings.[336]

A reviewer in the *San Francisco News*, a journal from Adams's hometown, found the book "unnecessary and cruel."[337]

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[333] Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, undated [likely from November, 1938], CCP/EW.
[334] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, November 4, 1938, CCP/Newhall.
[335] Charles Sheeler to Edward Weston, January 27, 1939, CCP/EW. As quoted in Hambourg, *New Vision*, 59.
[336] Arthur Ellis, "Camera Angles," *Washington Post,* October 2, 1938, TT11.
[337] *San Francisco News*, December 17, 1938, as quoted in John Tagg, "Melancholy Realism" *Narrative* 11, no.1 (January 2003), 44.

In a letter to McAlpin Adams elaborates further upon the reasoning behind his criticism of Kirstein's take on America.

> I repeat, America is a land of joy—more than any other land. With all the misery, all the economic troubles, and the crack-pot politicians, we are still the most liberal, best off, and most beautiful country in the world. I am very far from being 'Patriotic,' but I do resent untruths, exaggerations, false colors in relation to the land in which I work and live. Let us show everything that is false and inhuman, sordid and without hope, without alleviation of the larger fact, and our infection can only widen and deepen and eventually consume us.

Portraying despair and misery to highlight social concerns, Adams reasoned, only prompted inaction and apathy. He contrasts his own philosophical position, which stressed human and natural unity, against that of Evans and Kirstein, which almost entirely disregarded nature as a subject.

> If I feel I have any niche at all in the photographic representation of America, I think it would be chiefly to show the land and the sky as settings for human activity. And it would be showing also how man could be related to this magnificent setting, and how foolish it is that we have the disorganization and the misery that we have.[338]

The message he wished to convey in his own work was one of positive inspiration and hopefulness—a timeless view beyond politics and contemporary concerns.[339] Adams feared that this kind of photography would have no place at a museum that promoted Kirstein's view of America. He wrote to O'Keeffe:

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[338] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, November 4, 1938, CCP/Newhall.

[339] Adams would use this same positive approach in his later environmental work. Following the model of John Muir and the Sierra Club, he believed in inspiring people to protect wilderness by showing them how beautiful it is, rather than how ugly was the alternative. "Photography of the environment as a whole should be positive and truthful, revealing and discerning, and above all, it should move people to constructive action." Ansel Adams "The Role of the Artist in Conservation," *The Horace M. Albright Conservation Lectureship* (Berkeley: University of California College of Natural Resources, 1975), 8.

> Just why the museum would undertake to present *that* book is a mystery to me —although I can easily understand their presenting the finer photographs as *photographs.* Evans is certainly a sensitive and intelligent person, but goddamn motivated art (I mean consciously motivated by socio-political situations)! And that is just what this is.[340]

Adams claims he would have understood the museum's support of Evans's work if the photographs had been presented as autonomous works of art, but he could not fathom why MoMA would have promoted the radical point of view expressed in Kirstein's text and implied by his sequencing of the plates. This reaction is not surprising, as Adams maintained the traditional view that museums should be politically secular temples to expressive art, and as such, their primary concern should be aesthetic. To him, beauty was universal and timeless, whereas propaganda was inherently dated, and would invariably lose relevance to successive generations.[341] Likely unfamiliar with MoMA's exhibition history, he was perhaps unaware of the museum's openness to diverse contemporary voices. Over the course of its then short history, MoMA already had exhibited a great deal of art that was explicitly political—even Communist—including several paintings featured in Kirstein's controversial *Murals by Painters and Photographers*, which had garnered vehement criticism from inside and outside the museum for their incendiary content.[342]

Criticized in its early years for overlooking homegrown talent in favor of established European artists, the leadership of MoMA was likely attracted to the insistent

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[340] Ansel Adams to Georgia O'Keeffe, November 11, 1938, CCP/AAA.
[341] According to Adams, "the photo-document is always *dated*." Adams, *Making a Photograph*, 86.
[342] See Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 98-101. Lynes notes that since revolutionary politics and avant-garde art were often inseparable--particularly in the 1930s--the Museum was not averse to presenting politically charged work, despite the fact it was often controversial with some of its more conservative trustees.

Americanness of the subject matter and style of Evans's photographs. According to Nickel, Evans perfectly suited the museum's needs, as he was:

> …an individual photographer who could be proposed as a legitimate artist in his own right, one whose technical skill, seriousness of intent and contemporaneity were beyond question. It needed an American—an antidote to Continental formalism—and a realist, someone to counter the metaphysical romanticism of Stieglitz and his generation.[343]

Evans rejected both the high art pretensions of the Stieglitz school and the experimental nature of much contemporary European Modernism, such as the work of Moholy-Nagy or Man Ray, which was never terribly popular with American audiences and had up until that point been the type of photography most frequently exhibited at MoMA.[344] In his essay in *American Photographs* Kirstein cunningly situates Evans's work so that it appears to be a natural fit with MoMA's agenda, arguing that it was more closely related to American folk art than to the Stieglitz tradition, which was ultimately indebted to European models. "We recognize in his photographs a way of seeing which has appeared persistently throughout the American past," he wrote, suggesting Evans was tapping into a deep reservoir of indigenous precedent. He explicitly links Evans's work to folk art, writing:

> In the second part [of the book] will be found the work of Evans which refers to the continuous fact of an indigenous American expression, whatever its source, whatever form it has taken, whether in sculpture, paint or architecture: that native accent we find again in Kentucky mountain and cowboy ballads, in the compos-itions Stephen Foster adapted from Irish folk-songs and in contemporary swing-music.[345]

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[343] Nickel, "American Photographs Revisited," 94.
[344] Tagg, "Melancholy Realism," 38. In a 1971 Archives of American Art oral history interview with Paul Cummings, Evans stated that he was "photographing against the style of the time, against salon photography, against beauty photography, against art photography…even including Stieglitz."
[345] Kirstein, *American Photographs*, 198.

Such claims to ancestry in vernacular American forms were in line with contemporary efforts at MoMA to find indigenous roots and to establish American folk art as a predecessor to Modernism. Interest in folk culture, writes Richard McKinzie, was widespread during the Depression, a period when "America experienced an upsurge of nationalism accompanied by patriotic self-examination. This phenomenon included a new concern for the local, the vernacular, and the American scene—for a culture that was uniquely American."[346] Not coincidentally, Abby Rockefeller, one of the museum's founders, had a deep appreciation for folk art, and her collection was exhibited at MoMA in 1932.[347] Two subsequent exhibitions, mounted in the same year as *American Photographs,* suggest the continued significance of folk art to MoMA's project: *American Folk Art* and *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America.*[348]

In contrast, Adams would write, "the idea that photography is a folk art makes me mad. It's a profitable idea for the manufacturers and dealers….we must give photography more dignity."[349] Folk art, in his estimation, was lowbrow, or kitsch, and Evans was "slumming" in his adoption of the look of vernacular photography or folk art and in his interest in "low" subject matter. Further, he felt that Kirstein's claims for Evans's authenticity and purity were mere posturing—that Evans's photographs emulated the style of vernacular or folk documents, but were, in fact, carefully planned works of

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[346] Richard McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), xi.
[347] *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*, November 30, 1932-January 14, 1933. The exhibition was organized by Holger Cahill, who was then serving as acting director of the museum while Barr was on a temporary mental health leave.
[348] *American Folk Art*, February 2 –March 7, 1938, and *Masters of Popular Painting*, April 27-July 24, 1938.
[349] Adams, untitled letter to the editor, *Photo Notes* (March 1948), 4.

art. To Adams's way of thinking, this was "arty," and more importantly, deceptive. Significantly, Adams's rejection of both folk and socially engaged art contrasts starkly with contemporary trends featured at MoMA, and with photography in New York in general.

Tellingly, before 1938, Evans, like Adams, had been negatively compared to his peers for creating photographs that were, as William Stotts terms it, "idiosyncratic, old-fashioned, cold, insufficiently reformist."[350] Thus, perhaps Kirstein strategically deployed leftist rhetoric in his promotion of Evans, who himself was not politically engaged, in an effort to convince his audience that the photographer did, in fact, possess requisite left-wing credentials. In *American Photographs*, Kirstein writes that the "moral implication" of the work was there for "those who wish to see it."[351] Evans was not interested in confirmation as a leftist, however, but rather in differentiating his work from other "documentary" photographs.[352] Such a distinction was critical to Thomas Mabry's agenda as well, who wrote to Kirstein with sentiments about popular photography that Adams likely would have shared:

> The canonization of the commonplace that documentary photography has turned into (Margaret Bourke-White, 'Life' photographers, and much of the Federal Art Project photography) is just as bad to me as any kind of Herald Tribune beautiful baby contest photography.[353]

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[350] In Stomberg, 52.
[351] Kirstein, "Photographs of America: Walker Evans," in *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 193.
[352] Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, 198-99 "Evans, leaving the FSA in 1938, wanted to break away from such an ideology of art in the service of a cause: 'I never much liked the label that got stuck on me when I wasn't looking, of an artist rebelling against society. I had no intention of seeing my work…serve any political purpose.'"
[353] Thomas Mabry to Lincoln Kirstein, April 29, 1938, in Stomberg, 48.

In order to elevate Evans above "commonplace" documentary photographers, Kirstein and Mabry promoted him as a truthful and honest alternative to his greatest rival, the more famous Bourke-White, whose photographs they characterized as "corrupt and fake." [354] Although she is not explicitly named, Bourke-White is clearly, argues John Stomberg, the photographer against whom they compare Evans. Despite the fact that Evans was not much interested in social change, or in "Truth," for that matter, Kirstein and Mabry, who deftly orchestrated the public relations campaign for the exhibition, promoted him as the most ethical and moral photographer of his age.[355] Stomberg writes of Evans and Kirstein's agenda that:

> [T]hough this was at heart an aesthetic dispute, Evans and his friends often presented their aesthetic preferences as ethical principles, arguing that some formal approaches to photography were inherently morally superior.[356]

Thus, in what amounts to a twist on Adams's tactics against Mortensen, which involved couching an aesthetic debate in technical terms, Mabry and Kirstein disguised what was essentially an aesthetic debate as an ethical one. The desired results were the same, however: to demonstrate that their photographer was different from and superior to his

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[354] Ibid., 50.

[355] Ibid., 47-9. In an interview, John Szarkowski talks about Evans's lack of interest in social causes: "Probably the most misunderstood important photographer in American photography is [Walker] Evans. You know, people think he was photographing the Depression, people think he was photographing poor people or tried to promote social change. Walker was less interested in social change — except in his own individual case! [Laughs.] No, actually he didn't think there was anything wrong with his social situation except that he was broke, he wanted more money. Socially, he considered himself absolutely top of the pack! But what he really was photographing was something else. Very seldom did he photograph anything that he didn't think had some kind of quality. Even if it was the record of a failure, it was the record of a failure in which there was some kind of poignancy, some kind of memorable ambition. Some kind of artistic intention, even if naive or cut short. Noble failure was a constant interest of his. A piece of stamped tin ornament thrown away in the junk pile — it's a record of an artistic ambition that was for some reason cut short, thwarted, died stillborn, of course naive, but nevertheless, on some level, moving." Holly Myers and Tom Christie, "Talking Pictures: John Szarkowski On the Good, the Bad and the Flat in American Photography," *LA Weekly*, Dec. 6, 2006.

[356] Stomberg, 37.

rival. As in the case of Adams versus Mortensen, the differences were only meaningful within the narrow confines of the debate. As John Tagg writes of the moral basis of Kirstein's and Mabry's claims for Evans, ethics were not the real issue:

> The production of a difference was what Evans's supporters worked for, as part of a discursive strategy to institute a particular status for his work. Within that context, the ethical terms of the contrast have a function. Outside it, they are not only questionable, but also essentially beside the point."[357]

Despite their stylistic differences, Adams and Evans shared elite aspirations. Evans wanted to become famous, to have his work considered above and apart from conventional documentary photography, and most importantly, to be shown at MoMA.[358] Although vernacular forms were his stylistic inspirations, he saw his photographs as belonging to a higher order than popular ones. In this respect, his views were very much in line with those of Adams, who wanted to see the museum separate the photographic wheat from the chaff. The crucial difference between the two was that Evans was virulently anti-Stieglitz, equally committed in his opposition to "artiness" or Romanticism in "art photography"—which he attributed to Stieglitz—as he was to popular and commercial genres.

In *American Photographs,* Evans and Kirstein proposed an alternative history of photography, one with roots in vernacular modes and folk art, rather than in the Stieglitz circle. Kirstein's essay in the book is in some respects an elaboration on his 1934 essay "Photography in the United States," which Alan Trachtenberg contends was the first

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[357] Tagg, "Melancholy Realism," 58.
[358] Ibid., 36. "'a book about me' that the Museum 'is to bring…out as an example of the work of an artist…."

"serious effort to describe American photography as a subject in its own right."[359] In it Kirtstein writes that Mathew Brady was the first great American photographer, relegating Stieglitz to a distinctly minor role. Four years later in *American Photographs*, Kirstein asserts that Evans's roots were uniquely American, constructing for him a lineage independent of Stieglitz that reached back to Brady. His idiosyncratic version of photographic history skips over Pictorialism—for which Kirstein had nothing but contempt—and suggests that although Stieglitz, Steichen and the other members of the Photo-Secession had revolted against the ills of Pictorialism, they had never quite freed themselves from its romantic and misty tendencies, and were thus not completely modern. He claims Evans's work harkened back to a simpler time when photography was pure and untainted by a desire to paint, and in the process bypasses Stieglitz, as well as a good sixty years of photographic history.

Considering Kirstein's construction of Evans as the savior of American photography—its twentieth-century paragon—Adams's condemnation of the book is understandable. Adams saw himself as Stieglitz's standard-bearer, and his mentor's dethronement threatened Adams's own career ambitions. Adams's critique of *American Photographs* was at its core a defense of Stieglitzian Modernism, and, by extension, his own ideals, which were deeply rooted in Stieglitz' philosophy. Although Adams respected Evans's work, and included it in the major survey exhibitions he organized in the late 1930s and early 40s, he recognized that Kirstein's promotion of Evans was

[359] Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 232. Kirstein, "Photography in the United States," in Cahill and Barr, eds., *Art in America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934), 143-8.

predicated on a devaluation of Stieglitz and his followers and a negative view of America.

Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail

To add fuel to his fire, Adams's own book, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, was released around the same time as *American Photographs*, and while his usual supporters heralded it, many in the New York photography world criticized the book for being remote and cold, like the wilderness it depicted.[360] Nancy Newhall recalled the negative reaction, particularly from those affiliated with Julien Levy and Lincoln Kirstein, writing:

> To some New York intellectuals, especially the antigraphic group, to whom beauty was a sybaritic distraction and nature a sentimentality, the book was too handsome, too luxurious, even inhuman. Lincoln Kirstein, riffling through it there in the museum library, remarked, 'doesn't anybody go there?'[361]

Frustrated by such reactions to the book, Adams bemoaned left-wing criticism of his work in a letter to Stieglitz:

> Some of my left-wing friends accuse me of bowing to the rich simply because the book looks so well. It seems that the new order of society is afraid of clean hands…where-o-where are the bled pages, the lowercase type blocks, the montage and the spiral bindings with the celluloid covers??? I am thinking of doing an astronomical book some day that will be so damn modern that Moholy-Nagy will have a stroke.[362]

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[360] Nancy Newhall, *An Eloquent Light*, 165.
[361] Ibid. "Antigraphic" was a term coined by Julien Levy to refer to the work of Cartier-Bresson, as opposed to the "graphic" photography of members of the Stieglitz circle. The "antigraphic" group would have included Evans, Abbott, Bresson, Lee Miller and other artists shown at the Julien Levy Gallery.
[362] Ibid.

Adams links a particular style of modernist book design to a leftist political agenda. In contrast, he contends his more classic presentation was characterized as old-fashioned and conservative, as "bowing to the rich."[363] Despite Adams's protests to the contrary, the book was, indeed, quite sumptuous. Offered at fifteen dollars, roughly equivalent to two hundred and twenty dollars today, it was certainly accessible only to an elite audience.[364] Its jumbo size, arts and crafts lettering, and elegant design distinguish it from Evans's more modest offering, which was small and simple in comparison. Adams's highly polished book presented an American landscape devoid of any evidence of human incursion, which, appearing as it did during a period of great human tragedy, seemed remote and irrelevant to many readers, particularly Kirstein.

Formally speaking, the landscapes reproduced in *Sierra Nevada* share much in common with Stieglitz's roughly contemporaneous series of cityscapes taken from his window in the Shelton Hotel. Writing of those photographs in *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, Lewis Mumford called them "cold exhalations of a depopulated world," a description that could just as easily apply to Adams's *Sierra Nevada* photographs.[365] Similarly, Harold Clurman wrote of Stieglitz's New York pictures as:

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[363] In an oral history interview conducted in 1968, Dorothea Lange blames Albert Bender for giving Adams the idea "that an artist had to develop his patrons, and Ansel became a 'little brother to the rich,' there under Albert's guidance. Ansel became somewhat their entertainer and it wasn't good for him." Suzanne Riess, *Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer* (Berkeley: University of California, Bancroft Library/Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office, 1968), 115.

[364] Figure arrived at using inflation calculator provided by U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl. Accessed August 13, 2008.

[365] Lewis Mumford, in Waldo Frank, ed., *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, 51.

> [B]uilt up now to a pyramidal splendor, crowded, immutable, and terribly, terribly deathlike….It is a city in which man has almost completely disappeared; despite all its metallic precision, it is like an enormous graven image of some very ancient civilization in which all signs of humanity have withered and everything is wrapped in silence.[366]

Adams's landscapes in *Sierra Nevada* share this apocalyptic, post-human quality, as they too are cold, precise, and preternaturally still. His *Bishop Pass and the Inconsolable Range, Kings Canyon, CA,* 1936 [Fig. 3.11] for example, resembles in many respects Stieglitz's *From the Shelton,* 1935 [Fig. 3.12]. Composed of large masses of contrasting light and dark forms and repetitive details, like rows of windows or similarly sized rocks, they are crisp, graphic studies devoid of figures or any evidence of messy human concerns. While the skyscrapers are indeed man-made, in Stieglitz's conception they are analogous to the craggy peaks Adams pursued, and like mountains, take on an geological quality in his airless compositions. Stieglitz was not celebrating man's technical prowess by depicting skyscrapers, nor was he primarily concerned with documenting a particular historical moment—although those were surely facets of the work—rather, the photographs are studies of light and shadow, mass and space. Most importantly, however, it is in their denial of the ugly realities of American life during the Depression that both series of photographs are fundamentally unlike the work of Evans, Cartier-Bresson, and many other photographers of Adams's generation.

Despite its resolutely formal appearance, however, Adams's *Sierra Nevada* has a distinct, if largely invisible, political dimension. Many of the photographs reproduced in the book were made on Sierra Club outings in Kings Canyon, California, an area the

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[366] Harold Clurman in Waldo Frank et al., eds., *America and Alfred Stieglitz*, 272.

organization was concurrently lobbying the federal government to protect. In fact, in 1936 the Sierra Club sent Adams as an envoy to Washington, D.C., where he deftly used his own photographs to appeal to Congress to designate the area a National Park. Two years later, Adams sent a copy of his book to Harold Ickes, then Secretary of the Interior. In turn, Ickes presented the copy to President Roosevelt, who advocated on behalf of the designation, which passed in 1940.[367] Although the photographs themselves were not originally made to convince the government to preserve Kings Canyon—Adams wrote on the first page of his autobiography that he "never intentionally made a creative photograph that related directly to an environmental issue"—it was certainly one motivation behind the publication of the book.[368] This use of his photographs to campaign for an environmental cause marks a move away from Adams's earlier commitment to remaining strictly apolitical. Tellingly, however, when he criticized MoMA for publishing *American Photographs,* Adams did not mean to suggest that they should have published his book instead. Rather, as he wrote to McAlpin, he "would certainly not expect MoMA to sponsor my Sierra book because the subject is limited and a large percentage of the content is representational," meaning that many of the photographs were simply topographical documents, and not examples of his best

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[367] Adams, *Autobiography*, 1. Also in Alinder, *Biography*, 106. Nancy Newhall puts Adams's efforts in historical context, "Just as Carleton Watkins' photographs of Yosemite had convinced Congress that that 'Incomparable Valley' should be set aside as the first State Park, and William Henry Jackson's documents of the unbelievable Yellowstone had led to the first National Park, so, he hoped would his pictures help decide the issue for King's Canyon." Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 12.

[368] Hammond, *Divine Performance*, 49. "Adams clearly saw the book as combining several functions: an elegy for Peter [Starr, who had died on a climbing trip in the Sierra in 1933], a celebration of [John] Muir, and support for the wilderness lobby in Congress."

"creative" work.[369] As such, he considered much of the work in *Sierra Nevada*, like many of the photographs in Evans's *American Photographs*, to be inappropriate for display in an art museum. The struggle to maintain a distinction between art and non-art photography would be of primary concern to Adams and Newhall in the early years of the department of photographs at MoMA, a period marked by the steep rise in popularity of documentary and commercial photography and overshadowed by a war in which photography played a crucial role in propaganda efforts by both sides.

[369] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, November 4, 1938, CCP/Newhall.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FOUNDING OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

While publishing his nascent theories on straight photography, Ansel Adams was concurrently calling for the establishment of "institutes" or "centers" dedicated to the promotion of photography as an expressive medium of art. The two projects were inextricably linked; institutionalization was critical to his agenda to promote straight photography because, like Peter Henry Emerson and Alfred Stieglitz before him, Adams believed the general public would not accept photography as a legitimate art form unless it was exhibited in museums. Despite the fact that Stieglitz, his mentor, had largely disavowed further interest in gaining museum representation for the medium after the climactic Photo-Secession exhibition he organized in 1910 at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo, Adams, more than twenty years later, engaged the fight anew.

Adams's efforts in this regard eventually led to his co-founding, with Beaumont Newhall, the Department of Photographs at MoMA. In addition to reconstructing the history of the department's birth and analyzing the ideological motivations of its founders, this chapter considers the ramifications of Adams and Newhall's choice of Alfred Stieglitz as what Christopher Phillips terms the "genius loci" of the department, its patron saint.[370] Moreover, by exploring the department's reception by photographers, other factions in the museum, and the photographic press, this chapter situates the co-

[370] Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," 21.

founders' agenda for the department within the many debates that divided the American photographic community in the 1930s and 40s.

The Ansel Adams Gallery

On September 1, 1933, a few months before Adams began his battle in *Camera Craft* with William Mortensen, he opened the Ansel Adams Gallery in downtown San Francisco.[371] Inspired by his first venture to New York earlier that year, and particularly by a visit to Stieglitz's gallery, An American Place, Adams rented a space on Geary Street and began soliciting loans from photographers, painters, and sculptors.[372] Considering his precarious financial situation at the time, opening an art gallery at the height of the Depression can be interpreted either as an expression of a selfless missionary zeal to bring modernist photography to his hometown, or evidence of a complete lack of business sense. Either way, Adams was clearly undaunted by omnipresent negative economic portents. Outlining his plans for the gallery, which he characterized as a "center for photography," Adams wrote to Stieglitz, seeking support from the man he most wanted to impress:

> I want to show the best photographic exhibits I am able to obtain—local, eastern, and foreign. I am anxious to present within a year a cross-section of present day photography—also some early photography if I can obtain it…Only the most important and significant phases of photography will be shown; I will certainly not include any 'Salon' work.[373]

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[371] Alinder, *Ansel Adams: A Biography*, 112. Adams opened his gallery at 166 Geary Street on September 1, 1933. Willard Van Dyke had opened his gallery at 683 Brockhurst Avenue in Oakland on July 28, 1933 with a show of Weston's work. Van Dyke, unpublished autobiography, CCP/WVD, 50.
[372] Newhall, *An Eloquent Light,* 91. At his gallery Adams showed Group f.64, Jean Charlot, Anton Breuhl, William and Marguerite Zorach, Edward Weston, and Peter Stackpole.
[373] Stillman and Alinder, *Ansel Adams: Letters and Images*, 51.

As evidenced by this passage, Adams was concerned with historical as well as contemporary work four years before Newhall organized *Photography 1839–1937*. Such an approach, which consciously eschewed "salon" (pictorialist) photography and embraced a range of photographic genres or "phases" as well as work in other media, was, generally speaking, consistent with what he had seen at An American Place and the various other galleries he visited while in New York.[374] Adams was determined to duplicate the manner in which these galleries presented photography in San Francisco, which he felt was woefully behind the times.[375]

Although he denies it in order to demonstrate requisite humility to Stieglitz, there can be little doubt that An American Place was indeed the model for the Ansel Adams Gallery.[376] He wrote to his mentor:

> My venture is not an attempt to imitate what you have done at An American Place—that would be more than ridiculous to try. It is most certainly not an imitation of what Julien Levy is doing. It is an attempt to experiment with the public response to fine photography.[377]

That he embraced Stieglitz's model and rejected Julien Levy's is extremely consequential. It was Adams's disavowal of the kind of work Levy promoted—as well as the ideals of the photographers that made it—that distinguished him from most of his contemporaries in New York in the 1930s, including Newhall, whose 1937 exhibition, as demonstrated in chapter one, shared more with Levy's program than it did with

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[374] It is evident from his letters that Adams visited Alma Reed's Delphic Gallery and the Julien Levy Gallery, and it is possible that he went to others as well.
[375] Ansel Adams to Paul Strand, September 12, 1933, as published in Alinder and Stillman, eds. *Letters and Images*, 57. "I am trying to bring things to San Francisco that should have come many years ago."
[376] Mary Alinder goes so far as to contend that in the 1930s Adams modeled his entire life after Stieglitz's. Alinder, *Ansel Adams: A Biography*, 112.
[377] Ibid.

Stieglitz's. Adams adopted a Stieglitzian philosophy at a time when many photographers of his own generation had begun to consider the founder of 291 a champion of conservative—if not rearguard—values, finding his emphasis on fine print quality, personal expression, and disinterested art to be passé.[378] Unlike Levy, who had taken inspiration from Stieglitz and then moved beyond him to embrace new approaches to the medium, Adams in the 1930s was largely uninterested in photographic trends that conflicted with Stieglitzian ideals.

Adams visited Levy's gallery on March 29, 1933, the same day he first met Stieglitz at An American Place, and the contrast between the two venues must have been striking. On view at Levy's was an exhibition of the work of the eccentric Romantic painter Eugene Berman, but Adams likely also saw examples of experimental European photography at the gallery.[379] A comparatively prosaic exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Arthur Dove and his wife, Helen Torr, was on view at An American Place, and while he was there, Stieglitz also showed Adams examples of work by Paul Strand, Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, and possibly others.[380] The artwork and mode of presentation at the Julien Levy Gallery was wild and experimental, as its impresario aspired to shock and challenge conventional taste. Levy embraced the newest of the new, enthusiastically "throwing over" whatever had come before it in order to make room.[381] In contrast, the ambience at An American Place was calm and classically understated.

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[378] Hambourg, *New Vision,* 52
[379] Levy, *Memoir of An Art Gallery*, 298.
[380] Ansel Adams to Paul Strand, September 12, 1933, as published in Alinder and Stillman, eds. *Letters and Images*, 56–7.
[381] Oral history interview of Julien Levy by Paul Cummings (May 30, 1975), 13–14. Archives of American Art.

Visitors often likened the atmosphere to that of a church or temple, a place for the reverential contemplation of art. Waldo Frank described it as "…a church consecrated to them who had lost old gods, and whose need was sore for new ones…a refuge…from the tearing grip of industrial disorder."[382]

Upon his return to San Francisco, Adams wrote to Stieglitz that the work he had seen at Levy's gallery had "depressed" him.[383] He elucidates the source of his distress in a letter to the painter William Zorach, in which he contrasts his own photographs to the kind of surrealist-inspired work he likely encountered at Levy's.

> I don't think my pictures have the least smell of trickery about them; I know they are not Freudian, and thank God, they are not reeking with bloated contemporaneousism [*sic*]. I think the salvation of art is going to be in its detachment from the shallow fashions of surface-contemporaneous thought.[384]

In sum, Adams found the type of photography Levy promoted, namely experimental work, to be gimmicky or trendy. To him, it was based on superficial camera "trickery" and shallow ideas.[385] Of the kind of European photography Levy showed, which Adams had first seen in person at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco the year before, he had written:

> Photographically, I was brought up to believe in the infallibility of the European technique, precision of apparatus and method, and perfection of workmanship. I have waited for years to see the productions of Continental photographers 'in the flesh.' What I have seen during the last

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[382] Waldo Frank, *Our America*, as quoted in Carey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 148

[383] Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, May 20, 1934, CCP/AAA.

[384] Ansel Adams to William Zorach, November 20, 1933, as quoted in Nancy Newhall, *The Eloquent Light*, 96.

[385] Anne Hammond notes that Adams disliked psychoanalysis and "talk therapy." Hammond, *Divine Performance*, 98

> months has served to disillusion me completely. The Moholy-Nagy exhibit was the greatest perversion of serious photography that has ever come to my attention. The current show of foreign commercial photography further deflates my opinions….I find their tricky manner highly disturbing, and the technical aspects of the prints are so vile that I feel almost as if I were duped. I resent it, and yet am not sorry that this work has come to our attention, for it places our American standards securely in superior relation to the over-flaunted foreign productions.[386]

In addition to being appalled by the poor print quality, which was an affront to his aesthetic ideals, Adams believed such work would lose relevance over time, as it was unduly reliant on fashionable concerns. He aspired, rather, to make timeless, disinterested art that spoke to eternal values, a stance he elaborated in his letter to Zorach: "There is something deeper to express—the return of humanity to some sort of balanced awareness of the natural things—some rocks and sky. We need a little earth to stand on and feel run through our fingers."[387]

To those engaged in the quest to re-create modern photography against the transcendentalist Stieglitzian grain, as were many of the photographers who showed at Julien Levy's gallery, Adams's philosophy seemed both wrongheaded and retrograde. Nancy Newhall would later write of a conversation, perhaps apocryphal, she had in the 1950s with Henri Cartier-Bresson on the subject. Cartier-Bresson said:

> "Now, in this moment, this crisis, with the world going to pieces—to photograph a landscape!...I can't understand these men. [e.g. Adams and Weston] It is a world of stone." To the explanation that through images of what is as familiar to all men as stone, water, grass, cloud, photographers can make visual poetry and express thought beyond translation in other media: "Do you think that by photographing what is eternal they make their work eternal?" To photograph a house instead of a man in it seems to

[386] Ansel Adams, unpublished article written for the *Fortnightly* dated May 17, 1932, three days before it ceased publication. CCP/AAA.
[387] Ansel Adams to William Zorach, November 20, 1933, as quoted in Nancy Newhall, *The Eloquent Light*, 96.

> Cartier-Bresson inconsistent, and to find meaning in such images seems to him dangerously personal and close to mysticism …Man to Europe and many in the American East, is still the proper study of man. The earth, the universe, eternity?—"They are too big, too far away. What can we do about them?"[388]

Cartier-Bresson averred that Adams and his ilk were burying their heads in the sand while the world went to hell, and advocated instead what he considered a more humanist position, one that addressed contemporary concerns and modern experience. Voicing a similar opinion upon seeing Adams's photographs on exhibition at the Delphic Gallery in 1933, a show Adams had booked on his fateful trip to New York earlier that summer, Walker Evans wrote, "His work is careful, studied, weak Strand, self-conscious, mostly utterly pointless…wood seasoned, rocks, landscapes, filtered skies. All wrong."[389] Such characterizations of Adams as something of a reactionary, someone removed from contemporary concerns, were repeated by many among his cohort on the East Coast in the years to follow, and would later frustrate his dealings at MoMA.

It was Adams's great dream to open his gallery with an exhibition of Stieglitz's photographs. Like Julien Levy and Lincoln Kirstein before him, Adams likely hoped that Stieglitz's imprimatur would provide him a sure audience and a strong foundation upon which to build. Despite many attempts and a great deal of supplication, however, he was unable to convince Stieglitz to send him his work or, for that matter, that of any of the artists in his stable.[390] He was no more successful in securing prints from Paul Strand, who wrote in no uncertain terms of his disgust with exhibitions, which he felt were

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[388] Nancy Newhall, *From Adams to Stieglitz*, 4.
[389] Walker Evans to Jay Leyda, November 22, 1933, as quoted in Hambourg, *New Vision*, 58.
[390] See letters about gallery from Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz on June 22, 1933, October 9 and 23, 1933, and May 20, 1934 in Alinder and Stillman, eds. *Photographs and Letters,* 50-52, 58-61, 64-66 and 69-71.

exploitative.[391] Stieglitz detailed similar concerns in the letter declining Adams's offer: "You know I hate the very idea of all exhibitions for exhibitions as such are rarely true.—Have no fundamental significance.—Are 'entertainers' & not enlighteners."[392] Although it can be interpreted as something of a double standard, Stieglitz considered his manner of showing art to be different from that of museums and other galleries, whose intentions he considered venal. He did not present "exhibitions;" he "placed" art rather than sold it, and supported the artists he represented even when their work didn't sell. Rarely was he amenable to surrendering control over his own work or that of the artists he represented, as few outsiders met his exacting standards.[393] Despite his estrangement from Stieglitz at the time, Strand was in full agreement with his former mentor in this regard.

While Adams admired their dedication to maintaining the highest standards of art, he was more of a populist when it came to exhibitions. Although like Stieglitz and Strand he believed that only a select few would ever appreciate or understand what he sought to achieve in his work, he was alone in the belief that it was worth the effort to try to reach those few people, wherever and whoever they might be. He wrote to Strand:

> I must admit that I do not fully understand your attitude (and Stieglitz's attitude) about exhibitions in general. I think there are always a few people in any part of the land that would react completely to truly fine things—that would make those things functional in a social sense. After all, should we not be resigned to the naked fact that there is (as there ever has been) only a

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[391] "I cannot say yes to an exhibition of my things at the present time—Actually I have little interest in exhibitions—because at the basis they seem to be un-American—just a mean and meaningless affair; mean in that they exploit the artist to entertain the public free of charge—meaningless in that they seldom establish any standards." Paul Strand to Ansel Adams, October 14, 1933, in Stillman and Alinder, eds., *Photographs and Letters*, 63.

[392] Alfred Stieglitz to Ansel Adams, October 20, 1933, in Stillman and Alinder, eds., *Photographs and Letters*, 63.

[393] Sarah Greenough, "Alfred Stieglitz, Facilitator, Financier, and Father, Presents Seven Americans," in *Modern Art in America*, 279.

> very very small real audience for anything worthwhile? And should we not trust that in almost any group there will be a few—perhaps only one—who will perceive the significance of a great expression? And if there is only one, wouldn't that justify an exhibit? I don't think there is anyone who detests the average American attitude towards Art more than I—but if there wasn't *anyone* who understands I think I would go jump in the ocean.[394]

Clearly outlined here is the philosophy that would drive Adams when he began to work with MoMA: Present the best examples of photography to the greatest number of people without pandering to mass taste. Although he was disappointed that his requests for prints were denied, his dejection neither tarnished his admiration for Stieglitz and Strand, nor diminished his commitment to exhibiting photography as art. He abandoned the gallery in less than a year, turning its administration over to a partner, but did not relent in his quest to promote photography and present it to a wide public. He merely changed his focus and set his sights higher.

Beaumont Newhall and *Photography 1839–1937*

Before Adams and Newhall embarked on their mission to found a department of photographs at the MoMA, the museum's first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., included photography in its program. As discussed in chapter two, *Murals by Painters and Photographers* (1932) was the first exhibition held at the museum to include photographs; a year later *Walker Evans: Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses* its first exhibition to solely feature photographs.[395] Many photographs, including works by

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[394] Ansel Adams to Paul Strand, October 31, 1933, in Alinder and Stillman, eds. *Photographs and Letters*, 67.

[395] Kirstein, *Murals by Painters and Photographers* (New York: MoMA, 1932). Evans later stated, "I don't consider that business about architecture a show." His 1938 "American Photographs" was the first one-man

Lázsló Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and Evans were included in Barr's three major exhibitions of the period: *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (1937), and *Bauhaus 1919–1928* (1938).[396] Significantly, before the department was founded Moholy-Nagy and Evans were the photographers most frequently shown at the museum.

In 1936, Barr took the next step toward actualizing his goal of exhibiting photography on equal footing with other media when he asked Newhall, who was then librarian and resident photographer at MoMA, to organize the museum's first large-scale exhibition of photographs. It was to be afforded the same amount of space as the Bauhaus, Dada, and Cubism shows mounted in previous years.[397] Barr approved Newhall's proposal that the exhibition should present a comprehensive history of photography since Daguerre's public announcement of the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, and as Christopher Phillips demonstrates, the organizing methodology Newhall employed was in line with Barr's approach in earlier large-scale exhibitions held at the museum.[398] Uninterested in social factors that shaped the history of the medium, Newhall linked technical and aesthetic developments to present a hermetic history of an autonomous medium. Significantly, Phillips notes that Newhall's refusal to argue for

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exhibition of the work of a photographer held at MoMA. Walker Evans, Oral History Interview with Paul Cummings, 1971, Archives of American Art.

[396] *Cubism* contained work by Man Ray, Francis Bruguière, and Lázsló Moholy-Nagy. *Fantastic Art* included Evans, Moholy-Nagy, Bayer, Man Ray, Hannah Höch, Dora Maar, George Platt Lynes, and Christian Schad. *Bauhaus* included Moholy-Nagy, Florence Henri, Werner Feist, Herbert Bayer, and Lux Feininger.

[397] Phillips, 17.

[398] Ibid., 19–21.

photography's acceptance as a fine art "represented a notable departure from the usual practice of an American art museum."[399]

Recognizing the magnitude of his assignment and the limits of his own knowledge, Newhall solicited the guidance of several advisors, including Stieglitz, whom he considered to be the most influential figure in the history of American photography.[400] To Newhall's great dismay, however, Stieglitz, who had harbored intense animosity toward MoMA since its inception, refused to participate in any fashion.[401] He had begun exhibiting modern art decades before the museum was founded, and felt that the upstarts at MoMA, who were funded by Rockefeller money, had not given him proper credit for laying the groundwork upon which they had built.[402] Newhall was disappointed by Stieglitz's response, believing any legitimate history of photography must feature work by the man who was responsible for its acceptance as a fine art in the United States.[403] Rejected by Stieglitz, he turned instead to a group of men whose philosophies on photography Stieglitz saw as antithetical to his own: Charles Peignot, director of *Arts et Métiers*; Alexey Brodovitch, art director of *Harper's Bazaar*; Edward Steichen, photographer for *Vogue* and other magazines, and Moholy-Nagy, who had immigrated to Chicago to run the New Bauhaus the year the exhibition opened. With such guidance,

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[399] Ibid., 20.
[400] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, April 8, 1938. CCP/AAA.
[401] David McAlpin to Ansel Adams, December 7, 1939, CCP/AAA. Stieglitz was apparently incensed when Barr neglected to credit him for being the first to show Picasso in America.
[402] From a document labeled "NN notes from Conversations with Stieglitz: An American Place," 1., GRI/Newhall. "Stieglitz said to himself that the Rockefellers—their fortunes unshakable—would get the same stranglehold on art that they had gotten on finance, the church, and, to some extent, education. He felt also that they would center their interest on the older and more famous European names—Cezanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, etc., and that whatever they did in American art would be half-hearted. O'K felt that in that case she would back a new gallery for him herself."
[403] Nancy Newhall, *Eloquent Light*, 156–7.

Stieglitz was certain to disapprove of the eventual product, even if he never visited the exhibition.[404]

Photography 1839–1937 was enormous, including more than eight hundred photographs by makers from both the United States and Europe. The structure of the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue was marked by an inclusiveness long promoted by Moholy-Nagy, and, as discussed in Chapter Two, first put into practice in America by Lincoln Kirstein at the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art.[405] Like Kirstein's show and earlier exhibitions organized in Germany by Moholy-Nagy, it was not limited to photographs intended as art, but included everything from X-rays to daguerreotypes, and news photographs to scientific images.[406] Newhall was trained as an art historian, however, and Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus model, though visually appealing, was largely ahistorical and did not differentiate amongst different makers, styles, and movements. Unconcerned with authorship, Moholy-Nagy was strictly interested in photographic form. Thus, as Phillips notes, in order to remain in line with Barr's methodological strategy, Newhall integrated aspects of the Bauhaus ideal—namely a wide purview and experimental exhibition design strategies—into a more traditional art historical framework. As the statement of purpose written as an internal museum memo notes:

> Aim of the Museum of Modern Art's first photograph exhibition is to show how photography since 1839 has become an increasingly vital method of visually interpreting man and his affairs….this exhibition will enable visitors to understand the principles which have governed

[404] Ibid., 136.
[405] According to Christopher Phillips, the exhibition was "guided more by Moholy-Nagy's expansive notion of *fotokunst* than by Stieglitz's *kunstphotographie*." Phillips, "The Judgment Seat," 20.
[406] Ibid., 18.

> photography since the earliest days and will demonstrate the capabilities of the camera as a medium of expression.[407]

Newhall presented in his exhibition a history of photography both as a means of mass communication and a medium of personal expression. In good Bauhaus fashion, he was not concerned exclusively with "art," but with the multifarious uses of the medium, which he details in the catalogue. Art was but one aspect of a popular medium whose applications included large-format and miniature camera work, news, color, scientific, aerial, and motion pictures.[408] Newhall's interest in the democratic nature of the medium—its cultural pervasiveness and polyvalence—would diminish greatly, however, as he began working with Adams.

An "Institute"

In 1937 Newhall received a letter of congratulations on his catalogue from Adams, whose work he had included in the exhibition.[409] Although the two men had not yet met in person, this was not their first interaction. In the mid 1930s, the young and largely unschooled Adams used the pages of local and national camera journals to work out his own philosophy on photography, occasionally penning articles that generated criticism from individuals better versed in the history of the medium. For example, in a 1935 review in the *American Magazine of Art,* Newhall had remonstrated with Adams for

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[407] Statement of purpose sent to Ansel Adams from Beaumont Newhall, n.d., CCP/AAA.
[408] It also emphasized that photography was a modern technology, and included many cameras, lenses, and didactics explaining how they operated.
[409] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, April 8, 1937, CCP/Newhall. "I am anxious to compliment you on what looks to be (at a distance, at least) the best show of photography on record…I was especially interested in your text and feel that it is a major contribution to the literature of photography…the entire catalog presents a true 'museum' attitude towards the subject."

the dubious model of photographic history he outlined in his introduction to the *Studio Annual of Camera 1934–1935*.[410]

In late 1935, however, Adams published a book that demonstrated his profound gifts as a teacher, technician and artist. While *Making a Photograph* is primarily a technical guide, the precursor to his widely read three-part series published decades later, (*The Camera, The Negative*, and *The Print*), the book demonstrates that from an early date Adams viewed scholarship and museum study as crucial means for promoting photography as an autonomous medium of art. [411]

> What is required above all else is a number of centralized institutions which combine competent instruction in theory and practice with library and museum features. Repositories of the most significant photography, past and contemporary, are sorely needed. The understanding of photography as a form of art implies much more than a knowledge of physics and chemistry and a superficial education in the aspects of painting and other media. It is necessary to study photography itself—to interpret the medium in its own terms and within its own limitations.[412]

It is important to note that when the book was published Adams was not yet a national figure, and was still struggling for recognition in his native California. His first significant solo exhibition (at An American Place) would not occur until the following year. Considering the embryonic state of his career at the time the book was published, his concern for photography as a museum subject seems particularly farsighted.

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[410] Beaumont Newhall, "Review," *American Magazine of Art*, Vol. 28, (August 1935).
[411] In a 1934 application for a Guggenheim Foundation grant, Adams wrote that one of his goals was: "To establish, or assist in establishing, a central institute of photography wherein instruction, library and exhibit facilities will be available and where serious students of photography, both as an art and a craft, will be able to derive information, encouragement, and knowledge. This institute would also support traveling exhibits of the finest contemporary photography, such exhibits to be properly judged and accepted by a rotating jury, having little to do with the 'salon' or 'Pictorial Societies.' The institute would relate only to the serious and functional aspects of photography."Ansel Adams, 1934 Guggenheim application, CCP/AAA.
[412] Adams, *Making a Photograph*, 12.

Two years later, Newhall's *Photography 1839–1937* buoyed Adams's hope for expanded museum recognition of the medium. After seeing the truncated version that traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) in 1938, Adams rhapsodized in *Miniature Camera Work* over the exhibition and the future that it augured.[413] Although he generally praised the exhibition, and was clearly excited that the foremost modern art museum was showing photography, Adams still retained reservations about Newhall. He reviled the work of Moholy-Nagy, one of Newhall's advisors on the project, whose work he earlier had contended was the "greatest perversion of serious photography," and was surprised to find that Stieglitz had not served on the advisory committee and was only represented by a series of *Camera Work* gravures rather than actual prints.[414]

In response to Adams's congratulatory letter, Newhall inquired whether he thought the museum should found an "institute" at MoMA like the one outlined in *Making a Photograph*.[415] Newhall had been investigating the possibility of creating a separate department of photography at the museum, and was excited to find Adams's beliefs were in line with his own. He wrote:

> We are considering setting up an ambitious photographic section to the museum, to collect and exhibit photographs, and to publish monographs and picture books—all in the cause of what we consider to be the most creative aspects of photography. I remember being impressed by the lines

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[413] Adams, "The Expanding Photographic Universe," in Willard Morgan, ed., *Miniature Camera Work* (New York: Morgan and Lester, 1938). "Whoever saw the recent exhibition *Photography 1839–1937* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York could not fail to recognize the true meaning and attainments of the art….Photography is doing for the modern age what the early printing presses did for post-Renaissance social expansion."

[414] Adams, unpublished article for *The Fortnightly* written in May 1932, CCP/AAA. Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, March 15, 1938, CCP/AAA.

[415] Nancy Newhall, *Eloquent Light*, 154.

> in the foreword to your book about the need of such a project. As we shall have to raise a substantial sum of money to make the project really worthwhile, and as we want to make the project fit into the needs of the out-standing photographers of the country, I should appreciate very much an expansion of the foreword of 'Making a Photograph' in the form of a letter. Would you be good enough to do this for me? [416]

When he sent the text to Newhall, Adams tailored it specifically to MoMA's strengths, adding a key sentence to the paragraph quoted above: "The efficient power of a well-organized Museum is required to effect this work, and it is high time that an institution, sympathetic with contemporary trends in art, take up this responsibility and carry it to effective heights."[417] After his failed attempt to establish a "center" at the Ansel Adams Gallery, he likely saw the benefit of working with an established institution in New York with deep pockets; MoMA seemed to Adams to be the ideal place to promote photography as modern art.

While he embraced Newhall's interest in founding a department at the museum, Adams also chided him, erroneously thinking he had not consulted Stieglitz on the 1937 exhibition. He makes a forceful case for Stieglitz's importance in a letter to Newhall:

> Too many photographers have forgotten what Stieglitz is, and what he has done for photography….In a very definite sense, Stieglitz *is* photography….I know Stieglitz was not in sympathy with the exhibit, and I have gathered that it was largely because he was not approached as a prime source of information and advice…his favorable support of your project is of the utmost importance. In the selection and evaluation of photography he is absolutely supreme….it is relatively easy to gather thousands of good photographs; the real task lies in correlating them into a true expression of photography…. [418]

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[416] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, February 14, 1938, Beaumont Newhall Papers, II.1. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
[417] Adams, document labeled "Statement Derived from Foreword to 'Making a Photograph,' Ansel Adams," Newhall, II.1. MoMA Archives, NY.
[418] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, March 15, 1938, CCP/AAA.

These concerns for Stieglitz's legacy closely mirror those voiced by Stieglitz's friend, the critic Lewis Mumford, in a review of Newhall's exhibition published in *The New Yorker*:

> The most important modern photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, is not represented in this show by any of the work he has done in the last twenty-five years. An amazing omission that at least called for explanation in the catalogue.[419]

Mumford took umbrage with what he considered a lack of "selectivity" in the organization of the exhibition, a concern Adams would also stress in his letters to Newhall. Suggesting that certain kinds of photographs had no place in an art museum, Mumford posits that MoMA was suffering from an identity crisis caused by a desire to be inclusive:

> Perhaps it is a little ungrateful of me to suggest that the Museum of Modern Art has begun to overreach itself in the matter of documentation: the precedent of the Surrealist show seems to be hardening into a permanent vice. For what is lacking in the present exhibition is a weighing and assessment of photography in terms of pure aesthetic merit—such an evaluation as should distinguish a show in an art museum from one that might be held, say, in the Museum of Science and Industry. In shifting this function of selection to the spectator, the museum seems to me to be unfairly adding to his burden, and to be reducing its proper sphere of influence.[420]

In other words, Mumford wanted to see a distinction made between "art" photography and photography intended for other purposes. He believed, as did Stieglitz and Adams,

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[419] Mumford, "The Art Galleries: Prints and Paints," *The New Yorker* (April 3, 1937), 39–40. Mumford obviously did not read the catalogue carefully, as Newhall wrote in the acknowledgements: "At the request of the photographer, the later work of Alfred Stieglitz has not been included." Newhall, *Photography 1839–1938*, 8.

[420] Ibid.

that the role of an art museum was to establish high aesthetic standards by exhibiting only exemplary expressive art.[421]

After pleading his case for Stieglitz's primacy and for increased curatorial selectivity, á la Mumford, Adams expressed support for Newhall's efforts and acknowledged the future potential for photography at MoMA. His enthusiasm for Newhall's agenda remained muted, however, by his overarching concern for Stieglitz and his legacy, which Adams felt was also his own. This is not surprising, as Stieglitz was the first to recognize Adams's potential as an artist and to give him a major show at a gallery.[422] In addition, the older man's devotion to the transcendental possibilities of photographic art had inspired Adams's own creative philosophy. In his old age Stieglitz had grown to feel that Adams was the only legitimate heir to his legacy, and impressed upon the younger photographer that he would eventually assume his mantle.[423] Thus, Adams was surprised to learn that he had been wrong about Newhall, that the curator had in fact approached Stieglitz for counsel, but had been rebuffed.

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[421] In reviews of other MoMA exhibitions, Mumford contends that the museum often did not fulfill what he considered to be its assigned role. For example, of an exhibition of the work of Gaston Lachaise he wrote: "In the Lachaise exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum is doing for the first time something I had, perhaps erroneously, thought to be its chief mission. It has taken a distinguished modern artist, whose originality stands in the way of his easy public acceptance, and given him the space that is lacking at the private art dealer's gallery." Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries" *The New Yorker* (February 9, 1935). Jerome Mellquist, another critic with close ties to Stieglitz, also criticized Newhall for his lack of selectivity, and for including too much inferior work. Jerome Mellquist "A Century of International Photography," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 21, 1937, C9.

[422] Significantly, in an effort to further align himself with Stieglitz in the public mind, Adams insisted that Newhall indicate that his work appeared in the 1937 exhibition courtesy of Stieglitz and An American Place, Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz January 15, 1937, CCP/AAA.

[423] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, July 11, 1938, CCP/AAA. "Stieglitz has told me several times that I am the only photographer that understands what he has been trying to do. I wish I understood more than I do, but I do not doubt that, in principle, he is right. Strand, his chief protege, no longer is a still photographer. Porter is magnificent, but I do not know how far his work reaches into the horizons established by Stieglitz."

In response to a letter Adams had written about Newhall and MoMA, Stieglitz responds that he had no respect for the museum or for Newhall's endeavor.

> Fine as your letter to Newhall is—very fine—I'm afraid the reason you have given him for my not having supported his Photographic Exhibition is not the correct one. The reason was that when he came to me for support I realized that the spirit of what he was doing was absolutely contrary to all I have given my life to. In short that he was doing exactly what I felt was a falsification of values—primarily because of ignorance. Etc., etc.—I won't go into particulars here. The Catalogue itself was proof that my 'intuitions' were correct.[424]

It quickly became clear to Adams that Stieglitz had ensured a self-fulfilling prophecy: Newhall's exhibition had not lived up to his standards primarily because he had not deigned to contribute. The exhibition would certainly have been different had Stieglitz obliged. Newhall wrote:

> I simply want to give you the facts, which you can judge for yourself. When the museum asked me to organize the exhibition I immediately visited Mr. Stieglitz….I cannot tell you how disappointed I was, and still am, that my attempts to enlist the aid of Mr. Stieglitz met with complete and dismal failure. I am fully aware of his position in photography. I am fully in agreement with what you have written about him.[425]

Soon after, Adams wrote Stieglitz that he felt it imperative to cooperate with Newhall—he disagreed with the older man's characterization of the project, and believed he could effect changes at the museum.

> I think Newhall has a good idea in his photographic project for the museum…as you are unable to give the time and strength required for such a project someone must do it, as photography is getting more-or-less out of bounds. I feel that when a large plant such as the Museum of Modern Art can turn its wheels in the direction of serious photography that

[424] Alfred Stieglitz to Ansel Adams, April 8, 1938, CCP/AAA.
[425] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, April 8, 1938, CCP/AAA.

> we should all pitch in and make them turn as efficiently as possible on the right track.[426]

Here, for the first time, Adams explicitly expresses his desire to influence the direction the museum would take with respect to photography. More pragmatic than Stieglitz, and at a different point in his career, Adams felt that if MoMA was going to exhibit more photography in the future, he wanted to make sure it lived up to his own standards, and, despite his mentor's lack of interest, to Stieglitz's as well. He was convinced that museum representation was a means of preventing the medium from getting "out of bounds," as he termed it, of ensuring that art photography would remain segregated from popular culture. Further, as Stieglitz showed no signs of offering Adams another exhibition at An American Place, Adams may also have considered aligning himself with MoMA to be a good career move. He wrote to Newhall to express his support and to suggest that he would help bring Stieglitz around.

> Stieglitz is difficult. Emotionally, I am in sympathy with him and many of his views, in spite of their extreme quality. But objectively I am entirely in sympathy with what you are trying to do. I understand Stieglitz better that most people (this I truly believe), and I see the entire perspective of his life and efforts with reasonable clarity…. His standards have the inflexibility of a mathematical formula, and there isn't any person of any institution that can live up to them in entirely (except himself—to about 95%). You, on the other hand, belong to the Present, and your problems are of the present. I certainly feel the same about myself and my work. I am eager to support anything that is for the good of photography, and am not hyper-sensitive about my own work. Stieglitz and I seem to get along splendidly—I get "panned" occasionally, but I go my own way and sometimes "pan" him back. I am able, personally, to soften his attitude a bit about the Museum and your work, but it is something to handle with gloves.[427]

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[426] Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, April 18, 1938, CCP/AAA.
[427] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, April 15, 1938, Newhall, II.1, MoMA Archives, NY.

Adams immediately began to contact influential people to solicit support for the new department. At the same time he was corresponding with Stieglitz and Newhall, he was maintaining regular contact with David McAlpin, a cousin of Nelson Rockefeller, an amateur photographer, MoMA Trustee, and client of Stieglitz's.[428] Like Adams, McAlpin was a devotee of Stieglitz, and from him he had learned to appreciate modern art and photography. Adams and McAlpin had met in New York in 1936 through Stieglitz' wife, Georgia O'Keeffe, and McAlpin subsequently had purchased eight of Adams's photographs from his show at An American Place.[429] Adams sensed McAlpin was the key to ensuring the Stieglitzian tradition of photography would have a place at MoMA, and that through his family connections McAlpin might be able to exert some control over an independent department there. Adams also hoped McAlpin could help secure a Stieglitz retrospective at the museum. Nancy Newhall opined of Adams's state of mind at the time, "Adams already found himself defending him (Newhall) even against Stieglitz, somewhat to his amazement. Now if only McAlpin could bring Stieglitz and the Museum of Modern Art together."[430]

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[428] Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 160. McAlpin, a grandnephew of John D. Rockefeller Sr., lived in Princeton, NJ, but worked as a stockbroker in New York City.
[429] Alfred Stieglitz to Ansel Adams, December 16, 1936, as published in Alinder and Stillman, eds. *Letters and Images*, 89.
[430] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 12.

Alfred Stieglitz and the Museum of Modern Art

In early 1939, McAlpin sensed MoMA might be amenable to more regular exhibitions of photography if he were willing to contribute the start-up funds. He felt that MoMA was taking too much time to commit, and finding himself "impatient with the whole situation," gave one thousand dollars each to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA to purchase photographs.[431] Upon receipt of the money, Barr suggested that Newhall ask his generous patron what he wished the museum to purchase with his money. McAlpin left the decision up to Newhall, who bought fifty prints by Moholy with five hundred dollars of the donation.[432] According to one of his later assistants, Adams was shocked by Newhall's choice:

> Newhall's purchase appalled Ansel, who had every right to feel midwife to the McAlpin/photography relation. For Ansel, Moholy's vision was ugly…these photographs represented the degeneration of photography and were the opposite of everything Ansel stood for.[433]

Yet, Adams had not, in fact, played "midwife" to that relationship. McAlpin had discovered photography through Stieglitz and had become involved with MoMA, which was founded and supported by members of his own family, long before meeting Adams. Further, Adams and Newhall were unaware until decades later that it had been McAlpin who had donated the five thousand dollars used to fund Newhall's *Photography 1839–1937*.[434] Adams had encouraged an interest that was ongoing in McAlpin, but he had not been the original spur.

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[431] Ibid., 10.
[432] Beaumont Newhall, *Focus*, 57.
[433] Alinder, *Biography*, 152-3
[434] Beaumont Newhall, *Focus*, 57. "I never asked Alfred Barr, nor did he tell me, how the museum had suddenly received five thousand dollars for a photography exhibition. It wasn't until forty-one years later,

The 1938 exhibition of Walker Evans's photographs and Newhall's purchase with McAlpin's money of the Moholy-Nagy prints seem to have fortified Adams's resolve to influence the direction of the photography program at the museum. He saw the increasing popularity of Evans, and of "documentary" photography in general, as a threat to his and Stieglitz's transcendental brand of Modernism. Hoping that McAlpin's contribution would eventually lead to the formation of a department, Adams continued to encourage his wealthy friend, writing, "You have done the most important thing anyone could do for photography in the larger sense….you have made it possible for a large and very potent museum to incorporate photography in the presentation of the Fine Arts."[435]

In the same letter he elaborates his contention that the museum should differentiate between art and functional forms of photography. Unlike Moholy-Nagy, who embraced photography in its plenitude, Adams felt that the museum should only exhibit photographs that could be considered "art." Curatorial selectivity, in his opinion, which he felt was lacking in Newhall's *Photography 1839–1937,* primarily due to Moholy-Nagy's influence, was crucial in separating art from mere craft.

> My only hope is that the museum will manage the project well, keep the standards high and selective and make a sharp discrimination between functional and experimental work. The greatest menace to photographic development—as far as the basic lay appreciation goes today—lies in the confusion of the Expressive, the Documentary and the Socio-Economic functions. All these phases are essential, but they do not mix as well as they should….[436]

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when I was a houseguest of Ansel Adams on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday celebration, that David H. McAlpin….quietly admitted to me that he had been the benefactor."

[435] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, February 14, 1939. CCP/AAA.

[436] Ibid.

A lack of separation between the "expressive" and the merely "documentary" was the foundation of Adams's critique of Walker Evans's *American Photographs*, as well as of Moholy-Nagy's tendency to lump together photographs made for diverse purposes. Adams felt that functional photographs, and those used in service of political ends, should not have a place in an art museum, as its purview was exclusively aesthetic.

McAlpin responded as Adams hoped he would, reiterating his contention that Adams was Stieglitz's heir, and that therefore the museum was in need of Adams's counsel:

> You are the only hope in sight because you and S[tieglitz] are the only people I know who combine technique, the power of seeing things and reproducing it artistically and faithfully and truly, and really have a philosophy about it. What the Museum of M.A. needs is to take you on—if they are going to accomplish anything re: photography. They have the best intentions but no capacity to accomplish what we know should be done.[437]

In the same letter McAlpin disgustedly details Stieglitz's rude treatment of Newhall when he went to inquire at An American Place about holding a Stieglitz retrospective at the museum. In his response, Adams defended his mentor, expressing his continued reservations about Newhall, which likely stemmed from his purchase of the Moholy-Nagy photographs.

> My feeling about it all is that Newhall is trying hard, but does not know just what to do about it…. I had hoped your contribution would start things off with a bang, as it were. And I also hoped that you would be able to keep control of many of the phases….we will have to force a certain balanced approach, a clean-cut program….we cannot let eclectic phases control entirely….[438]

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[437] David McAlpin to Ansel Adams, February 18, 1939. CCP/AAA.
[438] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, February 23, 1939. CCP/AAA.

Suggesting that Newhall was beholden to the social documentary and Bauhaus camps, Adams contends that he and McAlpin might have to force their own agenda at the museum to balance out those influences. McAlpin responded to Adams that he and O'Keeffe had "worked on Newhall," and encouraged him to approach Stieglitz about holding a retrospective at the museum.[439] On the back of a brochure for the Eliot Porter show held at An American Place in early 1939, McAlpin wrote a note nudging Newhall away from the model of the 1937 show:

> This is what I call a show. And this is the sort of photography I have in mind. The Museum show last year on the History of Photography was very swell but between you and me and the gate post—you've never had a show like this one, or Adams or Weston. It's too bad the museum doesn't go out to show the best—to encourage this kind of work—quality, sensitivity. So much work is propaganda, documentary, press or commercial. Let's see if we can't do something to encourage this sort of development.[440]

Despite Stieglitz's recalcitrance, Adams, McAlpin, and Newhall held out hope throughout 1939 that they would be able to inaugurate their new department at the museum with a grand Stieglitz retrospective. The old man had eventually relented to pleas from Adams and McAlpin to reconsider his position vis-à-vis Newhall, who finally won Stieglitz over with the gift of a small portfolio of his own photographs.[441] In return, Stieglitz agreed to allow him to use his work as the frontispiece to the second edition of the 1937 catalogue, which Newhall subsequently dedicated to him.[442] Newhall would

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[439] David McAlpin to Ansel Adams, February 18, 1939, CCP/AAA.
[440] David McAlpin to Beaumont Newhall, January 6, 1939, Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL.
[441] Nancy Newhall, *Eloquent Light*, 157.
[442] Christopher Phillips, 21-2. Newhall wrote to Adams: "I am proud and happy to write you that, during the last few days, I have had two conversations with Stieglitz, and that the breach is repaired. The new edition of our photography book will be dedicated to him and will have as frontispiece an unpublished photography by him. During our conversations your name was often brought up, and I wish to thank you

later recount that "from that moment on, everything changed."[443] This is particularly true of his approach to photography, which from that time forward became increasingly Stieglitzian. Once Stieglitz had given his blessing, Newhall adapted the text of his book. Where in 1937 he had characterized Stieglitz as merely a figure in the Photo-Secession, after the rewrite Stieglitz was given his own section and credited with pioneering the idea that photography could be an expressive art in America.[444] Newhall's dedication of the second edition of his catalogue to Stieglitz and his commitment to establishing the department with a Stieglitz retrospective are clear signs of his departure from the Bauhaus ideals that marked his earlier work. Reflecting his adoption of a more Stieglitzian approach to photography, Newhall wrote to his wife of the problems he saw in retrospect with the 1937 show: "What Paul Strand said was more true than I could admit, that to include X-ray, scientific photography and cameras was like putting a section on house painting in a general painting show."[445] Thus, by 1938 Newhall had almost entirely come around to Adams's point of view, embracing a narrower perspective of what was appropriate to an exhibition of photography at an art museum.

Of the importance Stieglitz had to Adams and Newhall, and of their desire to launch the new department with a retrospective of his work, Nancy Newhall recalled:

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for whatever you have written to him in our behalf. Lewis Mumford, to who[m] I appealed for help in getting permission to use a photograph as a frontispiece, was immediately responsible for bringing us together on the amicable ground on which we now stand. I need hardly tell you that I feel honored to learn that Stieglitz feels that I am on the right track, and that I am his logical heritor [sic]." Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, May 25, 1938, Newhall, II.1, MoMA Archives, NY.

[443] Philips, 21-2.

[444] Beaumont Newhall, *Photography, A Short Critical History* (New York: MoMA, 1938), 63-5.

[445] As quoted in letter from James Thrall Soby to Alfred Barr, August 21, 1943, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, 1.85. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

> For both men on whom the demanding mantle was to descend, Stieglitz ...was more important than ever…. For Newhall…the important thing was an exhibition—the greatest and most comprehensive exhibition of the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz ever held….With a Stieglitz retrospective as its monumental start, the serious study of photography would be nobly launched.[446]

Newhall and Adams saw themselves as Stieglitz's rightful heirs, and a department inaugurated with an exhibition of his work would solidify that lineage. Of the dozens of letters exchanged in 1939 amongst McAlpin, Newhall and Adams, a great many document Stieglitz's prevarications on the issue of a retrospective, which continued for more than a year. Adams wrote to Newhall of McAlpin's plans to highlight Stieglitz's importance to the new department in his essay for the inaugural brochure.

> This will not associate Stieglitz directly with the sponsorship of the department, but, rather, will associate the department with Stieglitz point-of-view about photography (which is more important even than to have Stieglitz personally involved).[447]

Even without a retrospective of his work, Adams felt that a philosophical association with Stieglitz was key to the department's success.

Adams and Newhall finally met in person in 1939. That year, Adams spent the entire month of May in New York, in part to see his own work installed in Newhall's exhibition, *Seven American Photographers*, the photography portion of the museum's tenth-anniversary exhibition, *Art in Our Time*.[448] The seven photographers included were Berenice Abbott, Adams, Harold Edgerton, Walker Evans, Man Ray, Ralph Steiner, and Brett Weston, whom Newhall chose because they were all "straight" photographers who

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[446] Ibid.
[447] Adams to Beaumont Newhall, undated, Newhall, II.1. MoMA Archives, NY.
[448] *Seven American Photographers* [Exh. #86] May 10–September 30, 1939. The name may allude to *Seven Americans,* an exhibition organized by Stieglitz in 1925 at the Anderson Galleries of the work of Arthur Dove, Stieglitz, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Charles Demuth, Paul Strand and Georgia O'Keeffe.

"show a marked reaction against so-called 'pictorial' or manipulated photographs," but used the medium in different ways.[449] Despite his newfound affection for Newhall as a person, however, Adams was displeased with his design for the exhibition, one of the few instances where he and Walker Evans were in total agreement. In Bauhaus style, Newhall had chosen a different, bright color of paint for the wall behind the work of each photographer. Irate over the color choice, Evans insisted on hanging his own work, and in so doing covered over with white board the bright red that Newhall had chosen for his section. Disagreements over exhibition design would continue between Newhall and Adams in the months leading up to the founding of the department. For instance, Adams wrote to McAlpin:

> I fear that the Museum will favor the photographic exhibit be presented in the modern display technique. I thought the 'Seven American Photographers' was a terrible piece of interior decoration. If our first show looks anything like that you might as well kiss Stieglitz and what he represents goodbye. I have proposed some ideas, and I believe I might get by with some of them. Newhall undoubtedly feels he will have to plan the show along the Barr display ideas. Maybe it will be all right, but I keep my fingers crossed! Barr hangs paintings beautifully—but photography is something else, and I am afraid of the color-on-the-wall idea. We have to get things cleaner, more solid, less slick. We have to get our print collection into shape quick. And we have to invite people to see it, invite them for informal symposiums [*sic*], make them feel welcome and develop interest in the Museum.[450]

Adams ultimately won out on matters of exhibition design, moving Newhall away from the flashy, experimental Bauhaus style that had marked his earlier curatorial efforts.

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[449] Press release, *Seven American Photographers*, Curatorial Exhibition files, Exh. #86. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.
[450] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, untitled progress report on department, November 4, 1940, CCP/AAA.

A Pagaent of Photography

In the spring of 1940, while McAlpin and Newhall were devising a plan for the new department, Adams produced for the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco *A Pageant of Photography*, an exhibition intended to introduce a broad Western audience to photographic art. Unlike previous large-scale exhibitions of the medium presented at world's fairs and other non-museum contexts—such as Willard Morgan's 1938 First International Photographic Exposition, which will be discussed in the next chapter—*A Pageant of Photography* was not a photographic free-for-all. Rather, it was carefully planned by Adams, who saw the exhibition as a platform from which to promote photography as an expressive art form, and in the process to demonstrate the significance of Western photography to the American tradition. In a letter to Stieglitz, he suggests that his desire was to show only the best in photography, writing, "it is high time that the cream of photography in this country be put together as some sort of bulwark against the rising tide of baloney."[451]

The catalogue, which included essays by Adams, Newhall, Edward Weston, Moholy-Nagy, and Dorothea Lange, among others, demonstrates Adams's desire to shape public perception of the medium. Taking a page from Stieglitz, in his introduction Adams contends that David Octavius Hill was the first "art" photographer, dismisses Pictorialism as a "deviation," and elaborates a link between "straight" photography and

[451] Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, April 13, 1940, CCP/AAA.

the work of the early "masters" of the medium, such as Hill and Julia Margaret Cameron.[452]

> The best modern work suggests the basic qualities of the great photography a century ago…. The moving spirit of the Hills and Camerons and the fine daguerreotypes lives again in the magnificent work of Stieglitz, Strand, Weston and others who have assumed the responsibility of continuing a simple, incisive statement by means of the camera. This point of honest simplicity and maximum emotional statement suggests the basis of a critical definition of photography as an art form—that is, as a means of more than factual statement.[453]

In Adams's schema, art photography was "straight" photography and, conversely, through some dubious deductive logic, much early work that could be seen as "straight" was thus "art."[454] Works by nineteenth-century photographers such as Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan, Edweard Muybridge, and others were considered by Adams to be examples of early "creative" photography, a term he used to denote photographs that were not necessarily intended as art, but represented the zenith of photographic production in a particular genre.

> It is safe to assume that they are, technically, the equal of any work of their time: many are supreme examples of creative photography…. Above all, the work of these hardy and direct artists indicates the beauty and effectiveness of the straight photographic approach…. Their work has become one of the great traditions of photography.[455]

In actuality, however, this "great tradition" was a manufactured one of more recent origin. Weston, Stieglitz, and Strand, whom Adams vaunts for their "straight" aesthetic, had their roots in Pictorialism, not in nineteenth-century topographic photography. In an

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[452] See Chapter One for a discussion of "Masters of Photography" held at the Albright-Knox Gallery in 1915.
[453] Adams, *A Pageant of Photography* (San Francisco: San Francisco Bay Exposition Co., 1940), unpaginated.
[454] Nickel, "History of Photography," 552.
[455] Adams, *A Pageant of Photography*, unpaginated.

effort to suppress soft-focus work from the history, Adams looked elsewhere for affirmation and historical lineage, creating a link between modernist work and early wet-plate examples.[456]

Newhall later contended he first noticed affinities between what he called "New Photography" and the work of some of the early masters after reading Adams's *Making a Photograph.* This attribution is likely revisionist, as Stieglitz, and subsequently Julien Levy, had earlier made the same connection.[457] Newhall contends the link was solidified when Adams sent him a portfolio of Western expeditionary photographs taken in the 1860s by Timothy O'Sullivan for inclusion in *Photography 1839–1937.* Phillips contends that it was in these photographs that Newhall and Adams discovered a heritage they could exploit.[458] Adams, Phillips argues, sought in the work of these early photographers, particularly in O'Sullivan, a "usable past," an ancestry that would elevate his own status as an artist and provide him a laudable lineage in a specifically Western tradition of photography. As Eric Hobsbawm argues in the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, whether or not the roots one claims are historically valid is irrelevant, for the "attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" constitutes a search for stability and legitimization that is not necessarily based on fact.[459]

Claiming O'Sullivan as ancestor to Adams, Phillips asserts, was a product of Newhall's desire to create a canon of photographic masters.[460] He suggests Adams's co-option of O'Sullivan was primarily motivated by museological factors, by a desire to fit

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[456] Christopher Phillips, "A Mnemonic Art? Calotype Aesthetics at Princeton," *October 26* (Fall 1983), 37.
[457] Beaumont Newhall, *Focus*, 45.
[458] Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," 23-4.
[459] Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.
[460] Phillips, "A Mnemonic Art?" 36.

photography into an art historical framework. Adams use of the term "creative" to describe photographs not necessarily intended as art enabled him to distinguish between merely functional photography and exemplary photographs that transcend their intended purpose, expanding the horizons beyond intentional art. Like "straight," however, "creative" was semantically indistinct—it had various connotations and did not clearly demarcate a particular type of photograph.

Sixty Photographs

In the summer of 1940, Adams received a confidential package from McAlpin containing a prospectus Newhall had developed for the department, and on which he and McAlpin requested Adams's feedback. Mc Alpin wrote:

> I am having a conference next week with Nelson Rockefeller. It may be important for you to come east sometime this summer or fall before the matter gets too definitely crystallized. My thought is that you would not be interested in a full time administrative job but I would certainly like to see you retained in an advisory capacity and have so told Newhall and Barr.[461]

A few weeks later the Newhalls traveled west on vacation, spending most of their time with Adams, who treated them to a grand tour of California. They visited *Pageant of Photography*, met Edward and Charis Weston in Carmel, and stopped to make photographs in between, including Adams's famous *Surf Sequence*. While on the Adams's porch in Yosemite one night, the discussion turned to MoMA. In the unpublished second volume of her biography of Adams, Nancy Newhall vividly recounts their mutual enthusiasm for the project:

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[461] David McAlpin to Ansel Adams, June 28, 1940. CCP/AAA.

> The more Beau talked, the more a certain look I have come to know very well began to glow in Ansel—a daring, questing, excited brilliance. Finally, he rose, tossed the ice from his glass down the slope as if it were a libation to the gods, and said, "Here's to it!" Then went inside and called David Mc Alpin…. Ansel's excitement and conviction carried across three thousand miles. Yes, Newhall and he had worked out a solid, dynamic program. No more hesitation, cautions, doubts, even if emanating from the Place—the time to launch the department was Now![462]

Three months later, McAlpin would relay to Adams that he had accepted the chairmanship of the new department and ask him to come out to New York to consult for several months. Adams excitedly agreed, but cautioned that their joint endeavor would not necessarily be easy, stressing that they would have to stick to their convictions. "We have to keep a perfectly straight track without aggravating or compromising," he wrote, pointedly using the term "straight" to allude to their philosophy, adding "it is going to take a lot of thought and tact."[463]

By this time Stieglitz had ceased to entertain any further talk of a retrospective, claiming he was too old to cope with the anxiety such an exhibition would engender. Nevertheless, his importance to the MoMA project had not waned. Despite numerous disappointing encounters with him, Newhall, like Adams and McAlpin, still craved the older man's approval. Like an excited schoolboy, he wrote to Adams about relaying news to Stieglitz of McAlpin's success: "Isn't it swell of Dave to get the thing started? I have written Stieglitz about the plans in general and have appealed to him for advice and counsel—I want him to feel that he is in on the work from the very foundation."[464] The glorious, museumwide Stieglitz retrospective the three men had dreamt would inaugurate

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[462] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment,* 99.
[463] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, September 9, 1940, CCP/AAA.
[464] Nancy Newhall, *Eloquent Light*, 82.

their new department was not to be, however, and in its place they were forced to console themselves with the one small gallery and truncated two-week stint the museum offered. It was not ideal, but considering the imminence of America's entry into the war, they decided it was worthwhile to introduce the department sooner rather than later, lest the museum lose interest.[465]

Sixty Photographs, the inaugural exhibition jointly organized by Adams and Newhall, represented a refinement on the large survey exhibitions each had produced separately. Gone were Newhall's wild colors and experimental installation techniques—Adams had insisted on an elegant, Stieglitzian presentation, which he thought afforded the pictures more dignity than the haphazard Bauhaus style. Unlike *Photography 1839–1937* and *A Pageant of Photography*, no scientific or functional photographs were included. The brochure text carefully explains this omission:

> This exhibition is not to define but to suggest the possibilities of photographic vision. As its title implies, the choice has been an arbitrary one, and is not all-inclusive. Certain omissions have been deliberate: color photography is not represented, nor is commercial, scientific and advertising work. These and other exclusions have not been intended as criticism. This is but the first of a series of exhibitions.[466]

Despite the suggestion that exhibitions of commercial, scientific, and advertising work might be shown later, Newhall states elsewhere in the brochure that the new department would only exhibit "art"—exemplary photographs selected from the massive number of images created every day. His statement could easily have been taken from Adams's

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[465] Beaumont Newhall to James Thrall Soby, February 12, 1941, Newhall, II.1. MoMA Archives, NY. "The reason the show was held so hurriedly was because David McAlpin wanted to establish the Department as soon as possible for, as he pointed out, should the international situation become tense in the Spring, the museum officials would be disinclined to sponsor a new project."

[466] *Sixty Photographs*, exhibition brochure, 2, CCP/AAA.

Making a Photograph in that it emphasizes truth to medium, personal expression, and aesthetics—Adams's key concerns. It also includes terminology favored by Stieglitz and Strand, such as "living photographs." It read:

> From the prodigious output of the last hundred years relatively few great pictures have survived—pictures which are a personal expression of their makers' emotions, pictures which have made use of the inherent characteristics of the medium of photography. These living photographs are, in the fullest meaning of the term, works of art.[467]

In limiting the department's purview to photographs that were "works of art"—examples of "personal expression" made by an artist—they were rejecting, as Christopher Phillips writes, the "more openly functionalist claims of the 'new vision,'" which Newhall had entertained in 1937, or the full complement of "creative" photographs Adams had shown in *A Pageant of Photography*.[468] This rejection did not go unnoticed.

Adams was undoubtedly relieved to hear from Newhall in a telegram written the day after the opening that Stieglitz had approved of the exhibition. Newhall reported, "I took Stieglitz over to see the show this morning. Except for numerous reservations and minor criticisms he was hugely pleased."[469] He wrote in more depth the following day, detailing Stieglitz's comments, which he interpreted as largely positive.

> He thought we had made a beginning, a fine beginning. "Mistakes, yes; not the way I would have done it, but sincere and fine. What Barr has written is very important. He has committed the museum to photography. More important than he knows, or you. You have a lot to fight for. So long

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[467] Ibid., 4.
[468] Phillips, 22. I disagree with Phillips's contention that Newhall changed his approach in order to attract "the support necessary to establish a full department at MoMA." I would argue, rather, that Newhall was decidedly less calculating, and had truly become a believer in Stieglitz's philosophy. Further, as will become increasingly evident, it is clear that such a model was not in line with the administration's goals for photography at the museum, and thus was not a surefire way to get the support he needed.
[469] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, January 1, 1941, CCP/AAA.

> as you do the things you believe in, so long as you can please yourself, all will be well."[470]

Newhall's assessment was perhaps overly optimistic, however, as a brief snippet from an earlier letter from Stieglitz to O'Keeffe suggests that they did not support the MoMA project:

> [R]eceived an invitation for a cocktail party to be given for Ansel Adams on Friday, 5 p.m. because of his identification with the project on hand to open a section of the Museum of Modern Art to photography. The invitation came from Maloney, publisher and editor of U.S. Camera!!—I was told I'd meet many of my friends at the party.—Ye gods. Good I have a fairly good stomach otherwise I would have had to vomit.—Just too awful. But somehow I know it can't be otherwise. Of course I am not going. I'm merely wondering what next step I must take to protect "myself"—that is "protect" all I have stood for.[471]

Despite the fact that he appeared to enjoy the company of Adams and the Newhalls, and particularly that of Nancy Newhall, with whom he became quite friendly in his last years, Stieglitz continued to feel a need to "protect" himself and his legacy from too close an association with the department and the museum. While he supported their efforts in certain respects, consulting with them about their plans and giving his opinion, he could not control what they were doing, and never gave his name to their work.

Despite her deep affection for McAlpin, O'Keeffe, even more so than Stieglitz, was unwilling to be associated with the fledgling department. From the outset, she harbored strongly negative sentiments about Adams and Newhall's plan. When they began preliminary talks about the department, Newhall wrote to Barr that McAlpin wanted O'Keeffe to be a key advisor. "As one whose esthetic judgment McA respects

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[470] Ibid.
[471] Alfred Stieglitz to Georgia O'Keeffe, October 23, 1940, Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL.

above all others, and as one who has been close to photography through Stieglitz for some 25 years, McA[alpin] felt that O'Keeffe would be a great help," wrote Newhall, adding that her assistance would be imperative, "particularly in getting for the museum the Stieglitz material at his death. Stieglitz himself would be asked to be honorary chairman—and would probably refuse."[472] At that early moment, McAlpin and Newhall felt MoMA was the logical repository for Stieglitz's collection, and hoped the Trustees would be more inclined to green light the department if it appeared it would entice Stieglitz and O'Keeffe to promise his collection to the museum.

As is evidenced by a letter she wrote sometime in 1940 to McAlpin in response to his invitation to serve on the department's advisory committee, O'Keeffe's negative assessment of the project had much to do with her opinion of Adams, which was strikingly harsh.

> [D]o not print my name in connection with anything you are doing unless I talk with you first about your policy…I think it is an opportunity to do something that hasn't been done in the world as far as I know but I am not willing to break my neck convincing you and Adams or anyone else…. I have no patience with Adams way of capering through life—making a monkey of himself to attract attention. He can make beautiful photographs but usually they are just that—beautiful photographs—he doesn't take the time to say anything. You as a rich man are very attractive to him. If you were a gingham salesman I doubt if he would work so hard to amuse you. That may seem a mean remark to write but as I cannot talk to you I've got to lay my cards on the table in the written word. Adams is probably still on the fence between trying to make what money he can and doing the best work he can—he is a half thing and no one can help him. [473]

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[472] Beaumont Newhall to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., September 12, 1940, MoMA Department of Photographs.
[473] Georgia O'Keeffe to David McAlpin, undated, Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL. The letter was likely written in September of 1940, when McAlpin wrote to O'Keeffe for advice about the project. It is unclear whether it was ever sent.

Although she would never clearly delineate what her own strategy for the department would be, O'Keeffe suggests that McAlpin would never be willing to fight to uphold the standards she would insist on promoting:

> I believe I could easily convince him [Adams] of my idea for a plan but I am not sure I could convince you so that you would be willing to take the beating you would have to take for it—and I assure you you would have to take a beating because it is an odd plan and I am not at all sure that you believe that much in me. The museum would probably make a fuss too. So I am going to sit here in the sun and say to you please do not print my name in connection with anything you are intending to do because I am probably not with you. If I would not be really helpful to create something that is like another part of myself I am not interested and I really doubt if any of you will care as much about it as I would. My love and luck to you Dave—I may seem a bit violent to you but you know I am that way about a few things. You had better keep this to yourself.[474]

Unaware of the extent of O'Keeffe's negative feelings, Newhall and Adams invited her, along with Soby and Barr, to preview the inaugural exhibition before all the kinks had been completely worked out. They later recognized that this had been a grave mistake, as O'Keeffe went to Edward Steichen—who had the ear of some of the museum's most influential trustees, particularly Henry Allen Moe—and complained that the exhibition did not do justice to photography, and that the short run and the lack of space dedicated to the exhibition demonstrated the museum's lack of serious interest in the subject.[475] Newhall wrote to Adams detailing O'Keeffe's behavior, which he had difficulty comprehending:

> O'Keeffe I cannot but help agreeing with you is unfair. She came to the dinner meeting which Dave gave for the Committee last Wednesday, and I have seldom seen a person less cooperative, less ready to listen to the other person's point of view and more prejudiced. She felt that the

[474] Ibid.
[475] Undated notes by Adams on his stay in New York. CCP/AAA.

> exhibition was a great mistake, that it was an insult to photography to begin with a two-week show in a lousy little room. The reason for the short time was explained to her. "Who cares when you begin? What if you do have to wait a few years?" She felt that we didn't care about photography, that it all came about too easily, that there was not enough struggling and sweating. But not once did she propose an alternative, not once did she put her finger on a point and say "This picture was bad, why didn't you use that picture?" When appealed to for constructive help, she shrugged her shoulders with "That's up to you."[476]

Her complaints made their way to the Board, who forced Newhall to defend himself against the criticism. In a letter to James Soby, head of the Museum's Advisory Committee, he addresses O'Keeffe's charges, writing that "O'K[eeffe] objects to the museum as a whole. She objects to the whole Phot'y Committee, and to Ansel Adams in particular. She feels that we do not deserve to have a S[tieglitz] exhibition."[477] Apparently agreeing with her on certain counts, Newhall suggests that Adams was to blame for many of the exhibition's shortcomings.

> …the chief criticism which I have to make of the show was that it was undertaken too hurriedly, and that the responsibility was split between Ansel and myself. Please do not think that by that remark I am trying to cast off the responsibility, or to pass the criticisms on to another. I erred in giving Ansel too free a hand, and things had gone too far when the committee went over the selections. The objections which you and Alfred made at that time were valid, and I should have liked to profit by them more than was possible at that stage of the show. The show began simply as a selection of prints from the permanent collection, assembled on the occasion of the formal announcement of the formation of a Dept. of Phot'y. It then began to assume more importance. The reason the show was held so hurriedly was because David McAlpin wanted to establish the Department as soon as possible for, as he pointed out, should the international situation become tense in the Spring, the museum officials would be disinclined to sponsor a new project. And in this regard he acted well, I think.[478]

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[476] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, February 2, 1941, Newhall, II.1, MoMA Archives, NY.
[477] Beaumont Newhall to James Thrall Soby, February 12, 1941. James Thrall Soby Papers, III.F 2. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.
[478] Ibid.

The net result of O'Keeffe's behind-the-scenes maneuvering was that the Trustees and executive staff were left with doubts about Newhall's and Adams's fitness to run the department even before the inaugural exhibition had opened.

Prescient of the sentiments that later would cut short Newhall's tenure at the museum, was the reaction to *Sixty Photographs* from Barr, the man who all along had supported the inclusion of photography at the museum. As Nancy Newhall recalled, "Alfred Barr, coming in while we were hanging the show, looked discontentedly at the prints by Weston, Adams, Strand, Stieglitz, Emerson, and even Atget, and asked: 'why do great photographers like to photograph bushes?'[479] Many reviewers expressed similar bafflement with the subject matter of the photographs selected. The most positive analysis of the exhibition was written for *Time* by an anonymous journalist, who found no fault with their presenting the "heavy cream of camera craft."[480] Photographer Ralph Steiner, on the other hand, writing for *PM,* complained "on the whole it [MoMA] seems to regard photography as soft music at high tea rather than as a jazz at a beefsteak supper."[481] He argued that Adams and Newhall considered photography too narrowly, stating "today photography is a hustling, bustling science, craft, hobby, business and racket as well as an ART."[482] Like other reviewers, Steiner considered all of the

[479] *Enduring Moment*, 115.
[480] "From the Birdie's Nest," *Time* (January 6, 1941), 32.
[481] Ralph Steiner, "Untitled," *PM*, January 3, 1941, unpaginated.
[482] Ibid.

photographs in the show to be excellent, but took issue with the exhibition's overall tone, writing "This show looks too much like a MUSEUM show."[483]

Tom Maloney, publisher of *U.S. Camera*, a magazine to which both Newhall and Adams had contributed, was particularly dismayed by their efforts in the first exhibition, which he contended demonstrated an elitist approach to a popular medium. Likely spurred by Steichen—with whom he worked closely at the magazine—Maloney wrote in an anonymous review that MoMA did not take photography seriously enough, asserting that it treated photography like a "stepchild," and suggesting that the short run of the exhibition and the poorly printed brochure were evidence of an institutional lack of interest in the subject.[484] Like Steiner, Maloney bemoaned the fact that the show looked like a typical museum exhibition, that the presentation was too "precious" for photography. He described it as "very choice, very pristine, very small, very ultra."[485]

In the "Your Camera" column in the *World Telegram*, Mabel Scacheri wrote a three-part series of articles on the department and the inaugural show. Apparently comprehending Newhall's and Adams's intentions, in the first article she writes that the photographs in the exhibition "all represent something special, in fine quality, in originality, in true artistic expression," and that the show's purpose is "to study more closely the esthetic side of photography."[486] In the second and third installations of the series, however, she expresses concerns she claims to share with the general public, who,

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[483] Ibid.
[484] Tom Maloney, "Museum of Modern Art's Photo Department" *US Camera 14* (January 1941), 28.
[485] Ibid.
[486] Mabel Schacheri, "Your Camera" *World Telegram*, December 31, 1940.

she writes, found the show "goat getting."[487] Like Maloney and Steiner, her main complaint was not with the selection of photographs, which she largely found to be outstanding. Her criticism, rather, was that the curators should have provided more explanatory text to elucidate why certain photographs were included. "What is there about Charles Sheeler's White Barn that makes it a must?" she wrote, "I'd love to read a note explaining why."[488] The public did not know what to make of *60 Photographs,* Scacheri argues*,* because it was not accustomed to seeing photographs presented as works of art. "People have formed their notion of shows, and especially of subject matter, by the more popular type of photographic salon," she writes, "and if this is something—and it really is—they will have to have an explanation."[489]

All three of these reviewers were, in essence, saying the same thing: The general public considered photography bumptious, popular, and full of energy. *60 Photographs*, which was quiet, elegant, and still, was incomprehensible and seemingly elitist to the majority of viewers. Its focus on "esthetics" was apparently particularly maddening, leading a local dealer to produce an exhibition titled *60 Photographs (Without the Esthetics)*.[490] Each of the reviewers praised the museum for exhibiting photography, but in the same breath complained that the show looked too much like a museum show. All seemed to believe that photography was sui generis—that it should not be treated like painting or sculpture, even when it was shown in a museum. Photography was a different kind of art.

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[487] Schacheri, "Your Camera" *World Telegram*, January 8, 1941.
[488] Ibid.
[489] Ibid.
[490] "60 Photographs (Without the Esthetics)," Rabinovitch Galleries, January 13-25, 1941.

In the first issue of *Photo Notes,* the newsletter of the New York Photo League, the work of its members was described as "in keeping with the traditions set by Stieglitz, Strand, Abbott and Weston," and thus nominally in the same camp as Newhall and Adams.[491] Three years later, its editor ran a reprint of an article by Elizabeth McCausland that presented a more nuanced criticism of *60 Photographs* than most other reviews. In "Footnote on 'Camera Esthetics," McCausland writes that the exhibition raised provocative questions about the nature of photography and its relationship to art. Voicing some of the same concerns as the other reviewers, she writes that photography's status as a "second language of daily use," complicates its embrace by the public as a museum subject. Prefiguring the criticisms lodged in the 1970s and 80s by critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Abigail Solomon-Godeau against the department under curator John Szarkowski, she questions whether there can be such a thing as a strictly formal aesthetics of photography.[492]

> In closing, one may add that esthetics does not exist for the camera as an isolated entity. Esthetics, in fact, is inseparable from the purpose of the photographer and the use he makes of his theme. When photography fails of its highest expressiveness, it is usually because a false separation has been imposed on content and form.[493]

Like Newhall and Adams, McCausland believed that photography had unique characteristics independent of other media. Unlike them, however, she suggests that part and parcel of its individual nature is its link to a specific moment in time. It is this "timeliness," she argues, that is the medium's defining essence. As such, separating form

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[491] "For a League of American Photographers," *Photo Notes* (August 1938), 1.
[492] Elizabeth McCausland, "Footnote on 'Camera Aesthetics,'" *Photo Notes* (February 1, 1941), 2.
[493] Ibid., 3.

from content in photography is a denial of its very nature. When McCausland later joined the department's advisory committee, she would vigorously debate Adams and Newhall on this very point.

Newhall and Adams exchanged numerous letters in the months following the opening, attempting to come to terms with the criticism and, if possible, to make constructive use of it. Neither was swayed by the contention that the show was elitist, as both believed that only exemplary photography was worthy of exhibition at the museum. They had not aimed to organize a popular exhibition, and Adams was frustrated that that was what the critics apparently wanted.

> It seems to me that these people miss the point of the exhibit—they expect it to be something it isn't. Or rather, they are convinced photography is a great big horsey sort of popular sport—20,000,000 shutters can't be wrong. What really happens is that they don't see that there are not 20,000,000 artists; that the public at large is concerned with things not related to photography as a form of art…we have to be very careful not to be unduly influenced by BOTH the esoteric and the popular to the exclusion of common sense. We have a clear field of our own.[494]

After *Sixty Photographs*, Adams and Newhall found themselves largely on their own, criticized on the one hand by Tom Maloney, Edward Steichen, and Elizabeth McCausland for being too "precious," and on the other by Stieglitz and O'Keeffe for not being 'pure" enough. In a letter to Adams Newhall described what he saw, despite the criticism, as their goal for the department going forward:

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[494] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, undated (likely from early 1941), Newhall, II.1. MoMA Archives, NY.

> Our job, as I see it, is to stress originality, quality and—if one can use the word—"character" in photography. We shall present photography as one of the arts—not as a broad and universal method of communication, without regard to quality, but with stress on universality and quality.[495]

[495] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, March 21, 1941, Newhall II.2, MoMA Archives, NY.

CHAPTER FIVE
PROPAGANDA FOR FREEDOM

According to Alan Trachtenberg, Stieglitz's desire to "free the image from its social context, thereby preserving the aesthetic from political appropriation, [was] itself a political act with practical consequences for the institutionalization of 'art' photography."[496] When they founded a department of photographs at MoMA and attempted to put their mentor's ideas into practice there, Adams and Newhall felt those consequences keenly, discovering that separating art photography from the medium's functional forms was less natural and straightforward than they had suspected it would be. They found Stieglitz's model excessively restrictive and photography's broader political potential increasingly difficult to deny at a moment when traditional notions of art were being questioned, the social and communicative uses of photography were being widely celebrated, and, especially, in the face of a looming world war.

Although during the Depression Adams had been able to resist pressure to embrace social engagement, he found this position increasingly untenable as America was drawn into the escalating war in Europe. The combination of the war, the increasing popularity of documentary photography, and his own involvement with the federal government led him in the early 1940s to soften his stance against politically engaged art, and began to promote a positive and "creative" variety of documentary photography that he felt merited museum display. This chapter analyzes the period immediately following the founding of MoMA's department of photography, examining how Adams and the

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[496] Alan Tractenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 289.

Newhalls reconfigured their exhibition philosophy in order to simultaneously promote expressive art and accommodate the museum's wartime mandate.

When the war in Europe escalated dramatically in the summer of 1940—the same year the department was founded—key members of MoMA's staff and Board of Trustees began taking leadership posts in defense-related government agencies. Most notably, Nelson Rockefeller, then president of the museum's Board, was named Coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), a unit charged with counteracting "the Fascist influence in Latin America."[497] John E. "Dick" Abbott, the museum's executive vice president, served as chairman of the OIAA's art section under Rockefeller, and Monroe Wheeler, then director of the museum's Exhibitions and Publications departments, began work as a consultant for the agency's publications and art sections. James Thrall Soby, a museum trustee and later the head of the advisory committee for the Department of Photographs, became director of the Armed Services Program, which was established to provide entertainment and therapy for servicemen both on leave and in the field.[498]

As a result of these direct ties to the federal government, MoMA became what Russell Lynes has termed "a minor war industry," supplying the OIAA, the Office of War Information, the Federal Communications Commission, the War Department and many other agencies with circulating exhibitions and films.[499] Not surprisingly, the war became a primary focus of the museum's programming in the years between 1940 and

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[497] From an unnamed Associated Press article of August 17, 1940, quoted in Lynes, 222.
[498] See *The Museum and the War*, a special edition of *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (October-November, 1942). See also "Museum to Offer Aid to Camps: Modern Art Institution Names J.T. Soby to head Work with Army and Navy," *New York Times*, January 28, 1942.
[499] Lynes, 237.

1946. MoMA's participation in government-sponsored propaganda efforts was celebrated in the 1942 issue of the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* titled "The Museum and the War," in which were listed the names of the agencies it had serviced and the many war-related projects it had undertaken to date.[500] Handsomely rewarded for this work, the museum earned $1,590,234 in government contracts over the course of the war.[501]

If MoMA had not been so actively involved in the production of government propaganda, the exhibition program of the Department of Photographs under Newhall would certainly have been vastly different. As it was, the museum staff was expected to contribute to the war effort, and Newhall had little alternative but to conform to expectations. The pressure to produce war-related exhibitions began before the department was even founded. In 1940 the board of trustees asked Newhall to organize an exhibition he later regretted undertaking: *War Comes to the People: A Story Written with the Lens*, a show featuring photojournalist Therese Bonney's photographs of the devastated civilian population of war-torn Europe.[502] The exhibition is significant because it was the first of many mounted at the museum in which the photographs included were selected for the timeliness of their subject matter rather than for their aesthetic value, a trend that was deeply disheartening for both Adams and Newhall.

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[500] Ibid.
[501] For a history of MoMA's involvment in government propaganda efforts see Lynes, *Good Old Modern;* Eva Cockroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *ArtForum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
[502] *War Comes to the People: A Story Written with the Lens*, December 10,1940–January 5, 1941. For a review of the exhibition, see "The Lens Writes History," *New York Times*, December 15, 1940.

Over the course of the war they would attempt to balance such exhibitions with shows that emphasized aesthetics over content, such as the first exhibition Newhall organized after the department was founded: a presentation of works by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson.[503] Unlike many of the war-themed shows that would follow, the Hill exhibition explicitly promoted photography as art. The press release, likely written at least in part by Newhall, credits Hill with being the first to use "photography as a medium of artistic expression."[504] Significantly, it also states: "this is the first of a series of exhibitions outlining the esthetic development of photography which the Museum will hold from time to time."[505] By starting with Hill, Newhall and Adams were establishing a tradition for expressive photography that stretched back almost to the invention of the medium. In so doing, they were following in the footsteps of Stieglitz and the Photo-Secessionists, who exhibited Hill's work as early as 1905. A key member of that group, Alvin Langdon Coburn, called Hill "the father of modern photography" in the catalogue for his 1915 exhibition *Old Masters of Photography,* which similarly sought to establish an artistic lineage for the medium.[506] Others followed suit. In an essay he wrote for *Camera Work* in 1917, Paul Strand called Hill one of the early "creators of a living photographic tradition," and in 1932, Heinrich Schwarz, a Viennese art historian, wrote *David Octavius Hill: Master Photographer*, the

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[503] *Photographs by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson*, September 9–October 19, 1941.
[504] Press release for *Photographs by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson*, CUR, Exh. #145. MoMA Archives, NY. It is worth noting that while Newhall included prints from Hill negatives by J. Craig Annan and Alvin Langdon Coburn in the 1937 exhibition, he did not at that point contend that Hill was the father of expressive photography.
[505] Ibid.
[506] Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Old Masters of Photography* (Buffalo: Albright Art Gallery, 1915), 2. The fact that the Photo Secessionist had promoted Hill is noted in the press release for the MoMA exhibition.

first monographic study of a photographer.[507] Newhall, who admired Schwarz's work and often credited him as an inspiration for his own art historical approach to the subject, helped Schwarz immigrate to the United States to escape the Nazis. It was his collection of Hill's work that Newhall drew from to organize the exhibition.[508]

Due to the low cost of printing and shipping, many of the circulating exhibitions prepared by the museum and sent across the country or overseas during the war were composed entirely of photographs. The majority of photographs included in the circulating exhibitions prepared by the museum—few of which were organized or overseen by Newhall—were chosen for their subject matter, rather than for their aesthetic merit. The museum's use of photography as propaganda complicated Newhall and Adams's efforts to promote the medium as an expressive art. Concerned with maintaining high standards, they feared that showing photographs at the museum that were not aesthetically significant would confuse the general public, making it difficult for them to discern the difference between photographic art and other uses of the medium. Newhall used an unusual analogy to describe the problem:

> It's as if you set up a lathe in a doctor's office and made shell casings. People would see M.D. on the door and come in to see the physician hoping to get a cure for a stomachache, and be given a shell casing instead. Nobody is going to deny the need for making shell casing, but some will think that the doctor needs an office, too, and still others are going to have a peculiar idea of what M.D. stands for.[509]

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[507] Paul Strand, "Photography" (1917), in Jonathan Green, ed., *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Aperture, 1973), 327.
[508] It is noted on a checklist in the curatorial files that about half of the prints were vintage, and half were later prints. MoMA Department of Photographs.
[509] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, September 12, 1943, GRI/Newhall.

Both Newhall and Adams believed that expressive art remained relevant during wartime, that it could lift the spirits of a beleaguered nation by reminding its citizens that beauty and truth would endure, and they lamented the mounting of exhibitions at MoMA that they felt would be more appropriately held elsewhere, such as at a museum of science and industry or a world's fair.

From the department's inception, Adams argued that MoMA should support the government's needs during wartime.[510] Nevertheless, he believed that the museum should remain true to its mission by exhibiting only work that was truly art, and not simply propaganda. As he explained:

> In adjusting the position of the Museum in this regard, we should be certain that no possible 'military' or obvious propaganda aspects are implied. It would be dangerous to foster, even by implication, a 'State Art." Yet, the museum as a whole can function as a focus point for Pan-American Art and expression, and encourage the interpretation of the Pan-American material in all media. This interpretation would necessarily be directed to the accent of confidence—propaganda for what exists in the background of the nation's strength and constructive activities. It was suggested that the terms 'Defense,' 'War,' etc. not be used in relation to the Museum's work during the stress times. The Museum would have nothing to offer Military programs of propaganda, and such confusion would result only in serious difficulties. It seems that such a term as 'Contemporary Public Relations' might be the reference term to the situation.[511]

As it was in the early 1930s, the avoidance of "propaganda" continued to be priority for him; he argued that the department should aspire to contemporary relevance without exhibiting "obvious" propaganda, which was not art. This line would prove very difficult to draw.

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[510] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, October 20, 1940, CCP/AAA.
[511] Ibid.

Image of Freedom

In 1941 Adams and Newhall jointly conceived of Image of Freedom, a contest that they hoped would contribute simultaneously to the war effort and to the promotion of "creative" photography—a compromise of sorts.[512] The contest and the resulting exhibition of winning entries was designed as a corrective to what they deemed to be the excessive negativity of much documentary photography produced during the Depression, and for Adams was exemplified by Evans's *American Photographs*. According to Nancy Newhall, to Adams's mind it was also intended to show Easterners the beautiful country to their west:

> The apathy and the cynicism bothered Adams, and the foreboding concern for New York City seemed ridiculously nearsighted…. If New York and Pittsburgh symbolized America to Easterners, he could understand that lack of will to fight. How to make the people in the Vortex [the East] realize that a tremendous land, continent wide, stretched behind them to the West? That it contained places, mountains, waterfalls, deserts, lakes and coasts as beautiful as any in the world? And vast fertile valleys, incomparable forests, and towns, cities and villages where people were still neighbors, helping each other? Of course there were still injustices, corruptions, discriminations—but America still had the power to fight them, and the freedoms long since fought for still stood in the laws of the land. America was still a potential, an ideal not fully realized, but where else in the current world was there a country and an ideal more worth fighting for?[513]

In a period overshadowed by the prospect of America's entry into the war, Newhall and Adams felt that Americans needed positive images to inspire national unity, and they hoped that the department could contribute to the war effort by offering a rousing vision

[512] *Image of Freedom*, October 29, 1941–February 1, 1942.
[513] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, unpublished manuscript, CCP/Newhall, 180.

of the country for which they soon might be forced to fight.[514] Coincidentally, the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred during the run of the exhibition.

The year before Image of Freedom, while organizing the *Pageant of Photography* in San Francisco, Adams wrote to Newhall about his interest in "documentary." He was not alone: in the late 1930s and early 1940s Newhall, Elizabeth McCausland, James Soby, Edward Steichen, and many others had attempted to define the term and the kinds of photographs it described.[515] For *Pageant*, Adams planned a section dedicated to documentary photography and, acknowledging that there was no single definition of the term, sought opinions on the subject from various writers. He announced:

> I am planning to show a group of outstanding Documentary photographs… which will present the most significant work of this classification of recent times. I am in consultation with Dorothea Lange, and we both feel this exhibit may be of the greatest importance. I am writing six individuals—Hartley Howe, Paul Strand, Pare Lorentz, Beaumont Newhall, Archibald McLeish and Lewis Mumford—to inquire if they will send me a paragraph defining a Documentary photography. These paragraphs will appear on the walls of the exhibition and will be a most important adjunct to the exhibit as a whole. The title of this series of paragraphs is not yet established but it would be one of the three following: "Defining the term 'Documentary Photography,"' or "What is Documentary Photography?" or "To Define the Documentary Photograph."[516]

Although to Adams's mind it had some negative connotations, he nevertheless found "documentary" to be a useful characterization of certain kinds of photographs. Despite the category's slippery nature, implicitly acknowledged in his own continuously

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[514] Of the rationale for the exhibition, Nancy Newhall writes: "War, we thought, was inevitable, but there was little answering patriotism. We were beset with apathy and cynicism; it would be a long war, more terrible than any before, ending, if the free world managed to survive, in the siege and attack if the formidable Fortress Europa…. Was any war worth it? Would humanity be any better for another terrible and futile mass sacrifice? If only America could stay aloof!" Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 172-3.
[515] James Thrall Soby, "Notes on Documentary Photography," *U.S. Camera* (November, 1940): 38, 73-4; Beaumont Newhall, "Documentary Approach to Photography," *Parnassus* 10 (March 1938): 3-6; Edward Steichen, "The FSA Photographers," *U.S. Camera Annual* 1939, 43-66; Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," *Photo Notes* (January 1939).
[516] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, April 26, 1940, Newhall, II.1, MoMA Archives, NY.

morphing definition of the term, he found it to be a fitting description for a particular genre of photography that was growing increasingly popular:

> I am aware of the difficulty of crystallizing photographs into the 'Documentary' or other fields, as the borderlines are often very hazy. I know many people think that a Documentary photograph must have a brutal expression of Poverty and ill-clad infants—but I think that some of Walter [sic] Evans's architectural photographs and some of the things I have seen of Luke Swank's are certainly Documentary in the broad sense. I am thoroughly inclined to agree with you about [Berenice] Abbott. She carries out the point that you can still make a Documentary and have hope![517]

Significant here is the fact that Adams believed that the documentary genre could also include photographs that presented a hopeful and uplifting message, and that he wished to promote that aspect of the genre as a counterpoint to the more negative, left-leaning examples that had earlier predominated. This interest in locating positive examples of documentary photography had begun as early as 1932, when he wrote an essay on Lewis Hine's *Men at Work*. Adams praised the book, writing that it was unlike most "photodocuments," which typically "stressed only the sordid and the despairing aspects of the [American] Scene—human derelicts, glimpses of dreadful poverty, the scenes and setting of misfortune and decadence. These undoubtedly exist in more than ample measure in our troubled time and are profound in their bitter implications."[518] Hine's work was different, writes Adams, because it accentuated the positive. Although he acknowledges that there were decidedly bleak aspects to life in America in the 1930s, there were also things worth celebrating. "But there are other phases—of a balanced

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[517] Ibid. Adams was responding to a letter in which Newhall wrote that he thought Abbott's work was "different from the usual 'documentary' work: it does not depend on ruination for its effect. It is much more straightforward than almost anybody else, it seems to me." Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, April 24, 1940, Newhall, II.1, MoMA Archives, NY.

[518] Adams, "Lewis Hine, *Men at Work*," 1932, unpublished article, CCP/AAA.

life, or hopeful and productive labor," he noted. "It is the latter aspect that has been handled with deep understanding by Lewis Hine."[519]

The desire to highlight examples of positive documentary photography that were also creative or expressive was the implicit impetus behind Image of Freedom. The exhibition represented an attempt to reconceptualize the term *documentary* along moderate political lines, balancing the critical with more hopeful portrayals of American life. The call for entries, which was written by Nancy Newhall, began with a series of questions based on the assumption that its readers already had a positive view of America.[520] The implicit message of the text was that there was no longer room for the kind of negativity or social criticism that colored much of the documentary work made in the 1930s. In this sense, Nancy Newhall's rhetorical stance shares much in common with the sentiments about America that Adams expressed three years earlier in letters to David McAlpin and Georgia O'Keeffe assessing Evans's *American Photographs*. She wrote:

> Let us look at these United States…now, in these critical days, when our lives and all that gives them meaning are threatened: What give our lives meaning? Why do we feel that, with all its faults, this is the place we want to live? Why do we feel that the foundations of our national life are not only unshaken but capable of supporting a greater, more human structure than any nation, or combination of nations, has yet built?[521]

Like Adams, Newhall acknowledged that times had been hard, but asserted that American democracy had proven to be the best possible political system. Moreover, she suggested that it was not the time for protest, but for building unity and finding solutions

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[519] Ibid.
[520] The call for entries was sent out to photographic journals, camera clubs, the Photo League, and art schools that taught photography, such as the Art Center School and the Clarence White School.
[521] Nancy Newhall, *Image of Freedom,* call for entries. CUR, Exh. #155, MoMA Archives, NY.

to the problems the nation faced. "We have seen searching photographic studies of the waste of life and land due to abuses that we allowed to accumulate, and we have seen the beginnings of a reclamation," she wrote. "Now let us see, with a vision equally exact, the power which can remedy these faults."[522] Staking out a political middle ground, she cautions against the extremes of radical protest and jingoistic nationalism, calling on photographers to present a moderate vision of America: "Can you compress it into a few photographic images? Not with the hysteria and jingle of superficial patriotism, nor with the bitterness of protest, but profoundly, simply, with insight and emotion?"[523] The call ends on a hopeful note, emphasizing photography's power to provide uplifting and positive messages of hope for the future: "In the belief that you, photographers of America, can through photography express and affirm our faith…. You are invited to enter a competition…. IMAGE OF FREEDOM."[524]

Despite their best intentions, Adams and the Newhalls were unable to produce an exhibition commensurate with their ideals. *Image of Freedom* was designed to be moderate, but it ended up being milquetoast, failing to either rouse nationalistic sentiment in the public or promote photography as a fine art. Nancy Newhall wrote to Stieglitz that the exhibition was "a fizzle," and although she blamed the exhibition's failings on a lack of creativity on the part of the photographers who submitted their work, its shortcomings were more likely due to procedural and conceptual problems.[525] While the winning

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[522] Ibid.
[523] Ibid.
[524] Ibid.
[525] Nancy Newhall to Alfred Stieglitz, August 15, 1941, Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL. She later admitted that it wasn't the fault of the photographers: "Nothing quite like the image of freedom had been done by an art museum before. The most democratic of competitions, it was a daring and important

entries were, by and large, uplifting in tone and subject matter, few could be considered examples of the best "creative" photography. In fact, most were mediocre and unmemorable.[526] One reason for the paucity of quality submissions was that few photographers were willing or able to submit their best work, as the museum required them to relinquish future rights to any submissions.[527] Thus, most work originally produced for a magazine or newspaper—a category that included the bulk of photographs made during the period—was immediately ineligible, as the rights generally belonged to the publication for which it had been made.

Such bureaucratic problems only exacerbated the exhibition's conceptual failings, which were detailed in a review by Walter Rosenblum, editor of *Photo Notes*. Rosenblum's primary criticism was that the preponderance of entries chosen were landscapes. He contended that the dearth of human subjects prevented the exhibition from eliciting patriotic sentiments:

> The call had gone out to all the photographers in the country to show their personal conception of 'America.' The show on the museum walls was not fitting reply to the demand…it failed because the photographs were not sufficiently representative of America….The line which many of the photographers adapted was too narrow, and failed to take into consideration many of the broader aspects of American life…. In essence, the museum has asked us what in this country is worth defending? Of course, as many of the photographers showed in the museum competition it is to a certain extent our beautiful country, the trees, the skies, the very

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experiment. It did not make a great show. We realize from what we knew of the work of the photographers who submitted, that we should have gone to them, hunted them out in the back country and byways, looked through their prints and asked for what the theme needed. The *Image of Freedom* was, so far as we know, the first theme show, and a theme show, we began to understand, is a symphony. It needs first a composer and then a conductor, preferably the same person." Newhall, *Enduring Moment,* 180.

[526] The exhibition file in the MoMA archive contains press prints of all the winning entries, most of which are unexceptional.

[527] Memo from Sarah Newmayer, MoMA Publicity Agent, to Nancy Newhall, October 15, 1941, Registrar Exhibition files, Exh. #155. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.

> earth which we all hold so dear. But isn't there something more important than that now? Isn't it that very human quality that differentiates a Nazi storm trooper from a real American?[528]

Rosenblum's criticism of the exhibition closely mirrors Lincoln Kirstein's earlier complaints about Adams's *Sierra Nevada*. Like many on the left, particularly in New York, neither felt that beautiful landscapes sufficiently defined American values and ideals. For Kirstein and Rosenblum, it was the *people* that made America great, not the land.

Elizabeth Mc Causland, on the other hand, thought the exhibition represented a step in the right direction, as it conveyed a powerful social message, even if it was a largely uncritical one. Pointedly referring to the lack of interest in documentary photography Adams and Newhall had previously shown, she wrote:

> This week the irony is evident when a museum sponsors a theme of profound social content. Only a week or so ago (it seems) we were told with pontification that propaganda had nothing to do with art. Now we are told that propaganda for the 'American way of life' is the highest art. With the latter statement we are in total agreement.[529]

Unlike Rosenblum, McCausland praised the "duality" of landscapes and depictions of human subjects presented in the exhibition. Of the juxtaposition of the two she wrote:

> From coast to coast the duality stretches, the land and the people: Yosemite, a California tractor…the Rockies, a man's garden on his fireescape [*sic*] overlooking the Third Avenue 'El'…here is the best, happiest, most hopeful image of that freedom on which we have proudly based our life as a people. This positive if idealistic image is the pledge the United States makes that the less happy, less peaceful side of the pasture shall be changed, while the ideal is maintained.[530]

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[528] Walter Rosenblum, *Photo Notes*, December 1941.
[529] Elizabeth Mc Causland, "'Image of Freedom' Photos at the Modern Museum," *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, November 2, 1941.
[530] Ibid.

According to William Stott, the "unity-in-diversity-as-strength theme" that McCausland here appears to invoke was "the central strategy of America's entertainment, propaganda, and reportage of World War II."[531] As examples he cites Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" (1940), and Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," which Stott contends was "epidemic" by 1941. Both songs, like McCausland's text, suggest that the unique beauty of America's landscape was the shared inheritance that united a diverse people. It was the land, rather than a common culture that was, as Guthrie writes, "made for you and me."

Only months before *Image of Freedom* opened, an exhibition of FSA photographs was mounted around the corner from MoMA at the New York Museum of Science and Industry at Rockefeller Center. The political tone of the show, titled *In the Image of America*, was, like *Image of Freedom*, surprisingly moderate. According to a review in the *New York Times*, the exhibition did not include the kinds of photographs for which the FSA was best known—images of people suffering under the weight of extreme poverty—instead featuring examples that celebrated the industry and variety of rural America. The reviewer noted:

> That the purely documentary approach does not necessarily mean the destitute approach is proved conclusively by the prints exhibited. When F.S.A first showed its work it impressed more by its mere subject matter—the poverty-stricken 'third of the nation'—than by photographic excellence. But since that time the Farm Security has broadened its viewpoint to include all rural America.[532]

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[531] William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 236.
[532] Robert W. Brown, "Rural Face of America," *New York Times*, June 29, 1941, xx15.

This adjustment in "viewpoint" at the FSA was not accidental, but rather was consciously made by Roy Stryker, the head of the photographic section, in response to efforts on the part of conservatives in Congress to discontinue funding for his agency. The move is also reflective of a larger trend toward the middle that had begun after Stalin's purges and increased as the war escalated in Europe.

This political shift was evident as well in books illustrated with documentary photographs. William Stott writes that after 1938 such books increasingly celebrated the country rather than criticizing it, and depicted the land over the people.[533] Earlier books, such as *Land of the Free* (1938), which was illustrated with photographs by Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Walker Evans and others, and made mostly under the auspices of the FSA, evinced a critical, leftist point of view.[534] In it, poet Archibald MacLeish, a MoMA trustee, argues that in order for conditions to improve for tenant farmers and others hit hard by the Depression, the national conception of liberty had to shift. "We wonder if the liberty is done," he writes, referring to what he considered to be an outmoded sense of liberty based on natural resources that were now largely expended, "or if there is something different men can dream…or if there is something different men can mean by liberty…Or if there's liberty a man can mean *that's men, not land*."[535] These last lines were illustrated with photographs of a May Day demonstration in Philadelphia, a group of labor leaders addressing textile workers in North Carolina, and a celebration marking the end of a steel strike in Pennsylvania, where, amidst a veritable

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[533] William Stott, 240–1.
[534] Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), 84–7.
[535] Ibid.

sea of exuberant workers, one smiling young man waves an American flag. These photographs, taken in cities and featuring workers who were well dressed and adequately fed, contrast starkly with the lonely and desolate images that illustrate most of the book: pictures of babies dressed in dirty rags, hungry people stranded by the roadside, eroded farmland, and environmental destruction. The political message is thinly veiled: unionization equals liberty and social betterment. In stark contrast to Jeffers's "not man apart," McLeish was interested, as he wrote, in "men, not land," a position common in the more left-leaning texts published in the period.

But as the Depression ebbed and the war in Europe escalated, the tenor of the times changed. This is evident when McLeish's work is compared to *Fair is Our Land* (1942), edited by Samuel Chamberlain, which, with its moderate, pro-American message, sought to counter the negative image of the country painted by the overtly leftist books published in previous years.[536] "In recent years a deafening babble has been dinning at our ears," writes Donald Moffat in the introduction, "striking doubt and despair in all but the strongest of hearts.[537] The message of the book was one of unity based on a shared natural inheritance that had been abused and taken for granted for too long. It is as much plea for saving the environment as it is a rallying cry for national togetherness. Moffat contends that in the recent past Americans had sinned against the land and thus against themselves. Greed and wastefulness had led to environmental damage, unhealthy food (such as sugar and white bread), crime, cultural immaturity, and a lack of social responsibility. With outside threats lurking, the time was ripe, he

[536] "…from 1938 until the war began, 'conservative' documentary was at its zenith." Stott, 251.
[537] Donald Moffat, *Fair is Our Land* (New York: Hasting House Publishers, 1942), 17.

argued, for Americans to remedy these faults and rise together for the betterment of the union. Seeing the country as a whole and the populace as one was the first step toward "learning to forget ourselves and fight to keep this beauty undefiled."[538]

Like MacLeish, Chamberlain illustrated his book with photographs made for the FSA, adding to them etchings and lithographs as well as photographs by Minor White, Cedric Wright, Roi Partridge, Laura Gilpin, and even Adams, all known primarily for their evocative and beautiful landscapes. The FSA photographs he chose were of the merry, agrarian variety that Roy Stryker began to call for in the waning years of his project, and not the pictures of sordid shacks or dirty-faced children that illustrate *Land of the Free*.[539] In fact, *Fair is Our Land* includes very few depictions of people at all. Most of the illustrations are picture-postcard images of a romanticized, idealized America. There is no evidence of ugliness, poverty, or grime, just quaint and beautiful townships or expanses of tamed nature. The one Adams photograph included in the book is an unremarkable shot of tiny skiers dwarfed by massive snow-covered trees at Badger Pass in Yosemite—a commercial job done for the U.S. Department of the Interior. Most of the other photographs included in the book are equally prosaic and topographic. In his desire to counter what he considered to be the negativity of the many earlier publications, Chamberlain went to another extreme, illustrating his book with photographs that depict a blissfully rural America that was largely a fantasy.

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[538] Ibid.
[539] Christopher Phillips, "Steichen's Road to Victory," *Exposure* 18:2 (Fall 1980), 40. "Stryker had specifically instructed his photographers to obtain a more judiciously balanced view of rural, small-town and urban subjects..." See also F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade*.

Road to Victory

In the fall of 1941, after the lackluster reception of *Image of Freedom*, Adams organized an exhibition of nineteenth-century photographs of the Western frontier and the Civil War.[540] In a press release, he suggests the exhibition was inspired by the war in Europe, writing that he hoped the clean, direct style of Mathew Brady, Timothy O'Sullivan and their peers would serve as a model for contemporary war photography. In a review of the exhibition, Elizabeth McCausland argued that contrary to the belief in some quarters that art was of no importance during war, the nineteenth-century photographs included in the exhibition were relevant to the contemporary crisis, writing:

> In these crucial times of our existence as a country, we are forced to question all we think and do. Today in the arts and culture generally, we must face the grave problem of how the life of the mind and the reason can contribute to the gravest reality of our age—war. There is a tendency to think and act as if the arts were extraneous activities, capable of being indefinitely suspended until in lighter, easier times we can afford to indulge them again. Nothing could be more contrary to the sober, dignified spirit in which the American people have to enter upon war…. These civil war photographs show us in human terms a great war, a necessary and self-respecting war. More than that, by ruin, devastation and death, they teach how dear and how prized is life….[541]

In a blurb printed in a brochure listing the museum's circulating exhibitions, the photographs in the exhibition were also touted as valuable reminders of what Americans were fighting for.

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[540] *Photographs of the Civil War and the American Frontier*, March 3–April 5, 1942 [exh. #172] The photographs in the exhibition, most of which were not intended as art, were chosen for their aesthetic qualities, rather than for any historical, social, or scientific purpose they may have been created to serve. Newhall, as had Adams in his earlier introduction to *Pageant of Photography*, contended that the origins of contemporary straight photography were in the wet plate work of the 19th century, rather than in Pictorialism, as they were in actuality. Press release, MoMA Department of Photographs.

[541] Elizabeth McCausland, as quoted in a brochure listing the museum's circulating exhibitions for 1942-43, 35. Department of Circulating Exhibitions Records, I.4.2.8. The Museum of Modern Art Archive, NY.

> One may also point out that in the photographs of the pioneers' frontier we rediscover the love of country, and we deduce that there is work to be done today of equal importance and value. Our contemporary struggles need to be documented no less vividly than our past.[542]

While Newhall and Adams were engrossed in preparations for that exhibition, Newhall and David McAlpin, then chairman of MoMA's advisory committee on photography asked Edward Steichen to organize another war-related show, one that would celebrate the prowess of the American military.[543] Steichen was one of the most famous commercial photographers of the day, with many connections to key members of the museum's board, and had in 1936 organized one of MoMA's more peculiar exhibitions, a show of his prize-winning delphinium plants.[544] A colonel in the army during World War I, Steichen had the requisite knowledge of the field and the social connections necessary to helm such a project, which was to be titled either *The Arsenal of Democracy* or *Panorama of Defense*.[545] As it was initially conceived, the exhibition was to be a rather modest affair composed of only a few dozen photographs. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and America's subsequent entry into the war, the project ballooned into something far grander.

The attack also inspired Steichen, then age sixty-two, to reenlist in the armed forces. He joined the navy in January 1942.[546] His first assignment as a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserves was to complete the exhibition for MoMA, which

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[542] Ibid.
[543] Penelope Niven, *Steichen: A Biography* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1997), 586–7.
[544] *Edward Steichen's Delphiniums* (Exh. #50), June 24–July 1, 1936.
[545] Philips, "Steichen's Road to Victory," 40.
[546] Before Pearl Harbor, Steichen tried to reenlist in the Army Air Force, but was rejected due to his advanced age. After the attacks, and as the result of pulling many strings, Steichen was asked by the Navy to document their missions overseas. Niven, 581–89.

then became known as *The Road to Victory*.[547] Working with his brother-in-law, the poet Carl Sandburg, and the Bauhaus designer Herbert Bayer, Steichen created a spectacular piece of pro-American propaganda designed to lift the spirits of the populace and inspire nationalistic pride.[548] Where Adams and Newhall had attempted the year before with *Image of Freedom* to reconceive documentary photography along politically moderate lines, featuring only examples of the genre that could also be considered "creative" and emphasizing the importance of individual expression, Steichen used documentary photography in a radically different way, downplaying the authorship of individual photographers and repurposing photographs made for other uses to illustrate one particular vision of America: his own.[549]

Steichen's interest in documentary photography was piqued in April 1938, when he saw a mural of FSA prints on view at the *First International Photographic Exposition,* organized by Willard Morgan and held for one week at Grand Central Palace in New York City.[550] Mounted a year after Newhall's *Photography 1839–1937*, this massive exhibition was marked by profusion and unfettered populism. It featured some

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[547] An undated and unsigned note in a file from MoMA's registration department lists other possible titles for the exhibition: *The United States at War, Our Many Weapons, Foundations of Victory, Design for Victory, Our Way to Win, Equipped to Win, Instruments of Victory, America Forward, Prelude to Victory, Premise for Victory, America is Fighting!, We Can Win, Our Power for Victory, Toward Victory, Good Morning America.* The same file contains a note to Steichen from Sarah Newmayer, the museum's head of publicity, who suggested several other titles, including; "Land of Liberty…from 'My Country 'Tis of Thee,' of course, or it could be Land of the Free, from 'The Star Spangled Banner.' I like Land of Liberty better, however." Exh. #182. MoMA Archives, NY.

[548] For analyses of this exhibition see Philips, "Steichen's Road to Victory," 38-48. Also, Mary Anne Stanieszewski, *The Power of Display*: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 209-224.

[549] Phillips, "Steichen's Road to Victory," 40. William Stott contends that Walker Evans criticized Edwin Rosskam for doing much the same thing in the many books he edited, including Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town* (1940) and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). Stott writes "He used many photographs, some of them first rate, but he stripped them of their integrity by insisting on just what they should mean." Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 233.

[550] Niven, 575.

three thousand photographs and drew 110,000 visitors during its one-week run.[551] Sponsored by the photographic industry, it was a commercial event that included displays of cameras, enlargers, and other photographic equipment, as well as a lighted stage where models posed for camera-wielding visitors.[552]

Of the show, Walker Evans wrote to his former boss, Roy Stryker, "I must say the whole thing is so commercial it made me sick."[553] Others, such as Steichen, Ralph Steiner, Elizabeth McCausland, and Tom Maloney, embraced the riotous manner of display, which was similar to the way in which photographs were presented at the annual *U.S. Camera* salons that Maloney regularly organized and held at Rockefeller Center. Writing of the 1937 *U.S. Camera* salon, one reviewer characterized it as "vigorous and rowdy," stating that to see the photographs on view, "you shove and elbow your way. None of the muted art gallery whisper here. These pictures are to be enjoyed and shouted over."[554] Just as this anonymous reviewer contrasted the salon's raucousness to the quietude typical of art galleries, so would Steiner, Maloney, and Steichen two years later compare the presentation common at these popular salons to Newhall and Adams's *Sixty Photographs*.[555] McCausland, who would continually pressure MoMA to consider photography more broadly, wrote of the exposition at the Grand Central Palace in terms of which Maloney, Steiner, and Steichen would likely

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[551] See "110,000 Visit Photography Show," *Business Week* 11 (April 30, 1938): 18, 20. Also, "Eager Crowd Opens Photo Show Early," *New York Times*, April 19, 1938, 23.
[552] Ibid.
[553] Evans to Stryker, April 21, 1938, as quoted in Raeburn, *Staggering Revolution*, 281.
[554] "Success Story," *Minicam* I (September 1937), 23.
[555] See Steiner, Maloney and McCausland criticism of *Sixty Photographs* in Chapter Three.

have approved: "here is the vulgar tongue for which art has been looking."[556] When the department at MoMA was launched two years later, these critics hoped the museum would present photography as "vulgar" or popular art. It was against this idea that Newhall and Adams would continuously be forced to fight.

The *First International Photography Exposition* included photographs of all kinds by artists, commercial workers, and amateurs alike. Along with a historical component reminiscent of that featured in Newhall's MoMA exhibition a year earlier and many small sections devoted to individual artists, the show included a composite mural of seventy photographs created for the FSA, which many critics and visitors felt was the highlight of the exhibition.[557] Of the popularity of the mural, Roy Stryker, chief of the FSA's photography section, bragged, "It is not exaggerating a bit to say that we scooped the show."[558] The mural is significant to the history of documentary photography because it was among the first opportunities for the general public to see a large selection of FSA photographs, which previously had appeared only singly or in small groups in books, magazines, and newspapers, but had yet to be exhibited in any number. Asked to write about the photographs in a visitors' log, close to five hundred attendees contributed their comments, which ran the gamut from praise to condemnation.

Like most visitors, Steichen had previously seen only a few of the FSA photographs then on view.[559] Moved by what he considered to be their emotional power and potential to convey a message, he included a twenty-three-page feature about them in

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[556] Elizabeth McCausland, *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican* (April 24,1938), in Raeburn, 282.
[557] Raeburn, 280, and Phillips, 39.
[558] Roy Stryker to Ed Locke, April 26, 1938, in Phillips, 39.
[559] Raeburn, 281. Raeburn erroneously contends that Newhall hadn't seen much FSA work, either. In fact, Newhall had earlier visited Washington to buy some prints for MoMA's library.

the 1939 *U.S. Camera Annual*, which he edited. The feature included forty-one images by eight photographers, including Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Russell Lee. Taken together, the photographs paint a rather bleak picture of life in the American South. A large number depict women and children dressed in rags and living in desperate conditions. The few men pictured appear dejected, exhausted, and hopeless [Fig. 5.1]. The grim FSA photographs contrast awkwardly with the cute babies [Fig. 5.2] and campy commercial works that make up the rest of the issue—such as Steichen's *Hurray, Hurray for the U.S.A* [Fig. 5.3], a composite of his famous shot of the George Washington Bridge with a group of laughing girls in the foreground, dressed in gaudy red, white, and blue dresses. This jarring juxtaposition of commercialism with representations of unalloyed poverty exemplifies the magazine's catholic approach, which often paired photographs of serious subjects with others that can only be described as fluff.[560]

Superimposed on the bottom edge of each FSA photograph was a quote taken from the visitor's log at the exposition at Grand Central Palace [Fig. 5.4]. Some herald the work: "Admirable social document. A culturally integrated form of art," or "Wonderful. Sad. Photography beautiful," and "The most vital photography in America." Others address the political dimensions of the work: "From my point of view it's just another Roosevelt issue," or "Purely propaganda for communism," or "Pro-Nazi," and

[560] Adams and Newhall often bemoaned U.S. Camera's tendency to include too many photographs of cute babies and kittens. For example, Newhall once wrote to Adams: "Did I tell you that when Edward and Charis [Weston] were here we spent a splendid evening tearing U.S.C (Annual) apart? Literally apart, separating the sheep from the goats. Out of the 200 odd photos we found 28 that were superb, and which make up a fine little show. If we had an independent gallery, a place where we could do as we please, it would be fun to exhibit the torn out plates as a silent criticism of the book." Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, December 18, 1941, CCP/Newhall.

"Terrible. Waste of tax payers' money." Some express indignation at the situation they document: "Why the hell isn't something done about it?" or "Our land of plenty? I am ashamed." Others mock or blame the subjects for their fate: "O.K. Toots!" or "They could do better in building homes, etc. It's partly their own fault." [561] While these quotes instructively reveal the broad range of contemporary reactions to these photographs, the lack of a unitary point of view makes for a rather confusing experience for the reader. Although it is clear from his introduction that Steichen was impressed by the photographs and intrigued by the stories they supposedly tell, he does not elucidate why he finds them of value or what he considers to be the point of those stories. As he does not construct a coherent narrative scaffolding to hold the feature together, or ascribe to the body of work any particular message, the plight of poor tenant farmers gets lost in the tangle of conflicting interpretations laid out in the quotes. Further, as the tone of the photographs and the text are often at odds, the reader is forced to contend not only with his own reaction to each photograph, but also with that of a previous viewer whose opinion might be contrary.

Perhaps unintentionally, the piece demonstrates that context is critical to how these photographs are received and understood by an audience. In his introductory remarks, Steichen appears to argue just that: "Pictures in themselves are very rarely propaganda. It is the use that is made of pictures that makes them propaganda. These prints are obviously charged with human dynamite and the dynamite must be set off to

[561] Edward Steichen, "The FSA Photographers," *U.S. Camera Annual 1939* (New York: U.S. Camera, 1939), 43-66.

become propaganda; they are not propaganda—not yet."[562] Here he acknowledges the photographs' malleability of meaning, suggesting that they require a contextual spark to access their latent power. Earlier in the essay, however, he states that the FSA photographs are significant because they tell a particular story, writing, "We don't know if the photographers made these pictures with the purpose of telling a story. If they did not, then their cameras certainly put one over on them," in which case the agency lies with the camera and not the photographer.[563] Like a sideshow barker, Steichen exhorts his readers to, "step up folks, and look this way!" implying that what they were about to experience was something freakish and outside their normal experience. "Listen to the story they tell and they will leave you with a feeling of living experience you won't forget," he writes, describing the photographs as "weird, hungry, dirty, lovable, heart-breaking images."[564]

Steichen's message is contradictory: on the one hand, he suggests that the photographs tell a story, and on the other that they are dependent on context for meaning. In the *U.S. Camera* feature, any story that either the individual photographs or the group might tell is disrupted by the superimposition of comments made by previous viewers, which appear like captions below the images. The comments are distracting, creating a bifurcated narrative with an effect akin to listening to running commentary about a movie you are in the process of watching. While it is certainly possible that Steichen purposefully played up the political ambiguity of the photographs, using the comments to

[562] Ibid., 45
[563] Ibid., 44.
[564] Ibid.

demonstrate their narrative flexibility and allowing his readers to make their own judgments about their significance, features in *U.S. Camera* were rarely that sophisticated or nuanced. Based on Steichen's previous work for the magazine, it is more likely that he simply failed to present a coherent message or explain his intentions, a mistake he would not make with the *Road to Victory*.

Like Newhall, Adams, McCausland, and many others in the late 1930s, Steichen recognized that the term *documentary* was gaining currency, and weighed in on the emerging genre it defined. In *U.S. Camera* he disparages those who would try to "pigeonhole" photography into discreet categories, especially those who would suggest that so-called documentary work was simply a matter of "impersonal" documentation. Using a term of derogation first leveled at Stieglitz by Thomas Hart Benton, Steichen suggests that the "art for art's sake boys," were threatened by the power of documentary photography, and that this group—namely Stieglitz—-defensively disparaged the storytelling ability of documentary photographs, relegating them outside the realm of "art." Significantly, and in contradistinction to Adams and Stieglitz, for whom the individual artist was of paramount concern, Steichen writes: "It is not the individual pictures nor the work of individual photographers that make these pictures so important, but it is the job as a whole as it has been produced by the photographers as a group that makes it such a unique and outstanding achievement."[565] Although at first glance he appears to argue that documentary photography is expressive, and thus artistic, Steichen indicates that the intentions or accomplishments of individual documentary

[565] Ibid., 45.

photographers—as well as the question of whether their work was "art"—was to him of little concern. Rather, his primary interest in documentary photography was that it could be used to tell a story, and not necessarily the one the photographer intended.

Even before he saw the mural of FSA photographs in 1938, Steichen had aspired to create a grand and nationalistic photographic exhibition about America.[566] His later assistant, Wayne Miller, said that Steichen wanted to assemble "a massive, big show" that "was going to be [about] the spirit of America, the face of America…He hoped to use the Grand Central Station…He wanted to use the walls of that and have pictures from floor to ceiling: I guess it must be five to six stories high inside."[567] In many respects, *The Road to Victory* was the first realization of those grand dreams. It was significantly different from the *U.S. Camera* feature four years earlier, however, for, as Christopher Phillips points out, although Steichen had previously published the more "hard-hitting" FSA work, he chose few of that type for *The Road to Victory*, opting instead for the rosier variety of documentary photographs contained in Stryker's files.[568] Phillips writes that between 1938 and 1942 "times and the national mood had changed," and like Adams and Newhall did in *Image of Freedom*, Steichen chose to celebrate the American people and the land, rather than highlight domestic injustice.[569] In his introduction to the 1941 *U.S. Camera Annual* Tom Maloney expressed an even more extreme shift towards nationalism: "America seems all important, and since our medium is pictures, then *U.S. Camera* should be first of all American. Not only American, but literally flag waving

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[566] See Phillips, "Steichen's Road to Victory," 39.
[567] From transcript of interview of Wayne Miller by Christopher Phillips. Phillips, 39.
[568] Ibid., 40.
[569] Ibid.

American, proud American, even belligerent American, if belligerence is a necessity to maintain all that this land has given us."[570] Steichen celebrated the power and glory of America, commencing the exhibition with landscapes of domesticated fields of grain and glorious mountain wilderness, setting the stage with text from Sandburg that reads, "The earth is alive. The land laughs. The people laugh. And the fat of the land is here."[571]

Despite similarities of intention, *The Road to Victory* was exactly the kind of popular exhibition Adams and Newhall had endeavored to avoid with *Image of Freedom*. They had featured interpretations of America by individual, named artists, purposefully allowing both the artist and the viewer room to conceive of their own image of America, so long as it was positive. As Beaumont Newhall wrote of *Image of Freedom* in the Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art:

> Some photographers chose to represent freedom by portraying in landscape the vast natural resources of the country. Others felt that the spirit of freedom was most tangible in the betterment of living conditions by a beneficent government…. To still others freedom of expression seemed most important: freedom to worship, freedom to protest, freedom to live the way on pleases…. To all contestants freedom was deeply associated with America; it was generally felt that to focus on typical aspects of our way of life was ipso facto to express freedom. The result is a series of photographs of America embodying a spirit not common in photographic exhibitions. Among the photographs there are few abstract symbols. For the most part the prints form a composite picture of a land where, happily, freedom is enjoyed by many; a picture representing what a group of citizens feel to be worth defending.[572]

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[570] Tom Maloney, *U.S. Camera Annual 1940*, 11.
[571] "The Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* IX, no. 5-6 (June, 1942), 4. The fat was literally there as well, embodied in the form of a rotund laughing couple depicted in a photograph by Jack Delano.
[572] Beaumont Newhall, "Image of Freedom," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* IX (November 1941), 14.

Newhall here contends that the photographers used individual means to express what they felt signified America, and that each person's views were legitimate in their own right. Conversely, in *Road to Victory*, Steichen used photographs as illustrations of a narrative with a single point of view, eliciting from the visitor what Bayer characterized as a "planned and direct reaction."[573] Steichen, Bayer and Sandburg deftly manipulated the visitor, instructing him how to feel rather than allowing for any ambiguity. As Christopher Phillips has noted, Steichen minimized the authorship of individual photographers and emphasized his own role as curator, creating what a biographer has characterized as "another type of one-man show."[574]

According to Mary Anne Staniszewski*, Road to Victory* was "an ambitious reworking of the documentary photography that had developed during the 1930s under the aegis of the Farm Securities Administration." [575] She writes that Roy Stryker himself had assisted Steichen in selecting photographs for the exhibition and repurposing them, as the future of his agency depended upon just such a political transformation.[576] She contends that Steichen and Stryker transformed photographs that might have once had a critical edge into pro-American propaganda: "many of the FSA's photographs were cropped, all of their captions were changed, and the gritty documentary meanings were altered when reinscribed within the universalizing narrative of the *Road to Victory*."[577] Of primary concern to Adams and Newhall was not the political message of the show,

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[573] As quoted in Stange, 138.
[574] Niven, 594.
[575] Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display,* 215.
[576] See also Maren Stange, "The Record Itself: FSA Photography and the Transformation of Rural Life," in *Offical Images*, 4.
[577] Ibid.

with which they had few qualms, but the fact that Steichen used photographs as illustrations in a narrative, rather than as individual works of art by named artists. In *Road to Victory*, the photographs were not isolated on the wall and framed like paintings, as they were in exhibitions organized by Adams and Newhall under the auspices of the department, but cropped, altered, blown up to large scale and overlaid upon one another, much as had been done, writes Philips, by illustrated magazines such as *Life*, and in exhibitions in Germany and Russia in the late 1920s and 30s, such as *Pressa*, held in Cologne in 1928 [Fig. 5.5].[578] Interestingly, the design of earlier exhibitions such as *Pressa* and *Film und Foto* were also the inspirations for Newhall's 1937 exhibition.

Where *Image of Freedom* received tepid mention in the press, *Road to Victory* was lavishly praised. Edward Allen Jewell, an art critic for the *New York Times,* called it the "the season's most moving experience," lauding Steichen, Bayer, and Sandburg for their "stupendous" effort, which he characterized as a "portrait of America," that captures the "essence of a people, vitally and indissolubly linked with a people's environment, the very soil itself that nourishes and that in a sense shapes a people's life."[579] This was precisely what Newhall and Adams had attempted, but failed to achieve, with *Image of Freedom*. Elizabeth McCausland, whose review of the earlier exhibition had been guardedly positive, showered *Road to Victory* with the highest praise, calling it "a powerful call to the people of America to remember their glorious traditions of freedom

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[578] Phillips, 41.

[579] Edward Allen Jewell, "Portrait of the Spirit of a Nation: In 'Road to Victory,' MoMA Assembles a Moving and Gigantic Chronicle of America Today," *New York Times*, May 24, 1942, X5. Interestingly, four years earlier, Jewell had praised Walker Evan's American Photographs, similarly characterizing it a "true portrait of America," *New York Times*, October, 2, 1938, 169.

and to fight that we may continue to live as free people."[580] Concerned primarily with photography as a tool for social betterment, McCausland saw *Road to Victory* as an example of the medium's potential to move people to action. "Here art has been made a weapon of unmistakable intent and power," she wrote, averring that the exhibition was "significant not merely in a technical and formal sense but especially for its human and social implications."[581] Obliquely taking aim at Stieglitz and those who embraced his philosophy, McCausland writes that *Road to Victory* was proof that such an approach to photography was no longer relevant, writing:

> Since the ideological issue of the period now ended has been whether or not art should be above the battle of real life, it is worthwhile noting (for the record) that in this exhibition art has not been too proud to take sides. It has taken sides on the side of the American people, and against the defeatists, the fifth columnists, the spiritual saboteurs. A medal for art, the writer says.[582]

Although in retrospect the exhibition appears to mark the beginning of the end for Newhall and Adams's vision for the department, such a proclamation of victory was premature. Newhall was still curator, and the future that *Road to Victory* portended was still several years away—there were battles yet to come.

Not surprisingly, neither Newhall nor Adams shared McCausland's views about Steichen's exhibition. In fact, they were distressed by the overwhelmingly positive critical and public response and what it augured for the future of photography at the museum. Newhall, who had assisted with the installation, wrote to Adams of the "Steichen shebang":

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[580] Elizabeth McCausland, "Photographs Illustrate our 'Road to Victory,'" *Photo Notes* (June, 1942), 3.
[581] Ibid.
[582] Ibid., 4.

> The public finds the show very exciting, and we have been showered with praise about it. Between you and me, the show, for all its spectacular timeliness, has nothing whatever to do with photography, and may be more harmful than good. It's like a Stowkowski orchestration of a Bach fugue: very spectacular, very tuneful, very popular but it ain't Bach and it ain't good taste. Perhaps I'm a chamber music photographer, but somehow the ten Stieglitz photos that we are acquiring seem to me more important than the entire *Road to Victory*.[583]

Here Newhall distills the issue down to its basic element, analogizing his approach to chamber music and Steichen's to spectacular popular forms, suggesting that the quieter, classical approach was more dignified and appropriate for an art museum. Adams would soon after write to Stieglitz of his disgust with Steichen's brand of nationalism, echoing Newhall's sentiments about expressive versus popular art:

> I am, however, personally fed up with the self-conscious Sandburg Americanism; the paeonic glorification of what is, instead of what might be. The only true thing is the poor wretch on the firing line—not the expansive poems, texts, and pictures which depict him. I don't like Rockwell's posters, Hollywood war movies, Roads to Victorys [sic], Free Verse in Praise of Sacrifice, etc. [584]

Adams characterizes *Road to Victory* as popular propaganda, relating it to other "low" cultural forms such as movies, Norman Rockwell posters, "Oscar Levants and Irving Berlins and George Gershwins, studio photographers, columnists, agents, Dalis and dilatants [*sic*]."[585] He compared the beauty and truth of John Marin's and Stieglitz's work to the mendacity of advertising, which he related to Steichen and popular culture, writing:

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[583] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, June 3, 1942. Newhall, II.1. MoMA Archive, NY.
[584] Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, August 22,1943, CCP/AAA.
[585] Ibid.

> I think of Marin's work—the sharp accents of inner realities so simply set forth. And your photographs of the essential little things that are so big in their potency. All things, and the things they represent, are worth fighting for. But the bathetic world of Advertising is not worth the powder to blow it to Hell; and those advertising boys are in the saddle it seems—at least with most phases of our daily lives….Whatever is destructive and false in this world can be described in relation to advertising; it is the symbol of our decadence, the philosophy of untruth and exaggeration. I suppose I am so violent about it because it uses photography to such a great extent.[586]

Adams resented what he considered to be the misuse of photography by commercial concerns, and Steichen, the most successful commercial photographer of the period, embodied to him the "untruth and exaggeration" he here regrets.

When they first met him, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall were enchanted by Steichen's charisma and outsize personality. Nancy Newhall later wrote that when he had assisted her husband in the preparations for the 1937 exhibition she "thought Steichen one of the most wonderful men I had seen, and went and sat at his feet."[587] Her opinion changed after he, in league with Georgia O'Keeffe, had taken his criticisms of *Sixty Photographs* and the plans Newhall and Adams had for the department to some of the trustees, sowing seeds of doubt about their fitness to run the department.[588] From the department's inception, Steichen had been critical of Newhall's and Adams's approach to the medium. He wanted to see photography treated more broadly at the museum, and decried the "preciousness" of *Sixty Photographs*, its overemphasis on beauty and form. Like Ralph Steiner and Tom Maloney, whose critiques of the exhibition and the

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[586] Ibid.
[587] Nancy Newhall, unpublished notes for book on Alfred Stieglitz organized later by Beaumont Newhall. GRI/Newhall.
[588] Steichen had the ear of Henry Allen Moe and Nelson Rockefeller, among other influential figures.

department had appeared in print, Steichen urged the museum to present photography as something more than simply art: as a vibrant, modern means of communication.

After he arrived at MoMA to begin preparations for *Road to Victory*, relations deteriorated between Steichen and the Newhalls. Nancy Newhall wrote of an impromptu "picnic" they shared with Steichen on the museum's terrace during the exhibition's installation:

> [H]e did not like my—and Beaumont's—and Ansel's—espousal of Stieglitz and all he stood for; he himself stood for other standards and directions altogether. Alive, anti-art, the housewife with the Brownie over the kitchen sink, the newspaper photographer, and so on. A dislike grew between us that noon—it had been hurt and doubt before—that neither side has been able to overcome more than sporadically, in spite of gestures on both sides.[589]

Nancy Newhall here sets up a dichotomy between the philosophies of Stieglitz and Steichen, referring to the battle between the two sides that had begun when the department was founded. After Steichen's enormous success, the conflict would escalate. To further complicate matters, during the run of *Road to Victory*, Beaumont Newhall was called up for duty in the Army Air Force, and left his job in August 1942 to begin basic training.[590] Before he departed, he met with his wife and Adams to strategize about the future of the department. The three agreed that the best way to counteract the effect of Steichen's exhibitions was to produce several monographic shows that would demonstrate that photographers were the equals of their counterparts who worked in other media, such as Picasso, who was honored with a retrospective at MoMA in 1939.[591]

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[589] Nancy Newhall, unpublished notes for book on Alfred Stieglitz, GRI/Newhall.
[590] For details on Newhall's war work, which included the identification of camouflage from aerial photographs, see Newhall, *Focus,* 71–97.
[591] *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art*, November 15, 1939–January 7, 1940.

Together they decided that the first three subjects would be Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Adams. Although they also planned various thematic exhibitions, they believed these monographic shows were key to securing for photographers equal status with painters, as well as to demonstrating that photography was indeed modern art.

When Newhall left for the war, he and Adams had proffered Nancy Newhall as the best choice for his replacement. In the ensuing battle with the museum's administration, which lasted for almost a year, they were surprised to discover that even some of their staunchest supporters at the museum, including Barr, had harbored reservations about their collective approach to photography. In one of the many letters she wrote to her husband while he was in basic training, Newhall recounted that she and David McAlpin had found in their many meetings with MoMA's leadership that there was a pervasive bias at the museum against photographers classified as "purist," namely Stieglitz, Weston, and Adams.[592] After meeting with Barr, she wrote to her husband of learning that it was widely held that his "heart is in the nineteenth century," meaning that some felt Newhall's interests were either not sufficiently contemporary or that his approach to photography was outmoded.[593]

Newhall wrote a long letter to his wife about the soul-searching this criticism engendered. It is worth quoting here almost in its entirety, as it provides insight into the situation the pair faced at the museum.

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[592]Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, August 19, 1942 (postmarked), GRI/Newhall. "Alfred [Barr], Jim [Soby], Monroe [Wheeler], Stephen Clark and Frances Hawkins [Museum Secretary] were there—I don't remember who else—Dave [McAlpin] said that he really got the whole thing in focus for the first time—Apparently he never grasped the anti-Purist bias before, nor the hold statistics of attendance have on Hawkins and Clark and Abbott."

[593] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, August 20, 1942, Newhall, II.1. MoMA Archive, NY.

> To my surprise, to my sorrow, and to my intense disappointment, I now realize that the museum was not 100% behind me in the work I have been doing in photography…. Now of course I am neither so sensitive nor so shortsighted to resent criticism, and I would be the first to admit that I made, or allowed others to make, many mistakes. But I had the feeling that I had been entrusted with the confidence of the Trustees and the staff. Acting on this assumption I proceeded to conduct the department as I felt best.[594]

This reckoning must have been wrenching for Newhall, a gentleman with courtly manners and a big heart. His acknowledgment that he had let "others," namely Adams and McAlpin, make mistakes is significant, as it underscores the fact that the three were not always in lockstep.

> I believe that I have a broad point of view. If some people think that there is an overemphasis of "purist" photography, I can only answer that more good work is being done in that spirit. The resentment against Edward is something I simply cannot understand—even when it is Stieglitz speaking. Criticism of Ansel I can follow, and it will be noticed that Ansel has not been given any emphasis or precedence in the Museum shows.[595]

Here he proudly asserts the bias for which he had been criticized, clearly unashamed of his belief in the superiority of "purist" photography. Interestingly, while his admiration for Weston was apparently complete, he retained reservations about Adams as, he suggests, did others at the museum.[596]

> As to Moholy and Man Ray, I honestly cannot admit either in the ranks of the great photographers. And there, I think, lie the criticisms against me. I know that Alfred has been disappointed that I did not stage a one-man show of Man Ray when Jim [Soby] gave us his collection. Query: should I have played politics or stuck to the courage of my convictions? There was only one answer that I could make, darling, and only one answer that you could make.[597]

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[594] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, August 23, 1942, GRI/Newhall.
[595] Ibid.
[596] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, August 27, 1942, GRI/Newhall.
[597] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, August 23, 1942, GRI/Newhall.

The division between Barr and Newhall described here is significant, as Barr had initially supported Newhall in his efforts to promote photography and found a department at the museum. Despite the fact that their tastes in photography diverged—Barr's interest was in Surrealism, the Bauhaus, and Evans, whereas Newhall had gravitated to photography of the Stieglitzian or f.64 variety—Barr had nevertheless been an important mentor to the younger Newhall. Both were essentially formalist in their approach to the medium, but for Newhall, Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray were not the central figures they were for Barr. Nancy Newhall would write to Stieglitz that Barr's support of photography went only so far, that he had: "[a] blindness where photographs are concerned; he just cannot see them—for him, to acknowledge that photography can be an art is a kind of intellectual leaning over backwards—his duty towards a museum of modern art."[598] Along the same lines, Newhall vents his frustration that people who knew little about photography had questioned his decisions:

> There is only one man who knows more about photography as a fine art than I do, and his name is Stieglitz. Why I should be criticized by people who know practically nothing about photography, I cannot understand. Please don't think that I'm complaining or resenting: I simply had felt that the museum made me curator of photography because I was an expert.[599]

Lastly, he acknowledges the stark difference between his approach and that of Steichen, clearly confronting the criticisms lodged against his own exhibition philosophy:

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[598] In a letter to Stieglitz Nancy Newhall suggests that some of the tension was related to what others considered the overly narrow approach to photography advocated by Adams and McAlpin. "I think a lot of their [Soby and Barr] criticism is unwitting and basically is a lack of knowledge. To this, of course, should be added, as a postscript or by letter or word of mouth, how you slowly persuaded both of them (Ansel and Dave) to take a broader view of photography...." Nancy Newhall to Alfred Stiegltiz, (n.d.), 1942, Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL.

[599] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, August 23, 1942, GRI/Newhall.

> What was expected of me that was not given? More spectacular exhibitions, I guess, for one thing. The Steichen show has eclipsed all the little shows that preceded it. Everything I did was in miniature, small, quiet, unobtrusive, in good taste and (I realize it) lost in the shuffle. I didn't fight hard enough, allowed myself to be booted around. I didn't put on didactic shows, marked plainly so that people could read their way thru the gallery, because I felt that the photos themselves should tell their own story. I didn't handle the social angle well; didn't get around town, didn't bring in the photographers people were talking about. Another thing: by making close friends of those photographers we believe in, by speaking of the familiarly, I think we have built up a false idea that we're playing favorites.[600]

In many respects, the criticism of Newhall was the result of changing dynamics within the museum. From MoMA's founding in 1929 until its move ten years later to its present location on Fifty-Third Street, the composition of the Board of Trustees and the executive staff remained largely unchanged. Although, as Russell Lynes writes, "business was never either usual or 'as usual' in that eruptive, contrary, intense embattled institution," internal affairs became significantly more contentious at the end of the museum's momentous tenth year, beginning a period Lynes characterizes as the most "turbulent" in MoMA's history.[601] At a dinner celebrating the museum's tenth anniversary and the inauguration of the new building, Conger Goodyear, the founding President of the Board of Trustees, passed the torch to Nelson Rockefeller, marking, according to Lynes, "the end of an era and of a regime, and the beginning of a new manner of life for the museum and its staff."[602] In his biography of Nelson Rockefeller, Cary Reich suggests the tenth anniversary marked the moment the museum shifted from being a "precocious showplace to a basilica for the new artistic establishment, an

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[600] Ibid.
[601] Lynes, 238
[602] Ibid., 199.

institution with, as one commentator put it, 'a national reputation and national responsibilities.'"[603]

Paul Sachs, advisor to the museum's founders and the mentor and confidante of Alfred Barr, spoke at the dinner, voicing an opinion about the museum's future, which, in retrospect, perhaps more aptly describes the ambitions of the old guard, whose influence would soon after begin to wane. Subsequently published in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art,* Sachs's address focused on the problems he saw facing American museums in general and MoMA in particular. His main concern was with the maintenance of high standards in scholarship and connoisseurship, which he averred were not being upheld to the degree they were in Europe. As transcribed under the heading "The serious danger of vulgarization," Sachs warned:

> Let us be ever watchful to resist pressure to vulgarize and cheapen our work through the mistaken idea that in such fashion a broad public may be reached effectively. That is an especially tempting error because of the intense competition for public attention in American life. In the end a lowering of tone and of standards must lead to mediocrity and indeed to the eventual disintegration of the splendid ideals that have inspired you and the founders.[604]

Rather than attempting to lure in larger audiences with popular fare, it was his opinion that the museum should direct its efforts toward the education of an elite, who would lead the general public. "MoMA has a duty to the great public," he wrote, but in serving an elite it will reach, better than in any other way, the great general public by means of work done to meet the most exacting standards of an elite." Sachs urged the museum to

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[603] Cary Reich, *The Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller:Worlds to Conquer, 1908-1958* (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1996), 144. Reich does not name the "commentator."
[604] Paul Sachs, "Professor Sach's Address," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 5, no. 6 (July 1939), 11.

continue to "take risks," "avoid the sentimental," build a permanent collection that could serve as a "background of quality," and to allocate more money and effort to "[F]ilms, to architecture, to photographs, and to the library; for it is through these that the greatest number of young people can be reached—a fact, I fear, which too few of our generation appreciate."[605] Critically, such a vision for the museum mirrored that held by Barr, as well as by Newhall and Adams, who like Sachs were concerned with upholding high standards and steering clear of vulgarization. Unfortunately for them, such a vision for the museum was not shared by the incoming regime.

While Rockefeller took some of Sachs's suggestions to heart, his primary concern was with transforming the museum into a more financially responsible, efficient institution, more like a commercial business.[606] His goal was to wean the museum off Rockefeller money—upon which it had up until that point been largely dependent—lessening the responsibility on the trustees for the museum's financial support, and seeking out alternative revenue streams.[607] To that end, in 1935, before he was president, Rockefeller had recommended the museum hire efficiency expert Artemis Packard to analyze its administrative functioning. In his1938 report, which was highly unpopular with the staff, Packard suggested that the museum was faced with striking a difficult balance.

> It is only too apparent that its present enviable reputation has been largely built on the care with which it has avoided catering to the 'popular' interest. Yet 'popular instruction' is one of the major objects for which the institution exists…. What we are really confronted with is the need for two

[605] Ibid.
[606] Lynes, 213.
[607] Ibid.

> quite consciously and deliberately different kinds of enterprise; on the one hand, the search for what is best in Art according to the highest standards of critical discrimination, and, on the other, the provision of facilities for popular instruction in accordance with the public need.[608]

In order to address these conflicting needs, Packard suggested that the museum reconsider its exhibition program, endeavoring to keep "both the specialized and the popular interest equally in mind," rather than directing its efforts exclusively to the elite.[609] In his unauthorized history of the museum, Russell Lynes writes that the board took Packard's suggestions seriously, reassessing the museum's exhibition program and its relationship to the general public in response to the findings in the document.[610]

When Rockefeller assumed the board presidency in 1939, a tension developed between members of an old guard dedicated to maintaining standards of excellence, and a new guard who sought to increase visitor numbers and appeal to a larger public. Lynes notes that this cultural shift within the museum coincided with the move into the new building, and that in addition to the change at the top, many significant founding members of the staff either left or were fired after Rockefeller became president and took control of the Board.[611] Rockefeller's tenure as president was short lived, and when, in 1941, he stepped down to become coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, the museum experienced further disruption and internal turmoil. Stephen Clark, an heir to the Singer Sewing Machine Company fortune, was named president of the

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[608] As quoted in Lynes, 161.
[609] Ibid.
[610] The Trustees did not, however, take his advice about dropping the word "Modern" from the name of the institution. Packard wrote, "I cannot emphasize too strongly the desirability of using such terms as 'present-day' or 'contemporary' rather than 'modern' and of seeking to correct, wherever it appears, any tendency to look upon MoMA as primarily an agency for the dissemination of propaganda in favor of any particular modern school of expression." Lynes, 162.
[611] See Lynes for detailed account of the staff changes that occurred at this time.

board of trustees, and John "Dick" Abbott, once the director of the museum's film program, became the executive director. According to Lynes, neither Clark nor Abbott respected Barr, and upon their ascent to power relations between trustees and staff "deteriorated."[612] Barr's authority was incrementally eroded over a period of several years, during which time Abbott and Monroe Wheeler, the director of publications, were assigned many responsibilities that had previously been Barr's purview. Around this time, Lynes writes that Barr confided in Sachs that "he was deeply concerned," in Lynes's words "about the disintegration of the Museum, and the fact that it was relaxing its standard of excellence and distinction in favor of mediocrity just because mediocre people were easier to get along with than really gifted ones."[613]

In sum, Newhall found himself a member of an old guard in a museum that was no longer governed by its founding ideals or director. The erosion of Barr's authority and the shift towards a more popular approach to exhibitions had a great deal to do with the difficulties the Newhalls and Adams would face at the museum during the war. From the copious wartime correspondence between the Newhalls, it is clear that Dick Abbott and Frances Hawkins, the museum's secretary, were the most vocal critics of the department. It is not coincidental that these same individuals were simultaneously working to decrease Barr's power, and would eventually succeed in having him demoted.[614] Abbott,

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[612] Ibid., 220.
[613] Ibid., 221.
[614] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, November 9, 1943, GRI/Newhall. "Apparently Hawkins-whom Dorothy Miller calls a rattlesnake and I have seen no reason to qualify the description-and Dick have by mean and sneaking attacks-of a kind Alfred would not stoop to parry-undermined him and put the Trustees in their pockets. Hawkins calls Stephen Clark tootsie-wootsie and Old Pussycat. Apparently even Mrs. R is under the influence. So they actually think they can dispense with Alfred, the foremost authority on

whom Lynes contends was essentially a mouthpiece for the interests of trustees Henry Allen Moe and Stephen Clark, was also a great enthusiast for Steichen's *Road to Victory*, as one of his primary concerns was increasing visitor numbers at the museum. Abbott and Hawkins appear to have felt that the exhibitions Newhall organized were esoteric and pitched at a niche audience. Seeing the numbers of visitors that Steichen's exhibition had drawn, they felt that Newhall was steering the department in the wrong direction, and saw his enlistment in the military as a chance to either dissolve the department completely, or change its direction.

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modern art, the scholar and showman, whose intelligence, perceptions and devotion are their one asset-the old guard are shocked, confused, lost."

CHAPTER SIX

"NO DEMOCRACY IN QUALITY": THE NANCY NEWHALL YEARS

Despite the fact that she served as curator of the Department of Photographs for almost as many years as her husband did, and organized the two most critically acclaimed exhibitions produced during the department's early years—retrospectives of the work of Paul Strand and Edward Weston—Nancy Newhall has largely been overlooked in the literature on photography at MoMA. For instance, in his "Judgment Seat" essay, Christopher Phillips relegates her to a footnote, and in *Good Old Modern* Russell Lynes, a close personal friend of the Newhalls, gives her custodianship but passing mention. While a thorough accounting of her curatorial career is not possible here, this chapter takes preliminary steps toward recovering the history of her tenure at the helm of the department, a period marked both by the museum's involvement in war-related government propaganda efforts and continued debate over photography's place in an art museum.

During her tenure at MoMA, Newhall was often accused by critics of privileging the work of her friends.[615] Yet she promoted a broader array of photographers than she is often given credit for. Although it is true that in time her attention narrowed to focus on a few select artists, while she was curator at MoMA her tastes were quite catholic. In addition to Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and Alfred Stieglitz—who would

[615] For example, Roy Stryker, then chairman of the department's advisory committee wrote to her on October 10, 1945, "I have one comment to make, perhaps a little unfair…. I do hope that these fellowships [that the department was about to begin awarding] are not going to the chosen few who seem to have gotten the most out of the Museum during the past few years." MoMA Department of Photographs.

become the primary subjects of her later books and exhibitions—she also championed photographers as diverse as Peter Henry Emerson, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Weegee, Lisette Model, Helen Levitt, and W. Eugene Smith, all of whom were represented in exhibitions while she was curator at MoMA.

Like her husband and Ansel Adams, Nancy Newhall was a fervent admirer of Alfred Stieglitz and his philosophies on art and photography, and she brought these ideas to bear in her work at the museum. Wary as she initially was of Stieglitz's legendary wrath, however, she was the last of the three to embrace him. As an aspiring young painter studying at the Art Student's League in the early 1930s, she had often visited Stieglitz's gallery, An American Place, but had always assiduously avoided a direct encounter with the notoriously volatile photographer.[616] In the unpublished second volume of her biography of Adams, Newhall writes of being unwillingly taken by him and her husband to meet Stieglitz. Writing of their first tête-à-tête, she recalls her surprise at his welcoming demeanor:

> That this frail little man in his late seventies, with his wild white hair and his deep black eyes—everything about him seemed black and white—should be as beautiful as the Place he had created and the things on its walls, was perhaps not so surprising. But that he should be gay and gracious, warm, wise and brilliantly witty, was totally unexpected.[617]

In hopes of becoming the first to write his biography, Newhall would spend innumerable hours with Stieglitz over the course of the following two years, listening to him hold

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[616] Ironically, Newhall had studied under Stieglitz's arch nemesis, Thomas Hart Benton, who in the mid-1930s became a conservative populist and railed in the press against Stieglitz's supposed elitism.
[617] Nancy Newhall, "Anselography," in *Nancy Newhall 1908-1974/ Friends of Photography* 10 (1976), 32.

forth—as he was often wont to do—asking him probing and personal questions, and, most importantly, eagerly absorbing his ideas.[618]

In time, Stieglitz's ethos became her own, and while she was an independent thinker who embraced the work of many of the photographers he had rejected out of hand, Newhall's method was ultimately deeply rooted in what she had gleaned from their encounters during those transformational years. She was quite frank with Stieglitz about his influence on her, writing to him, "A lot of your battles are, however, now part of my own existence."[619] She later contended he was her most significant teacher, writing of their relationship:

> I find it hard to define my personal relation to Stieglitz; it falls into no category I know of. It was more than friendship, especially when he and I became fighters for the same cause. But it was never master and disciple, though he taught me more than Smith College, the Art Students' League, the Museum of Modern Art, and various media all combined. Nor was it sexual, though I am sure he welcomed me to the Place partly because I was a woman.[620]

Although she never completed the planned biography, Newhall was forever changed by the relationship she developed with Stieglitz while conducting her research. Not surprisingly, the first exhibition she organized at MoMA was of Stieglitz's work—a small selection of prints that David McAlpin had purchased for the museum.[621] Despite its diminutive scale, the exhibition was of great symbolic value to the Newhalls and

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[618] Beaumont Newhall, *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1993), 161. She never finished the biography, deferring to Dorothy Norman, who Newhall discovered was farther along in her research. Newhall planned to write the biography after Norman finished hers, but never did. Her notes are housed in the Newhall Archive at the Getty Research Institute.
[619] Nancy Newhall to Alfred Stieglitz, dated "Labor Day, 1942," Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Archive, YCAL.
[620] Nancy Newhall, *From Adams to Stieglitz* (New York: Aperture, 1989), 101.
[621] *New Acquisitions: Photography by Alfred Stieglitz: European and American Art*, December 12, 1942–February 2, 1943.

Adams, who saw it as a quiet and elegant riposte to the bombastic, popular spectacle that had been Steichen's *Road to Victory*.[622] Although it did not compensate for the fact that their plans for a retrospective of Stieglitz's work had collapsed in 1940, to their minds, the exhibition—and the fact that the museum finally had a representative selection of original prints by him in its collection—was significant, embodying the core values upon which they had founded the department.

The next two exhibitions that Newhall organized—mounted simultaneously—were of the work of Eliot Porter and Helen Levitt.[623] Porter, a scientist turned nature photographer, had been championed by Stieglitz, and Levitt, best known for her photographs of New York street life, was an associate of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. The concurrent exhibitions thus neatly pleased two divergent camps then jockeying for predominance at the museum.[624] The shows evolved out of a proposal developed by Newhall to explore the history of street photography and the origins of the snapshot aesthetic, which was to have included the work of hidden-camera pioneer Paul Martin, as well as Stieglitz, Levitt, Cartier-Bresson, and many others.[625] When her search for good Cartier-Bresson material turned up few prints, however, it was decided that a show of his work, and the related snapshot concept, would be put off until after the war, when prints could be acquired directly from the photographer himself.[626] The idea for a

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[622] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, June 3, 1942. Newhall, II.3. MoMA Archive, NY.
[623] *Birds in Color: Photographs by Eliot Porter* and *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children*, March 10, 1943–April 18, 1943.
[624] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, November 12, 1942, GRI/Newhall.
[625] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, postmarked September 10, 1942, GRI/Newhall.
[626] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, postmarked November 2, 1942, GRI/Newhall. Although the Newhalls planned a show of Bresson's work after the war, it was not mounted until 1947, after they left the museum.

joint Porter/Levitt exhibition was the brainchild of James Thrall Soby, a prominent trustee and art collector who began serving as chairman of the Committee on Photography in the summer of 1942, when McAlpin left New York to serve in the navy. Although Soby's views on photography diverged from the Newhalls's—like Barr, he was an enthusiast of surrealist and Bauhaus photography—he would eventually become one of their primary allies at the museum. "Jim felt a nice juxtaposition of opposites might be achieved with Porter and Levitt, and two entirely different publics attracted," Newhall wrote to her husband. "They really did seem to balance," she continued, "so I guess that's what happens."[627] The plan for an exhibition about the origins of the snapshot aesthetic was thus shelved, to be revisited later in a radically different form.

Nancy Newhall's appointment as assistant in charge of the department didn't happen without a battle. It was not until early 1943, on the heels of the Stieglitz show, that it was finally decided. Her husband wrote to Stieglitz of his frustration with the museum's attitude towards her:

> There was a certain opposition at the Museum to her taking over; this negative attitude disgusted and annoyed me to the point of forcing, through every means I knew, her appointment—not because Nancy is my wife, not because she needs to have a job, and not for the sake of the museum, but simply because both Nancy and I felt very strongly that we owed it to the photographers who have cooperated with us so fully to continue as long as we could be of service to them. And I knew of nobody better suited for the job than Nancy; I asked for other nominations, and received not one suggestion. But as I have written to Nancy, and as she quite independently decided, we will continue at the museum just so long as we can really help photography through the Museum as an instrument, or agent. We will not allow photography to be used simply as a means of

[627] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, postmarked November 5, 1942, GRI/Newhall.

> "promoting" the museum, as a cheap window decoration or leading attraction like a sideshow freak.[628]

After vigorously courting their favor, Newhall won over Barr and Soby, who promised to defend her against the Abbott camp, the primary critics of the department. The department itself was rescued from oblivion by McAlpin, who pledged matching funds to keep it alive on the condition that the museum commit to the department for the long term, and that Nancy Newhall be allowed to organize several exhibitions a year.[629]

Beaumont Newhall was pleased that McAlpin—the man who had given the seed funds in 1940 to found the department—had put up more money to save it from dissolution. Yet his delight that that department would continue in his absence was tempered by fear that the new administration's desire for inclusiveness would trump his own plan to focus on expressive photography. He explained his views on the subject in a letter to his wife:

> The only thing that worries me is the desire to be broad-minded. I know that you will curb any tendencies to play up bad photography. I cannot agree that the dept. in the past was too XIX century and orthodox purist. It just happens that good photography has been restricted to certain times; it is up to us to see that good photography of other types is encouraged, and that is the importance of the Levitt show, because she does practice good photography, and unlike Man Ray and Moholy, she has a feeling for the medium and a respect for it.[630]

Although he knew she shared his desire to uphold the standards he and Adams had fought so vehemently to establish, Newhall feared that in the name of opening the museum to a broader array of photographs Soby, Barr, and Abbott would take advantage of his

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[628] Beaumont Newhall to Stieglitz, September 14, 1942, GRI/Newhall.
[629] Soby to Nancy Newhall, January 7, 1943, GRI/Newhall.
[630] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, February 9, 1943, GRI/Newhall.

absence to pressure his wife to show work that he considered inferior. His mention of Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy in this context is significant, as it refers to Barr and Soby's enthusiasm for the work of those artists, which Newhall had grown to see as merely fashionable, devoid of any depth of feeling. It also suggests that he felt his vision for the department was threatened not only by Steichen and popular photography, but also—albeit to a lesser degree—by Barr and Soby, who, as proponents of Surrealism, Bauhaus photography, and Moholy-Nagy's inclusive New Vision approach, were unconcerned with differentiating between art and non-art photographs.

Around the same time, and unbeknownst to the Newhalls, Adams, or McAlpin, the museum's Executive Committee solicited advice on the future direction of the department from influential figures in the field, including Willard "Herc" (for Hercules, as he was a giant of man) Morgan, a publisher of photography books and the organizer of the *First International Exposition of Photography* held in New York in 1938, discussed in the previous chapter.[631] In a letter to Morgan, Soby wrote: "the Museum is particularly interested in finding out how the Department could be expanded to represent and reflect a wider range of photographic activity in this country; including amateur, press and specialized photography."[632] In addition to aspiring to include genres of photography Adams and the Newhalls intended to filter out, Soby suggests in his letter that the museum also wanted the department to organize war-related circulating exhibitions. In response to Dick Abbott's mandate to locate outside sources of funding for museum

[631] There does not appear to be a record of whom else was contacted, but soon after *Sixty Photographs*, McAlpin invited Barr to a "round-table discussion" about the department with Steichen, Maloney and the filmmaker, Henwar Rodekiewicz, suggesting that advice was solicited from many quarters. David McAlpin to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., January 17, 1941, MoMA Department of Photographs.
[632] James Thrall Soby to Willard Morgan, January 1, 1943, MoMA Department of Photographs.

departments and programs, Soby asked Morgan for suggestions on eliciting subsidies from the photography industry.[633] This desire to attract outside financing would increasingly motivate the administration's governance of the department, leading to compromises the Newhalls, as well as McAlpin, Soby, and Barr would deeply regret.

Nancy Newhall learned of the planned expansion and excitedly wrote to her husband about what she saw as promising possibilities: "Beloved, it looks as if the Department were about to get all the things we've been shouting for all these years, and, best of all, the complete backing of the Museum. Of course, it's being done in typical Museum fashion, through agonizing storms, but now I can see something really brilliant approaching."[634] At first, she recounts, she was upset to learn that Willard Morgan had been proposed as director of the expanded department, fearful as she was that he would be brought in to replace them. She was mollified, however, by Barr's explanation that the proposal to hire a director had been his, and that other departments were similarly staffed with a director and curator. Barr had further explained to her that much of the internal conflict over the continuation of the department had resulted from McAlpin's fervent embrace of "purism"—his promotion of the work of Stieglitz, Adams, Strand, Weston, et al.— and that he believed installing a director approved by Abbott would smooth feathers ruffled by the considerable enmity that had developed between Abbott and McAlpin. Newhall voiced her concerns about the proposed expansion, she told her husband, confiding in Barr that she feared it would lead the administration to expect more spectacular exhibitions of the Steichen variety:

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[633] Ibid.
[634] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, May 10, 1943, GRI/Newhall.

> I spoke of the dangers of a directorship—huge R to V exhibitions dwarfing the curatorial exhibitions, more money poured into the directorship than into the curatorship, cross purposes likely to develop and the evils they would work. Alfred admitted all that and said it all depended on who was chosen as Director. I said that Herc would be my preference…. He advised me to let Jim and himself do any fighting I found necessary and I agreed.

Although he did not agree with Abbott that the department was ready for expansion, Barr determined that allowing him to move ahead with his plan was the best way to appease him and gain his support for its furtherance. Newhall concurred.

Days later, Barr, Soby, and Newhall were surprised to learn that Abbott had precipitously offered the directorship to Morgan. As they were in favor of the choice, they decided not to protest. Morgan relayed the news of the offer to Newhall over lunch, during which they determined that they could work together to create a strong, independent department. The Newhalls had long been friends with Morgan and his wife, Barbara, a photographer herself, and they trusted that Morgan would not attempt to oust them. She wrote to her husband:

> He [Morgan] emphatically didn't want to do anything if it would hurt you in any way…. He was very swell and I began to feel that Herc's force and reliability would be an immense help to me, and that in his present position he could serve as a fulcrum for what we need…. I went to see Alfred and Jim. They were as surprised as I. Dick had jumped the gun and committed a bad strategic error in offering a job without their knowledge. So they were even more behind me than usual.

Newhall decided to support Morgan's hiring even though she felt she could have resisted the choice—and possibly prevailed in undermining Abbott's plans—as she had come to believe that Morgan's instatement as director would ultimately help them achieve their goals for the department. She ended her letter by asking for her husband's approval,

reassuring him that the expansion would benefit them and their plans for photography at the museum.

> Now it seems to me that the basis for the vital center we want is actually coming to pass and that we can extend our leadership boldly over the entire field. And this vital center is the beginning of the great photography center we dream of. Herc and I want your opinion on what we are doing very badly.[635]

She hoped that the proposed expansion would enable them to realize their early goal to create an "institute"—as Adams had described it back in 1935—a "center for creative photography" that might ultimately break off from the museum and become an independent entity. She also saw the expansion as a means to better serve artists, to open up new avenues for education and exhibition, and to proselytize about expressive photography to a much wider audience.

Approving of both of the proposed expansion and of the hiring of Morgan, Beaumont Newhall wrote to his wife that it was "the best thing from the Museum's side that has happened to the department, and the way should be paved for doing many of the things that were only vague possibilities when I left."[636] He agreed in part because he sensed the changes would help Dick Abbott and other critics of the department become invested in its future, recognizing that they would see Morgan as their man, whereas they had looked upon McAlpin and Adams as interlopers imposed upon them from outside. He explained to his wife the troubles that such a perception had caused:

> I can see, in retrospect, exactly what happened when both Dave and Ansel had their fingers in the pie. I still am as fond of both of them as ever, but I realize that the complicated organization which was allowed to develop

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[635] Ibid.
[636] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, June 3, 1943, GRI/Newhall.

> during the past two years could not have lasted. Ansel was not appointed by the directors, and yet he was expected to be on a par with me by Dave. Dave felt that he had power that he did not have, and the confusion was inevitable. Neither one of them knew enough about photography to have the broad point of view demanded in a Museum job. Herc (Willard Morgan) comes in with the blessing of the directors, and with our own high opinion of him—we are working with a person we know whereas we got to know Ansel and Dave thru the museum, when it was too late to repair the damage which, with the best and most faithful of intentions, they caused.[637]

Although McAlpin, who had stepped down as the chairman of the department's advisory committee when he joined the navy, and Adams, who lived in California and was busy with myriad other projects, would continue to serve as advisors, in the eyes of the museum's top brass they would no longer be dictating the direction the department would take. The illusion of a diminution of their influence on the department was crucial, as it would enable Newhall to make something of a fresh start under Morgan, and establish herself with Abbott anew. Regardless of appearances, however, McAlpin and Adams remained her primary advisors.

When word of the expansion reached Adams, he wrote to McAlpin seeking clarification:

> Frankly, the MMA situation puzzles me…. I have had a glowing letter from Nancy about it, and a report came yesterday on the budget for the 1943-44 season, it's a grand program and a lot of money. As you say, if they can raise it, O.K. I agree with you about Morgan; I like him immensely. I think he has punch and drive, and the Department needs just that professional executive attention on a full-time basis.[638]

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[637] Ibid. In a report he made for McAlpin in 1940 documenting his time in New York helping to set up the department, Adams indicates that he struggled with the manner in which the museum functioned, and that he often bumped heads with members of the staff. Accustomed to working at his own hyperkinetic pace, Adams was appalled by the ponderous speed at which things were accomplished at the museum. He railed against the bureaucracy, and the fact that it often took many days for decisions to be reached. Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, November 4, 1940, CCP/Adams.

[638] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin, May 26, 1943, CCP/AAA.

Like the Newhalls, Adams welcomed the appointment of Morgan as well as the expansion plans, but worried that the museum would expect more spectacular and popular exhibitions. Further, he feared that the standards of taste and quality established in the early days would be diluted, concerns he had back in 1939. He wrote to David McAlpin:

> BUT—and here is the possible rub—I think the POLICY and the QUALITY of the department should rest on Beaumont's (now Nancy's) shoulders—and on yours as much as you will allow. My worry is that the Department will become supercharged with events and 'come-on' procedure to justify the expense. The taste and quality of Popular photography (I didn't mean the magazine) is unfortunately low as you know, and the Museum promised to be the 'precipitator' of the cloudy material. I hope nothing occurs to take us off the beam. I am all for it if it will 'follow the line' but I feel it can be very dangerous if it ever gets out of control. Anyway, I am still violently interested, and want to do all I can to help.

Adams also wrote to Nancy Newhall, asking her to explain how the department would function with Morgan as director. He warned her that expressive photography would get swallowed up in a diffuse program that didn't differentiate between art and other uses of the medium, an outcome he had feared since the department was founded, writing, "expansion implies dilution. That's a cliché, but I believe it…. I am a bit worried about the inclusion of certain phases of photography in the program, not because I am reactionary or precious or a pessimist, but because I cannot clearly see the relationship of these phases to the concept of expression and to our program as a whole." He also took the opportunity to reiterate what he understood to be the role of the museum: to show only the best expressive work—not every genre or "phase" of photography—and to emphasize aesthetics over craft. He explained:

> I may be entirely wrong, but I feel the job of the Museum is to integrate and clarify and "clean-up" the development of photography—not to motivate it. What I mean may be summed up in this statement: I have not yet seen an infra-red photograph which contains what I would call the esthetic "reason for being." Maybe "emotional" is a better word. I have seen spectacular, exciting, and promising infra-red pictures. What I fear is that because infra-red exists, and because it is spectacular, exciting, etc., we will promote it as esthetic expression before such expression is actually made.

Acknowledging that differentiating amongst various types of photography in order to determine which were appropriate for exhibition at the museum would be complicated, he wrote that his hope from the beginning had been that MoMA would focus on expressive photography and let other outlets handle the rest:

> I am really confused in this distinction of values. I have felt that the Philadelphia Photography Museum and/or the museum of Science and Industry could very well handle the "wonderment" phase of photography. *U.S. Camera* is handling the "corn" to perfection—perhaps *Popular Photography* is doing better. But I have hoped that the MMA could get to the "meat" of the whole thing and sum up the expressions rather than the methods. What I probably mean is simply that I think we should make the distinction between the expressive aspect and the craft aspects, and we should encourage craft only when it is pointed towards more intense expression.[639]

As he maintained that the department's mandate should remain distinct from that of the popular photographic journals, Adams feared that Morgan, a magazine man, would open up the department to inferior photography and thus degrade the value of the work he and the Newhalls had endeavored to promote when they originally founded the department. His fears would soon prove prophetic.

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[639] Ibid.

The Photography Center

For Nancy Newhall, the most exciting aspect of the proposed expansion was the promise of gaining increased space for exhibitions, a print study room, a darkroom (which her husband had first proposed in 1939), as well as a library. After the pros and cons were debated, it was decided that the interests of the department were best served by relocating it a block away in a vacant building owned by trustee Phillip L. Goodwin. Opinions had been divided on the subject: McAlpin and Barr had not wanted to see the department ghettoized by being moved out of the museum, whereas Soby, Newhall, and Morgan felt that space and independence were worth the physical separation from the other departments.[640] As there was apparently no unused space remaining in the main museum building, and plans for an additional wing had been suspended, it was eventually decided that the department, its library, print collection, and staff would all be moved to the Goodwin building. Large-scale photography exhibitions would continue to be held at the museum, where a "Photography Room" dedicated to rotating exhibitions from the permanent collection would be established on the third floor. Smaller, more casual and experimental shows would be held offsite at the new "Photography Center."[641]

As the finishing touches were being put on the Goodwin building, Newhall wrote to her husband, detailing the exhibition she had organized to inaugurate the Photography Room at the museum, which was to open simultaneously with the new center. Despite persistent criticism leveled against the department for its "purist" bias, she assembled an exhibition composed entirely of work by the artists most often branded with that label:

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[640] James Thrall Soby to David McAlpin, May 13, 1943, Newhall, II.6. MoMA Archive, NY.
[641] Ibid.

Weston, Strand, Adams, and Stieglitz, whom she canonized as members of the "classic movement" in photography, a term coined for the occasion. She recounted:

> The little opening show in the Photography Room is going to be beautiful. The 9 equivalents [by Stieglitz], the 5 Strands, Ansel's "Moonrise, New Mexico"—you remember it—this is a big print and soft—4 Westons—Charis on the sand, the black dunes, the tomato field, the floating ice—and 4 [Peter Henry] Emersons—the two old men with the bow net and the gunners wading in the shallows, from the album, the rowing home down the crick, and the waterlily gatherers. With a label on the classic movement as American's outstanding contribution and therefore a suitable inauguration.[642]

That she chose to feature these photographers in the inaugural exhibition of a permanent collection gallery signifies Newhall's bold intent to spotlight expressive photography despite profound internal and external pressures to do otherwise.

Dedicated to the opening of the Photography Center, the October–November 1943 issue of the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* featured on its cover a photograph of the light and spacious new combination print room, library, and "experimental gallery," complete with Adams's *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* visible on one of the tables [Fig. 6.1].[643] The journal opened with a brief statement by Dick Abbott, then executive vice-president of the museum, who focused on the ubiquity of photography. He stated that it was the Center's "function to help and encourage both amateur and professional photographers," and that it would only be able to fulfill this educational mandate if it received outside funding. "To reach maximum effectiveness and expansion," he wrote, "they will need the support of the photographic industry,"

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[642] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, October 17, 1943, GRI/Newhall.
[643] "Museum of Modern Art Annex Photography Center, 9 West 54th Street, New York," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 2, Issue XI (October-November 1943), unpaginated.

clearly referring to financial support, "and of photography's vast and devoted following," meaning as visitors to the Center. Abbott obviously had grand aspirations for the new center and the popular appeal of photography.

Although he had recently been demoted and was no longer the director of the museum when the Photography Center opened, Barr also contributed an essay to the *Bulletin*, asserting that photography was about to become central to MoMA's program. Acknowledging that the museum's focus had previously been on photography as an art—"as a peer of painting"—he stated that the department "recognized, of course, that photography is also a popular art, an art of, by and for everybody."[644] With this nod to popular photography, Barr indicated that the Center's overarching mission was to elevate the standards of the medium and educate visitors to better taste, goals that had always been central to his mandate for the museum.[645] Alluding to the question of what constitutes "art" in photography, he wrote:

> Not many of the ensuing billions of snapshots could be called art, but each might have been a work of art however modest, had the photographer had some modicum of patience, talent and instruction. To encourage and guide the amateur photographer will be one of the essential functions of the Photography Center.[646]

Since almost everyone in America was an amateur photographer, the potential audience for photography exhibitions and education programs was immense, and it was Barr's contention that the museum's role was to inspire the masses to make better photographs.

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[644] Ibid.
[645] Examples of exhibitions intended to improve public taste include *Machine Art* (1934) and the *Useful Household Objects* series, which began in 1939 and continued for many years.
[646] Barr, *The American Snapshot* (New York: MoMA, 1944). Unpaginated.

The last contributor to the introduction was Willard Morgan, who spoke directly to critics of the department:

> It is not my intention to force photography in a narrow or precious direction, but here at the Photography Center to encourage its varied possibilities and affirm its simple honesty. The purpose of the Photography Center is to watch and encourage the best in all photography.

Morgan thus pledged to embrace a wider variety of photographs than had the Newhalls and Adams, broadening the department's scope to address the medium's "varied possibilities," rather than simply the "precious" few. Due mostly to this promise, critical reception of the expansion and the opening of the Center was almost entirely positive. Most outside observers welcomed Morgan's leadership, seeing it as a sign that the museum was finally opening its doors to a wider array of photographs. For example, in a lengthy and heavily illustrated feature story on the Photography Center published in *Popular Photography*, Bruce Downes wrote, "doors once closed to some kinds of photography have been opened wide to all kinds of photography. This is big news for photographers everywhere."[647] Downes noted hopefully that the focus of the department would change, and, although it was not exactly what Barr, Morgan, or Abbott had indicated in the *Bulletin*, that it would now emphasize popular over elite expression:

> Photography as a democratic art will gain in strength at the Center under Willard Morgan, one of the best informed men in photography, whose catholic tastes and broad experience should yank the Museum's photography department from its tendency to lapse into precious esoteric fogs.[648]

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[647] Bruce Downes, "The Museum of Modern Art's Photography Center Will be a Mecca for America's Cameramen," *Popular Photography* (February 1944), 24.
[648] Ibid., 25.

Although he praised Beaumont Newhall for the work he had done to establish the department, writing, "the Museum has done a great deal to evaluate the accomplishments of photography over the past hundred years," Downes also repeated the same brand of criticism leveled against *Sixty Photographs* three years earlier by Maloney, McCausland, Steichen, and Steiner, similarly characterizing the exhibitions Newhall had organized as "precious" or "esoteric." He also chastised the department for failing to live up to its own professed goal of inclusivity, writing:

> …but its job has not been altogether as democratic as its theoretical intent in spite of published declarations. Its choice of pictures has often been a little on the esoteric side and its attitude toward its public often snobbish. Many an otherwise serious photographer has felt himself out in the cold so far as the Museum of Modern Art was concerned because he has felt that it countenanced only one of another sort of picture.[649]

Echoing previous criticism of the department, Downes noted that Beaumont Newhall had shown the same group of photographers over and over again: "Walker Evans, Ansel Adams, the Westons, Stieglitz, Dorothea Lange, and in another category, Man Ray and Moholy Nagy."[650] Throwing in a pointed barb against Stieglitz, he wrote "…you will also find quite a bit of pretentious and sleazy stuff, like *Grass* in the *Lake George* series by Stieglitz, who has been capable of both magnificently beautiful and at times shoddy work" [Fig. 6.2].[651] In the *New York Post*, John Adam Knight repeated many of Downes's sentiments about the future that Morgan's directorship portended. For example, of Morgan he writes, "His tastes in photography are catholic and current: he is

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[649] Ibid.
[650] Ibid.
[651] Ibid. It is difficult to understand how any of the photographs Stieglitz made of grass at Lake George (ca. 1933) could be considered "sleazy," as they are simply close-ups of strands of windblown grass. Perhaps what Downes considered distasteful was the fact that Stieglitz was trying to pass them off as art.

no evangel of any one type of school of photographic expression and his mind is not closed to new methods or developments."[652] Morgan's hiring, he contends, was "a virtual guarantee that the museum's field of interest hereafter will extend beyond its former boundaries." Taking aim at Newhall, he described the exhibitions he had organized as "too often the precious, the drab, the finicky, and the unspeakably dull."[653]

Despite the fact that Morgan, Abbott, and Barr had suggested in the *Bulletin* that the expansion of the department would entail a radical shift in exhibition philosophy, a proposition heralded in the popular photographic press, Nancy Newhall was elated at the prospects the center appeared to offer. She felt vindicated by the large turnout for the opening and the excitement expressed by photographers and photography enthusiasts, and was seemingly unfazed by the threats posed to her husband's vision. Of the opening reception she wrote:

> It was a great success. Not only that, but the whole atmosphere was different from Museum openings. It was warm with hope and attention and enthusiasm—and absolutely jammed—with photographers, members, everybody—brilliant white walls leading you close to see. There were more of our friends per square inch than you can imagine, and everybody said, "If only Beau were here! Wouldn't he be proud and happy!" The whole thing surprised the Museum—they had expected a crowd—but not this kind of crowd.[654]

In many respects, her enthusiasm was well warranted, as the Center was something of an overnight success, attracting visitors by the hundreds. The lecture program, which featured talks by a diverse group of photographers, including Paul Strand, Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler, Barbara Morgan, and Weegee, as well as a popular five-part lecture

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[652] John Adam Knight, "Photography," *New York Post*, November 4, 1943, 21.
[653] Ibid.
[654] *Focus*, 103.

series by Adams, was consistently well attended.[655] A roundtable forum for critics gave Downes, McCausland, and Knight a chance to express their views, even if they were largely critical of the department.[656] Emerging photographers were encouraged to bring their portfolios to show Morgan and Newhall for comment, and print viewings became a popular weekend activity. Of a Sunday afternoon at the Center spent showing prints to visitors and facilitating conversations between photographers, Newhall wrote to her husband:

> I love the occasional afternoon, Saturday or Sunday, when I help out our schedule. It's the only chance I get to meet the public and feel the Center is really a laboratory. I try to imbue the others with the excitement I feel and teach them the technique of finding out what each person wants to see—and giving him more than that: something to challenge, something to grow on, and something of the passion and beauty of photography. And doing it with excitement, without pompousness or pontification. Eagerly. There were about 140 people today between two and six p.m. of whom more than 20 looked at the collection—several boxes of it. Nearly all of the others stayed for hours, asking questions, reading books, looking over the shoulders of those who were looking at prints, introducing themselves to each other.[657]

The enthusiastic welcome with which photographers embraced the opening of the Center gave Newhall hope that her efforts to evangelize for expressive photography would bear fruit.

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[655] Flyer for lecture series, MoMA Dept. of Photography: "May 17, 1944: 'The Meaning of Photography—One Hundred Years of Photographic Expression'; May 19: 'Visualization and Exploration of the Photograph—the Technique of Perception'; May 22: 'Light and the Exposure of the Photograph'; May 24: 'Printing and Presentation of Photographs'; May 26: 'Photographic Forum, Criticism and Discussion.'" MoMA Department of Photographs.

[656] Flyer for lecture series, MoMA Department of Photographs: "March 22, 1944: 'Standards of Photographic Criticism': Bruce Downes, Elizabeth McCausland, and John Adams Knight; April 5: 'Realism in Photography,' Weegee, *PM*, and Herbert Giles, *Parade Magazine*; April 19:' Photography and the Other Arts,' Charles Sheeler, Hyatt Mayor, Ben Shahn and Paul Strand; April 26: 'Imagination in Photography,' Barbara Morgan, photographer-author, 'Martha Graham Dances.'" MoMA Department of Photographs.

[657] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, January 17, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

Visitors also came for the small, experimental exhibitions that she organized, the content of which reveals her interest in the work of a diverse range of contemporary photographers, as well as in genres that her husband, Adams, and most especially, Stieglitz would have avoided. Archival material about these shows is sparse, as they were not assigned timeslots or exhibition numbers by the museum, nor were official press releases or other announcements produced to promote them. Despite the lack of documentation, however, they offer insight into Newhall's evolving curatorial vision, and are important indicators of the kinds of exhibitions she would have produced for the museum given unrestricted freedom to pursue her own program.

The first exhibition she organized for the Center was a chronological survey of portrait photography, which featured examples taken from the entire history of the medium, drawn primarily from the ever-expanding permanent collection.[658] That show was followed by an exhibition that showcased contemporary photographs of Mexico, featuring the work of two Mexican and six American photographers, including Edward Weston, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Helen Levitt, and Paul Strand.[659] The third exhibition, somewhat surprisingly, considering the harsh condemnation of the genre she expressed in *Camera Craft* in 1941, was a presentation of pictorialist photography.[660] Newhall's determination to show pictorialist work at the Center speaks to her deep commitment to educating camera club members and other serious amateurs in order to raise their standards of taste. It also marks a departure from the exhibitions organized by her

[658] *100 Years of Portrait Photography*, November 4–December 7, 1943.
[659] *Mexico: 8 Photographers*, opened December 13, 1943–end date not clear. Included the work of Fritz Henle, Anton Bruehl, Bradley Smith, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Antonio Reynoso, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and Helen Levitt.
[660] Nancy Newhall, "What is Pictorialism," *Camera Craft* (November, 1941), 653-63.

husband and Adams before the Center was founded, and suggests that she was both less rigid and more experimental than either man, both of whom had met with pictorialist leaders in 1940 to garner their support for the then fledgling department, but considered contemporary work in the genre unworthy of exhibition at the museum.[661] For example, of his own sentiments about Pictorialism Beaumont Newhall wrote:

> The pictorialist show is a good idea. I'm glad you're doing it, but I do not think that it will make the Pictorialists any less disturbed or that it will help them to see our point of view, because the pictures are not contemporary…the pictorialists are the epigones of what they are the decadent followers of. Strong words but, alas, true ones. In Pictorialism they found the formula, and they have not added one iota to it. Not a thing has come out of the organized pictorial movement since Stieglitz and White made their experiments…. After all the creators got out, nothing was left but the followers, and they have gone on repeating the formula. They couldn't clothe it with flesh and blood and life—all they could do was to retain what was charming, beautiful in an obvious way.[662]

Agreeing with her husband in many respects, Nancy Newhall wrote to him that she had to "hold her nose" when she walked by some of the contemporary work she had included in the exhibition. She nevertheless felt it had been worthwhile, as it gave contemporary Pictorialists—some of whom did good work—an opportunity to feel included at the Center.[663]

Pictorialism in Transition featured the work of past greats, such as Clarence White, Gertrude Kasebier, and Arnold Genthe, as well as the best contemporary examples made in the idiom. In an introductory text, Newhall wrote that the exhibition

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[661] Adams and Newhall exchanged several letters in July of 1939 about whether to join the Pictorial Photographers of America in order to enlist their membership to the cause of the department. They determined that the sponsorship of the PPA was not worth the taint of association with Pictorialism. CCP/AAA.
[662] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, February 24, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[663] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, January 30, 1944 and February 14, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

proved that the museum, contrary to the contentions of many critics, was "non-partisan," that it was not biased against *all* Pictorialism, only that which was formulaic or *retardataire*. In fact, she wrote, MoMA was "in sympathy with the basic aims of the Pictorial movement"—to make art with a camera—and had "quarrels only with the present day standards" of the movement, "which inhibit free personal expression."[664] It was her hope that the exhibition would provoke dialogue and challenge Pictorialists to see beyond the genre's tired formulae. With the right encouragement, she believed even the most hardcore Pictorialist could be redeemed.

Hoping it would be the first in an ongoing series, Newhall also organized a *New Workers* exhibition, in which she grouped the work of Lisette Model, Adrian Siegel, Walter Rosenblum, Morris Engel, Dorothy Norman, and John Candelario.[665] Not all of the experimental exhibitions she organized at the Center were her idea, however; on occasion she had to appease Morgan. For example, at his insistence she mounted a show of the war work of W. Eugene Smith, despite the fact that she did not find the bulk of his prints to be exceptional. She wrote to her husband that she wished she could have organized a show of exemplary war pictures made by an array of photographers instead, as the museum had a duty to show only the best war work, and not simply whatever was most readily at hand.[666]

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[664] Document titled "Label and Release, *Pictorialism in Transition*," MoMA Department of Photographs.
[665] In 1945, the department's Advisory Committee recommended other candidates for such shows—which both the Newhalls considered critical to their program—including Arnold Newman, Aaron Siskind, Rosalie Gwathmey, Gordon Parks, Esther Bubley, Frederick Sommer, and Homer Page. Advisory Committee Minutes for meetings of March 24 and 26, 1945, GRI/Newhall.
[666] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, May 13, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

Despite her best efforts to work with Morgan, Newhall found herself continually frustrated by his tendency to favor the popular, an inclination reinforced by Dick Abbott's pressure to seek industry support. As she wrote in a letter to her husband, "the damned Abbott set up expects Herc to produce cash. And so he is caught again. And what do I find myself doing? Often, trying to fight tendencies in him rather than trying to set him free…he thinks I'm 'purist' and that he must therefore be more 'broadminded.'"[667] Equally suspicious of such claims to "broadmindedness," David McAlpin was not certain that the opening of the Center and Morgan's hiring were positive developments for the department. He wrote to Adams of his concerns, stating that he had heard that Steichen was convinced that the Newhalls, Adams, and McAlpin had lost their battle to bar popular uses of the medium from the museum's walls.[668]

Snapshots

In January of 1944, Eastman Kodak Company offered to fund an exhibition at MoMA, thus fulfilling Dick Abbott's goal to secure financing from the photography industry. The company pledged three thousand dollars to mount an exhibition of "amateur" photographs taken from its own collection. Nancy Newhall immediately grasped the challenges of exhibiting such snapshots at the museum, fearing the show might end up looking like an advertisement for Kodak.[669] Tellingly, when Beaumont Newhall was curator, he had declined a similar offer from the company. He later explained the decision to his wife, writing, "I could have had the snapshot show—you

[667] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, October 17, 1943, GRI/Newhall.
[668] McAlpin to Adams, January 25, 1944, CCP/Adams.
[669] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, January 1, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

probably know that Kodak asked us for space—but I couldn't bring myself to it. It was not to be controlled by the Museum, and hence was not considered by Alfred, who said that the Museum could not put up a show chosen by others."[670] After his demotion in October of 1943, however, Barr no longer had the authority to reject the idea. Nancy Newhall had little say in the matter, either, as the exhibition was to be directed by Morgan. In her unpublished biography of Adams, Newhall wrote of her efforts to convince Morgan to supplement the exhibition with other photographs:

> I tried in vain to introduce some of the snapshots which have really broadened and influenced man's vision, and whose impact is felt throughout the art of this century. The list of amateurs I presented included poets, painters, scientists, musicians, and the astonishing development of the snapshot in the early work of Alfred Stieglitz and Cartier-Bresson, then an amateur. But no—the emphasis in this exhibition was to be on the anonymous public….[671]

She pressed Morgan to include snapshots that captured daily life in unusual, rather than simply in expected ways, but he preferred to feature the kind of work that he felt the public wanted to see, what Newhall disparagingly characterized as "cute babies, puppies, etc."[672] Despairing at her failure to influence him, she wrote to her husband:

> Last night I was so discouraged I was thinking about resigning: Herc and I seemed to have reached an impasse—I fighting for quality, for a livelihood for photographers, Herc apparently determined that neither should impede the popularity of the Museum.[673]

Despite profound misgivings, Newhall attempted see the snapshot exhibition in the best possible light and to convince herself that it would be a valuable counterpoint to the more scholarly shows she and her husband had planned. Yet she ultimately couldn't shake the

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[670] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, March 17, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[671] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 248.
[672] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, January 30, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[673] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, February 4, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

feeling that it was a tragically missed opportunity. In a letter to her husband, she mused about what could have been, namely the snapshot exhibition she had proposed two years earlier, which had morphed into the Levitt/Porter show. She wrote:

> Snapshot show—which at the moment looks to both Rudovsky [the exhibition designer], and me as advertising for Kodak, which we're trying to rescue for our own good name as perhaps a necessary corrective. Yet I saw the Snapshot show when he first mentioned it—(remember my plans for a snapshot show—Martin, Stieglitz, Cartier, etc., plus the great amateurs of all times). It's just the low standards I can't take.[674]

In his foreword to the exhibition brochure, which he likely later regretted writing, James Soby acknowledged that the vast majority of snapshots are interesting only to the photographer and his immediate circle, but wondered whether there existed examples that "transcend this narrow appeal and deserve consideration apart form their personal, subjective, values."[675] Such a question, he averred, is worth asking, especially by an institution that had previously shown other types of "folk" art.[676] An amateur photographer himself, Soby had a longstanding interest in snapshots. His own photographs, like those of the contemporary photographers he most admired, such as Helen Levitt and Henri Cartier-Bresson, were informed by the aesthetics of the snapshot. Included in a recent exhibition catalogue of the collection of his personal friend, Julien Levy, are several photographs by Soby that clearly reveal this influence on his own work [Figs. 6.3–6.4].[677] As Peter Barberie writes in that catalogue, many photographers in Levy's circle, including Soby, collected strange, humorous, surrealistic and otherwise

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[674] Ibid.
[675] James Thrall Soby, "Foreword," in *The American Snapshot* (New York: MoMA, 1944). Unpaginated.
[676] Ibid.
[677] Katherine Ware and Peter Barberie, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Soby had owned a 49% share in Levy's gallery in the early 1930s, but sold it back when he joined MoMA's board. Lynes, 236.

unusual snapshots, considering them akin to Duchamp's readymades, *objets trouvés* that were "accidentally" art.[678] In his own work, Soby co-opted the naïve style of such snapshots, making humorous, witty, and playful compositions that shared the guileless quality he so admired in amateur examples.

Significantly, Soby's views on the medium were closer in line with those of Levy—who embraced photography in all its myriad forms, and not strictly as art—than with those of the Newhalls. Although he had once collected photographs made by artists, by the late 1930s Soby would characterize himself as "anti photography as art," and claim that he did not consider photography an equal to painting.[679] He wrote in *U.S. Camera* in 1940 that he had lost interest in the Man Ray photographs he had once admired and bought in quantity in the 1920s, having grown to believe that the only photographs that remained compelling over the long term were those that "clearly and eloquently tell a story."[680] That same month he donated all of his Man Ray photographs to the museum.[681] After singling out Man Ray's work for criticism, Soby went on to deride photographers who "pose" as artists, ending the article by proposing that the most interesting photography was made not by self-conscious artists, but rather by amateurs, middle-class people who sought simply to document their lives. "The Kodak is everywhere," he concluded, "and its users are without pretense or guile. Its owners want simply to remember the story of what they have seen and done in their time—and

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[678] Barberie, "Found Objects, or a History of the Medium, to No Particular End," in *Dreaming in Black and White*, 123-170.
[679] James Thrall Soby to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., August 10, 1943. AHB, 1.108. MoMA Archive, NY.
[680] Soby, "Notes on Documentary Photography," *U.S. Camera* I, no. 12 (November 1940), 38, 73.
[681] Beaumont Newhall journal entry, November 12, 1940, GRI/Newhall.

remembering what humanity has seen and done is, in the last analysis, the chief concern of photography."[682]

As evidenced in an article about the work of Helen Levitt and Henri Cartier-Bresson written three years later, however, Soby appears to have found renewed interest in photographs made by artists, although he continued to prefer what he termed the "accidental," over what he considered to be self-conscious art. He compares the work of Levitt and Cartier-Bresson, who worked exclusively with a 35mm Leica, to that of the "viewcameramen" of the previous generation, such as Edward Weston, whom he praises for their efforts to "restore the integrity to the photographic medium and to offset both the artiness of earlier professional photography and the thoughtlessness of most contemporary work." Yet he suggests that the work of Cartier-Bresson and Levitt was more compelling, as it was less concerned with idealizing and more with "poetic accident."[683] He wrote that Cartier-Bresson had been "affected by the Surrealists' faith in accidents as the true source of the marvelous," and that "no one before him ever had quite his gift for consistently discovering the miraculous phase of the commonplace."[684] It was this revelation of the "marvelous" in the everyday that similarly drew Soby to anonymous snapshots.

Beaumont Newhall vehemently disagreed with Soby about the value of the accidental in photography. Whereas Soby and Barr had argued that it was the surrealistic

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[682] Soby, op cit.
[683] Soby, "The Art of the Poetic Accident: The Photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt," *Minicam* (March 1943), 29-30, 95.
[684] Ibid.

quality of the accidental that was the central, defining aspect of the medium, Newhall wrote:

> It is my growing belief that most of the appreciation of 'accidental' photographs is appreciation of the object and not of the photograph. For example, that close-up of the broken spoon in the surrealist catalogue gave Alfred a kick not because it was a photo but because it showed an object found.[685]

It was the subject matter of such photographs that made them of interest to Barr and Soby, Newhall contends, and not the photographs themselves or the intentions of their makers. Newhall felt that other critics of the department, including Steichen, Maloney, McCausland, and Steiner were similarly more interested in the subject matter of a particular photograph than in aesthetics or artistic expression. Newhall contended that affection for the "accidental," was fundamentally "a denial of photography's status as an art form."[686] Unlike Soby, Newhall insists on a distinction between accidentally interesting snapshots and the work of Cartier-Bresson and Levitt. "I cannot and will not consider Cartier's or Levitt's work as accidental, but as deliberate," he wrote. "What I am getting at is that x-rays, astronomical records, aerial surveys, etc, unless they show an aesthetic intent so clearly that the onlooker sees it at once, should be left alone."[687] He believed Levitt's and Bresson's work was expressive art, and thus belonged in a different category than amateur snapshots.

As evidenced by the illustrations in the accompanying brochure, Morgan's exhibition contained neither the sort of curious, atypical, and surrealistic snapshots that so

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[685] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, n.d. (1943), GRI/Newhall.
[686] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall July 22, 1944, in *Focus*, 123-4.
[687] Ibid.

enthralled Soby, Barr, and Julien Levy, nor those by artists whom Nancy Newhall would have featured in the exhibition she had proposed the year before. Rather, it included only photographic tripe—literally pictures of babies and puppies—antiseptic, uninteresting, and aggressively cheerful pictures of the type regularly featured in *Popular Photography, Minicam* and *U.S. Camera* [Figs. 6.5–6.6]. In order to relate the exhibition to the museum's mission, these average snapshots were characterized in the title of the exhibition and throughout the accompanying brochure as "folk art." Unlike the folk art that had been previously featured at the museum, however, these snapshots were not the unique expressions of self-taught artists, but simply generic banalities. Further, like the prints included in *Road to Victory*, the snapshots in Morgan's exhibition were reprinted, cropped, and enlarged to improve their composition and make them more easily visible.[688] This, Soby wrote to Nancy Newhall, destroyed the "humble" character that he so admired, and turned them into something else altogether. He explained:

> To speak bluntly, I think that show was dominated by Eastman's desire to make snapshots look like big works of art rather than snapshots, i.e. you push the button on a Brownie and out comes Junior, Jenny and Giotto, four feet high, hand in hand and possibly in color. And all the humble and accidental quality of true snapshots is lost. Everybody is an artist.[689]

As he wrote in 1940, Soby believed that the value of amateur work lay in its lack of "pretense" to art, and he held it was their small, unpresuming size and unselfconscious composition that differentiated snapshots from other kinds of photographs. In his estimation, enlarging and perfecting upon them, as had Morgan and Kodak, destroyed their defining character and appeal.

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[688] Morgan, "The American Snapshot," 18.
[689] Soby to Nancy Newahll, March 18, 1945. JTS, III.F.2. MoMA Archives, NY.

After the opening, Newhall wrote to her husband that she felt the snapshot show was further evidence that the museum's administration saw all photographs as equal, that average Kodak snapshots were to them just as significant and worthy of attention as prints made by established artists. She explained:

> It's queer, but I don't think the Museum realizes that the fight is not for photography, but for *good* photography…. The American public loves corn, would be delighted if the Museum showed Norman Rockwell and Howard Chandler Christy and the Petty girls. Is Willard's formula the right one?—Corn and good stuff, like *U.S. Camera*—but never with passion, with an edge, with a trumpet call? Is the past—beyond the past 15 years—dead or obsolete? I say he's utterly wrong—Jim [Soby] knows it, so do the old guard. And yet—there were possibilities in the snapshot idea.[690]

Newhall didn't think corny photographs or Norman Rockwell posters belonged at the museum, no matter how much the public clamored for them. She felt that MoMA should strive to show only photographs that transcended the ordinary and the popular, ones that challenged the public to see the world in new ways. Her husband agreed; allowing the exhibition demonstrated that Dick Abbott was more interested in visitor numbers than in quality exhibitions, a marked change from the museum's earlier, "laboratory" days under Barr. Beaumont Newhall wrote:

> Actually, and this seems to me the root of the trouble, there is not one person in the Museum who understands what we are about. The Museum seems to have become a game of attracting people through the turnstiles…it is not the number of people who have visited it that counts, it is how much have the visitors gained?[691]

Like Adams, Beaumont Newhall saw the struggle over the department as one of elite versus popular expression, equating expressive photography with poetry or chamber

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[690] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, no date (March 1944), in *Focus,* 104-5.
[691] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, March 6, 1944, in *Focus*, 118.

music and popular photography with pulp fiction, arguing that the museum should be in the business of distinguishing between the two. He wrote:

> We cannot afford to lower our standards, we cannot afford to compromise—else there is no purpose in the Center. It should be difficult to have a photograph accepted for exhibition or purpose. It should be an honor to be represented in the Museum….neither a false sentiment of democracy nor politics should force us to break down our standards…. If the museum's work in photography under my direction was snobbish, it was snobbish in the sense that chamber music, poetry and great literature is snobbish compared to the sweet symphonic jazz of Tommy Dorsey, to the jingle of popular poetasters, or to the adventure stories of a Street and Smith pulp magazine.[692]

Back to Square One:

As it turned out, the Newhalls had misjudged the administration's reaction to the snapshot show. The executive staff and Board of Trustees had not, as the Newhalls had assumed, been satisfied with the exhibition. In fact, as Beaumont Newhall later wrote in his memoirs, the trustees had seen it as a grave mistake:

> The exhibition, unfortunately, was not a success and injured the department's reputation for maintaining the highest standards. The mistake had been in allowing Kodak to select the pictures; had Nancy been allowed to make the selection, a wonderful show could have resulted. But Morgan didn't see fascinating pictures, he saw only popular pictures. Both the staff and the trustees were shocked at what they considered the poor taste, and although Eastman Kodak covered all expenses, it was not moved to make any further financial contributions to the photographic activities of the museum.[693]

Morgan did not stay around long enough to face any of the repercussions from his bad decisions. Before the show closed, he accepted a plum offer of an editorship at *Look*

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[692] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall March 12, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[693] Newhall, *Focus,* 105.

magazine—a job more closely allied to his interests—and resigned from the museum. For several months he continued in an advisory capacity, assisting Newhall through the transition until a new director was found. Several names were floated as possible replacements, Newhall told her husband, including Adams. She wrote:

> The fate of the Department is still being discussed; apparently they still hope to find a director, but the nominees are scarce and poor: Paul Strand, Roy Stryker, Jim Agee (!), Hyatt [Mayor], even Paul Vanderbilt…. I'm getting tired of doing most of the work…. Who—of all the nominees—really gives a damn? Not even Roy. Paul [Strand] does, of course; but for all his good judgment—intellectual—he's no director. Ansel would be far better, with all his faults, but Ansel is a red flag to the mad museum.[694]

Other possible candidates included Edwin Rosskam, the editor of numerous thematic compliations of FSA photographs, whom Nancy Newhall characterized as "a little squirt whose only claim rests on mediocre books and shows of propaganda."[695] If Rosskam were made chairman, Newhall told her husband, she would quit.

While Morgan was organizing the snapshot exhibition, Newhall had prepared a large historical survey drawn exclusively from the museum's collection, which served as the photography portion of the museum's fifteenth anniversary exhibition, *Art in Progress*.[696] Before it opened, Adams had come to New York to conduct a lecture series, and assisted Newhall with the installation. Where museum trustees and staff had seen the snapshot show as an embarrassment, they praised Newhall's efforts in the anniversary show. For example, Stephen Clark, the chairman of the Board of Trustees, whose views on photography were in line with those of Dick Abbott and Steichen, wrote to Newhall,

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[694] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, April 17, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[695] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, April 22, 1944, GRI/Newhall. Among other books, Rosskam edited the *Face of America* series, which included Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town*; and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*.
[696] *Art in Progress*, June 24–August 17, 1944 (exh. #258).

"the photography section of 'Art in Progress' does honor to the Department. It is well thought out and excellently installed. On behalf of the trustees I wish to express our appreciation and thank you."[697] Although she was pleased by the positive reception, Newhall was perturbed that it had taken others so long to recognize what she and her husband had been trying to do all along. She wrote:

> My—unuttered—answer is that it ought to be beautiful and astonishing; some of the greatest pictures are gathered cheek by jowl. I don't say it, because I think they're getting from it by themselves a little of what we've been trying to tell them for years. These are beautiful prints, made with love and selected with love, and exhibited with all the love and care I could squeeze through a wartime world.[698]

She saw the exhibition, which featured what she considered to be the best expressive work in the history of photography, as an antidote to the shows Steichen and Morgan had produced. "To anyone with an ounce of feeling for quality," she wrote to her husband, "it should be worth more than all the spectacular idea-shows ever inflicted."[699] Soby agreed, writing to Beaumont Newhall that the show would "do more to interest and improve good photography than any amount of pandering to popular taste."[700]

Around the time *Art in Progress* opened, Soby wrote to McAlpin that he had resigned as chairman of the department's advisory committee, explaining that he did not have adequate time to devote to the job.[701] Nevertheless, he wrote, as he continued to have a vested interest in the fate of the department, he had worked with other members of the Board of Trustees and executive staff to determine its future following Morgan's

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[697] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, May 28, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[698] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, May 31, 1944.
[699] Ibid.
[700] Soby to Beaumont Newhall, August 2, 1944, JTS, III.F.2. MoMA Archive, NY.
[701] Soby to DMCA, June 26, 1944, JTS, III.F.2. MoMA Archive, NY.

departure. In his letter, he informed McAlpin that plans for the center had drastically changed. Rather than moving it to a new site—as had been planned after the Goodwin building was sold at the beginning of the year—the department was to be scaled back to its original size and returned to the museum.[702] The Photography Center would be no more. Explaining that the museum had little choice in the matter, Soby told McAlpin that a major reduction was the necessary result of a budget crisis, and further, that it was the only way to avoid mistakes like the snapshot exhibition. Among others on the Board, he had felt that outside subsidy had led to unacceptable compromises at the center, and that returning the department to its original size was the best way for the museum to control the program going forward. Surprisingly, considering his previous contention that he was "anti photography as art" and that the department should broaden its purview rather than focus exclusively on expressive photography, he wrote to McAlpin that he felt a "purer" program was now in order:

> Personally, I'm relieved that the expansion is over and that we've returned to a more limited but purer activity…. As you know my own feeling about photography has been different for your own. I still believe that we should occasionally show such aspects as industrial, scientific and even amateur. But I think these shows should be done on our own terms, without compromise of any kind. And I think that the core of the Department should be the work of the leading professionals—Stieglitz, Strand, Weston & Co.[703]

For that moment, at least, the snapshot debacle appeared to have chastened Soby and the board, demonstrating to them the risks of catering to popular taste, as well as highlighting the fundamental soundness of the Newhalls's more narrow approach to the medium.

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[702] Newhall, *Focus*, 109.
[703] Ibid.

On the same day that he wrote to McAlpin, Soby wrote a long letter to Abbott, pressing him to retain Nancy Newhall as curator—despite what he termed her "administrative shortcomings."[704] Reiterating what he had written to McAlpin, Soby contended that the newly reduced department required a narrower mandate, and that its focus should return to work by the best "professional"—as opposed to commercial or amateur—photographers. He continued:

> There's another important point: She stands very well with the leading professional photographers—Strand, Weston & Co.—the kind we should exhibit. She does not stand well with Steichen, who has long tried to deride as "precious" the non-commercial photographers, precisely because he long ago gave up professional photography and went straight commercial. I don't believe she stands well with Morgan, who has Steichen's viewpoint with "Pic" magazine fringes, i.e. believes in photography for the masses.[705]

Strikingly, Soby writes to Abbott that although the Stieglitzian program he was now championing ran contrary to his own philosophy about photography, he felt it was the most appropriate track for the reduced department. He explained:

> Personally, as you know, I've always believed in a wide use of photography and opposed the Stieglitz "Fine Arts" approach. But if we're to have so small a department, I think we should stick to that kind of photography which promises some permanent interest. If we were going on with a big department, then by all means we should show scientific, fashion, industrial and related kinds of photography. They're all interesting and valuable. But if we haven't got the dough, I think the core should be professional as opposed to commercial photography. And here Nancy Newhall knows more than anyone except Beaumont, Hyatt Mayor and [Robert] Taft, none of whom is available.[706]

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[704] Soby to Abbott, June 26, 1944, JTS, III.F.2, MoMA Archive, NY.
[705] Ibid.
[706] Ibid.

He further suggests that retaining Newhall was an important strategic move that would help offset the inevitable criticism that would result when the news came out that the Center was to be shuttered.

That summer, Nancy Newhall updated Adams on the status of the department, which, she reported, had been saved by Soby as well as by McAlpin, who had once again put up more money to keep it running.[707] For the time being, Newhall explained to Adams, the museum would replace neither Morgan nor Soby, as a new kind of advisory committee was going to be formed with a chairman to be selected from outside the museum. While she had proposed Adams for this role—as she had for the directorship of the department—the board felt they needed someone local, and without her approval had selected Roy Stryker. She wrote to Adams:

> I like and respect Roy, who doesn't, but, hell, he knows nothing about photography. Well, neither he nor the Committee of Advisors have any power. Their function is to make a noise. Jim and Dick are my joint advisors within the Museum. But a chairman, even in the new sense, with whom I could really work, whom I could trust, with whom I could plan, initiate, fight beside—that would be something. Well, maybe Roy will teach me how to fight and I'll larn [*sic*] him something about photog-raphers.[708]

Privately, the Newhalls were both deeply disappointed by the closing of the center and the reduction of the department. In a letter to his wife, Beaumont Newhall voiced his frustrations over the lack of support for their vision at the museum, writing:

> We have fought the good fight for photography.We have gained the intellectual recognition of photography as an art. But we have not found at the Museum the emotional backing, the conviction and the will that must be present before our hopes are realized. That we should have to argue in

[707] Nancy Newhall to Adams, July 18, 1944, CCP/AAA.
[708] Ibid.

> behalf of Stieglitz, that Edward's work should be dismissed as academic compositions, that Strand's sensitive work should be contemptuously referred to as 'those bushes,' that Ansel's grand landscapes should bring forth the remark, 'Don't people live in Yosemite?' are evidences of a complete lack of understanding—indeed an unwillingness…. And I put up with all of this![709]

Around the same time, he also wrote Adams of his disgust with the manner in which the museum had treated the department:

> I am now convinced that we cannot play the part we wish to play at the Museum. The reason is so obvious that I wonder I did not sooner see it: nobody else at the Museum, except Dave who is not now there, gives more than an intellectual recognition of photography. They do not believe in photography—it is still to them a minor graphic art—they are incapable of seeing it as the great communication channel of human thought, capable of infinite variety and of great emotional peaks. If they did, they wouldn't keep knocking us and kicking us around. If Stieglitz, Strand, you, Weston are not of equal worth with Miro, Dali, Matisse, Rivera, Tchelitchew and all the other artists they have honored with one-man shows and sumptuous catalogs, I would not, and Nancy would not, be devoting ourselves to photography.[710]

In letters to Adams, McAlpin, and to each other, the couple tried out many alternatives to remaining at the museum. Nancy Newhall wrote to her husband with an outline of a plan for their own photography center to be founded in California, for which Stieglitz's American Place was clearly the model.[711] Alternatively, they discussed the option of a sabbatical in California that they would begin once the war was over, or proposed that Beaumont would give up museum work altogether and become a full-time photographer.

McAlpin gently persuaded them to stay at the museum, pointing out the weaknesses in each of their various plans, and suggesting that for the moment, at least,

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[709] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall July 22, 1944, in *Focus*, 123-4.
[710] Beaumont Newhall to Adams, July 27, 1944, CCP/AAA.
[711] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, July 28, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

MoMA still had a lot to offer them.[712] He closed his letter by maintaining that their best option was to stay at the museum and establish a new advisory committee that was composed of photographers who could lobby the board on their behalf.[713] He wisely counseled them to keep their future plans to themselves, fearing that if Dick Abbott discovered that they were even considering leaving, he would use it as an excuse to shut down the department for good.[714]

[712] David McAlpin to Nancy Newhall, July 31, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[713] Ibid.
[714] In fact, Abbott attempted to do just that. When Nancy Newhall left in the summer of 1944 for a vacation with the Adamses in California, Abbott accused her of "abandoning her post," as Newhall termed it, and threatened to fire her for insubordination. McAlpin apparently squelched the plan. David McAlpin to Ansel Adams, July 23, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

CHAPTER SEVEN

OF MANZANAR AND MoMA

In late 1944 Nancy Newhall organized the only solo exhibition of photographs by Ansel Adams to be mounted at MoMA during the Newhall era. Although it included several landscapes in Adams's signature style, the exhibition was composed mostly of photographs unlike any he had ever made before or, for that matter, would ever make again. For Adams, *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams of Loyal Japanese American Relocation* was anomalous in many respects: it was a reportage project, so text and images were given equal weight; many of the photographs were portraits, a genre he infrequently practiced; and, most importantly, the subject was politically controversial. The exhibition is significant to the history of the department primarily because Adams and Newhall argued that it demonstrated what they felt documentary photography could ideally do: present a positive social message in the form of expressive art. It is also germane because it was pointedly unlike any of the other war-related exhibitions of photography produced at the museum during the period.

Throughout the war Adams searched, mostly in vain, for ways to meaningfully contribute his photographic skills to the American cause. Immediately following Pearl Harbor he wrote to Newton Drury, Director of the Park Service, "I can visualize ways in which fine photographs can be utilized in…depicting, in part, that for which we are fighting. I hope there will be a way in which I can point my work towards this

function."[715] Yet in February 1942, soon after he turned forty, he unintentionally sabotaged his best opportunity for a military appointment. After seeing the beautifully crafted prints Adams had made from Mathew Brady's negatives for the *Civil War and Frontier* exhibition Adams had organized at MoMA, Edward Steichen, who had recently joined the navy and was then assembling a unit of photographers for that branch of the service, asked him to oversee the building and direction of a specialized darkroom in Washington, D.C., a job perfectly suited to his keen technical abilities.[716] Thrilled at the prospect, Adams accepted under the condition that he be made an officer and start five months later, once he had finished other projects.[717] After their first conversation on the subject, however, Steichen didn't reply to further inquiries from Adams, and formed his unit without him. Adams had misjudged the situation, writes Mary Alinder, and was left upset and confused by what had transpired because he had not comprehended that accepting such an offer required dropping everything and going to Washington immediately, that "Steichen waited for no one."[718] It was neither the first nor the last time that Adams would be frustrated by Steichen's actions.[719]

The following year, after Newhall had joined the army and McAlpin enlisted in the navy, Adams took a job at the Art Center School in Los Angeles, which specialized in commercial photography. He accepted the position with the understanding that soldiers from the Signal Corps were to be trained at the school, and that by teaching them skills

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[715] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 191.
[716] Ibid., 198.
[717] Alinder, *Ansel Adams: A Biography*, 172.
[718] Ibid.
[719] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin April 16, 1943, CCP/AAA.

they could use in the field, he would be performing a worthwhile role in the war effort.[720] When the Signal Corps chose not to send their cadets to the school, and Adams found himself continuously bumping heads with other photographers on the faculty, he resigned in frustration. To his great consternation, he discovered that most of the students and faculty, like the primary critics of the department at MoMA, dismissed the work of the photographers he most admired. Adams wrote to David McAlpin that the director, Henry "Tink" Adams, had made it his goal to win him over to their side:

> I was soon aware of the activity of Tink to 'change' me. What I was doing was 'dead.' The things I believed in were 'dead.' Weston was 'dead.' Stieglitz was an 'old fogie'…. One day I expressed myself in no uncertain terms and I heard little of it since from him although he had instructed the staff to get me "changed" to his way of thinking…it seems the majority of "commercial" boys…have a strong dislike for Weston and Adams—probably more for me because I sometimes enter their field. The [Margaret] Bourke-Whites of the world simply do not like the people who puncture their thin shell of superficiality.[721]

His experience with commercial photographers in Los Angeles led Adams to a period of soul-searching, during which he took stock of his own work and acknowledged the compromises he had made in order to support his family.[722] He wrote to McAlpin that he felt "ashamed" of much of the commercial work he had done to make a living.[723] Throughout his life, he would struggle to satisfactorily reconcile the fact that he was at once an artist and a photographer-for-hire. It was not an easy duality for him to live with, as more than anything else he wanted to be recognized as an artist. Unlike Weston, who

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[720] Alinder, 230.
[721] Ansel Adams to David McAlpin 4/16/1943, CCP/AAA.
[722] Adams's experience in Los Angeles was not a total loss, as it was there that he developed his teaching method and came up with the basic concepts behind his famous Zone System. Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 216.
[723] Ibid.

had sacrificed basic comforts and familial harmony to pursue his art, Adams took seriously his financial responsibilities to his parents, maiden aunt, wife, and children, and to make ends meet often accepted commercial jobs that he felt were unworthy of his talents.[724] Incidentally, for making what seemed to him to be the responsible choice, Stieglitz and O'Keeffe had condemned him.[725]

After working with his friend Dorothea Lange on a job in San Francisco for the Office of War Information, Adams wrote to McAlpin that he had realized that he had been too selfish in the past, and following Lange's example was determined to be more "generous" and engage with the contemporary world.[726] He explained:

> I have fully realized that there can be no compromise with the basic ethic as far as the artist is concerned, but I do feel that the artist must be far more generous and tolerant than he has been in the individualistic past. The recent experience with Lange strengthens my belief in this to a very large degree; she gives of herself to people in complete honesty and directness, and they in turn give back to her the essence of themselves.[727]

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[724] Mary Alinder notes that at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Adams had six dependents: his wife and two children, his parents, and his aging aunt. Alinder, *Biography*, 172.

[725] In her notes for a biography of Stieglitz, Nancy Newhall wrote that in 1941: "Virginia [Adams's wife]…had filed suit for divorce, and Ansel was dead against it. He had been through a similar crisis before, and the agony of his decision to stay married to Virginia sent first him and then his love to the hospital. He was not going to go through that ever again. Also he had seen too many of his friends through such crises and what happened to their children. He was determined that such tearing apart should not happen to little Michael and Anne. O'K[eeffe], and I believe S[tiegliz] too, were for the divorce. O'K maintaining that an artist must not be saddled by a family; he has deeper responsibilities than the average man. Ansel retorted: 'If I am not man enough to shoulder the normal responsibilities and still go on being an artist, then I am not strong enough to be either a man or an artist. And I insist on being both!'.... Neither S nor O'K—nor for that matter, EW[Edward Weston]—approved Adams's refusal to divorce." Nancy Newhall, unpublished manuscript notes assembled later by Beaumont Newhall, GRI/Newhall.

[726] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 230. For more information on their work for the OWI, see "Collection Details, Office of War Information (OWI)" in the "Guide to the Lange (Dorothea) Collection at the Oakland Museum of CA" on the website of the Online Archive of California at www.oac.cdlib.org. Consulted 1/10/2010.

[727] Adams to McAlpin, January 10, 1943, as published in Alinder and Stillman, eds., *Letters and Images*, 141-3.

Crucially, this new approach involved photographing people. Adams wrote: "I have a dismal reputation to live down—that of not being interested in people. I AM interested in people, and I feel that I shall do increasingly intense work with human subjects.[728] According to Mary Alinder, the urge to photograph human subjects came out of a desire to demonstrate that he could "do it all."[729] As she explains:

> He could not be content with becoming merely the most celebrated landscape photographer of all time so long as the whispering voice of Stieglitz in his subconscious argued that it was a time not to photograph rocks and trees but to turn his camera instead on the most important subject: man.[730]

Adams aspired to prove himself not only to Stieglitz, but also to those who had insinuated that his interest in the natural world stemmed from a deep-seated misanthropy.

The desire to prove his mettle as a documentarian was one factor that led Adams to accept an offer in the summer of 1943 to photograph the internees at Manzanar, the Japanese American relocation camp located at the foot of Mount Williamson in the Owens Valley. A friend from the Sierra Club, Ralph Merritt, had taken over the direction of the camp several months after it opened in 1942, and following a riot in which two young internees were killed by guards, had endeavored to make the camp less like a prison and more like a community.[731] By most accounts, Merritt had been successful. After the initial violence subsided, the internees had transformed the once bleak and dusty camp into a tidy, productive village. As Adams recounted to Nancy Newhall,

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[728] Ibid.
[729] Alinder, *Biography*, 225.
[730] Ibid.
[731] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 238.

Merritt and the War Relocation Authority—the agency responsible both for removing Japanese Americans from their homes and then relocating them once the war was over—wanted Adams to document the successes at Manzanar, as well as to assist them in their efforts to help combat racism against the internees, who would soon be returning to mainstream society. In a later interview, Adams recalled Merritt telling him:

> We think we have something at Manzanar…. We've been able to get these people in all their destitute, terrible condition to build a new life for themselves, a whole new culture. They're leaving here with a very good feeling about America. They know the exodus was a fundamental wrong, but they said, 'this is the situation—make the best of it.' If you can photograph that, it's a very important part of the record.[732]

In other words, Merritt hoped that Adams would accentuate the positive, demonstrating in his photographs the resilience the internees had shown in the face of adversity, rather than drawing attention to the injustices they had suffered at the hands of their own government.

Adams saw the invitation to photograph Manzanar as the perfect opportunity to exemplify what he and the Newhalls had long been arguing: that documentary photographs could serve a moderate and positive social function and at the same time be expressive and beautifully crafted works of art. He aspired to create a body of work that was unlike either Walker Evans's *American Photographs*, which he saw as unduly negative, depressing and critical of America, or Steichen's *Road to Victory*, which he characterized as hollow propaganda that marginalized the creative work of individual

[732] Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun, *Conversations with Ansel Adams* (Berkeley, Ca: University of California, Regional Oral History Office, 1978), 24.

photographers. In the introduction to the book, *Born Free and Equal*, he relates his photographs of Manzanar to his longstanding interest in landscape:

> For many years I have photographed the Sierra Nevada, striving to reveal by the clear statement of the lens those qualities of the natural scene which claim the emotional and spiritual response of the people. In these years of strain and sorrow, the grandeur, beauty and quietness of the mountains are more important to us than ever before. I have tried to record the influence of the tremendous landscape of Inyo on the life and spirit of thousands of people living by force of circumstance in the Relocation Center of Manzanar. Hence, while the people and their activities are my chief concern, there is much emphasis on the land throughout the book.[733]

As Karin Higa and Tim Wride have argued, landscape was "central to his interpretive agenda" for the project, as it directly linked the Manzanar photographs to his expressive work. They assert:

> At the outset he employs dramatic and majestic interpretations of the natural landscape of the Owens River Valley to indicate his position as an artist in this dialogue. Thus, he immediately establishes that *Born Free and Equal* is above all an expressive and artistic undertaking consistent with his work as a whole. From this perspective, the work escapes Adams's own damning classification of being mere documentary or reportage and therefore 'barren of human or imaginative qualities.'[734]

Arguing that his Manzanar project transcended mere documentary and entered the realm of "creative" photography, Adams felt it was worthy of exhibition at MoMA.

As demonstrated in earlier chapters, Adams averred that documentary photographs that dwelled on the negative, that made viewers feel guilty and heartbroken, only increased public apathy. It was his contention that social causes would be better served with positive images that gave viewers reason for hope. As he later wrote, what

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[733] Adams, *Born Free and Equal* (Bishop, CA: Spotted Dog Press, 2001), 13. This reprint of the book, which was first published by U.S. Camera in 1944, includes a somewhat modified facsimile of the original, as well as interpretative essays and additional photographs.

[734] Karen Higa and Tim Wride, "Manzanar Inside and Out," in Stephanie Barron et al, eds., *Reading California: Art, Image, and identity, 1900-2000*, 325.

he had witnessed at Manzanar was, in fact, hopeful—he had not put a positive spin on a sad situation. In an oral history interview taken later in his life Adams explained:

> So I went down to Manzanar and photographed, oh, hundreds of people, and practically everyone was positive. They'd rejected the tragedy because they couldn't do anything about it. The next step was a positive one. And I had them smiling and cheerful, and happy. The photo-journalists raked me up and down over the coals; you have no idea. "Why do you have these people smiling? That's all fake! They were oppressed prisoners." And so I tried to explain what really happened. Because of this adversity, about which they could do nothing, they became a marvelous group of positive, forward-looking people…they really did a magnificent job of establishing a life out of chaos. And I think that's my most important job. Although conventionally I should have shown them downtrodden and unhappy and dirty—which was not true![735]

His stated goal was to encourage average Americans to overcome their racial prejudice and embrace their fellow citizens of Japanese descent, and it was his conviction that the best way to encourage tolerance was to show Japanese Americans as upbeat, industrious people with deep-seated democratic values who had, in spite of great odds, remained true to the ideals of America. He did not deny that they had been wronged, but he did not dwell on that fact either. He photographed individuals, pairing their portraits with text that described their lives and professions [Figs. 7.1–7.2], as well as aspects of life in the camp [Figs. 7.3–7.5]. The project pointedly noted that Japanese Americans were serving in the military [Fig. 7.6], and demonstrated that the internees were Americans like any others, showing them playing baseball, going to church, and growing their own food [Figs. 7.7–7.9].

Scholars have often reduced Adams's Manzanar project to a foil for Dorothea Lange's work on the same subject done a year earlier for the War Relocation Authority

[735] Teiser and Harroun, *Conversations*, 24.

(WRA). Commissioned by the WRA to document the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans from the Bay Area, Lange traveled to major cities, assembly centers, and ultimately to Manzanar, to photograph them as they were rounded up, shipped off, and inprisoned.[736] Lange herself appears to be the original source for the negative assessment of Adams's work that has since prevailed. In a frequently quoted excerpt from an oral history interview taken in the early 1960s, when Lange was, incidentally, quite ill, she stated that Adams's approach to the subject had been "shameful" and politically naïve.[737] Although she allowed that it had been "far for *him* to go" to do the project in the first place, Lange contended that Adams had not gone far enough in his condemnation of the government's actions, and on this basis she wrote off his entire endeavor.[738]

Despite the fact that the intent of the two projects is not comparable, and that when Lange made her pictures the conditions in the camp and the political situation were very different from when Adams arrived, the out-of-hand dismissal of Adams's work has been repeated by many writers bent on elevating Lange's achievements. For example, despite noting that Lange "disregarded the constructive role Adams's more positive view might have played in encouraging widespread acceptance of Japanese Americans," Karin Becker Ohrn largely reinforces Lange's assertion that Adams's Manzanar work was

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[736] For a complete history of Lange's work for the WRA, see Karin Becker Ohrn, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), and Linda Gordon and Gary Y Okihiro, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).
[737] Suzanne Reiss, *Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer* (University of California Regional Oral History Office, 1968), 190.
[738] Ibid., 148.

inferior.[739] Ohrn avers that Lange more truthfully documented the conditions of the camps, because, unlike Adams, she did not accept the government's rationale for the unconstitutional treatment of American citizens, and was thus more apt to depict conditions as they really were. Similarly, Jan Zita Grover accuses Adams of naïveté, of producing a "happy-face" project that "made the internment look less of a punishment than it was."[740] Both authors suggest that Lange's political views enabled her special access to the truth, asserting that her photographs documented bald fact whereas Adams's presented a carefully constructed fiction. Neither acknowledges that Lange's portrayal of the camps was equally inflected by her own political point of view.

In contrast, Graham Howe and his fellow contributors to *Two Views of Manzanar*—a comparison of Adams's work with that of Toyo Miyatake, a Japanese American photographer interned at the camp—contend that Lange dwelled on the "misery exponent," while Adams "defines the people by the quality of their lives, not the interruption of their cultural continuity."[741] In a similar vein, Anne Hammond notes that Adams had set out to do something very different from Lange and other social documentarians. As she asserts:

> Most forms of social documentary drew public attention by portraying their human subjects in a state of distress to incite public outrage, but Adams wished to achieve recognition on the part of ordinary Americans that Japanese Americans were in very many ways just like them, not degraded or dejected in their racial difference, and not even expressing

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[739] Ibid.
[740] Jan Zita Grover, "The Winner Names the Age: Historicism and Ansel Adams's Manzanar Photographs,"*Afterimage* 16, no. 9, (April 1989), 17.
[741] Graham Howe, Jacqueline Markham, Patrick Nagatani, and Scott Rankin, *Two Views of Manzanar* (Los Angeles: Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, 1978), 11.

> outright anger, anxiety, or resentment, however justifiable those emotions were under the circumstances.[742]

Adams's goal, Hammond writes, was to individualize and humanize Japanese Americans, to demonstrate to the rest of the population that they were Americans too. For this same reason, John Szarkowski argues that Lange's criticism of Adams was unfair. He wrote:

> She felt that Adams's pictures seemed to gloss over the injustice that had been done. This criticism seems to me to miss the point. Adams's idea was to show that the Issei and Nisei, in spite of the injustices that they had suffered, had maintained their cohesion, dignity, and their will. This seems to me a wholly admirable ambition—perhaps ever preferable to that of those who were willing to photograph the people of the camps merely as victims.[743]

Although he believed Adams's intent was noble, Szarkowski was nonetheless critical of the photographs themselves, writing:

> The problem was not Adams's moral stance but his pictures, which—like his portraits even of his close friends—were generally wooden and opaque. Adams said more than once that it was his aim in making a portrait to photograph the head as though it were a piece of sculpture. Regrettably, he too often succeeded in this bizarre ambition.[744]

Adams himself would later admit that many of the photographs did not meet his own standards of expressive art, and few were ever reproduced in the many compilations of his work he oversaw during his lifetime.[745]

The contradictory views on Adams's project illustrate the fact that neither Adams's nor Lange's photographs reveal some sort of singular truth. As Jasmine Alinder writes in her insightful *Moving Images: Photography and the Japanese American*

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[742] Anne Hammond, "Ansel Adams at Manzanar," *History of Photography* 30, no. 3 (Autumn, 2006), 249.
[743] John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams at 100*, 46.
[744] Ibid.
[745] Adams to Grace Meyer [longtime assistant in the Department of Photographs at MoMA], October 17, 1982, CCP/AAA.

Incarceration, "what determines one's interpretation of these photographs has less to do with the actual images than it does with the expectation brought to them, and the viewer's stake in a particular version of history."[746] While it is certainly true that Adams's views on the incarceration were more conservative than were Lange's, and that he did not question the government's or Ralph Merritt's actions to the extent that she did, it is also true that *Born Free and Equal* was one of the few projects seen by the general public during the war that presented Japanese Americans in a positive light. Had his book been more critical of the government, as Lange had wanted, it would have had little hope of getting published, and would likely have been dismissed by most Americans.

Lange's project was very different from Adams's. She understood that the government would likely bury her work, keeping it unseen until after the war was over, and this allowed her a certain freedom to portray the exodus as she saw fit. Her best hope was that her pictures would provide future generations with her view of the evacuation and the early days of the internment.[747] Adams, on the other hand, intended his work for a wide, general audience, and believed that in order to be heard his message had to be carefully calibrated so as not to offend the general public's sensibilities.

During the war, few white Americans publicly questioned the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans.[748] In fact, racism against this group, already

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[746] Jasmine Alinder, *Moving Images: Photography and the Japanese American Incarceration* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 16.
[747] Ohrn, 148.
[748] The major exception is Carey McWilliams, whose *Prejudice: Japanese Americans Symbol of Racial Intolerance* was published in 1944, the same year as *Born Free and Equal*. For an account of the history of anti-Japanese sentiment in California, see Donald Pike and Roger Olmstead "The Japanese in California," in *Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans* (Los Angeles: University of California Asian American Study Center, 1992), 17-23.

endemic on the West Coast and particularly in California, had increased dramatically with the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the conflict. As Donald Pike and Roger Olmsted have noted, fear was the primary engine of this burgeoning racism:

> It was seriously suggested that Japanese saboteurs dwelt in inconspicuous hovels near oil refineries and shipyards, that fisherman had their Imperial Navy uniforms wrapped in oilskins in their bait boxes, that houseboys were intelligence agents and farmers militiamen. If Germans and Italians were also enemies, there still loomed the special menace of the Japanese, the enemy who plotted to attack us and had carried out the assault so successfully that our leaders sought to keep the scope of the disaster from us. Week after week came news of successive Japanese victories; suddenly the Japanese seemed a kind of despicable super race that threatened our very national existence.[749]

Not surprisingly then, racist propaganda was the norm during the war [Fig. 7.10], even in photography publications. For example, under a photograph by Peter Sekaer of a Japanese man with a camera titled *Very Honorable Tourist* [Fig. 7.11], Steichen and Maloney published the following in the 1944 edition of *U.S. Camera Annual*, which was subtitled *The U.S.A at War*:

> Nothing could be more symbolic of our sneak-thief friend than this picture taken sometime before Pearl Harbor. He was actually photographing and taking notes on a small government power project when Peter Sekaer, at that time a Rural Electrification Administration Photographer, snapped him. A camera in his hands became deadly, as deadly as the bite of a rattlesnake, we were soon to learn. Scattered though our homes, our restaurants, our universities, these condescending little gremlins found our every weakness; attempted to analyze and duplicate our every strength. Our stupidity aided their cupidity, aided it to the very brink of disaster. On December 7th, 1941, they struck with an effect so shattering we were to know its full meaning until all the pictures of our helpless sunken fleet were shown—just one year later.[750]

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[749] Ibid., 17.
[750] "Very Honorable Tourist," *U.S. Camera Annual* 1944, unpaginated.

Maloney, the likely author, who was, interestingly, also the eventual publisher of Adams's book, here equates people of Japanese descent who lived, worked, and studied in America with the perpetrators at Pearl Harbor, going so far as to suggest that they had abetted the attack.

Considering the prevalence of such negative characterizations, it is not surprising that Adams was condemned by some for his positive take on Japanese Americans. "It was a very difficult thing," he recalled in a later interview, "and even some of my liberal friends said, 'You made a mistake that time. You got yourself in hot water'…. They said, 'It's not the thing to do. Japan is the enemy and you shouldn't have done it.'" [751] Some of the criticism was heartrending:

> One man wrote me. He said, 'Well, I've lost three sons in this war, and you're glorifying our enemy.' And I had to write back and say, 'those in my book are American citizens. They were born in this country, and their sons who were in the army would come to see them.' But their hurt was so great that there was no reasonable solution to it. It was really quite a tragic experience for me.[752]

As Adams noted in a letter to Nancy Newhall, he had received criticism from all sides, even from other photographers:

> Another group of people—the professional social-conscious type—(and, in part, I include Dorothea Lange therein) simply see no other approach than the formula. I find the formula dull as hell. What interests me is that the people to whom I addressed the book—the ordinary average man-in-the-street are reacting very well indeed; exceeding expectations. I know we are on the right track.[753]

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[751] Teiser and Harroun, *Conversations,* 26.
[752] Ibid., 25.
[753] Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, January 2,1945, CCP/Newhall.

As the above passage makes clear, Adams had not set out to please people on Lange's side of the political spectrum. His intended audience had different values, and would not have been moved to reconsider their feelings towards Japanese Americans if the book had cast them as victims of an unjust government policy.

Press coverage of the exhibition and book was largely positive. Eleanor Roosevelt mentioned the book in her syndicated column "My Day," and it was reviewed in papers across the country.[754] An unnamed journalist for the *New York World Telegram* wrote that although he was not particularly concerned with the treatment of Japanese Americans, Adams's willingness "to deal with such an unpopular theme at this time calls for a certain amount of moral courage."[755] The reviewer acknowledged that he himself could stand to be more tolerant of people of other races, and characterized the book as "enlightenment for people like himself."[756] This was precisely what Adams had hoped to achieve.

Authors on the other side of the political spectrum were moved as well. For example, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune* that he believed the "legality of the government's procedure is as much a question as ever," Gerald W. Johnson had high praise for *Born Free and Equal*.[757] Significantly, noted socialist thinker Louis Adamic equated it with Carey McWilliams's *Prejudice,* a book for which Lange had nothing but

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[754] "In case you have not seen it, there is a publication by the U.S. Camera Publishing Corporation which is worth your looking through. It is called 'Born Free and Equal,' and the text and photographs are by Ansel Adams. It is one of the publications designed to temper one of our prejudices, and I think it does it very successfully." Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day" [syndicated column clipped by Ansel Adams from unknown newspaper] January 10, 1945. CCP/AAA.
[755] T.K.B, *New York World Telegram*, December 30, 1944.
[756] Ibid.
[757] Gerald W. Johnson, "Books and Things," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 1, 1945, 17.

praise. It is worth considering Lange's opinion in contrast to that of Adamic, an outspoken leftist critic of the internment who did not find Adams's work too politically conservative or insufficiently critical of the government, as had Lange.

Manzanar at MoMA

In May of 1944, around the time that Willard Morgan quit his job as director of the department, Adams traveled to New York to give a series of lectures at the Photography Center. With him he brought text and images from the Manzanar project to show Nancy Newhall.[758] Excited about what she saw, Newhall wrote to her husband that she felt the work was "different from ordinary FSA [photographs] or journalism," stating that what set it apart was "the approach, the sensitivity, the completely thought out quality, of course. But there's something more, too."[759] Like Adams, she thought it merited exhibition at the museum. At first she hoped to feature the work at the Photography Center, but once she showed it to the museum's exhibition committee grander plans were hatched. She reported to her husband:

> The Exhibition Committee was so enthusiastic there was talk of putting it up at once, as part of the Museum's Fifteenth Anniversary show, *Art in Progress*. Then it was decided that, with most of the first floor devoted to my exhibition of the Collection, it would emphasize photography at the expense of the other arts, and so a date was set for the fall. [Tom] Maloney saw the mock up, and offered to publish as 'handsome a booklet for a low a retail price as possible,' and time it to appear with the opening.[760]

[758] Nancy Newhall, "Review: Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal*," *Photo Notes,* June 1946. Unpaginated.
[759] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, May 28, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[760] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 252

As the opening date grew nearer, however, the exhibition faced significant hurdles and was almost cancelled. Newhall later recalled that ten days before the show opened "the wartime hysteria blew up in our faces."[761]

> New York was one of the most tolerant cities in the world, in spite of occasional frictions among its mixture of races, religions and nationalities. The newspapers were carrying what seemed to me only the usual atrocity stories about Japan in the Pacific war when, following due procedure on accepted scheduled shows, I checked it through again with assorted officials and discussed in with Sarah Newmeyer, the publicity director, the best way to present it to the press. Over the weekend, the Museum staff, which had been so sympathetic to the subject that Trustees wished it could be enlarged into a show covering all racial intolerance, suddenly reversed its attitude. Sarah reported at the usual Monday staff meeting that she had mentioned the subject casually to three quite different groups of people. Their reaction—in New York!—was one of horror and revulsion. Other staff members joined in. The subject was too hot. The Museum, in its present weakness, could not afford to be involved.[762]

Putting her job on the line to save the show, Newhall "threatened to blow the top off the Museum if they either dropped the show or emasculated it."[763] Although it is difficult to ascertain what exactly transpired, it appears that certain members of the staff felt it was too politically risky to pair Adams's photographs with what they saw as inflammatory passages of text. In order to appease internal critics, including Sarah Newmeyer, the head of publicity; Monroe Wheeler, the head of publications; and Jim Soby, Adams and Newhall agreed to allow two such passages—one from Whitman and one from Lincoln—to be removed, and the original title *Born Free and Equal,* which was taken from the Constitution, to be changed to *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams of Loyal*

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[761] Nancy Newhall, *From Adams to Stieglitz*, 110.
[762] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment,* 275
[763] Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, December 28, 1944, CCP/Newhall.

Japanese-American Relocation Center.[764] The exhibition was thus secured, but the museum refused to circulate it, and publicity was sparse.

Ironically, James Soby took issue with the exhibition for many of the same reasons Adams and the Newhalls had criticized the war-related shows Steichen had organized previously. Nancy Newhall wrote to Adams:

> Then Jim pronounced—and you and I both unfortunately agree with him, I think—at least I do—that he felt the Museum should devote itself to its true business, pleading for art, aiding and abetting art, and not using art to plead special causes, no matter how much the museum as individuals or as a group sympathize with the cause to be pleaded. As an overall policy I agree wholeheartedly with him—a reaction within the Museum that I'm happy to see, considering how much trash and balderdash we've put out as our bit in the Propaganda War.[765]

Newhall countered Soby's contention that the "Museum should not be used for propaganda" by stating: "what else could Steichen's 'Road to Victory' and 'Power in the Pacific' be called—to say nothing of several inferior show the Trustees had thrust upon the Photography Department?"[766] Considering their well-articulated opposition to the thematic exhibitions Steichen had produced for the museum, as well as Adams's concern over "propaganda," it was understandably surprising to Soby that Adams and Newhall found it appropriate to present the Manzanar work at the museum. They justified its inclusion by claiming that it was neither propaganda nor mere documentary, asserting that the photographs were, above all, beautifully crafted works of art. Newhall promoted the project as an example of "reportage," stating "that words and pictures were one, that

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[764] Ibid., and Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, August 29, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[765] Ibid.
[766] Nancy Newhall, *From Adams to Stieglitz*, 110.

this was the Museum's chance to show the best job in Documentary-Reportage that had happened in years, and that words and pictures were a new art together."[767]

Tellingly, although he strenuously argued for their artistic legitimacy at the time, Adams would in retrospect admit that many of the photographs in the Manzanar exhibition did not meet his own criteria for "creative" work, and thus should not have been shown at MoMA. Although he continued throughout his life to believe that it was the most important work he had done "from social point of view," he later equated it with the exhibitions Steichen had produced, writing:

> I detested his large exhibits primarily because they were obviously subject-oriented and did not belong in a museum of art. I felt the same way about a little exhibit of my Manzanar Relocation Camp photographs at MoMA in the early 1940's; there were only a few that might approach aesthetic expression; most were factual and would have been more appropriate in another type of public institution.[768]

Perhaps pressure to contribute to the war effort and prove himself as a socially concerned photographer caused Adams to deviate from his stated course. In a bid to demonstrate that he was sensitive to the plight of other people and not a misanthrope who was concerned only with mountains, he sacrificed his own ideals about art and of the sanctity of the museum as an apolitical preserve. He did not appear to have regretted it.

Both conceptually and ideologically, *Manzanar* contrasts sharply with the other war-related exhibitions produced by the department in the Newhall years. The exhibitions organized by Steichen, *Road to Victory* (1942), *Airways to Peace* (1943), and *Power in the Pacific* (1945), were all rousing, nationalistic battle cries. There was no

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[767] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment,* 275.
[768] Ansel Adams to Grace Meyer, October 17, 1982, CCP/AAA. Sent in response to Meyer's request for reminiscences about Steichen after his death.

ambiguity to the message they presented—nothing was left to the viewer's imagination, no questions were left unanswered. Steichen used photographs merely as illustrations of his ideas, not as autonomous art objects. The intent of the photographers whose work was included in his exhibitions was subverted in the name of the larger themes he wished to convey to his audience. The department organized other exhibitions of photographs during the war that did recognize individual photographers, however, including: *War Comes to the People: A Story Written with the Lens*, (1940) an exhibition of photographs by Therese Bonney of civilians in Europe; *Two Years of War in England*, (1942) which featured photographs by William Vandivert, a *Life* photographer; *Tunisian Triumph: War Photographs by Eliot Elisofon*, (1943) and *Pacific Report: Photographs by Eugene Smith* (1944), each of which provided visitors with a window onto a specific aspect of the war from one photographer's perspective, but for which no claims were made as to the expressive or aesthetic value of the work.[769] Those aspects were highlighted in *Image of Freedom* (1942) and *Photographs of the Civil War and the American Frontier* (1942).

Manzanar was sui generis. While it featured the work of one photographer, as did some of the other wartime exhibitions, and stressed the aesthetic and expressive aspects of the work, as did others, it was the only exhibition mounted during the war that dealt with a politically contentious subject. None of the other exhibitions challenged visitors' expectations or asked them to reconsider their values—all were essentially pro-American and pro-war. And each of the others had, in its own way, been designed to show

[769] "War Comes to the People," (exh. # 119) December 10, 1940–January 5, 1941; "Two Years of War in England," (exh. #177) April 15–May 10, 1942; "Tunisian Triumph," (exh. #233) June 14–July 24, 1943; "Pacific Report," (exh. #257a) May 10–June 30, 1944.

Americans what they were fighting for or against. Adams addressed these matters in his book as well, writing:

> We must prosecute this war with all the ruthless efficiency, stern realism and clarity of purpose that is at our command. We must not compromise or appease. We must assure our people that there will be no further human catastrophes such as the destruction of Rotterdam, the annihilation of Lidice, the rape of Nanking, or the decimation of the Jews.

Yet what set *Manzanar* apart was its claim that in service of the greater cause of freedom Americans must not neglect the individual rights and dignity of its own citizens—that Americans must uphold on the homefront the ideals for which they were fighting abroad. "We must be certain that, as the rights of the individual are the most sacred elements of our society," Adams wrote, "we will not allow passion, vengeance, hatred, and racial antagonism to cloud the principles of universal justice and mercy."[770] While from Lange's perspective Adams did not go far enough in his condemnation of the government's policy towards Japanese Americans, his project was one of the most politically nuanced and challenging exhibitions mounted at MoMA during the war.

[770] Adams, *Born Free and Equal* (Bishop, CA: Spotted Dog Press, 2001), 118.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE END OF THE NEWHALL ERA

In the two years between the closing of the Photography Center in the summer of 1944 and the Newhalls' ultimate departure from the museum in the spring of 1946, the divide between the Newhall/Adams camp and their critics became an unbridgeable chasm. It was a period of extremes—brilliant successes and disheartening blows. The lows were marked by a series of petty battles waged by proponents of a more inclusive, popular approach to photography, and the highs by Nancy Newhall's organization of the first two retrospective exhibitions to be mounted by the department. This chapter charts the final days of the Newhall/Adams era at the museum and considers the circumstances that led the Newhalls to be forced out just as they were beginning to achieve their long-held goal of presenting photographers as the peers of artists working in other media.

Once the Photography Center had been shuttered, Nancy Newhall's primary order of business was to work with Roy Stryker to seat an advisory committee that would advocate for the department. Seeking to encourage healthy debate and "demonstrate that no one point of view either could or should dominate in photography," she and Stryker purposefully selected members who represented diverse interests and a wide range of photographic fields.[771] The majority were photographers, including Louise Dahl-Wolfe from the commercial world; Dr. Harold E. Edgerton, a pioneer in the field of scientific photography; Edwin Rosskam and Arthur Rothstein, both formerly affiliated with the Farm Security Administration; William Vandivert, a *Life* magazine photographer; Ira

[771] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, unpublished manuscript, CCP/Newhall, 290.

Martin, a noted Pictorialist; and artists Charles Sheeler, Paul Strand, and Adams. From the publishing world came Albert Boni, known for editing pocket versions of literary classics; Willard Morgan, independent book publisher and editor of *Look;* and T.J. Maloney, publisher of *U.S. Camera.* Other members included critic Elizabeth McCausland; Hyatt A. Mayor, curator of prints and drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Dr. Walter (Nobby) Clark, from the research arm of Eastman Kodak Co.; Dr. Heinrich Schwartz, a noted Austrian art historian; Dr. Robert Taft, a professor of chemistry at the University of Kansas with an interest in the social history of photography; Lloyd Varden, Director of Education at the Ansco photographic corporation; Edward Epstean, writer and photoengraver; Romona Javitz, who started the photography collection at New York Public Library; and Albert E. Marshall, the former Executive Director at Ansco Corporation. Nancy Newhall, Stryker, Dick Abbott, James Soby, and Elodie Courter, MoMA's head of circulating exhibitions, also attended the committee's meetings.

Shortly before the Committee on Photography's first meeting in November 1944, Newhall's former assistant informed her of a rumor circulating around the museum that named Steichen as the next director of the department. Upon investigation she learned that Tom Maloney, a longtime critic of the department, had in a related move approached Henry Allen Moe, a prominent trustee, with a proposal to start a new arts magazine, "provided Steichen had something to do with it."[772] Newhall wrote to her husband that in the process of unearthing details about these discoveries she was heartened to learn that

[772] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, October 29, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

neither Roy Stryker nor Dick Abbott were Steichen supporters, and that the museum's staff, after working with him on several exhibitions during the war, did not approve the idea of his new role at the museum. She astutely noted, however, that because Steichen had connections with prominent Trustees it mattered little what the staff thought of him, as the will of the Trustees always prevailed.[773] Speaking with James Soby about the rumors, she learned that he had been trying to convince the Board that hiring Steichen was a bad idea.

> He said he'd been talking about Steichen for some time and thought he'd made headway, convincing trustees and such that inside of three weeks, Steichen would have the Museum on its beam ends and in utter chaos and that the director of painting would be lucky if he could hang a watercolor in the men's washroom. And spoke of Steichen's frustrations and megalomania in a way I didn't know he understood.[774]

After a brief flare-up, talk of Steichen coming on board died down for about a year. The Newhalls presciently predicted, however, that the threat would reemerge once the war had ended and Steichen was in search of new outlets for his boundless energy.

At the first meeting of the committee, Abbott, Soby, and Newhall provided the new members with an overview of the functioning of the museum and the department. They established that the committee's job was to "give advice and criticism, suggest ideas and projects, and generally supply a broader viewpoint than can be maintained by the head of the department alone."[775] The group was to have no administrative authority, however, and the Trustees could overrule any decisions it made. Despite the lack of any official power, many members of the group took their job quite seriously, as evidenced

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[773] Ibid.
[774] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, November 9, 1944, GRI/Newhall.
[775] "Minutes of the Advisory Committee on Photography," November 16, 1944, GRI/Newhall.

by the heated discussions chronicled in the minutes of their meetings.[776] Certain individuals, particularly Paul Strand, Elizabeth McCausland, Edwin Rosskam, and Roy Stryker, would prove to be particularly vociferous in the promotion of their own ideological agendas.

In February 1945, following a two-year hiatus caused mainly by war-related travel restrictions, Adams returned to New York for a stay of several months.[777] Prior to his arrival Newhall had arranged for him to conduct an intensive photography course at the museum, which met such an enthusiastic response that she was forced to turn away applicants.[778] Adams, who was vice chairman of the Committee on Photography, also sat in on several of the group's regular meetings while he was in New York. Newhall felt that his presence was particularly crucial at that moment, as she hoped he could help her contain the dangerous "putsch" that she believed was developing on the committee. As she explained in a letter to her husband:

> There is an anti-art feeling loose, Stryker plus Rosskam plus Mc C[ausland]. I believe the museum is behind us. But the thing I want to be sure of is the moment to take our stand, positively and irrevocably. The committee has done nothing but talk, and, thanks to Roy's dilatoriness for the last two months, it hasn't even done that lately…Meanwhile I go ahead with my plans for next year.[779]

With the status of the department constantly in question, and rumors aloft that Steichen might be made director, Newhall must have felt particularly threatened by the opinions of

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[776] No single archive has a complete set of these minutes. Some are housed in the Newhall collection at MoMA, others at the Getty Research Institute, and still others in the Elizabeth McCausland Papers at the Archives of American Art. Minutes from some meetings are missing entirely.
[777] Alinder, *Biography,* 177.
[778] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, January 17, 1945, GRI/Newhall. Nancy Newhall writes that the course was also a great financial success for the museum. Newhall, *An Enduring Moment*, 296
[779] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, February 27, 1945, GRI/Newhall.

McCausland, Rosskam, and Stryker, who, like many other critics, strenuously argued against the narrow focus on expressive photography that the Newhalls and Adams had been promoting. In the face of this criticism, now coming from the department's own advisors, Newhall assured her husband that she was doing everything she could to shore up her place at the museum and ensure that their values would continue to predominate.[780]

Newhall's fears were ignited by the contents of a report issued by a subgroup on "picture use" that addressed the issue of reproductions in the mass media. In early March this subcommittee, composed of Adams, Javitz, Morgan, Rosskam, Hicks, Mayor, Stryker, and McCausland (as chair), held a contentious meeting during which Adams led debate about the mission of the museum, the direction of the department, and the committee's objectives. The following excerpt from the minutes captures the fractious character of the exchange between the two camps, clearly delineating their opposing points of view:

> Adams: Frankly, feels the Museum is a little scared by this committee, isn't it going beyond its scope?
>
> Stryker: Suggests Adams refresh his memory by reading the Committee's report. The Committee voted 8 to 1 to accept the policy as drawn up and presented by the Sub-Committee on Policy.
>
> Adams: Reiterated his concern with the necessity for the committee to emphasize and support the aesthetic purposes of the Museum as it concerns itself with the work of photographers.
>
> Stryker: Members of the Museum staff sitting in on the Committee's meetings unequivocally stated that the function of the museum is primarily educational.

[780] Ibid.

> Rosskam: The Museum staff said that the purpose was to reach the largest possible public with the best in photography.
>
> Adams: I would like to see the extent of the field clarified and the purpose of the committee.
>
> McCausland: It is clearly stated and was accepted and typed out in the policy report, which was sent to you. It is photography broadly, not precious—not only aesthetics.[781]

Soon after the meeting, the sub-group submitted a proposal for an ambitious exhibition on the various cultural uses of photography to be called "Pictures to People," which would explore:

> The use of photography in contemporary life, though newspapers, magazines, books and other means of reproduction. The broadest audience for art is reached through these channels, and by these means the most immediate and quantitatively most powerful effect of photography is achieved.[782]

Alarmed by the scope and scale of the proposal as well as its emphasis on reproductions over fine prints, Newhall, Soby, Adams, and Strand concluded that certain members of the subcommittee sought to profoundly alter the founding mission of the department by endorsing a focus on photography as a mass medium rather than an expressive one.

The tension between those members who wanted the department to approach photography less as an art and more as a means of communication—namely McCausland, Stryker, and Rosskam—and those whose primary interest was personal expression—Strand, Sheeler, Adams, and the Newhalls—reached a boiling point that spring, when several absent members, including Beaumont Newhall, Soby, and Rosskam

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[781] MoMA Advisory Committee on Photography, Picture Use Committee, minutes of the meeting on March 6, 1945. Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art.
[782] Mimeograph titled "Proposed Exhibition on Picture Use." Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art.

sent letters of concern to be read at the meeting held on March 17, 1945. The differences of opinion are starkly outlined in the minutes and in the appended letters. The first was written by Soby, who soberly presented the issue as one of practicality, plainly stating that he felt the department had to make a choice "between the kind of program proposed by the subcommittee on picture use and the program which has been the Department's from the beginning and is now urged, with variations, by Mr. Strand and Mr. Adams."[783] Significantly, despite having long felt that the museum should embrace photography in its many manifestations, Soby maintained that the subcommittee's proposal was too ambitious for such a small department. Addressing the concerns of Stryker, McCausland, and Rosskam—with whom he agreed in many respects—he wrote:

> I realize that it is to combat this very artiness in professional photography that the sub-committee has placed so much stress on methods of reproduction, so that photography can become an instrument of sociological instruction and reform, or be used on a large scale as an educational and/or emotional stimulus. I haven't any quarrel with this program as such, though I'm not at all certain that it is the Museum's function except on a limited scale. But I don't think it should become anything like our main program, not when so much clarification of purpose, direction and quality is needed in photography.[784]

Sounding surprisingly like Adams or one of the Newhalls, he continued:

> I think it's the primary function of an art museum to do what it can to clarify for the public standards of quality which may be applied to various kinds of photography. It's a slow process. But in an age when the creative process in itself is being condemned in favor of an emphasis on the usefulness of the products of the process…I think we're in grave danger.[785]

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[783] James Thrall Soby to Nancy Newhall, March 18,1945, appended to advisory committee minutes, March 17, 1945, GRI/Newhall.
[784] Ibid.
[785] Ibid.

After asserting that the department was not in a position to make a significant impact in the area of improving photographic reproduction, Soby asked a number of rhetorical questions aimed at highlighting achievable goals and encouraged the committee to focus on promoting the work of individual photographers and to stay out of battles it was ill equipped to fight.

> Isn't there still much to be done in showing the best 20th century photography of all kinds by established and younger photographers? And shouldn't this take most of our time for now?.... Is it time to reform the reproductive uses of photography when Stieglitz has not yet been shown or published adequately? And can we do much about photographic journalism and layout when only a few people have ever heard of Cartier-Bresson?[786]

Considering the opinions Soby had previously expressed on the subject, the Newhalls and Adams were relieved, if somewhat surprised, to hear him so adamantly defending their point of view, urging the committee to focus on the expressive aspects of the medium and on promoting the work of individual artists. Their efforts to bring him around to their point of view appeared to be bearing fruit.

The second letter presented to the committee was from Beaumont Newhall, who wrote that although he appreciated the group's enthusiasm and the work they had done to date, he was surprised to find that the policies and programs they had proposed thoroughly de-emphasized expressive photography. He was concerned that "there is no clear-cut statement of what I have always considered the Department's main purpose to be—the encouragement of photography as an art."[787] He continued:

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[786] Ibid.

[787] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, February 15, 1945, appended to advisory committee minutes for March 17, 1945, GRI/Newhall.

> I have always thought of the Department as a place where the type of photography in which we all believe—call it creative, fine, artistic, pictorial, documentary, can be seen apart from the bewildering and confusing storm of the great bulk of photographic production…A place where people will come to see a Stieglitz or a Strand, as they come to see a Picasso or a Matisse, not to find an illustration of a horse car, but to experience the beauty and the emotions which Stieglitz was able to express by means of the humble subject.[788]

Attempting to counter the criticism he knew such as statement would engender, Newhall asserted that focusing on photography as an art would not unduly limit the department's purview, writing that he felt the department's role was to encourage and promote high standards by showing only exemplary creative photography, and not just work *intentionally* made as art. He explained:

> By admitting our artistic interests we are not narrowing our field nor altering our policy. For by such a statement we are not limiting ourselves to work deliberately produced as art. Rather we are putting on record our interest in that aspect of photography which is potential in all its phases and which, if developed, should make photography an even more powerful tool of democracy than it is at present.

Taking a cue from Stieglitz, who often compared expressive photography to poetry, Newhall suggested that at heart the issue was one of quality, and that it was the museum's job to present the best work made in a given medium:

> I like to think of our interest in photography as parallel to the relationship between writing and literature. Photography can be taken for granted today, as writing is taken for granted. But we need criticism of photography which will separate the great from the ordinary, as literature is distinguished from writing. We need to set up standards for this criticism, recognize the work which meets these standards, and make others appreciate photography as a form of artistic expression. This, I believe, is our challenge; this is our task.[789]

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[788] Ibid.
[789] Ibid.

In response to Newhall's letter, Edwin Rosskam wrote to clarify the intent of the subcommittee on picture use, which he felt Newhall, Soby, and other members of the group had misconstrued:

> First of all I feel that there was a misunderstanding: the Picture Use Committee, in submitting its proposal for a forum, book and exhibition, in no way intended that its proposal should be considered the only or even the paramount objective of the Photographic Department.[790]

That they had developed a program related to the use of photography in the mass media, he explains, did not mean that "we on the sub-committee are in any way in opposition to the showing of what has been referred to as "expressive photography."[791] Despite this assurance, however, Rosskam voiced antipathy toward what he perceived to be the exclusionary attitude of some of the members of the committee—namely Adams, Strand, and the Newhalls—and their use of terms such as "expressive" or "creative" to slot photographs into what he considered arbitrary categories. The department was overly concerned with defending photography's place as an art, he contended, when it should have been addressing the most pressing "present-day" concerns of the medium: its living uses. He advocated for opening the museum to all kinds of photographs, rather than singling out a certain class of pictures:

> I am afraid that I do not perceive the line where a photograph becomes expressive. A great many words are thrown around and the battle of sematics rages….What I am afraid of is that within these semantics a dangerous confusion may be hiding, the kind of confusion which, in its eagerness to prove that photography is as much of an art as painting, succeeds only in the vague assertion that photography is like painting; which, I submit, it most emphatically is not. This kind of approach might

[790] Edwin Rosskam to Roy Stryker, March 28, 1945, appended to advisory committee minutes for March 17, 1945, GRI/Newhall.
[791] Ibid.

> well sterilize the Museum as a breeding ground for new ideas. In the case of so young an art as photography, where even the 'masters' are very recent, if not contemporary, it leads to the affirmation of the past and the negation of the future—just the contrary of what is implied in the Museum's name, if 'Modern' means 'present day'.…Frankly, I doubt whether the Museum can get very far beyond its present photographic horizon if it makes the term 'expressive' into a wall separating one sort of photography from all others. A 'modern' museum has the task of continuously re-examining all of its own premises, lest it become a force against progress.[792]

Rosskam concluded by asserting that the agenda underlying the subcommittee's plan was to consider photography anew, to address how it functioned in contemporary society, rather than to historicize it or consider it solely from a traditional art historical perspective, as he implied had previously been the department's strategy. He wrote that the benefit of their plan was that it:

> …recognizes the existence of the vast and numerous channels through which the photograph reaches the public. And in the terms of these channels, it tries to define photography as a living force functioning in the USA in the year 1945; and, in view of this examination it hopes to provide the largest possible public with the best that can be done with pictures in all the various media that use photographs—so that by 1950 the general level may be raised and a new examination of values again will be in order.[793]

Although the Newhalls and Adams agreed that the department should work to raise standards in photography, they felt that Rosskam's plans to address photography more broadly were outside the purview of a museum of modern art, whose primary focus should be the promotion of expressive art.

Several days after the meeting, Nancy Newhall detailed the proceedings in a letter to her husband, recalling McCausland's assertion that "anybody separating 'expressive'

[792] Ibid.
[793] Ibid.

from 'commercial' was a snob. (Me, you, Ansel, Paul [Strand], Charles [Sheeler])."[794]

She continued:

> Then Roy read a letter from Rosskam, more or less trying to answer yours. Then we had a battle. Roy said, unofficially, that in his opinion the Dept. would die and remain dead until the point of view expressed in your letter was extinguished. Ansel rose to passionate defense. Albert Boni said both sides were fighting on no ground at all about nothing. Roy said sometimes levels were improved by going down and not up…All this however remained on a surprisingly amiable plane, except for Elizabeth [McCausland].[795]

Taken aback by the negative response to his letter, Newhall wrote to his wife that he wanted to continue to fight, despite the fact that, like Adams, he sensed that their values were in serious danger of extinction at the museum. He wrote:

> I am alarmed by the schism which is developing in the committee, and I'm glad that I spoke out in my letter. We can't let the artistic value of photography be denied—that is our purpose in having a department. I'm surprised, and not a little hurt, by Roy's denunciation of my views. I know that what he said was off the record, but it shows how the wind is blowing, and I don't like it…. We'll not give in to those who deny art its place, and we'll carry the banner of the creative worker, whatever our critics may say and do. Our doctrine does not lead into a blind alley—it leads onto that boulevard where great art flows ceaselessly—where poetry, music, painting, ballet have a place over and above their representational and documentary qualities.[796]

After Soby's intervention, however, the committee's suggestions gained no traction, and Nancy Newhall, despite feeling bruised and battered by the experience, was able to continue to direct the department as she saw fit, beginning work on the major retrospectives that had long been planned.

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[794] Ibid.
[795] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, March 30, 1945, GRI/Newhall.
[796] Beaumont Newhall to Nancy Newhall, April 14, 1945, GRI/Newhall.

Since the department's founding Adams and the Newhalls had maintained that producing retrospective exhibitions of the work of mature photographers was critical to their agenda. Stieglitz, Weston, Strand, and Adams would not be recognized as artists on a par with the likes of Picasso and Matisse, they averred, unless they were afforded equal treatment in major museum exhibitions and publications. Once it became clear that a grand Stieglitz retrospective was out of the question, they determined to focus on Weston. Nancy Newhall had discussed the project with the artist at length on her two trips west, and was prepared to begin work on the exhibition in early 1944. After she and Adams visited Strand and his wife for dinner one night that spring, however, plans changed. After seeing Strand's prints, many for the first time, Adams had become convinced that his work was superior even to Stieglitz's.[797] Newhall later wrote that on the taxi ride back from dinner Adams proposed giving the first show to Strand. According to Newhall, he said:

> What we just saw was a rebirth—perhaps the beginning of a whole new life for Strand. Affirming him right now might be of crucial importance to him and to the future. What do you think—we could reverse the present sequence—set up when we didn't think he'd be available—and get Strand going on his retrospective first? [798]

With that, Strand's retrospective was slated for the spring of 1945, Weston's for February of 1946, and Adams's for sometime in 1947.

As he had no darkroom of his own, and consequently had never had the opportunity to print from many of his early negatives, Strand spent several months in early 1945 in the museum's darkroom making prints for the exhibition and consulting

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[797] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, June 4, 1944, in *Focus*, 120.
[798] Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 253.

with Newhall about the layout. Adams was in New York at the same time giving his photography course, which afforded him and Strand an opportunity to get to know one another better, as well as to compare notes on printing technique. Newhall later recalled those months with great fondness. After having battled constantly with the advisory committee and the executive staff while her husband was away, she welcomed the company of Strand and Adams, with whom she shared similar values.[799]

The department's first retrospective to be devoted to a photographer, *Paul Strand: Photographs, 1915–1945,* presented the artist as one of the most influential forces in the medium. Tending toward the hagiographic, Newhall's essay in the catalogue recounts the story of the artist's life as a heroic struggle. She was particularly effusive in praise of his dual role as innovator and inspiration:

> The work of Paul Strand has become a legend. Rarely exhibited, its influence has nevertheless spread throughout the last thirty years of photography. Time and again photographers coming in brief contact with its force and its extraordinary beauty have felt the shock of a catalyst. Strand has been a discoverer of photographic forms and concepts of our time, penetrating with unswerving logic and passion through each succeeding phase of his problem.[800]

The exhibition included 172 prints, all matted and framed in white wood and hung on the line. Simple and elegant, the installation was reminiscent of those organized by Stieglitz at 291 and An American Place. The exhibition signaled Newhall's deep commitment to promoting the work of a select group of photographers—an approach that would come to characterize her career. It was in this respect that her exhibition record most resembled

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[799] Ibid., 289-95. Newhall writes about the joy of having Strand and Adams at the museum, as well as of the many social events they attended together during that period, including a particularly memorable night when Adams gave a piano concert for John Marin at the Newhalls' apartment.

[800] Nancy Newhall, *Paul Strand: Photographs, 1915-1945* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945), 3.

that of her mentor, Stieglitz, who similarly devoted himself to promoting a small cadre of artists with whom he worked closely and knew intimately. An artist herself, Newhall's admiration for and understanding of other artists were her greatest assets as a writer and curator, and she dedicated the rest of her life to showcasing the work of those with whom she felt the closest bond: Strand, Weston and, most of all, Adams.

Beaumont Returns

In spring 1945, after almost three years abroad, Beaumont Newhall returned to the United States. To celebrate their long-awaited reunion, the Newhalls took an extended vacation to the West Coast, on which they spent most of their time with Adams in Yosemite. After the numerous battles they had waged over the direction of the department, Beaumont Newhall, who had not yet been released from the service, was unsure whether or not he wanted to resume work at MoMA when his military career ended. Exasperated with the museum himself, and sensing Newhall's hesitation to return, Adams began a concerted effort to convince the Newhalls to leave MoMA and start a new life out West.[801] Aware that the president of the Board of the California School of Fine Arts, Eldridge (Ted) Spencer, was open to starting a department of photography at the school, Adams prepared a proposal with Newhall as director. Spencer, who was a friend of Adams's, was enthusiastic about the idea, but Newhall remained non-committal after the two met to discuss it, choosing to put off a decision on the matter until he had more time to consider his options. Adams continued to work with

[801] Nancy Newhall, *Enduring Moment*, 314

Spencer, as he considered founding a department at a prominent art school to be, like the establishment of the curatorial department at MoMA, an important means of promoting photography as an expressive art and establishing high standards for the medium.[802]

When he returned to the East Coast after their vacation, Newhall was assigned to a desk job in Washington, D.C., where he boarded with McAlpin, who convinced him to return to MoMA once he was released from the army.[803] With McAlpin's encouragement Newhall began investigating the possibility of being named a Trustee, a position of authority that he and McAlpin determined would enable him to advocate for photography within the museum.[804] Released from duty several months later, Newhall resumed his job at MoMA in October 1945. Upon his return, he hoped that Nancy would be permitted to continue as a curator and work alongside him as his equal, but the administration balked at the proposal, allowing her only to stay on as director of the Weston retrospective, which was to open four months later.[805] It was another in a long chain of disappointments, but the Newhalls took it in stride. Soon after learning that she would not remain on the staff, Nancy wrote to Adams about their ambitious plans for the department going forward, which included an Adams retrospective and her husband's

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[802] Jeff Gunderson, "Photography at the California School of Fine Arts," in Stephanie Comer and Deborah Klochko, eds., *The Moment of Seeing: Photography at the California School of Fine Arts* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 10. Gunderson writes: "Adams felt that with the combined resources of the California School of Fine Arts, its new department of photography and the San Francisco Museum of Art, 'a magnificent photography center will develop…that would unquestionably lead the field in this country, if not the world."

[803] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, August 22, 1945, CCP/AAA.

[804] Ibid, and Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, August 25, 1945, CCP/AAA; Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, August 2, 1945, CCP/Newhall; Nancy Newhall to Adams, August 5, 1945, CCP/AAA. Unfortunately, any record of what came of his bid to join the board is inaccessible to researchers due to restrictions MoMA has placed on trustee-related files.

[805] Newhall, *Focus*, 143.

assumption of the directorship.[806] Their plans for the department grander than ever, both of the Newhalls felt the reentry was going smoothly. Dick Abbott had given Beaumont ample time to prepare a proposal for the coming years, and Nancy wrote to Adams that there were "bright prospects of actually getting the dep't we ALL want!!!"[807]

Yet, before he had a chance to submit his plan to the Trustees, Newhall was blindsided by the news that Steichen and Maloney had beaten him to the punch, presenting the Board with their own proposal to realign the department and make Steichen director.[808] Newhall had been back at the job a mere two months, and already his agenda for the department was under siege. Leaving nothing to chance, Maloney wrote that Steichen was to have dictatorial control of the department—no questions asked:

> Captain Steichen would like to head the Photographic Division if certain factors are unanimously agreed upon. He must have complete charge. He must have the required facilities, and he must have a group in back of him willing to accept without question his program for photographic presentation and photo use by the Museum. An elaboration of this premise could run to page, but briefly, since he is being chosen to run the Division because of his outstanding ability and record, and also because of the Catholicism of his viewpoint and tremendous contacts in the field, these are less stipulations than simple factors in good sense in setting up a working department. Nor should it be overlooked that Capt. Steichen's abilities and age are such that he should spend no time whatsoever arguing for the point of view he wishes to promote.[809]

Steichen's agenda was to have a nationalistic bent, and echoing the pervading criticism of the department, would address the medium as a whole, and not simply the "precious"

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[806] Nancy Newhall to Adams, October 7, 1945, CCP/AAA.
[807] Nancy Newhall to Adams, October 17, 1945, CCP/AAA.
[808] Tom Maloney to Dick Abbott, December 10,1945, JTS, III.F.2. MoMA Archive, NY.
[809] Ibid.

aspects previously given precedence by Newhall.[810] Maloney and Steichen aspired to greatly expand the department, as well as the number and size of the exhibitions it would present, writing:

> Some of these shows will be on a scale comparable to *The Road to Victory* and *Power in the Pacific*. Some may even be larger…. It is hoped that the not too distant future will bring the possibilities of a wing or separate building devoted entirely to photography.[811]

They also proposed that the department produce more circulating exhibitions, publish books, sell photographs at a new Photography Center, and found a magazine "of such value and merit that it will automatically take its place alongside of Stieglitz's *Camera Work*," and in addition to promoting photography would help increase museum membership.[812] In direct criticism of what they perceived to be Newhall's priorities, Maloney states that he had little interest in the historical aspects of the medium, writing:

> As I say, this whole project should be a live and throbbing part of photography, with almost no emphasis on the history of the craft. It should be something that is essentially an educational service of daily value. Naturally, to be such it must encompass the history of photography, but only as a rightful portion of the project, rather than an overwhelming display of historic material. This does not mean that the material already in the hands of the Museum should be in any way deprecated. Many of the photographs are of great value contemporaneously, and the whole unit can certainly be considered as part of the thought I am trying to incorporate here. Photography, after all, is just 100 years old, certainly a short period for evaluation. Even so, we would like to see the emphasis predominantly devoted to living photographers and continuing work.

In an appeal to the Trustees' pocketbooks, Maloney promises that he and Steichen would raise $100,000—a huge sum in those days—from the photography industry to subsidize

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[810] Ibid.
[811] Ibid.
[812] Ibid.

the expanded program. It was only with Steichen at the helm, Maloney writes, that companies would trust the department to use the funds appropriately. They naturally distrusted the museum, he claims, and would only cooperate if Steichen—whom they knew and respected—were in charge. Maloney concludes the letter with a reference to what he considered to be the more esoteric projects the museum pursued, stating that they undermined efforts to gain financial backing from industry. In his view:

> The so-called chi-chi endeavors seem to be getting more space, and certainly more word of mouth circulation than the better things the Museum does. While this may be helpful to admissions, it certainly is detrimental in attempts to enlist assistance form leading industrial concerns. The Photographic Division lends itself beautifully to broad publicity, but not the Museum type. If and when this new project starts working, I want to recommend an entirely different publicity and public relations operation for it, than those of the past.[813]

All told, the proposal completely rejected the agenda that Newhall, Adams, and McAlpin had set for the department, suggesting that the department should cater to the general public and industry, rather than to elite tastes.

That Steichen would want to radically alter the aims of the department came as no surprise to Adams and the Newhalls. If the format of his wartime exhibitions was not evidence enough of his lack of interest in photography as an expressive art, a lengthy two-part profile published in the *New Yorker* in June 1944 left little doubt about where he stood on the subject. Given Steichen's outsize assessment of his own achievements, which he managed to impart to the author, it is not surprising that the profile constructs a history of photography that centers on him. After attributing the straight revolution in photography to Steichen—going so far as to state that he discovered f.64—the author of

[813] Ibid.

the profile, Matthew Josephson, recounts that in the late 1920's Steichen began to advocate for "functionalism" in photography, rejecting Stieglitz's view that photographers should, as Josephson put it, "make pictures for the joy of it and…shun the money power."[814] He argues, one assumes seriously, that in rejecting Stieglitz's restrictive and elitist notions, Steichen made photography a noble profession—"like advertising copywriting"—primarily by making a hundred thousand dollars a year as a commercial photographer. His rejection of Stieglitz and everything he stood for was so "violent," writes Josephson, "he could hardly stand having artists around."[815] Larding his article with encomium, and asserting that Steichen was the "master of modern photography"—Josephson writes that Steichen aimed high, looking upon "Leonardo and Michelangelo as his models."[816] Most significantly for the future of the department, the author notes that "as recently as five years ago" Steichen had "advised his disciples to 'forget and ignore art theories' and stay away from museums."[817]

After the December 1944 Board meeting, when Maloney's proposal was first presented, Soby, McAlpin, and Newhall sprang into action. Soby and McAlpin wrote to Henry Allen Moe, the Trustee leading the campaign to bring Steichen on board, vainly attempting to convince him that the proposal—as well as Steichen himself—was fatally flawed.[818] McAlpin and Newhall met and prepared a point-by-point rebuttal of

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[814] Matthew Josephson, "Profiles: Commander with a Camera I," *The New Yorker*, June 3, 1944, 32.
[815] Ibid., 31.
[816] Ibid., 32.
[817] Ibid.
[818] For example, see James Thrall Soby to Henry Allen Moe, December 19, 1945, JTS, III.F.2. MoMA Archive, NY.

Maloney's objectives and sent it to Soby in preparation for a group meeting.[819] In a note to Soby affixed to this document, Newhall wrote that he found it ironic how the tables had turned: Steichen had been given his first opportunity to organize exhibitions at the museum on McAlpin's insistence, and now the "tail wags the dog."[820]

Sensing that the trustees were leaning toward accepting Maloney's proposal and making Steichen director of the department, the Newhalls enlisted photographers in a letter-writing campaign. Nancy Newhall explained their plan to Adams:

> Showdown on Steichen-Maloney proposal next week. Everybody we've spoken to feels as you and Dave do. Astonishing how Steichen stinks!... We feel A. that the Trustees have no idea how deep the dislike and distrust of Steichen really goes in the photographic world. B. That all the trustees really know of our work is that it is solid, sensitive, scholarly—they do not know what the Department has come to mean to people. So—write a letter to Beau expressing your opinion on both counts, which can be shown to Trustees…. Hit hard. What we want is to cause trustees to investigate Steichen's reputation.[821]

Many significant photographers rose to their defense. Each of their letters expressed fear that Steichen would ruin what the Newhalls had worked so hard to build. Letters of support included the following:

> Brett Weston: "Granted they are experts and prolific in their own field—which is advertising. But it makes me shudder to think of the museum's fine severe walls plastered with nudes, babies, color and animals á la Steichen-Maloney."
>
> Harry Callahan: "I am sorry to hear that Steichen could possibly upset something that has so much meaning for me.... It is ridiculous to think that any photographer, who has a love for the individual and the group, would have a burning inspiration to follow any such program that these men could dream of for their personal glory."

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[819] Beaumont Newhall to James Thrall Soby, December 21, 1945, JTS, III.F.2. MoMA Archive, NY.
[820] Ibid.
[821] Nancy Newhall to Ansel Adams, January 28, 1956, CCP/AAA.

> Todd Webb: "Where the hell are the creative people going to take their work now? The Museum, with you two there, has been a wonderful thing for people who look upon photography as a true medium of expression—it is the only place that I know where they can find understanding and encouragement. If Steichen gets in there, he will surely turn the Department into a clearing house for news and propaganda pictures and that certainly will not do anything to advance photography to its' proper place in the field of art.... Wouldn't it be a good idea to ask the Museum Directors to look over a few back numbers of that magazine before they made any drastic decisions? I cannot see how they could possibly feel that two men, who are responsible for a fourth rate news picture (out-dated) magazine, would be an asset to creative photography."
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> Paul Strand: "In my opinion, and I am sure it is the opinion of all photographers of standing, you both have done a superlative job of picking up where Stieglitz left off, in the presentation to the public of photography as a creative medium...there is not evidence of great interest on Steichen's part in other developments which were going on or in giving warm support to them. On the contrary, there developed a general impression that he had reached the conclusion that the use of photography as an art form was nothing but 'artiness.'"
>
> Helen Levitt: "You and Nancy have always seemed to be the only people in an official position who have cared for and supported photography as a form of personal expression which didn't necessarily fit into the "Life-Fortune" sociological reportage so fashionable at the moment."[822]

Other writers included Cedric Wright, Walter Rosenblum, Rosalie Gwathney, Eliot Eliosfon, Charles Sheeler, and Willard Van Dyke. Unfortunately for the Newhalls, the campaign only served to enrage members of the committee, particularly Mr. Moe, who saw it as an act of insubordination on Newhall's part. [823]

While Beaumont Newhall was struggling to counter the Maloney/Steichen proposal and hold on to his job, Nancy Newhall opened the department's second major

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[822] Copies of these letters are held at the Getty Research Institute in the Beaumont Newhall Archive.
[823] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, February 8, 1946, CCP/AAA. Letter is dated January 8, 1946, but note in file suggests this is not possible, and must have been written a month later.

monographic exhibition, an Edward Weston retrospective that was widely hailed in the press, well attended by the public, and lauded by the museum's administration. David McAlpin wrote to Adams with a report:

> It was a wow. The place was jammed…. We have been over three times to see the show. It is the best yet and seems to be making a hit with the public. Nancy did a bang up good job.[824]

Like the Strand exhibition a year earlier, the Weston show demonstrated Newhall's investment in individual artists and the furtherance of their careers. From this point forward, her interest trended increasingly toward the support of a select group of artists rather than to the more general promotion of photography as an expressive art. Unfortunately for the Newhalls, the show's success was overshadowed by Steichen's threat to undo everything that they and Adams had built at MoMA.

Adams encouraged Newhall to quit. In a letter he wrote that the museum had "done you dirt," and said that Newhall would be miserable working under Steichen, whom he characterized as the "anti-Christ of photography."[825] In early March 1946, when it had became clear that Soby and McAlpin would not be able to convince the other trustees that hiring Steichen was a mistake, Newhall took Adams's advice and resigned. Despite assurances that his job was secure, and that Steichen had hoped he would remain at the museum, he determined that he could not work for someone whose values were so antithetical to his own.

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[824] David McAlpin to Ansel Adams February 15, 1946, in Nancy Newhall, *An Enduring Moment*, 372.
[825] Ansel Adams to Nancy Newhall, January 7, 1946, CCP/AAA.

Following suit, Adams also submitted a resignation letter to the museum, listing the reasons that he no longer wanted to be a member of the Committee on Photography, and writing pointedly:

> It seems strange to me that the Museum which has shown Marin, Picasso, Weston, Rouault and many other great creative spirits would at this time turn its back upon creative photography, or, at least, dilute its values….To supplant Beaumont Newhall, who has made such a great contribution to the art through his vast knowledge and sympathy for the medium, with a regime which is inevitably favorable to the spectacular and 'popular' is indeed a body blow to the progress of creative photography. [826]

When he received a copy of Adams's letter, Newhall responded:

> Your point is the point—is the MoMA an art museum or a place of spectacular exhibitions? Always we fight shy of that word 'art' and yet it is the crux of the whole thing. What we are interested in is artistic expression through photography, and I join in your fears that the Museum under its new regime will be no suitable place for art.[827]

Soon after, Adams received notice that he had been granted his first Guggenheim fellowship. Ironically, the letter came from none other than Henry Allen Moe, the MoMA trustee who had convinced his fellow board members to accept Steichen's proposal.[828]

Disappointed with this turn of events, David McAlpin wrote to Adams that as a group they were partially responsible for what had transpired. They had not done a good job, he argued, of rallying the trustees to their cause. Nevertheless, he was proud of what they had collectively achieved. He wrote:

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[826] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, April 29, 1946, CCP/Newhall.
[827] Beaumont Newhall to Ansel Adams, April 24, 1946, CCP/AAA.
[828] Ansel Adams to Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, April 4, 1946, in Nancy Newhall, *An Enduring Moment,* 382.

> Personally I have no regrets. It was a good fight, and in the losing much may be gained. At least we have forced the issue and quite a few people who did not know before now know what it is all about. From the point of view of the powers that be who engineered it, it is entirely logical and just what they want, a large sum of money; lots of ballyhoo; continuing publicity a la Maloney; sensationalism and crowds. So they are quite satisfied and pleased with themselves and the prospects.[829]

Soon after Newhall departed, McAlpin asserted in a letter to Barr that he didn't feel he and the Newhalls had been given credit for what they had accomplished, and complained that the Board and executive staff who had been making decisions about the department's future were ignorant of what had actually been achieved by its founders. He wrote:

> I think that the nub of the whole matter is that I felt that we did have a well balanced program and were making good headway, everything considered, including the war, Beau's absence, etc. But it is quite clear that some of the staff and members of the Board did not feel that the program was adequate. Though I don't think they took the trouble to find out what the program was or had been and I am sure that they did not see more than a few of the shows of the department. Nancy does not think that any of the Trustees ever saw what was done in the Photography Center on 54th street. So if they won't take the trouble to look at what is going on, it is hard to convince them that it is a good program.[830]

As time went on, McAlpin's frustration gave way to anger. He wrote to Barr again a year later to say that he was unwilling to support the department as he had in the past. He claimed that everything that he, the Newhalls, and Adams had worked for had been squandered, and suggested that Steichen's and Maloney's promises for funding had been mere pipe dreams. He fumed:

> I spent a good deal of time and effort for eight years and invested a substantial sum of money. Within a few short months the goodwill so laboriously and patiently built up was utterly dissipated. Until I have the confidence in how the Dept. is to be conducted, I think you are rubbing

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[829] David McAlpin to Ansel Adams, April 17, 1946, CCP/AAA.
[830] David McAlpin to Alfred H. Barr, July 6, 1946, MOMA Department of Photographs.

> salt in old wounds to ask me to make any further contributions. I have been waiting patiently since December 1945 to see whether anyone else in the Museum is seriously interested in the objectives which we set out to realize. I have refrained from resigning as a Trustee from the Museum and giving out a statement as to my reasons for two reasons first because I have not wanted to do anything to embarrass Mr. Rockefeller and Mr. Clark and secondly because I have been hoping that the Museum would eventually come around to recognize that we had been on the right track and would take steps to restore some of the damage which has been done since that fateful meeting on December 13th 1945. Outside of Jim Soby and yourself, I am convinced that no one else at the Museum really had the remotest idea what we accomplished and to what extent it was recognized by the most important and best qualified judges.[831]

Feeling snubbed and ignored by the rest of the Board and the executive staff, McAlpin soon after began directing his money and attention to his alma mater, Princeton, where he later left his photography collection upon his death, and endowed the first university professorship in the history of photography.

A month after the Newhalls left the museum, Georgia O'Keeffe was given a retrospective at MoMA. Before the exhibition closed, Stieglitz died, adding a poignant coda to the end of the Newhall/Adams era at the museum. Although O'Keeffe would not countenance allowing Newhall and Adams to organize a Stieglitz retrospective when they founded the department, following her husband's death she granted James Johnson Sweeney, the curator of her own retrospective, permission to assemble an exhibition of her husband's photographs and his collection of work by the artists he represented at his various galleries. Nancy Newhall learned from a mutual friend that O'Keeffe wanted the show organized by someone who was "NOT a photographer and NOT too involved."[832] In many respects, this was the final insult: The grand Stieglitz retrospective that the

[831] David McAlpin to Alfred H. Barr, June 23, 1947, MOMA Department of Photographs.
[832] Nancy Newhall to Beaumont Newhall, August 4, 1946, GRI/Newhall.

Newhalls, Adams, and McAlpin had dreamed would inaugurate their department in 1940 would be mounted at MoMA only after they had been shown the door.

When Newhall resigned, plans for a monographic exhibition of Adams's work in 1947 also dissolved. Although his photographs would be included in some of the thematic exhibitions organized at the museum while Steichen was curator—including *The Family of Man* in 1955—it was not until John Szarkowski replaced Steichen in 1962 that Adams would be given the recognition he had been afforded in the Newhall era. In 1979, Szarkowski organized *Ansel Adams and the West*, the first exhibition of his work to appear at MoMA since *Manzanar* in 1944.[833]

In a letter notifying museum directors that the exhibition was available to tour, Szarkowski characterized Adams in a manner that suggests the transformation that his career had undergone in the years between the two exhibitions. Szarkowski wrote that Adams's "enormous popularity has in fact made him something of an anomaly in modern art circles, where popular artists have generally been slightly suspect."[834] The Ansel Adams of 1947, who clung to the idea that popularity was synonymous with kitsch, and that popular art, like Rockwell posters, Mortensen photographs, or Dalí paintings had no business being shown at a museum, would have shuddered to hear himself characterized in this way. After the Newhalls left MoMA and Stieglitz died, however, Adams's conception of his own work and of the value of popular recognition were indeed transformed. According to Szarkowski, the shift was at least partially market driven. He

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[833] *Ansel Adams and the West* [Exh. #1273] September 5–October 28, 1979.
[834] John Szarkowski to Henry Hopkins, December 6, 1978, Correspondence, John Humphrey, Curatorial Records, 1959-1978, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives.

contends that Adams and Nancy Newhall, who collaborated even more closely after they had all left MoMA, had later emphasized "the dramatic and expressionistic, as opposed to the lyric and exploratory" in an effort to gain "broad popular appeal" for Adams's work.[835]

By the time of his death, Adams had become the best-known photographer in America. Yet despite his popularity he had never been the subject of an exhibition that, as Szarkowski put it, "attempted to define the specific nature of his original achievement, or to describe his evolution."[836] It was not until Adams's centenary that Szarkowski organized such an exhibition. In *Ansel Adams at 100*, he presented the photographer as a misunderstood Modernist, focusing on the photographer he was during the 1930s and 40s, when he was at what Szarkowski considered his creative peak and was consumed by the desire to promote photography as a museum subject. Although Nancy Newhall likely would have included a different selection of Adams's photographs in the retrospective she planned had it been produced in 1947, in intent and form *Ansel Adams at 100* was the realization of those early dreams.

While they were profoundly disheartened that popularizing pressures had undermined their project at MoMA, the Newhalls were not discouraged in their efforts to counter prevailing trends and promote photography as an expressive art. MoMA was simply a jumping-off point for them both, the place where they cut their teeth before launching successful independent careers. For Nancy Newhall, her brief but eventful

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[835] John Szarkowki, *Ansel Adams at 100* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co. in association with the Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 43.
[836] Ibid.

tenure at MoMA was a crash course both in the history of photography and in institutional politics that would serve her for the rest of her career. Although her years as curator are often overlooked in the literature, it is abundantly clear that while at MoMA she made a significant contribution both to the museum and to the history of photography.[837] A forceful advocate for artists, she helped launch the careers of many photographers widely known today, such as Helen Levitt, and helped solidify the reputations of established figures such as Strand and Weston.

After leaving MoMA, Beaumont Newhall became the founding curator of the George Eastman House, a museum dedicated exclusively to photography. Under his guidance the small museum in upstate New York amassed one of the most important collections of photography in the world, and became a center for the scholarly examination of the medium. There, Newhall mentored a new generation of curators and photographers, and began to reconceptualize his approach to the medium. As the head of a museum dedicated to the history of photography as a whole and not just as a modern art form, Newhall expanded his purview to include work he had once considered inappropriate to the program at MoMA. In 1972, after twenty-three years at the Eastman House, he took a position as a professor of the history of photography at the University of New Mexico. There he continued to mentor young curators and scholars, and became the field's generous éminence grise.

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[837] For example, despite the fact that Nancy Newhall was curator for almost as many years as her husband, in his "Judgment Seat" essay, which compares the manner in which photography was presented under the first three curators of the department, Christopher Phillips does not address her tenure at all. Similarly, in his history of MoMA, *Good Old Modern*, Russell Lynes, a personal friend of the Newhalls, only mentions in passing that Nancy had served as curator.

CODA

"A VAST PICTURE ARCHIVE OF SUBJECTS"

When Edward Steichen was named director of the Department of Photographs in 1947, Nelson Rockefeller, president of MoMA's Board of Trustees, stated in a press release that his charge would be:

> [t]o bring to as wide a public as possible the best work being done in photography throughout the world, and to employ it creatively as a means of interpretation in major Museum exhibitions where photography is not the theme but the medium through which great achievements and great moments are graphically presented.[838]

In other words, under Steichen's leadership the Department's focus would no longer be on the medium-specific tradition that was Newhall's primary concern, but on presenting photography as a window on the world. In a letter to Newhall, Adams wrote that such a plan represented "everything that we feared—the complete engulfing of photography as you and I and N[ancy] see it and feel it into a vast picture archive of subjects."[839]

Steichen lived up to his promise to the trustees and realigned the department's curatorial program to fulfill his radically different mandate. While it is true that he continued to show the work of expressive photographers such as Edward Weston and Paul Strand, and introduce emerging young greats like Robert Frank, Steichen presented their work in a mode that largely rejected the values upon which the Newhalls and Adams had founded the department. To begin with, he did not organize the in-depth retrospectives of the work of mature artists that the Newhalls and Adams had considered

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[838] Undated press release "Edward Steichen Appointed Head of Photography at MoMA," AHB, 1.188. MoMA Archives, NY.
[839] Ansel Adams to Beaumont Newhall, July 17, 1946, CCP/AAA.

absolutely central to their quest to gain public recognition for photography as a serious art form. In fact, over the course of his twenty-five years as director Steichen devoted only a small handful of exhibitions to individual artists, and organized only one that explored a photographer's entire career. Tellingly, the subject of that exhibition was Steichen himself.[840]

Neither was Steichen interested in scholarly research on photography and its history. In place of the monographic and historical exhibitions favored by the Newhalls and Adams he preferred thematic group shows, occasionally bringing together small groups of contemporary photographers whose work he considered complementary, as in *Realism in Photography: Ralph Steiner, Wayne Miller, Tosh Matsumoto and Frederick Sommer* (1949). From the perspective of serious photographers, such shows were the only occasions during Steichen's long tenure when their work was afforded the dignity it deserved.[841] More often, he assembled large numbers of photographs by dozens of different makers around broad, easily accessible concepts, as in *Seventy Photographers Look at New York* (1957), or *Postwar European Photography* (1953), the latter featuring seventy-eight different photographers from eleven countries. Like Willard Morgan's *First International Photographic Exposition* of 1938 or the annual *U.S. Camera* salons, these exhibitions tended to be extremely large, conceptually diffuse catch-all affairs that included work of widely varying intent and quality. He also assembled exhibitions of

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[840] Mounted in 1961, the year before Steichen retired, *Steichen the Photographer* was the only retrospective he ever organized.

[841] Yet, as Harry Callahan, whose work was included in several group shows organized by Steichen, later noted, Steichen saw himself as an impresario, and his own curatorial ideas were more important to him than the intentions of the photographers whose work he exhibited. "It was always a Steichen show." Callahan said, "always." Jacqueline Brody, "Harry Callahan: Questions," *Print Collectors' Newsletter* (January-February, 1977), 174, in Phillips, "Judgment Seat," 33.

photographs made for the mass media, such as *The Exact Instant: 100 Years of News Photography* (1949), *Memorable Life Photographs* (1951), and *Forgotten Photographers* (1951), described in a chronology of the department as "an exhibition of prints by unknown or unremembered photographers who, over the past 100 years, have filed prints with the U.S. Copyright office." Such shows are notable primarily for their large scale and lack of any scholarly or historical context that would assist viewers in making sense of the work included.

Today Steichen is best known for *The Family of Man* (1955), a grand thematic spectacle that brought together some five hundred photographs by two hundred and seventy-three makers. This exhibition epitomizes his overarching aims for the medium and clearly demonstrates the difference between his curatorial vision and that of the Newhalls and Adams. The most popular exhibition of photographs ever organized, *The Family of Man* toured the world for many years and was eventually seen by more than seven million people.[842] Along with his earlier curatorial efforts at the museum, *The Road to Victory* and *Power in the Pacific*, the exhibition was characterized in a MoMA press release as "a new concept of photographic exhibition" in which "the carefully thought-out relationship between the individual photographs in content, imagery, space and scale serves to convey an over-all message."[843] As the wartime shows had been, *The Family of Man* was designed by Bauhaus alumnus Herbert Bayer, and comprised photographs that had been printed to Steichen's own specifications by a New York lab rather than by the photographers themselves. Instead of being framed and hung on the

[842] Press release for *Steichen the Photographer*, MoMA Department of Photographs.
[843] Ibid.

line, the works in the show were blown up to mural size or cropped and mounted flush in small clusters. Work by makers who considered themselves expressive artists was shown alongside advertising, press, and scientific photographs. In stark opposition to the values promoted by the Newhalls and Adams, the works were primarily selected for their subject matter, and only secondarily for their aesthetic or expressive qualities. Overall, the goal of the exhibition was to impart a message of human unity to a broad audience, not to make a case for individual photographs as art, or for individual photographers as artists. As such, Adams contended that the United Nations would have been a more appropriate venue for it.[844]

Considering the transformative changes afoot at the museum when he was hired, it is not surprising that Steichen's approach to photography won out over Newhall's. Steichen brought to MoMA exactly the kind of program the museum's leadership sought in the postwar, post-Barr period. Starting with Barr's demotion in 1943, the main power players—Dick Abbott, Henry Allen Moe, and Nelson Rockefeller—had systematically moved the museum away from its origins as a laboratory for experimentation that catered to elite tastes. Managing the museum like a corporation and endeavoring to appeal to a broader audience, they favored popular, crowd-pleasing attractions—the first blockbusters—over the more esoteric, avant-garde fare that had been the norm under Barr. They hired Steichen because his wartime exhibitions, which had drawn huge crowds and were wildly popular with the public, had demonstrated that his approach to

[844] Ansel Adams to Grace Meyer, October 17, 1982, CCP/AAA.

photography appealed to a broader demographic than did Newhall's, and signaled that the museum was aspiring to open its doors to a wider public.

In his memoirs Newhall recalled a conversation he had with Dick Abbott in the days before he left the museum that had clarified for him the changes that were then taking place:

> One afternoon, Dick Abbott took me to the University Club, a few doors down from the museum, and over drinks explained the new policy of the photography department by comparing it to college athletics. 'Steichen's plans are the equivalent of Harvard football,' he explained, citing my alma mater, 'while what you propose can be compared in popularity to crew on the Charles River.'[845]

That Abbott and the rest of the museum's leadership preferred Steichen's "football" to Newhall's "crew" suggests the degree to which the new MoMA differed from the one Barr founded in 1929, where scholarship and what Lewis Mumford had termed "selectivity" had driven curatorial programming. Barr trusted his curators as experts in their fields, allowing them free reign to present what they considered the best and most important work. He saw the museum as a tastemaker with the mission of teaching anyone who was interested to appreciate the work of the modern masters and to recognize good design in everyday objects. Although he challenged many traditional notions of art by exhibiting folk art, machine art, and other vernacular forms, he selected only superior examples that he felt transcended their humble origins.

Driven by revenue goals and a false sense of democracy, the museum's new administration downplayed the value of curatorial authority and expertise in an effort to counter charges of elitism, thus allowing for mediocrity in its bid to attract a wider

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[845] Newhall, *Focus*, 149.

audience. This was as distressing a turn of events for Newhall as it was for Barr, who upon hearing of Newhall's resignation wrote a letter to him lamenting that the "laboratory" their museum had been in its first decade was history. He also presciently predicted that Newhall's work at MoMA would, in time, come to be appreciated for the "pioneering" effort that it was.

> I think, I know, what a loss you'll be, at least to the Museum we once dreamed of in which scholarship and taste would count in photography as much as big-top shows. I think you did a very fine job pioneering under real difficulties both institutional and personal. Certainly the Museum's reputation in the field owes more to you than will be understood until a retrospective (and a reaction) of several years makes a true perspective possible.[846]

Such recognition first came in 1948, a year after Newhall left MoMA, when he was chosen to be the founding curator of a new museum of photography to be located at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York.

Significantly, although Steichen headed the department for twenty-five years and organized one of the world's most popular exhibitions, his curatorial model for photography did not have staying power. In fact, when Steichen retired, the museum's director, René d'Harnoncourt, asked Newhall to return and take over the department, which he declined to do.[847] Rather than picking up where he had left off, Steichen's successor, John Szarkowski, immediately pursued a curatorial program that was in most key respects a return to that of the department's founders. His agenda for photography was one that embraced, á la Barr, the work of the modernist masters as well as the finest

[846] Ibid., 153.
[847] Ibid.

examples of anonymous, "accidental" art. Both Adams and Newhall supported his hiring.

Today Steichen's exhibitions seem like dated Cold War anachronisms. In contrast, the shows mounted during the Newhall era seem surprisingly contemporary. As Christopher Philips wrote in 1982:

> To a remarkable degree, the program of nearly thirty exhibitions mounted by the MoMA Department of Photography from 1940–47 anticipates what has emerged in the last decade as the standard practice of other American museums. The exhibitions centered on historical surveys…the canonization of masters…and the promotion of selected younger photographers. [848]

Despite the critical deconstruction this exhibition model was undergoing when Phillips's article was published more than twenty-five years ago, his observations remain true today. Although most curators of photography—especially those educated during the age of Postmodernism—are now well versed in the institutional criticism of the likes of Rosalind Krauss, Alan Sekula, Douglas Crimp, and Geoffrey Batchen—scholars who have judged museums to be poorly equipped to represent the history of photography in all its plenitude— exhibitions of photography mounted today at major American museums share a surprising amount in common with those organized by Adams and the Newhalls in the 1940s. While Postmodernism, Feminism, Marxism, and Multiculturalism have certainly had an impact on the manner in which curators present certain types of photographs in the museum context, the content and presentation of the majority of exhibitions of photography remain much as they were sixty years ago.

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[848] Phillips, "Judgment Seat," 21.

What makes the history of the Newhall/Adams era at MoMA germane today is that photography's place in the museum continues to be the subject of considerable debate. Although the points of contention have shifted over time, echoes of the originary conflict were evident in the Postmodern criticism of the department in the 1970s and 80s, as they are in the criticism of contemporary scholars like Geoffrey Batchen, who call for a "vernacular" history of the medium, charging that as bastions of an outmoded formalist approach to the medium—a "precious" approach, one might say—museums such as MoMA inadequately represent photography's true popular history. Since debate over photography's status as a museum subject hinges on thorny ontological questions that originated with the medium, it is not surprising that it remains unresolved. Arguments over the nature of photography and its identity are central to the medium's history, and are part of its history as a museum subject as well.

APPENDIX A

ANNOTATED CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT MoMA, 1932–47

May 3–31, 1932	*Murals by American Painters and Photographers* [Exh. # 16] The first exhibition held at the museum that included photographs. Organized by Lincoln Kirstein with assistance from Julien Levy.
Nov.16– Dec. 8, 1933	*Walker Evans: Photographs of Nineteenth Century Houses* [Exh. #30f] Organized by Lincoln Kirstein.
Mar. 2– Apr. 19, 1936	*Cubism and Abstract Art* [Exh. #46] Included photographs by Man Ray, Francis Brugiere and László Moholy–Nagy. Organized by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
Jun. 24– Jul. 1, 1936	*Edward Steichen's Delphiniums* [Exh. #50] First exhibition organized by Steichen (who also subsidized the show). A display of his prize-winning flowers that included neither photographs, nor other works of art.
Dec. 7– Jan. 17, 1937	*Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* [Exh. #55] Included photographs by Herbert Bayer, Walker Evans, Hannah Hoch, George Platt Lynes, Dora Maar, László Moholy-Nagy, and Christian Schad. Organized by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
Mar. 17– Apr. 18, 1937	*Photography: 1839–1937* [Exh. #60] First major survey exhibition of photography held at the museum. Organized by Beaumont Newhall.
Sept. 28– Nov. 18, 1938	*Walker Evans: American Photographs* [Exh. #78] First one-man exhibition at MoMA devoted to a photographer. Organized by Thomas D. Mabry in collaboration with the artist.

Dec. 7, 1938– Jan. 30, 1939	*Bauhaus: 1919–1928* [Exh. #82] Included photographs by Moholy-Nagy, Florence Henri, Werner Feist, Herbert Bayer and Lux Feininger. Organized by Barr.
May 10– Sept. 30, 1939	*Seven American Photographers* [Exh. #86] (photography portion of *Art In Our Time*, the museum's tenth Anniversary Exhibition) Included the work of Berenice Abbott, Adams, Harold Edgerton, Evans, Man Ray, Ralph Steiner and Brett Weston. Organized by Beaumont Newhall.
Oct. 2– Nov. 1, 1939	*Charles Sheeler* [Exh. #90] Included photographs as well as paintings by the artist.
Dec. 10– Jan. 5, 1940	*War Comes to the People: A Story Written with the Lens* [Exh. # 119] Exhibition of photographs by Therese Bonney. Organized by Beaumont Newhall. Shown previously at the Library of Congress by Archibald McLeish.
Dec. 31, 1940– Jan. 12, 1941	*Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Aesthetics* [Exh. #121] Inaugural exhibition of the new Department of Photographs. Organized jointly by Ansel Adams and Beaumont Newhall.
Sept. 9– Oct. 19, 1941	*Photographs by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson* [Exh. #145] Organized by Beaumont Newhall.
Oct. 29, 1941– Feb, 1, 1942	*Image of Freedom* [Exh. #155] Photography contest and exhibition conceived jointly by Adams and Beaumont Newhall. Call for entries written by Nancy Newhall. Jury composed of Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, Barr, Monroe Wheeler (Director of Exhibitions), David McAlpin, Adams, James Thrall Soby, A. Hyatt Mayor (Curator of prints and drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Dec. 2, 1941– Jan. 4, 1942	*American Photographs at $10* [Exh. #162] Adams, Abbott, Evans, Helen Levitt, Moholy-Nagy, Arnold Newman, Sheeler, Edward Weston and Brett Weston each printed one photograph in an edition of ten. Only fourteen of the ninety available prints were sold.
Jan. 13– Feb. 25, 1942	*New Acquisitions: Photographs* [Exh. #166] Organized by Beaumont Newhall. Included gifts such as photographs by Adams and Dorothea Lange (from San Francisco collector Albert Bender), platinum prints by Stieglitz (from Charles Sheeler), Man Ray photographs (given by James Soby), as well as Atget, Evans, Moholy–Nagy and Edward Weston prints given by anonymous donors. Also included prints by Julia Margaret Cameron purchased by the museum.
Feb.–Apr. 1942	Adams stays in New York to organize the exhibition listed below.
Mar. 3– Apr. 5, 1942	*Photographs of the Civil War and the American Frontier* [Exh. #172] Directed by Adams.
Apr. 15– Jun. 10, 1942	*Two Years of War in England: Photographs by William Vandivert* [Exh. #177] Organized by Beaumont Newhall.
Jun. 21– Oct. 4, 1942	*Road to Victory* [Exh. #182] Organized by Steichen, with text by Carl Sandburg and design by Herbert Bayer.
Sept. 16– Nov. 2, 1942	*How to Make a Photogram* [Exh. #195] Organized by Andreas Feininger.
Aug. 1942	Beaumont Newhall leaves MoMA and joins the army.
Dec. 16, 1942– Feb. 28, 1943	*New Acquisitions: Photographs by Alfred Stieglitz* [Exh. # 210] Organized by Nancy Newhall.

Jan. 1943	Nancy Newhall made special assistant in charge of the department of photographs.
Mar. 10– Apr. 18, 1943	*Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children* and *Eliot Porter: Birds in Color* [Exh. #220/221]. Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Jun. 14– Jul. 24, 1943	*Tunisian Triumph: War Photographs by Eliot Elisofon* [Exh. #233] Organized by Nancy Newhall and Willard Morgan.
Jul. 1943	Willard Morgan becomes director of the department. Nancy Newhall named acting curator of photography.
Jul. 2– Oct. 31, 1943	*Airways to Peace* [Exh. #236] Organized by Steichen.
Aug. 18– Sept. 19, 1943	*Action Photography* [Exh. # 240] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Oct. 1943	Barr demoted.
Oct. 4, 1943	Photography Center opens at 9 West 54th Street. At the museum, a new "Photography Room" on the third floor was inaugurated with a permanent collection exhibition of work by Stieglitz, Strand, Edward Weston, Adams, and Emerson. [No exhibition number]. Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Nov. 4– Dec. 7, 1943	*100 Years of Portrait Photography* [Exh. # 244] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Dec. 13, 1943– unknown	*Mexico: 8 Photographers* [no exhibition number—Photography Center show] Included the work of Fritz Henle, Anton Bruehl, Bradley Smith, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Antonio Reynoso, Edward Weston, Paul Strand and Helen Levitt. Organized by Nancy Newhall.

Feb. 16– Mar. 19, 1944	*Pictorialism in Transition* [no exhibition number—Photography Center show]. Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Mar. 1– Jun. 10, 1944	*The American Snapshot* [Exh. # 254] Organized by Willard Morgan. Funded by Eastman Kodak Company, and drawn entirely from the company's collection.
Mar. 22– Apr. 30, 1944	*New Workers I* [no exhibition number—Photography Center show] Included the work of Lisette Model, Adrian Siegel, Walter Rosenblum, Morris Engel, Dorothy Norman and John Candelario. Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Apr.–Jun. 1944	Ansel Adams in New York to conduct five-part lecture series on photography. Brings Manzanar material to show Newhall and Morgan.
May 1, 1944	Willard Morgan resigns as director of the department.
May 10– Jun. 30, 1944	*Pacific Report: Photographs by Eugene Smith* [Exh. #257a] Conceived by Willard Morgan and organized by Nancy Newhall.
Jun. 1944	James Soby resigns as Chairman of the department. Nancy Newhall goes on vacation to California. Stays with the Adamses in Yosemite. Visits Dorothea Lange and Imogen Cunningham in San Francisco.
Jun. 24– Sept. 17, 1944	Photography section of *Art in Progress*, Fifteenth Anniversary Exhibition [Exh. # 258] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Jun. 29, 1944	Photography Center closes. The department is moved back to the museum and reduced to pre–Photography Center status, without a director and with Nancy Newhall as acting curator.

Sept. 1944	Roy Stryker named Chairman of Committee on Photography.
Nov. 14, 1944	First meeting of Committee on Photography.
Nov. 10– Dec. 24, 1944	*Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams of Loyal Japanese American Relocation* [Exh. # 265] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Dec.11, 1944– Feb. 18, 1945	*Photographs from the Museum's Permanent Collection* [Exh. #271] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Jan. 23– Mar. 20, 1945	*Power in the Pacific: Battle Photographs of our Navy in Action on the Sea and in the Sky* [Exh. # 275] Organized by Steichen.
Feb.–Apr. 1945	Adams in New York to teach a series of hands-on classes.
Feb. 21– May 30, 1945	*French Photographs: Daguerre and Atget* [Exh. #277] Organized by Nancy Newhall, with assistance from Therese Bonney.
Mar. 6–25, 1945	*Creative Photography* [Exh. #280] Organized by Nancy Newhall with the assistance of Andreas Feininger.
Apr. 25– Jun. 10, 1945	*Paul Strand: Photographs 1915–1945* [Exh. #286] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
May–Jun. 1945	Beaumont Newhall returns to the United States from overseas service. Newhalls go to California on vacation in May. Beaumont Newhall stationed in Washington, D.C. after their return.

Jun. 20 Jun. 23, 1945	*Photographs from the Museum Collection* [Exh. #290a] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Oct. 1945	Beaumont Newhall returns to MoMA as curator. Museum denies his request to have Nancy Newhall retained as a curator. She is allowed to remain until she completes the Edward Weston retrospective she had already begun planning.
Dec. 10, 1945	Tom Maloney and Edward Steichen submit proposal to Trustees to make Steichen director of an expanded department.
Feb. 10– Mar. 31, 1946	*The Photographs of Edward Weston* [Exh. #311] Organized by Nancy Newhall.
Apr. 1946	Adams receives Guggenheim fellowship.
May 1946	Beaumont Newhall resigns as curator in March, effective May 1.
Jun. 14– Aug. 25, 1946	*Georgia O'Keeffe* [Exh. #319] Organized by James Johnson Sweeney.
Jul. 13, 1946	Alfred Stieglitz dies.
Feb. 4– Apr. 6, 1947	*The Photographs of Henri Cartier Bresson* [Exh. #343] Organized by James Thrall Soby and Lincoln Kirstein. Catalogue essay by Beaumont Newhall.
Jun. 10– Sept. 21, 1947	*Alfred Stieglitz Exhibition: His Photographs* [Exh. #351a] Organized by James Johnson Sweeney, with text by Nancy Newhall.
July 1, 1947	Edward Steichen assumes directorship of department.

APPENDIX B
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Associate Archivist

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