

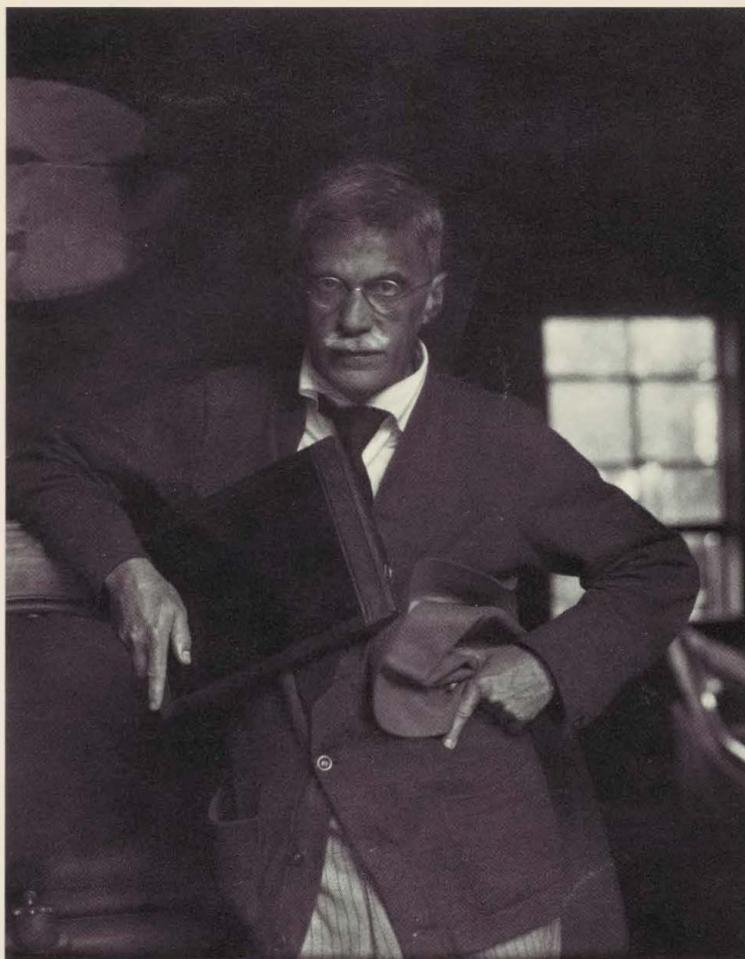
# CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA • TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721

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*Alfred Stieglitz: A Talk*

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Cover: "Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George," n.d.,  
by Paul Strand from the Paul Strand archive.

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part of this publication may be reproduced without  
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The original text for this lecture is in the Dorothy Norman-Alfred Stieglitz Collection at the Center for Creative Photography.

“*The first, uncorrected, undeveloped version of this “talk” was taken down by Rebecca Strand. I do not know its exact date. Presumably it was 1923 or 1924 because of the reference to a Stieglitz photographic exhibition and to the magazine MSS.*

## A Stieglitz Talk at a New York Art Center

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The following talk, typical of Stieglitz’s few “public speeches,” was given before his 1923 or 1924 photographic exhibition at a *New York Art Center*:

“You have heard me introduced here. I am always surprised when I see a crowd of people and I am introduced. The last time I was introduced was at a convention in Philadelphia. It was a hot night and when I arrived there, a gentleman from the West—I do not remember his name—said to me, ‘You are Mr. Stieglitz?’ I replied, ‘Yes, that is what they call me.’ ‘How do you wish to be introduced?’ he asked. I told him, ‘Just say Mr. Stieglitz. There is nothing else necessary.’

“It was about 104 degrees in the theatre. The people who listened to me had been in Atlantic City at another convention the day before. I looked at their faces and I felt, ‘I wish I could send them all home. They would enjoy going to bed. They look tired. I wish I could bring it about that they would all go home and not feel offended.’

“I started talking at random. I had prepared nothing. I rambled for about 45 minutes to strange men, women, children and to a few elderly faces. There were oldtimers there and they were listening for something that I might tell them. They do not know to this day what they were waiting for.

“ ‘I will tell you why I am here,’ I said. ‘For many years I have stayed aloof. Not because I wanted to, but because some good, old friends of mine insisted I was an obstreperous person and it would be good for me to be put in cold storage. Cold storage is good when you have lived in an atmosphere of hot air for many years.’

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“I happen to have come down to New York from Lake George, where I had been living on a hill. Living very simply. Not because I have wanted to, but because I happen to be built that way. Just the way a dying chestnut tree is free, I must be free. If the tree were a human being it would be complaining. You might invite it here to tell its story. In the meantime it stands there, simply a tree.

“You have been twenty years in the photographic or art game. I want you to know certain things. The cards are on the table. When I came from the chestnut tree at the lake, I happened to be walking through the street and for some mysterious reason, three cents happened to be burning in my pocket. I found myself buying an evening paper. I opened the pages and saw something that interested me intensely. An editorial. I read that the owner of ‘Exterminator’ was asked to send that great race-horse to do nothing, or to run in what was called the ‘New Year’s Handicap’<sup>1</sup>, for \$10,000—an unusual price for the time of year. A silver loving-cup was offered to the owner if he would permit his horse to run, on the grounds that this wonderful horse had become a national asset! A few years ago all the race tracks in the country were closed and here, suddenly, a gelding had become an asset! What, I asked myself, are the American people coming to? What are they made of? There were the three pennies burning in my pocket as I was walking through the streets. Now isn’t what has happened clear? For here I am, an old-timer. I wonder whether I, too, am becoming a national asset again? But I also wonder who will put up \$10,000 to see me run! In other words, to make a long story short—in the morning, after I had seen the Editorial, the telephone bell rang. There was a voice on the phone I had never heard before, saying, ‘Mr. Stieglitz?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Well,’ said the voice, ‘We would like you to talk to the *Pictorial Photographers of America*.’ I thought, ‘Ye gods—a national asset!’ I smiled and answered, ‘Why sure.’ And the questioner was glad. He told me he had heard me at the *Clarence White School*. Now anyone who had heard me at the *White School* must be a hero. And I am a hero worshipper. He asked me whether I would come to a dinner on December 4th. So December 4th became a millstone. That is, it nearly became a millstone around my neck because I like to keep myself free and to do what the moment holds for me. If I say that I will speak, then I feel bound because others will be expecting me to do what I said I will do.

“Well, in any event here we are, and I have been thinking about this evening and as I came in here, and as I now see these faces before me, many of which I have seen before, and the pictures on the walls, I really wonder where I am, because I wonder what sort of things have been

<sup>1</sup> Exterminator did not run in the ‘New Years Handicap’. He did run in other races from 1917–1924, (D.N.)

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going around in the minds of the different people who have come here. What are their feelings, their ideas? What do they hear? What do the pictures on the walls mean to them? What do the paintings mean? What does this building mean? I frankly confess I am still on the road to try and find out what art really means. If I were to ask you to get up individually and tell me what art is, I probably would get some very curious answers. You would probably say, 'I don't know.'

"The next thing I wonder is, 'What is Photography?' Or does everybody know about it from Eastman? Is it foolproof? Am I here tonight to tell you how to achieve something, or how Mr. Steichen or White or Paul Strand or X Y Z achieves something? I don't know how to tell you. If you expect me to tell you, I can't. That is an individual affair, just like religion. It is not a question of my consciousness being *your* consciousness. It is *my* responsibility being my responsibility, and your responsibility being yours. You see, we have not come here tonight to hear ethics, history, questions, etc., but all of these things—the chestnut tree, the picture opposite me, the gentleman sitting there—everything one experiences plays a role.

"I am going to tell you a few things I have found in my experience. I only know about my own experience. As soon as you show me a photograph which you tell me you have made, you are telling me something about yourself. If you knew what I saw, you would not show your photograph to me. Everything here to me is significant in the same sense that the hill, the sun, the three cents, the dying chestnut tree are significant.

"Now, as for photography. I will tell you a little thing that happened a few years ago. Two years ago this thing happened. It had been my dream as a youngster, as an American, that sometime there would be a place in New York under whose roof people could come together and do their work as they wished and thought it should be done. It would be a photographic center, a free center—not communistic or socialistic or anarchistic—but just a place where each could do the thing he wanted to do. I thought that that was not a very unusual wish. I thought that every individual had some way of wanting to do something. I thought that under the one roof there would be photographing, engraving, shoemaking, well-trained chickens to lay different kinds of eggs—a center in which human beings would come together to work as they wanted to work.

"Well, certain things have come out of this wish. Work has come out of it. Men have come out of it. They have utilized what they have been able to bring and to take away and to put into force. What this force is I won't go into tonight. But I have been living in these dreams, and being

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very much alone in the world—without a dark-room, without facilities, without money, without any longer being able to publish *Camera Work*.

“It so happens that tonight in the *Anderson Art Galleries* a complete set of *Camera Work*—one of a few sets in the world—is being sold at auction, and I feel that it is my business to be there and to see what happens. My own baby. But I said I would be here on December 4th. And what happens there has nothing to do with me. I only hope that someone has the courage to take care of the set and to look into it, and at the beautiful binding.

“How many of you who are interested in *Pictorial Photography* have not only looked into the pages of *Camera Work* but know what is there? You don’t know anything about it. I will tell you why. As I look at *Camera Work*, my own baby, it is a perfect revelation to me. Remember there are no *Camera Works* to sell. I have no place now. I have no place in which to publish it. Also, remember I *could* publish it tomorrow, but now I am not interested. To have the numbers in the *Metropolitan Museum*, in Mr. Morgan’s gallery, what good does that do if you are thinking in terms of today; of the things you are supposed to be thinking of photographically?

“A standard was established in days gone by by pictorial photography, and unless that standard is upheld you are doing nothing, even though you are entertaining yourself, or making Eastman rich.

“It is my business, since you have asked me here to address you, to try and find out what you expect me to tell you. I cannot look at your photography and say ‘You need pill #317’, or to another ‘You need pill #318.’ It takes time to find out what a man is made of, what he wants to make out of photography.

“I am here in a center called *The Pictorial Photographers of America*. Here is Mr. M. He has grown old in a way, as I have grown old in a way. He mentioned *Camera Work*. But I have to mention it, too, because *Camera Work* is a record not of photography, but of everything happening here in America, and developing in the world of art.

“My photographs shown here would not be interesting. They would be dead things. People would not know how to look at them. They are not great, but you would not know how to look at them. People are coming from all over the world to see them. I do not want to send people who want to see them here, because it would take time; they would want to look at other things. They cannot do two things at the same time at an *Art Center*. I have no secrets. But when you ask of my work, ‘How do you do it?’ ‘What does it mean?’ ‘Why can’t we do it?’, my answer is, ‘My dear fellows, get to work.’ If you feel a thing all the way through, you can really do something. If you feel something even half way through, you can really do something, also, whether you are a business man or a street cleaner. The trouble with Americans is that they do not do things all the

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way through. The American people today nearly all play golf, tennis, billiards. There is a law: Follow through. But when it comes to photography, people do not know anything about it. So I say that if I had my way, instead of 'God Bless Our Home,' I would put up a sign saying 'Follow Through'. If you follow through, you create a graceful stroke in life. If you do not, you make a mess of it.

"The gentleman here said that *Camera Work* had set a standard. No one has excelled *Camera Work*. I am going to state modestly that no one has come miles within reaching its standard. The gentleman here knows that. You know that. It is the spirit of the publication that really lives.

"You have spoken about the *Photographic Annual*. I am here to tell you about the *Annual*. I spent my money in creating standards; in establishing things that could last as long as the paper would last, so that the American could have before him something as a standard.

"Every painter thinks he possesses something, because he has a tradition; because Rembrandt and Michelangelo and the others at one time painted great pictures. In photography have we a tradition? Is it one that you know anything about? Is there a place to which you can go and look at things done by names of which you have heard? You cannot. I know this because nobody has taken the trouble to collect photographs as they were being made. Nobody has had faith. I could not get the members of the *Camera Club* to see that the *Club* held a position of trust, and that it should have the best things so that coming generations could have the same advantages as some of the old-timers had when there were real enthusiasts. The little enthusiasm you have had yourselves has come through such photographers as White, Käsebier, Steichen. These individuals interested men like Shaw and Maeterlinck. Shaw was not the world figure then that he is now. He is not interested in Rembrandt diluted a thousand times. How many of you here are really doing something that, when looked at, will make you say, 'Here is something I have not seen before.' I have not seen in the *Photographic Annual* a single thing which was not reminiscent of White or Demachy, etc. I do not know anybody at this time who can do what White, Demachy or Steichen did in their days of freedom. We do not want ideals, we want truth. When you come together to send out into the world your new *Annual* I wonder, as an interested party—not as a critical one—what will you send out, after I have made you conscious of some of the responsibilities you have assumed?

"I have the power to do what I did years ago—to say what is bad, to encourage what seems to be potentially living. Why do I not do it? Because I have said to myself, 'It is up to the people. They have been shown the way. It is up to the people, if they are interested, to create. It is their business. It is none of mine.' If you are dissatisfied, it is your business to

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do something about it. Furthermore, America has become the so-called center of the world. . .so this *Art Center* has become a center of some other center. You have not thought about it. There is something very humorous in the situation. The world is looking to you to produce something that will warrant your being that thing which you propose to be.

“Now in England, in 1887, a man turned up and he had a little box. I said to him, ‘What have you there?’ He said, ‘This is called a detective camera.’ I said, ‘Have you joined the police?’ He said, ‘No, you can press a button and photograph anybody you want to without his knowing it.’ ‘Do you enjoy that?’ I asked. ‘It isn’t that,’ he said, ‘but you can register an expression; you can do all sorts of things. There is a man named Eastman who has started something.’ I said to the man, ‘None of that for me. To learn how to photograph you have to know what you are doing.’ So I dismissed the idea. I did not have a hand camera until 1893. When I started with a hand camera I started with a basis. I knew what I was doing. Eastman gave the world the impetus for foolproof photography, and we know about Eastman. Today, if you want to do something you have to go to Eastman. The whole world has got to go there. He is not interested in quality of any kind which does not lead back to Eastman. That is nothing to be held against him. You are supposed to be at work and ready to do something with camera and paper and chemicals. You may say that Eastman is not giving you some of the things they are getting in England. I wonder why. If I should ask Mr. Eastman, he would say, ‘Well, you see, it is better to have a large, a very large output of a thing—make it democratic—so that everybody in all the world can use it, than to have just certain things of true quality.’ I disagree most vitally about that. When a man comes along and says, ‘I need this thing for a particular purpose, will you let me have it?’, and the answer is, ‘No, you may not have it because it does not pay to give it to you,’ I have a right to demand it for myself. I have a right to demand it for every living human being, and I must reply, ‘You do not know what is really needed.’ When I am told, ‘Why don’t you go to see Mr. Eastman?’ I then say, ‘Because the time will come. He is busy in his way, and I am busy in mine. Perhaps, in a million years we shall meet. The factory and the thing I represent will come together.’

“What did England do? Here we are in the hands of our benefactor, Eastman. In England the amateurs simply have said, ‘You can’t do this and you can’t do that. We will boycott you.’ I was in touch with Davidson in England and with a marvelous fellow at Kodak. Keen, sensitive. Then at a certain point, he said, ‘Nothing doing. It doesn’t pay in business to make the things you want. You can’t have them.’

“A peculiar thing happened in England four years ago, I should say. A standard no longer existed in photography because, although I had established a standard, it was thought I was not doing anything now,

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because the world did not hear of it. Yet it has been only in these last years that I have had an opportunity—now that I no longer represent anybody in the world but myself—to photograph things I had been thinking about for a long time and in a new way, entirely my own.

“The films I have used were made by Eastman. But when I wanted to print on platinum paper—which I had been using since 1883—I was told that if one wrote to England one could get some, but that Eastman had ceased making it. Now isn’t this really tragic in a way?”

“I had been working for 30 years to get at something. Finally I had my material in form, and there was the man who was to supply the goods saying that the law forbade him to make platinum paper available. So I said to myself, ‘Have I not earned the right to have that platinum paper made if I cover the cost? Even if it is the law not to make it? And England is willing to send it over here, and make exceptions, because it respects photography and photographers?’

“Finally I found that we couldn’t even have Palladium paper, which is disliked because it is brown. So I decided that I would go ahead and print on Palladium anyway. If I had been a madman I might have been tempted to go to Rochester, and do some harm, because of my feeling for photography. I was not quite mad enough, though, because I had a sense of humor. I thought, ‘Isn’t it remarkable that this country should develop two poles—George Eastman on one side, and yours truly on the other—I, seemingly harmless, but never having felt so strong.

“I predict that even today if platinum paper is really wanted it will come to Rochester. They will produce it. I have shown, in my own work—which is to be exhibited this year—that you can use postal-card paper—gaslight paper—and produce something that is fit to show anywhere as a fit piece of work. What I want to say will be reflected in spite of the material used.

“I have used the word passion. Everybody knows what passion is and what love is. Just think of this: A man and a woman are in love. They know it. The world knows it. They have a date in the park. They meet and see each other and rush to each other and kiss and hug each other. Then suddenly the man, when he does this, says, ‘Why Jane! There’s a thread on your shoulder.’ That is the aesthete. His Passion has been interrupted. Jane may understand. I, as an onlooker, wonder how the man could notice a thread on her shoulder at such a surprise moment. I know that many of you, if you are shown a photograph, no matter what there may be in it, if there is a fly speck on it, or a spot, you will say, ‘There is a thread on your shoulder.’

“I have, in a scientific way, recorded many things *actually*, photographically—untouched, direct—and I have hung my photographs in exactly the same way in which an oculist puts up a chart. You may think you can fool the oculist. But he can very quickly read what is

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the matter with your eyes. As someone has said, 'The most rare thing is normality.' When you photograph, what are you really trying to put down on a piece of paper?

"I want to close here tonight by telling you nothing about art or photography. I have spoken about this and that; about trying to find a *place*. Why, I continue to ask, is there not a place in the United States in which you can find some of the photographs that have been made; where the photographers of America could really take their place in photography? Ask George Eastman if you want to do so. Why can't this man find a place for photography, as well as a place in which to establish the movies? Why do we not have, here in America, a place created by Eastman, where you can see a Demachy, a Steichen and the rest? No catalogues, no names, no dates—that is not interesting—but let everybody know that there is a place where living photographs are kept for what they do to the people who look at them. You have libraries, museums. But they are all dead, as dead as can be.

"If I ask if I can go ahead and take a marvelous collection to the New York Library, they will say yes, they will accept it as a gift. But it will be put away, mutilated. Well, while these things are being destroyed, lost (for I have no place in which to keep them) I know this: The day will come when American photography will become a legend, a myth, because they will say, 'Where are these things? Who has seen them? They have been written about. If they were so fine, then somebody would have preserved them.' I have preserved them till now. You can't preserve them, because you don't know what they signify.

"The *Camera Club* is a workshop. Of spirit there is none. There *is* a spirituality in this country. There *is* a reason why I am here tonight. It is not an accident. I spoke to you about the race horse, "Exterminator", who became a National Asset. I am not a National Asset. I do not want to be a National Asset. Do you know what I am to you? I am this: You feel that I am really interested, *disinterestedly*, in a thing in which you are interested, photographically."

*At the end of her typescript Mrs. Strand added a note for Stieglitz: "Here you spoke about the Cat photographed by different people, etc. But I did not get this down. Then you did the land-office business with MSS. Very little left out of the whole thing, though there are little places that need polishing up." The present version is somewhat "polished" and developed, but nothing has been changed or added. (D.N.)*

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