

Photography has come a long way in recent years. This is evident in how it is practiced—which is to say digitally, covering more of life and experience than was possible or even desirable before—but maybe not so evident in how it is appreciated. Cause one is that since the 1970s photography has gradually become accepted as a fully fledged form of art. This in turn has had a domino effect, in that the kind of photography never conceived as art—the majority—is now exhibited, collected and enjoyed in much the same way as other art. Cause two is that more and more people have taken up photography seriously themselves, for creative expression rather than just for family-and-friends snapshots. This makes photography subject, as no other art form, to the “I could do that” reaction.

You would think, wouldn't you, that with photography having become so fully embraced by everyone, that we would be taught from an early age how to follow it—as a visual version of literacy? Far from it; there is not even a matching word. Although I cannot redress all of that here and now, it is worth looking at the whole spectrum of photography to show just how enriching it can be. And yet, it rarely is treated as a whole. Writing on photography tends to be partisan. Fine-art photography is usually considered in isolation, as is photojournalism, as is advertising, and so on. Personally, I don't see why this should be so, particularly now that the different genres of photography seem to be migrating. Museums now collect fashion photography, advertising uses photojournalism, landscape photography tackles social issues. Like a growing number of people, I like to think of photography as all one.

Nevertheless, an issue of identity now affects photography. It has been going on, and getting stronger, for the last three decades, and what is at stake is whether photography is rooted in capture, or in making fabulous images irrespective of whether they come from the real or from imagination. Capture is photography's natural capacity, the default if you like, with events, people, and scenes as its raw material, all happening more or less without the photographer interfering. This is the photographer as witness, as observer. Yet throughout photography's history there have been excursions into making images happen by construction, direction, creation. Tableaux telling a narrative; Surrealist experiments with process, collages, studio concoctions; still-life arrangements. Why should it be different in principle now?

What has changed has been the understanding that photography is either one thing or the other. What happened in front of the camera really happened as it seemed, or it was a different kind of photography in which things were made up. The processes of photography largely kept these two separate, with the exception of ingenious but rare attempts to alter reality. But this distinction, for many people, and perhaps already the majority, has disappeared. The two agents of change have been digital technology, naturally, but also the promotion and acceptance of concept as a valid direction for photography. There were hints of this coming from early in the twentieth century, but it was not until the 1970s that conceptual photography really got into gear.

The primacy of concept over actuality has in effect given photographers permission to make

use of techniques that alter the substance of images. These techniques—digital—continue to evolve, but already they are so sophisticated as to be undetectable in skilled hands. But perhaps the most important change of all is that much of the time these techniques are not operating in the context of detection. Whether a photograph is real or not is, for many people, unimportant. What is coming to count more is whether a photograph is clever enough and attractive enough. This does not please everyone, of course, but it is the reality of contemporary photography, and it calls for explanation. Or at least it calls for an attempt to integrate photography-as-illustration with photography-as-record. This is one of my aims here, within the overall framework of the capacity to read, enjoy, and have opinions about photographs in whatever form they appear.

► **Pittsburg, PA ca. 1979–1980,**  
by Lee Friedlander



© Lee Friedlander, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

# PART 1

## A MOMENTARY ART

Now that digital photography can be processed and altered to make it look more like an illustration, and now that contemporary art is at liberty to use photography as a starting point rather than just an end-product, it might be useful to get clear in our minds what is unique about a photograph. And right here at the start it's worth addressing the now-familiar concern about what can be done to a photograph digitally, in post-production, to alter it. The problem for many people is that the photograph may lose its legitimacy. Another is that perhaps it in some way is no longer a photograph, but a different form of image. This is a big debate, but for the purposes of this book I take the following, possibly simplistic

view: there is nothing inherently right or wrong about digitally enhancing and manipulating a photograph—just as long as no one is pretending it's not happening.

Simply put, a photograph...

Takes directly from real life

Is fast and easy

Can be taken by anyone

Has a specific look

These are the raw, obvious differences between photography and the other visual arts, but there are interesting implications when we start to dig more deeply, which reveal why photography is now by far the most popular means of creative expression worldwide.

# WHAT A PHOTOGRAPH IS...AND ISN'T

## TAKES DIRECTLY FROM REAL LIFE

Although the camera can be used to construct images, particularly in studio work, the great strength of photography is that the physical world around us provides the material. This elevates the importance of the subject, the event; and the reporting of this is obviously something at which photography excels. At the same time, however, this ease of capture reduces the value of accurate representation, because it has become commonplace—very different from the early view of painting, when Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his notebook that “painting is most praiseworthy which is most like the thing represented.” Instead, the way in which photographers document—the style and treatment—becomes more significant.

At a deeper level, there is an inherent paradox between depicting reality and yet being something completely apart as a free-standing image. Other arts, like painting, poetry, and music, are obvious as constructs. There is no confusion in anyone’s mind that a poem or a song have originated anywhere else but in the mind of their creator, and that the experience in life that they refer to has been filtered through an imagination, and that some time has been taken to do this. In this respect, photographs do create confusion. The image is, in most cases, so clearly of a real scene, object, or person, and yet it remains just an image that can be looked at quietly in completely divorced circumstances. It is of real life, and at the same time separate. This contradiction offers many possibilities for exploration, and much contemporary fine-art photography does just that, including making constructions to mimic real-life content.

## FAST AND EASY

Photography can explore and capture all aspects of life—and increasingly so as the equipment improves. One example of this is the increased light sensitivity of sensors, which has made night and low-light imagery possible. We take this pretty much for granted, but it is a strong driving force behind photography’s immense

popularity. Little or no preparation is needed to capture an image, which means that there are many, many opportunities for creative expression. As digital cameras make this easier and more certain technically, it also focuses more and more attention on the composition and on each person’s particular vision. Or at least it should, provided we don’t get sidetracked by the “bright, shiny toy” component in photography. “Photography is the easiest art,” wrote photographer Lisette Model, “which perhaps makes it the hardest.” There is unquestionably less craftsmanship in photography in the sense of time and physical effort than there is in other visual arts, something many professionals feel defensive about. But in its place, the act of creation is extended afterwards to reviewing and selecting already-taken images. As well as editing, as this is called, the processing and printing of images is also a later and important part of the process.

## CAN BE TAKEN BY ANYONE

This never happened in art before. Photography is now practiced nearly universally, and not just to record family moments, either. It’s no longer a case of artists and professionals on one side, audience on the other. Digital cameras, sharing across the internet, and the decline of traditional print media have made photography available to almost everyone as a means of creative expression. Nor do these many millions of photographers feel bound by the opinions of a few. Many are perfectly happy with the opinions of their peers, as audience and photographers are usually the same people. All of this makes contemporary photography wide-ranging and complex, with different and competing standards and values. Creating good photographs does not depend on a career plan, which for all save professionals is good news. What is less good is that a large number of images tends to confuse any judgement of excellence, and the internet is awash with imagery.



**A Scene of a building collapse, Xi’an, Shanxi, 2000, by Xie Haitao**

This is a tough first picture for the book, but it illustrates in an uncompromising way what photography does that no other art can (video excepting). It can report exactly what was in front of the camera in that place on that day in history, and at that moment. We may not always like what we see, but that is the nature of the special contract between the photographer and the viewer. Unretouched images that are captured from life were the original form of photography, and many would argue that this is its most legitimate form.

“Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography” Xie Haitao/FOtOE/www.fotoe.com/image/10126149

## HAS A SPECIFIC LOOK

Whatever choice of paper texture and coating you make for a print, the image itself is completely without a third dimension. The frame is a window, and this sets photography apart from painting and from any kind of imagery created by hand. In many ways, this lack of physical presence makes screen display perfect, and this is increasingly how most photographs get viewed.

In terms of its look, photography begins with the viewer's expectation that the contents are "real"—taken from real life. In fact, we relate the appearance of a photograph to two things: how we ourselves see, and how we have learned to accept the look of a photograph. We are very

sensitive to the naturalism and "realism" of a photograph. The further that a photographer takes the image away from this, by complicated processing or unusual post-production techniques, the less the image is photographic. This is not a criticism, just a statement of obvious fact. The basic photographic look relies on the assumption that very little has been done to the image since it was captured. Photography also has its own vocabulary of imagery, not found anywhere else. This includes such things as differential focus, a limited dynamic range, motion blur, flare artefacts, less-than-fully-saturated colors, and the possibility of rendering the image entirely in black and white.

## ▼ From the series *Four Seasons in One Day*, 2007, by Laura El-Tantawy

A warm afternoon graces central London as pedestrians cool down with ice cream cones. Differential focus, and even some slight motion blur, together with the smoothness of the tonal range, make this a very "photographic" image, despite the ways in which the photographer plays with illusion and juxtaposition. It presents itself as capture from the real world, rather than a manipulated illustration, and it's this given that allows El-Tantawy to experiment and to intrigue with her distinct way of seeing.



Laura El-Tantawy

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD PHOTOGRAPH

Good may sound sloppily vague as a generalization, but it means something useful to each one of us. And, of course, it means being way above mediocre, or even ordinary. By that definition, most photographs are not particularly good. This doesn't sit well with many people these days, because everyone wants to be liked and criticism is increasingly seen as impolite and unnecessary. This is nonsense, of course, and I'm not going to indulge it here. Excellence is the result of ability, skill and (usually) hard work. And this is what makes it worth writing about: to find out what exactly goes into the best photography, and why it stands out.

Ease-of-use and ease-of-taking guarantees that there will always be a huge majority of ordinary, uninspiring photographs. Using the camera for something more than semi-automated clicking demands attention to what a photograph can be. The American photographer Walker Evans, who was notably articulate, summarized good photography as "detachment, lack of sentimentality, originality, a lot of things that sound rather empty. I know what they mean. Let's say, 'visual impact' may not mean much to anybody. I could point it out though. I mean it's a quality that something has or does not have. Coherence. Well, some things are weak, some things are strong."

We all have different ideas about what "good" exactly means in the context of photography, and this variety of opinion is important. Here, we'll explore what these meanings are, and more importantly, how photographers put them to use to make good better. I have my own ideas, naturally, and equally naturally I want to infect you with them. But in the course of assembling them here, I've drawn on a very wide range of other people's thoughts on the subject, so what follows is not just quirkily personal.

The following are the qualities that I believe define a good photograph. Within each, as we'll see, is a whole world of ideas, methods and contradictions to explore. You may object that I've not included the term "original," but that is

because it's a very loaded word, to my mind to be used with extreme caution. I see it bandied about all over the Internet with little restraint, but sadly much of the time with ignorance. Unless you bend the meaning of "original" out of shape, very few creative works are. Most creative ideas, even in photography, evolve from others. True originality is rare indeed. Kant thought it a quality of genius, and I'm afraid we're not aiming quite that high. Or this, from Arthur Koestler: "The measure of an artist's originality... is the extent to which his selective emphasis deviates from the conventional norm and establishes new standards of relevance." Claiming originality is dangerous. It may just be that someone else did the same earlier, but the new claimant failed to realize it.

And as for what makes a truly great photograph, that is entirely another matter. The judgment of great transcends good and very good, and there is almost always conflict of opinion. Great usually needs to stand the test of time, as in any art, and at the start can be a lone voice. I believe a number of the photographs that we have in this book are truly great, but I'm not going to spoil the game by listing them. You will have your own opinions, and if I've done my job properly these may change by the time you've finished the book.

# THE QUALITIES OF A GOOD PHOTOGRAPH



Gueorgui Pinkhassov/Magnum Photos

## 1. IS SKILLFULLY PUT TOGETHER

There is a long list of image qualities which are seen by most people to be technically and conceptually correct. They include, for example, sharp focus on the main subject, a median exposure that covers the dynamic range, a composition that most people will find generally satisfying, and even a choice of subject that seems worthwhile. These and many more are basic photographic skills, not to be lightly dismissed, and there are strong arguments for mastering them all. If the image needs them, they have to be there. But a good photograph may deliberately dismiss many of them—for a reason. There is

a big difference between messing up the focus through ignorance or by mistake, and de-focusing for deliberate effect. What counts is first knowing how composition, lighting and so on work. Photographers who master these can then play with them.

Part of this is skillful process, or you could say craftsmanship, and it tends to be at its most evident in print and display. Anything well-crafted attracts admiration just for that fact alone, and this is as true of photography as it is for any other art. Not every part of the process may show through in the final image, and it may take another photographer to appreciate

fully what went into its making, but usually and to most people there is a sense of the skill involved. Traditionalists not only hold this very high, but make it essential. More experimental photographers may subvert it. But no one serious actually ignores it.



Trent Parke/Magnum Photos

## ◀ George Town, Penang, 1990, by Gueorgui Pinkhassov

This is a complex image that rewards a long look. The *trompe l'oeuil* of the painted wall extends into the image itself, and the precise framing adds to the segmentation. The real and the illustrated interlock. Pinkhassov writes, "The only thing that counts is curiosity."

## ▲ From the Dream/Life series, Sydney, 1998, by Trent Parke

Summer rain. A man stands huddled under awnings on the corner of George and Market Street, his tie thrown over his shoulder after running through a Sydney thunderstorm. The skill in the putting together of this image lies in Parke's sensitivity to light—in particular, high-contrast light—and in the framing that extends the depth between the figures, balances them, and yet leaves the eye to rest on the glittering, bouncing raindrops in the middle.



Elliott Erwitl/Magnum Photos

**A Felix, Gladys and Rover, New York, 1974,  
by Elliott Erwitl**

All art needs to strike a chord with its audience. There are many chords, and Erwitl generally chooses humor. In particular, he likes dogs, and finds their relationship with their human owners a rich vein to mine. “If you’re going to take pictures,” Erwitl says, “it’s good to find places where you’re going to have amusing situations. A nudist camp is one, dogs are another, beaches are another...” Also, “I have said that dogs are people with more hair. I have said that. I have said other stupid things. Dogs are universal, and they don’t ask for model releases, and they are usually quite friendly.”

## 2. PROVOKES A REACTION

Above all, a good photograph is visually stimulating, and so gets an interested reaction from its audience. Maybe not from everyone, but from enough people to show that the image is engaging attention. If our immediate reaction is “I’ve seen it all before,” then it’s a failure. That may be a brutal assessment, and it may not matter at all in many kinds of commercial photography, where a packshot is a packshot, and a tropical beach resort needs to prove only that it’s located on a beach with palm trees and blue skies, but if we’re talking about “good,” then the standards have to be higher than ordinary. Photographers want their images to be looked at, paid attention to, talked about. That is going to happen only if the image prods its audience, gives the viewer something to think about.

But for photography that aims to be in some way creative, problems begin when we try to second-guess the audience. Being too aware of how other people are likely to respond to a photograph can lead down a sterile path, towards images that are too calculated, trying too obviously to please. One of the last things I want when I show someone one of my photographs is for them to think it panders to their taste, because that makes me look like a salesman. All art has this in common, and it raises a well-worn debate about what makes a work of art—the intention of the artist or the judgment of the audience. The audience for photography wants, among other things, to see something afresh through the imaginative eyes of a particular photographer. Most people feel cheated, however, if they suspect that the photographer is simply trying to please them.

## 3. OFFERS MORE THAN ONE LAYER OF EXPERIENCE

A good photograph delivers to the viewer more than just the immediate, obvious image. It works on more than one level. Take, for example, an early image in this book, Romano Cagnoni’s striking black-and-white of Ibo recruits in Nigeria, on page 54. The graphics are immediately powerful—a mass of shining faces and torsos connected above to a line of figures in profile. Then there is a textural richness from the printing (although the original was in color). It is also optically unusual, and we are quickly aware of an extreme compression—it was indeed shot with a very long focal length from an elevated viewpoint. Another layer in, and there is much to discover, different expressions on each face. Look, for instance, at the seemingly paler face at the far left near the back of the main group, turned away and down, mouth open. What is this young man thinking? This leads us further down into the layer of context—what is happening here? This is recruitment for soldiers during the Biafran war, and, as such, a rich historical document.

In other words, looking at a good photograph gives a layered experience. Among the arts, photography actually has a head start in this, because it contains a built-in paradox with regard to reality. A photograph is of life and also divorced from it, both at the same time. From a creative point of view, this offers good potential for any photographer who cares to make use of it. There are already two frames of reference waiting to be shown and exploited. But it needs work; it needs to be recognized.

Arthur Koestler, whose 1964 book *The Act of Creation* was a deep investigation of the mechanisms of creativity, coined the word bisociative to mean working on more than one plane, which he considered central to the process, whether in science or art. In art it means juxtaposing two or more planes of perception, bringing together more than one

frame of reference to produce a way of seeing, an experience, that most other people have never thought of before—and yet which strikes a chord. For example, W. Eugene Smith, working much of the time for *Life* magazine, combined hard photojournalism with a lyrical, sometimes heroic style of lighting, composition, and moment. These at the time seemed contradictory, but Smith brought them together to great effect, in images such as *Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath*, and his essays on Albert Schweitzer, a psychiatric institute in Haiti, and Pittsburgh.

Striking a chord with the viewer is fundamental. We love to discover, and we want to be stimulated. Our minds take pleasure in finding connections and noticing things that are not immediately obvious. Being too obvious in an image is a far greater sin than being obscure, because it insults everyone’s intelligence. A full-frontal, baldly self-evident image that has nothing to accompany the first glance, is hardly worth our while looking at, and certainly not for enjoyment. And finally, among all these layers of experience and viewing, there is the unexpected and the unanticipated. In case all of the above gives the impression that all successful photography is well thought through from the start, many of the most stimulating photographs contain a little magic. This may be something that even the photographer was unaware of at the start. Looking through the contact sheets later—or the screen catalog nowadays with digital—the photographer may discover something about one frame that surprises, makes it special, which is the case on page 18 with Seamus Murphy’s image.

That a photograph can have these different layers does not always depend on the photographer being aware of this complexity. That can come later, on viewing. But in this case, Murphy was steeped in Afghan matters, and knew the context. The graphic coincidence here is discussed later in the book, under “Making Connections” on page 135.



Seamus Murphy/VII Network

**▲ Image from *Darkness Visible* series: Bamiyan, Bamiyan Province, June 2003, by Seamus Murphy**  
A powerful image that reads on different levels. There are at least three layers of experience, depending on how deeply the viewer wants to go. Not necessarily in the order of seeing, there is first, the image as showing the consequence of war, the Afghan war. The one-legged victim makes his solitary way through the harsh Afghan landscape. And then there is the striking coincidence of shape and timing. We see the correspondence between the

man, bent slightly at this point in his awkward walk, and the deep shadow in the rock behind. This is such a marvelous correspondence that the immediate thought for anyone who can imagine themselves in the position of the photographer is, how did he get that? It's clear that this is not something to stage manage. And then, in our hypothetical journey into the photograph, we look at the shadow in the rock face more closely. What happened there? It has been carved out, but it's empty. If we know something of the recent history of Afghanistan, and remember

the news reports, we realize that this is where the ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan were, before they were blasted to rubble by the Taliban in 2001. This adds another layer, of loss and intolerance. And of religious conflict. Religious intolerance destroyed the Buddhas. A war with religious undertones that began with the destruction of the Twin Towers destroyed the man's limb, and he, as the photographer explains, is a Hazara victim. The Hazara, as Shia Muslims, suffered particular tyranny under the Taliban. So, an equation of suffering.



© William Klein, Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, NYC

**▲ Theater Tickets, New York, 1955, by William Klein**  
An image that sits squarely in the tradition of street photography, a very specific form of photojournalism in which the photographer walks and looks for the unplanned moment, the coincidence of people or actions or form, hoping for the surprise. And also hoping to be able to recognize it quickly when it happens, and to capture it. The man points, and this is the moment for Klein. But equally, he is in the right position and is able to understand and frame the shot elegantly and simply.

#### 4. HAS ITS CONTEXT IN PHOTOGRAPHY

A good photograph is taken with an understanding of the range of imagery already out there for public view. This is dangerous ground when it gets close to pandering to an audience, as just mentioned, but photography is so embedded in the present, and so much a part of everyone's daily visual diet, that it can't help but have a cultural context. Photography is by nature contemporary, and most people like it that way, dealing with the here and now. Nineteenth-century photography really does belong in the nineteenth century—fascinating and valuable, but not part of the present. An experienced photographer knows where his or her imagery fits into the context of others. Some photographers strive to be like others, or at least to head in the same direction. Others strive for the opposite—to distance themselves from certain others. All of them, however, realize that their work is likely to be judged in a wider context. Anyone who chooses still-life photography, for example, and believes they have something worthwhile to bring to the genre, cannot escape the legacy of figures like Outerbridge and Penn.

#### 5. CONTAINS AN IDEA

This doesn't have to be complicated or obscure, but any real work of art has some depth of thought. In a photograph, it may be a way of composing on the surface, or perhaps a more intellectual idea deeper down. It may even surprise the photographer looking through the edit later, but there still needs to be something that catches the imagination. In fact, it is all the more important in photography, given that photographs can be made without any thought whatsoever.

But of course, there's a lot of published imagery out there that seems full of cliché—idealess—and yet apparently successful. Where does this fit in? Success in photography, as in any other art, can come by appealing to the lowest common denominator. Many photographs that are simply successful are also seen by some as being irritatingly shallow. We don't need to upset anyone by pointing to particular examples; it's sufficient to see some of what sells as stock photography through agencies. This is not to say that a photograph like this is easy to take, as the art directors and photographers who do this for a living will rightly point out. But they tend to be compromised on ideas.



**A Village submerging in a sandstorm, Daqing, Heilongjiang, 2001–3, by Liu Weiqiang**

Among other things, this is an “idea” photograph, and the idea is: what does a violent sandstorm feel like? What does it do? Sandstorms are actually beyond most people's experience, but are strikingly unpleasant. Here we see, and partly feel, everything we need to know. There are the low clouds of sand raging across the landscape, which is bleak and ravaged. The woman's mask is pure documentary, but the motion blur gives us the buffeting. And her face is in our face, too close for comfort, which is very much what being out in a sandstorm feels like.

## 6. DOESN'T IMITATE

There is a long-held view that each art should concentrate on what it does best, and not try to imitate others. The influential American art critic Clement Greenberg, for instance, wrote that “the unique and proper area of competence of each art” lay within what “was unique in the nature of its medium.” It should not borrow from others, and in this way would “purify” itself. He was writing about Modernist painting, but the same applies perfectly to photography. So, a good photograph does not attempt to mimic other art forms, at least not without irony. Rather, it explores and exploits its own medium, and this means having a clear idea of what photography is good at. The German writer and critic Siegfried Kracauer wrote, “Generally speaking, photographs stand a chance of being beautiful to the extent that they comply with the photographic approach... Pictures extending our vision are not only gratifying as camera revelations but appeal to us aesthetically also.” More than this, a good photograph does not imitate others, in as much as any image can be completely new.

Thus, documenting is something at which photography is exceptional, and this leads to one approach that emphasizes clarity, objectivity and a calm, cool eye, without involving personal expression. The Paris photography of Eugène Atget, the social documentary portraits of August Sander, and the drab landscapes of Robert Adams follow this route. A large part of their appeal is that they are “sensitive and technically impeccable readings” (Siegfried Kracauer again). Reportage with expression, capturing especially evocative moments, is another approach that also relies on the uniqueness of the medium, as in the work of much of the Magnum cooperative. Another aspect of the medium is the specific optical characteristics in photography, such as flare, differential focus, motion blur, reflections and projections like shadows and caustics, which all offer rich possibilities for exploration, partly because they are so easily captured by the camera, and partly because they have an illusory quality parallel to photographs themselves.



© Eikoh Hosoe, Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, NYC

**A Man and woman 24, 1960, by Eikoh Hosoe**  
One of a series of photographs under the Japanese title “otoka to onna,” which treated the rivalry between the sexes by means of unusual juxtapositions of parts of naked bodies. Hosoe took the body as object, separated from individual personality. His psychologically charged imagery and dramatic lighting, highly original, were also an exploration of photographic form.

## DOES THE AUDIENCE MATTER?

The practical dangers of playing to an audience, as spelled out, are real enough. At a particular level in any art, the audience becomes suspicious, or is simply turned off, if it thinks the artist is just ticking boxes to make people happy. And yet photography that is financially successful clearly does meet the needs of its audience, and most successful photographers know perfectly well who likes their work, and why.

This raises two questions that few critics or commentators like to think about. Can a photograph be calculated to appeal, and still be good? And, even more tricky, does good photography always have to be challenging, or can it work if its sights are set to a more popular taste?

The first question first. The received wisdom on serious photography, mainly photojournalism and contemporary fine art, is that the photographer should stay pure to his

or her own agenda, and trust that the results are admired by a discriminating audience. The reality is usually more knowing. As mentioned above, all photographers who take it seriously enough to want to carve out a place for themselves are fully aware of where their work fits in—who the competition is, what picture editors and critics think, and so on. It helps, of course, that most photography is about some sort of capture from life, and only a small proportion is constructed and fabricated as in painting or sculpture. So far, this has helped to keep photography grounded, making it harder to be calculating than in other art.

The second issue is really about who sets the standards for judging photography. There are different audiences for it, as there are for any art. This is nothing new. You just have to think about the scorn that the West Coast Group *f/64* photographers, including Ansel Adams and

Edward Weston, heaped upon the Pictorialists. Weston called them “fuzzy-wuzzies,” and Adams considered their work “shallow sentimentalism.” Well, what goes around comes around, and the meticulous craftsmanship and grand landscape visions of Ansel Adams nowadays come in for criticism from those who champion a deadpan, uninflected style.

Another clash of audiences occurred in 1959, when Robert Frank’s road pictures were published as *The Americans* (this U.S. edition appeared a year after the original in Europe). *Popular Photography* was, and still is, the largest magazine on photography in the world, founded in 1937, and highly influential among amateur photographers in the United States. The editors’ review of the book was both dismissive and strongly critical, including “meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness.” Yet, as time went by, Frank’s

radical style came to be accepted as normal by more and more people. This well-known example is a classic case of the leading edge of photography gradually filtering down from an elite audience to a popular one. This is the model that art critics like, because it justifies their existence. They have been proved right to lead the way against the bad taste of the masses. Frank’s case, of course, proves nothing other than that his work broke through and stood the test of time. Many, many photographers who were seen as being part of the avant garde then simply didn’t make the grade, despite the hype being applied. It’s neither polite nor necessary to list any of these unknowns, but the argument that contemporary and challenging photography always leads the way is flimsy.

There is no neutral way to describe the “class” division between these two audiences. There is the smaller one that is more educated in contemporary art movements, more discriminating, looking for creative breakthroughs, possibly elitist and equally possibly feeling intellectually superior. There is the much larger audience that enjoys the more obvious appeal of clarity, skill and craft, more traditional, preferring to relax in front of art rather than be constantly challenged. And so on. Neither of these two audiences—let’s call them high-concept and popular for want of anything better—will ever change its fundamental likes and dislikes. The particular photographers and artists being looked at and judged may come and go, but the high-concept audience will always dismiss the obvious, lush, emotional, and beautiful in photography, just as the popular audience will always embrace these qualities. The two audiences have a mutual distrust, the view in one direction looking unsophisticated and too easily pleased, the view in the other elitism, pretension, and the emperor’s new clothes.

I’ll single out just one example of a popular audience reaction, which is the very American one towards romantic landscapes in the style of Ansel Adams and his color descendants, David

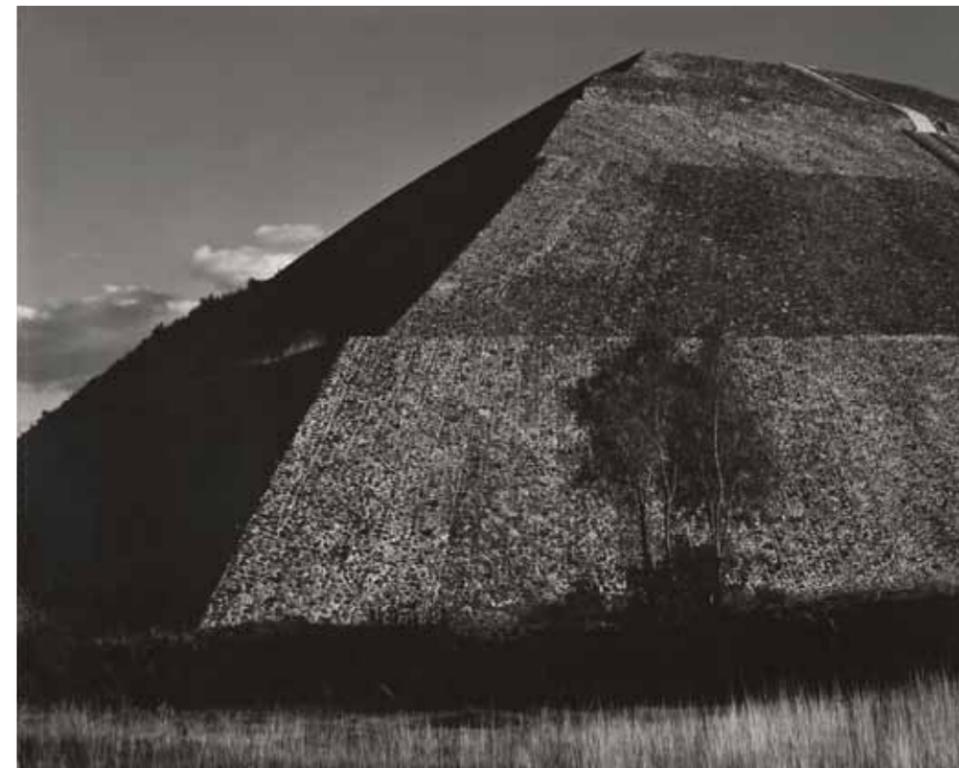
► **Untitled, 1984, Color photograph, 67 x 47 inches (170.2 x 119.4cm), Edition of 5, by Cindy Sherman**  
One of the anchors of American conceptual photography has been Sherman’s “several” series in which she photographs herself playing (often) exaggerated fictional roles. “There is a stereotype of a girl who dreams all her life of being a movie star,” she writes of her most famous series. “She tries to make it to the stage in films and either succeeds or fails. I was more interested in the types of characters that fail. Maybe I related to that.”



Muench et al. The standards of both beauty and craft are extremely high, and the audience is large and generally satisfied—just look at the number of books and calendars of this kind published—and also the number of books on how to take this kind of photograph. But you won’t find this work celebrated in contemporary galleries or contemporary museum shows. The reason is that it does not meet the conceptual criteria, and is not considered intellectually challenging.

What has changed is that the different audiences for photography have more voice these days, through the Internet, where few people

are shy about expressing opinion, likes and dislikes. Online forums and other social media that feature photography are having the effect of reinforcing differences between audiences, and hardening the edges. A common attitude is “we like it this way, and there are enough of us to matter.” So yes, audiences matter, and by being noisy and opinionated they increasingly help to set the standards by which photography is judged. You might not like this or that style, but you cannot reasonably dismiss it out of hand.



◀ **Pyramide del Sol, Mexico, 1923, by Edward Weston**

Like other West Coast photographers of the time, Weston combined formalism with technical excellence that extended to sharp focus throughout the image. The result, particularly when it was applied to landscape and sites such as this Mexican pyramid, was easy for a wide American audience to like, because it met rather than challenged basic assumptions.

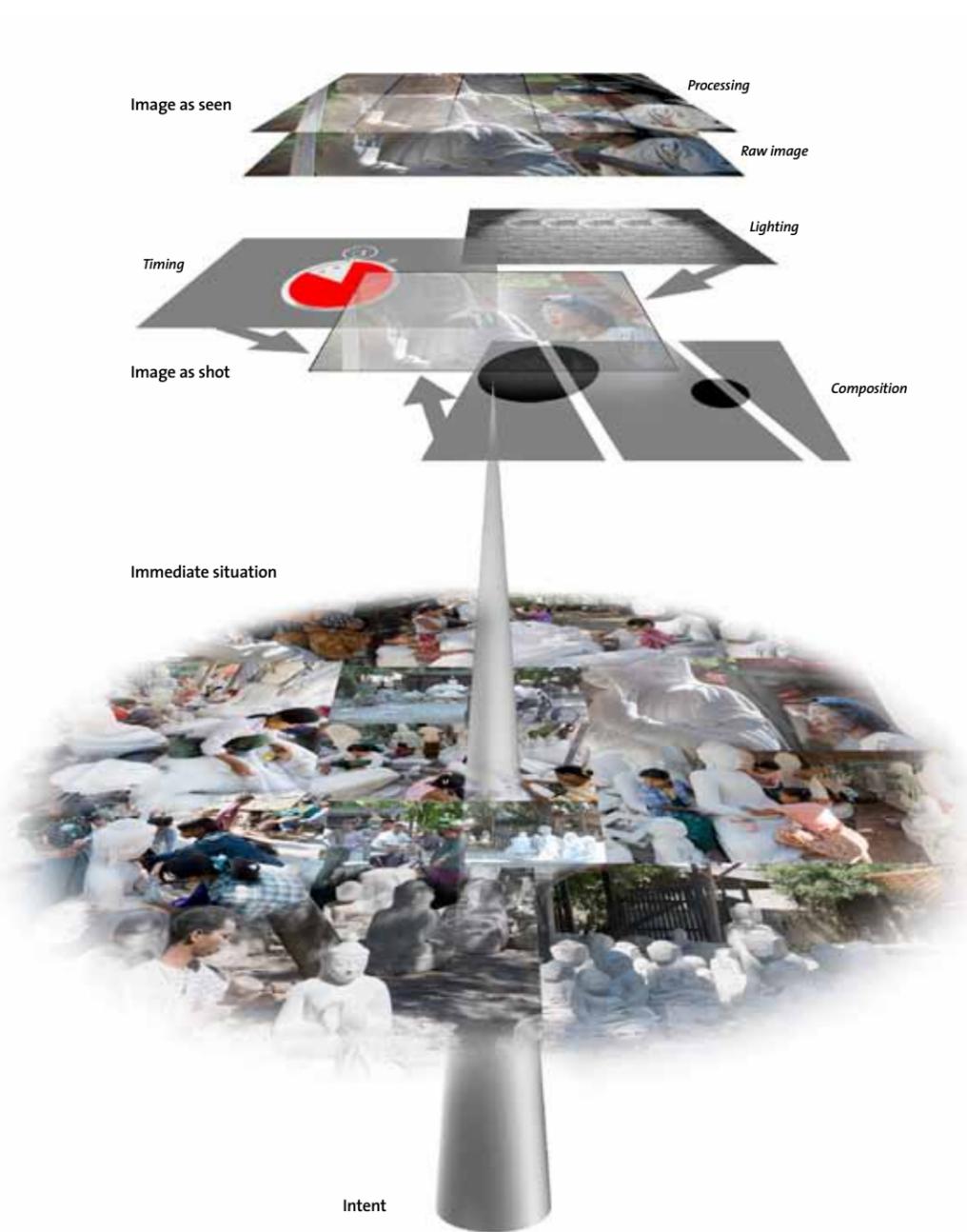
# HOW SHOOTING HAPPENS

In a sense, the creative process in taking a photograph is like a wedge. The options are often broad and open at the start, and narrow gradually because of the situation and because of whatever ideas the photographer has and techniques he or she wants to use. I particularly like the wedge comparison because photography, unlike any other visual art, ends in a point, a split-second of capture. Time itself drives the wedge home.

Let me try and make this clearer with a diagram. Or rather two diagrams, because there's a difference between unplanned and planned photography. Unplanned is much more common, and means, generally speaking, reacting to events and situations rather than trying to set them up and control them. It's how most photographers work. As we will see, the dynamics are sufficiently different that they affect the creative process.

## UNPLANNED

The first diagram shows the “wedge” in a street photography shot. It narrows from bottom to top as the photographer makes choices and refines them until, at the end (the top), it's the final decision on lighting, composition, and exact moment. The circumstances may look a little exotic to many people—a lane in the Burmese city of Mandalay given over to the carving of marble Buddha images—but in principle it's no different from countless street scenes around the world where there is some moderately interesting activity going on. Street photography is very much of the moment, and usually the only plan is to have no plan other than choosing a time and an area to walk around. That was the case here, an early morning walk, not knowing exactly what to expect. It's one thing knowing that such and such happens in a particular place—guide book stuff—but quite another finding lighting and exact subjects that appeal to a particular photographer. The general street activity forms the context. In this situation, the photographer followed a number of possibilities over the course of nearly an hour. Some of them were dead ends, others showed promise and were worth spending time on. This



▲ Above: The shooting process in a street setting, bottom to top. The large disc represents the range of possible subjects available. The choice is then narrowed down to the likeliest or most appealing. The upper section shows the interaction of composition, lighting, and timing. The very top is an add-on from digital photography: the range of ways in which the raw image can be processed and presented.



◀ Left: The actual shoot in a situation like this is likely to go through a number of frames, as the photographer tries to capture the best out of the final situation. This sequence took just over a minute. Part of this is simple improvement: trying to get a better frame than the previous ones.

▶ Top left: The final step of processing allows a huge range of interpretations, and all of those available in a standard raw processor are valid.

meant trying to improve on one aspect or another: camera position, moment, lighting, composition, varying focal length, and so on. The workers were there all day, so it was a general situation that could take some on-the-spot mini-planning.

Something we'll come back to later under “Photographers’ Skills” is the problem of when to give up on a possible subject, and when to keep going. Dorothea Lange once said, “Photographers stop photographing a subject too soon before they have exhausted the possibilities.” That's too sweeping a statement, but it highlights the dilemma that many photographers have to face every day. There are shots that can never be repeated—the photograph on page 141 of the D-day landings is one example—but there are also those that look like they could be improved upon, with some creative effort and a bit of luck. But how long do you spend on these before moving on to the next possibility? One of the marble-carving scenes that the photographer

chose to follow through was this one. The lighting, with all the marble dust flying around, was one attraction. Another was the man's face, covered in white dust except for lips bright red from chewing betel. Then there was the correspondence between worker and statue.

Choice of camera position, focal length, depth of field and exposure—all approximate—were the next step, and the last seventy seconds were taken up with refining these, particularly the composition. That meant small movements to the camera position, slight adjustments to focal length, and waiting for certain moments in the man's work. This took up a dozen frames. As shown here, the final moment of shooting meshes three things: lighting, composition, and timing. Of these, composition is a catch-all, combining not only framing and focal length, but also the depth of field and the speed at which movement is captured—frozen or blurred. These last two are set, respectively, by the aperture and shutter

speed, and this is the point at which the camera's technical controls also have an effect on the character of the image. Aperture, shutter speed, and the ISO setting (formerly film speed) have one role in fixing the exposure, but also another in creating the character of the image. This may sound like it's from the pages of a camera manual, but these choices, well applied, can make a real difference to an image.

That's it, the moment of capture, but one more step remains. The way the image is processed brings its own qualities, never more so than in digital photography, where it is both a necessary step and one full of choice. The choices involve contrast, saturation, brightness, together with more obscure qualities for which new names have had to be invented, like clarity and vibrance. As far as the subject is concerned, the photography stops with the shutter release, but the image itself needs these later processing steps.



## GLOBAL PHOTOGRAPHY

One of the most important recent changes in the world of photography is that photography is now finally international. It was not seen that way before; instead, it was taken almost without question as a Western activity. Until at least the middle of the twentieth century, the perception of photography was as something that Americans and Europeans did. There were a very, very few exceptions, such as Manuel Álvarez Bravo in Mexico, but, by and large, Indian, Chinese, African, and South American photographers might not have existed as far as published photography was concerned.

This is a little strange. Photography was supposed to be universal, to cross barriers of culture and language. Wasn't that the idea behind the hugely popular exhibition *The Family of Man* mounted in 1955 by Edward Steichen? He wrote that its goals were "to show the relationship of man to man; to demonstrate what a wonderfully effective language photography is in explaining man to man..." And later, Cornell Capa, photographer, curator and younger brother of Robert Capa, wrote that photography "is the most vital, effective and universal means of communication of facts and ideas between people and between nations."

These may be true, but while photography could be a universal means of communication, the twentieth-century media that delivered it to audiences were not. Photography flourished more than anywhere else in magazines, especially in the great picture magazines like *Life*, *Look*, *Picture Post*, *Paris-Match*, and *National Geographic*. Photographs depend on being seen by as many people as possible, and until very recently mass media meant print media. Print media meant large publishing corporations, so that effectively very few people—owners, editors and picture editors—got to decide what was good photography and what would interest their readers. As the market for these magazines was in the West, it followed naturally that published photography would be about things that Westerners wanted to see, and by Western photographers.

More than this, magazines and newspapers are language-specific, and it was America that had the largest affluent market for print media in the world. It still does, for that matter, as anyone in book publishing knows. *Life* magazine's circulation at its peak was 13.5 million copies a week; the *National Geographic* is now nearly nine million copies a month. In these two areas, weekly and monthly, no other picture magazine has ever come anywhere close. And until the decline set in in the 1970s, picture magazines were the vehicle for important photography (*National Geographic* and the *Smithsonian* still are healthy exceptions). That made magazines like *Life* the arbiters of what and who was good in photography, so there was naturally an Americentric bias. Now, America has something of a corporate sensibility. Large corporations get a measure of public respect that they do not in Europe. Part of the reason may be that Americans are joiners by nature, despite the ideal of rugged frontiersman independence. Not only this, but corporate America and government have generally worked together. Hence all the major picture magazines have been essentially conservative and "American" in spirit.

Most Americans think of the twentieth century as an American century, and with good reason. It was the period in which the United States grew economically and politically to dominate the world stage. It was also the period when photography blossomed professionally, and as art, and for amateurs, so perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised that Americans tended to think that photography belonged to them. As (American) art historian Gretchen Garner wrote in her excellent book *Disappearing Witness*, "for most of the twentieth century, photography flourished most strongly in the United States."

For the first two-thirds, until approximately the beginning of the 1970s, photography was understood by most people to have one job, to document. It showed its audiences how things looked, how people looked and behaved, and the unfolding of events on the world stage and in ordinary street scenes. Sometimes photographers



▲ *Through the doors of a wrestling school, Delhi, 1989*, by Raghu Rai  
A member of Magnum, Rai is one of the relatively few non-Western photographers who have long had international status.

idealized, invented, even distorted the truth, but the broad direction was still the same: making a visual record of life and the world. Things changed rather when photography discovered post-modernism in the 1970s, and even more so with digital and broadband. The point is that photography found its documentary role while America was booming, and it made for an effective relationship.

In addition, photography in America has also notably been supported and directed by non-media organizations. One of the most powerful in its time was the Farm Security Administration, which in the 1930s commissioned photographers like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn to document the Depression in rural areas. Then again, in the 1960s came the National Endowment for the Arts, with grants for those photographers who were hooked into the art-academic world. Many millions of dollars were disbursed this way in the 1970s. This was also the time when the Museum of Modern Art began to have great influence under its new curator of photography, John Szarkowski, and the combination of money and official approval meant that American photography started to be molded and supported in an organizational way. In contrast, consider the much less effective and much less confident role of Britain's equivalent, Tate Modern, which held its first show on photography in 2003, three decades later! In the United States in the 1970s, writers from outside the field, like Susan Sontag, chimed in, and before long there was a whole raft of graduate programs in photography in colleges and universities. In effect, American photography acquired official academic status and ever greater prominence, which never happened to anything like this extent in any other country.

In summary, a large and affluent market with a common language and many common cultural ideals allowed the growth of picture magazines, at a time when they were the main vehicle for displaying photography. Added to this was quasi-official support from government bodies and the academic art world. The result:

Western photography, with a strong bias towards America...until now.

Photography is no longer ruled by magazines, no longer even by print media, although for the time being it is print that pays photographers to reproduce their work much more than online media. As photography comes more and more to be published on millions of independent web sites and through forums, the center of gravity is shifting. And the biggest change is that this is worldwide, and begins to redress a serious historical imbalance. It also means that we are beginning to see photography that was "lost" because of the earlier Western bias. For example, in 2003-4, the Guangdong Museum of Art put on an exhibition called *Humanism in China: Contemporary Record of Photography*. It contained reportage work of the highest quality from the 1960s to the present day, hardly any of which has so far been seen outside China (we have eight images in this book). This is just one example of many.



**A On the train from Wuhan to Changsha, 1995, by Wang Fuchun**

Included in the important 2003-4 Guangdong Museum of Art show, Wang did a major reportage series on China's rail system. Here, a passenger who bought a ticket without a seat, has improvised a bed from the back of a chair.



“Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography”/Liu Yiwei

There’s a simple proposition here. Reading photographs and taking photographs help each other. More than that, they enhance each other. The more you know about the process of taking photographs, the easier it is to understand what another photographer was trying to do and how he or she set about it. And the reverse is true. If you know better how to read someone else’s photograph, you’ll be better equipped in taking your own. In the world of contemporary photography this has particular resonance, because so many people now use a camera as a means of expression—often creative expression. As I mentioned a little earlier, under “What a Photograph Is...and Isn’t,” much of the audience for photography considers itself as photographer.

So, what does it take to be able to read a photograph without a critic’s prompt-line? First, we need to know what the photographer was setting out to achieve. Also how the photographer chose to treat it in a way that was different from others—style, in other words. And finally, there are the actual circumstances and the timing, blow by blow. This last is quite often secret knowledge, unless the photographer happens to want to explain all, as Ansel Adams (but not many others) did. His book *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs* is a wonderful recapitulation of situations turned into images, on levels that range from the technical to the conceptual. It works particularly well for his kind of photography—large-format, considered, American grand

▲ **Worker on a viaduct, Beijing, 2002, by Liu Yiwei**  
As China began major construction projects on a scale never experienced before, photographers sought to capture often surreal scenes, poised between desolation and development. The timing in Liu’s shot of one of Beijing’s ring roads is impeccable—and essential. The single worker establishes the context.

► **Female lower half in seamed stockings, yellow background, by Guy Bourdin**  
One of Bourdin’s series for the shoe manufacturer Charles Jourdan, in which he created mysterious and ambiguous narratives, often sexually charged and always surprising. Bourdin’s compositions and styling were refreshingly eccentric.

landscape—but not for most others. Nevertheless, thinking as photographers, we can still make an attempt to work some of this out, even when the photographer hasn’t added footnotes. The sequence goes: Intent → Style → Process.

That’s not to say that most photographs are actually taken in this order. It isn’t usually a case of “I’m going to do this, and I’ll apply this style, and...ah, here’s a good subject, I’ll tweak the composition just so...” But if we’re reading a photograph, we should have an idea of all three. Intent is what the photographer sets out to do, Style is the individual way in which he or she decides to do it, and Process is making it happen, on the ground so to speak. Reading a photograph means deconstructing these three. At the end of this process of reading, we should be better equipped to decide for ourselves how well the photograph succeeds. Is it good? If so, how good?

This method is different from the usual approach and commentary on photographs, which tends to be distanced and cool. This is more like full immersion. The idea, and the ideal, is to try and put yourself in the situation in which the photograph was taken, and in the mind of the photographer. Quite often, there is not enough information to be had just from the image in front of you, and we need to dig for more. In order to read a photograph as a photographer, you need to reconstruct the aims, the personality and the techniques of the person who shot the image, all from the evidence contained inside the frame, helped by whatever else you can find out from research. It’s a kind of detective work, even forensic.

Not only that, but as the reader of a photograph, you are presented with everything in reverse order. It starts with the result, there for all to see. What appears in the frame is usually the very last fraction of a second in a series of events that goes all the way back to a photographer’s creative development. From this final frozen image, go a few seconds backwards into the immediate situation—to what was happening around the camera at the time, and in many

images what the subjects were doing right up to that moment. This is the sharp end, as it were, of Process, the blow-by-blow decisions and actions during the moments of shooting, which are often brief and concentrated. If you think back to all the details of what was going on at the time for each of your own photographs, you know just how different and specific each situation was, and how unlikely it is that other people would be able to know all of it.

The immediate situation is the exact place and event. Being at the right place and at the right time is central to taking a good photograph, as I well remember being instructed by one of the first art directors I worked for, Lou Klein of *Time-Life*. It’s important when reading a photograph to have a pretty good idea of what that time and place were. And looking at the image as photographers, we would all try and project ourselves into it. What would you have done then and there? Interestingly, some strong

situations have a certain kind of logic that tends to drive photographers to do similar things. The two photographs on pages 160–161 are an extreme and deliberately chosen example of this. As described there, the personality and style of the two photographers, Philip Jones Griffiths and Tim Page, could hardly have been more different, but there they were together on that day in Saigon in the same place. The similarity between the two images comes as less of a surprise to professional photographers than it does to most people, because they can more easily project themselves into that situation and figure out the last few moments of the process for themselves.

Go back further in time from the immediate situation and you have the general setting—the context. Context can be historical, cultural, artistic, and is the background to the shooting. For example, if you are looking at and judging a nineteenth-century photograph of a place, it’s important to know that photography at that



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time was being used to show how destinations looked to people who had never seen them, who rarely traveled, and who would probably never visit such places. A very simply composed landscape of the Pyramids and Sphinx outside Cairo, or of the Rocky Mountains, may not set your spine tingling, but at that time they were like the first pictures from another planet. The public was thrilled to see such strange sights. And remember that these images, which now have an antique look, were then the cutting edge of contemporary. The technology also was exciting. Huge mahogany cameras, and glass plates that the photographer had to coat before using, were advanced technology. All this and more is the kind of thing that makes up context.

So, there are two sets of things to think about, and they intersect towards the end-point of the shooting. One is what the photographer brings to it—intent, style, and process. The other is the circumstances, from context to the immediate situation. Reading a photograph involves having some idea about both, and one way of looking at it is that the photographer has a purpose and a style, and drives these into a particular situation.

Let's get down to practicalities. What we need is a procedure, a kind of system, for being able to look at any photograph and understand how and why it was taken. A sort of viewer's guide. As far as I know, this hasn't been done in quite this way, in book form. What follows is a set of questions for any viewer to ask himself or herself. As so much information is often missing from the photograph alone, and because we're dealing with an enormous variety of imagery, there will not always be satisfactory answers, but this in itself is useful: the difficult questions often identify the areas of ambiguity and uncertainty in a picture.

## Reading a photograph: ten questions to ask yourself

1. Pay attention to your first impression—what strikes you immediately? First impressions sometimes get closer to the heart of an image and its effect than a lengthy study. However, some images strike home faster than others: a photograph that celebrates rich colors will inevitably make a stronger first impression than a conceptual fine-art image that needs to be looked at carefully.

2. What genre of photography does it belong to? This is usually fairly obvious, though not always. The generally recognized genres, from Landscapes to Portraits to Still Life, are the subject of the beginning of the next section, from page 38 onwards.

3. What was the intended use? This is not always obvious, and may seem an unfair question to have to consider, but at the same time it can often help you to understand more. For example, a news photograph is shot with some very specific objectives, and in particular circumstances. There are three major groups of use: editorial, advertising/commercial, and fine art. Within these, there are also different dynamics, such as between news and feature photography (both editorial), and between high-exposure, high-profile advertising photography and corporate annual reports.

4. What was the immediate situation in which the shot was taken? In other words, what was going on around the photographer? This would be much more relevant in, say, street photography than in a studio, but it's important to know the difference.

5. Is it an unplanned or planned photograph? From the point of view of shooting this is one of the biggest differences of all. A genuine street shot is totally unplanned, a studio shot is all planned, but in between there is a huge range. And while a studio set-up is always what it appears to be, the same can't be said for reportage. Photographers are usually trying to make things work according to their idea of the image, and so asking people to move, or do this, or stop doing that, is extremely common. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, unless the image is presented as something it is not. At times, planning and intervention borders on deception (see page 118).

6. Thinking as a photographer in the same situation, what technical details are obvious? Note that this is important only if details such as the format of the camera (large, small) or the aperture or shutter speed, have a significant effect on the image. A slow shutter speed, for example, might impart motion streaking, but on the other hand it might be due to camera movement. And in either case it might be deliberate, or just inevitable, or even incompetent.

7. Are there any obvious styles or mannerisms used by the photographer? This could be anything from a virtuoso handling of light (see the image by Trent Parke on page 182) to an unexpected choice of timing. Some images wear more style on their sleeves, so to speak, than others. Some contemporary fine-art photography, of the uninflected variety, avoids obvious stylistic technique to such an extent that this itself becomes a style!

8. Getting down to the fundamentals, what was the purpose of the shot? The photographer's intent, in other words. Some images have more conscious purpose behind them than others, so it's easy to fall into the trap of crediting more deliberation than there was. And a good photograph does not have to be intellectual—it could be more visceral, less thought through, and all the better for it.

9. Are you missing background information that would help you understand and appreciate the image better? Often, of course, you might not know, but there are times when you might think to yourself, for example, "If the situation was what I think it looks like, that was a very clever way of dealing with it." Or more crudely, but unfortunately more commonly these days, a shot that could be amazing would be worthless if it turned out that it had been Photoshopped.

10. Finally, does the image work? Is it good? This means evaluating it in the light of the previous nine questions. But it is also the sometimes brutal assessment of question 8. You could distill the judgement of photography into three questions only: What did the photographer set out to do? How did he/she do it? Does it succeed?



Bill Brandt

### ▲ Stonehenge, 1940s, by Bill Brandt

Britain's most famous Bronze Age stone circle has, of course, attracted the attention of countless photographers, but few have been able to escape the trajectory into cliché as strongly as Brandt, in this image shot for *Picture Post*. The dramatic printing style that Brandt evolved serves this scene particularly well—having waited a long time for the right weather conditions, Brandt enhanced the contrast of weight and solidity between stones and snow.