

READING AS A METHOD OF PHOTOGRAPHIC CRITICISM

by Terry Barrett

Criticism is a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language primarily designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art.

Morris Weitz¹

Intelligent critical literature on photographs is barely discernible. No other art of comparable importance in our time possesses a body of literature more imbalanced or humdrum.

Henry Holmes Smith²

Until recently, creative activities for children were thought of as limited to the making of art. More and more teachers now realize that talking and writing knowingly and perceptively about works of art are equally creative tasks they can set for children.

Guidelines for Planning Art Instruction in the Elementary Schools of Ohio

Concurrently, but independently, a handful of photographic educators, and a growing number of art educators have been voicing concern that attention be given to critical response to art objects in conjunction with their production. The photographers are appalled with the dearth of qualitative photographic criticism, while art educators have been asking for an inclusion of the established discipline of art criticism into the cur-

riculum along with the production of art and the study of the history of art. This article is an attempt to further interest about photographic criticism in both educational communities.

In reviewing the body of photographic criticism, John L. Ward, in *The Criticism of Photography as Art*,³ has identified five major approaches; Pictorialism, Purism, Intentionalism, Archetypal Criticism and Reading. Briefly, Pictorialism is an aesthetic which states that a photograph is a form of art and ought to be judged by the same standards as other two dimensional art. In its historic context, however, the pictorialist evaluative criteria were rigid laws adapted from pictures which were painted between 1500-1850.

Purism is a later aesthetic, championed by such photographers as Edward Weston and Paul Strand, developed in opposition to Pictorialism for the purpose of liberating photography from an outdated painting aesthetic. The purists maintained that a photograph ought to extol the unique recording abilities of the medium. In Ward's words, "to the pictorialist, photography is a means; art is the end; to the purist, photography is both means and end, and talk about art is highly suspect."⁴ A second divisive issue concerns the object being photographed: for the purist the object is not merely the occasion but the reason for the photograph, while the pictorialist is more intent on expressing himself through the object.

Intentionalism is found in criticism of many art forms. A main spokesman for the intentionalist approach to photography is A. Krasznai-Krausz, who emphatically states the position in the *Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*:

The purpose of the photographer in making a particular picture must receive first consideration; whether his work appears to fulfill that purpose or falls short is, in fact, the only point that really matters.⁵

Archetypal Criticism is interpretive analysis which uses Jungian psychology to search for symbols which lie at the roots of all human experience. However, there is only one example⁷ of this approach in photographic literature, and at this point it cannot be considered a major approach.

Reading as a method of photographic criticism appeared in the 1950's, and is derivative of an earlier literary model developed by I. A. Richards and the New Critics who followed. Reading as adapted by Henry Holmes Smith, Minor White, and Walter Chappel is a procedure by which one attempts to uncover and communicate the various meanings a photograph may yield through visual analysis of the photograph itself, coupled with an avoidance of evaluation.

Of the five approaches, each with its set of intriguing problems, Reading is chosen for consideration here because it was proposed by teaching photographers expressly for use in the photography curriculum. Minor White and Henry Holmes Smith promoted criticism as an integral part of photographic study for two main reasons: to help people attend to meaning in photographs rather than limit themselves to technique and equipment, and to build a base for more substantive professional criticism. Over twenty-five years later the same needs are being expressed.

Photographic criticism as Reading was short-lived.

