



### Part III. Teaching about Photography: Types of Photographs

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# Part III

## Teaching About Photography: Types of Photographs

By Terry Barrett

*In this article. . .  
the last in a series. . . Barrett continues his  
analysis of photography as an aid for art  
teachers. "The assignment would not be to  
make a good or beautiful photograph, but  
to use the camera and darkroom to express  
something significant about what they are  
photographing."*

**T**here are all kinds of photographs made for all kinds of purposes, but all photographs share, to greater or lesser extents, the unique characteristics of "selectivity," "instantaneity," and "credibility" (Part I). Each of them can be interpreted by means of information drawn from the photograph's three sources of contextual information — "internal," "external," and "original" (Part II). A further aid to interpretation and evaluation is the category system presented here by means of which any photograph may be seen as belonging to one of six types: "Descriptive," "Explanatory," "Interpretive," "Ethically Evaluative," "Aesthetically Evaluative," and "Theoretical."

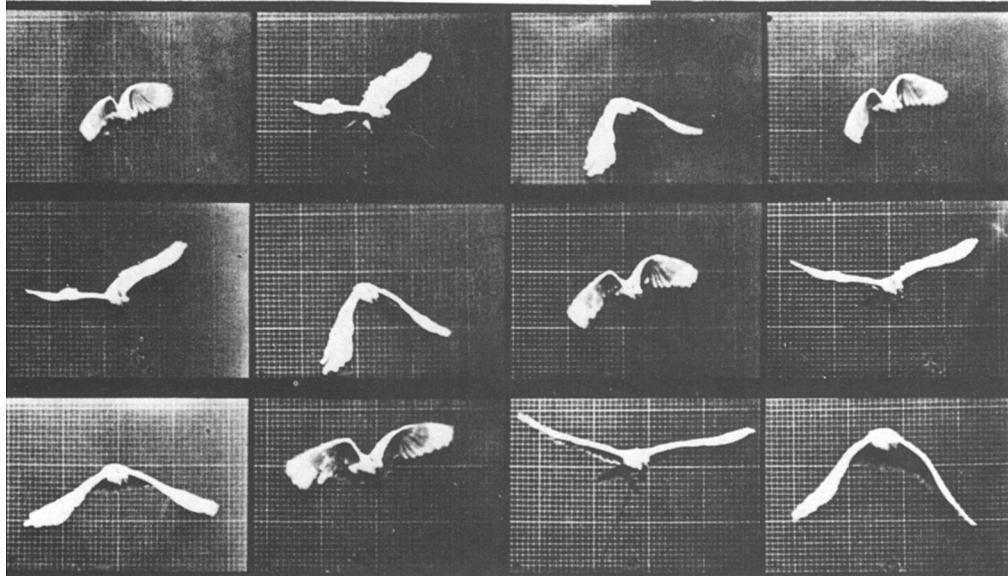
### **Descriptive Photographs**

All photographs describe, but some are made only to describe. From its inception, photography has been heralded as a quick, easy, and efficient means of visual description and one that has been trusted, oftentimes naively, as mechanical and objective. I.D. photographs, medical x-rays, security surveillance photographs, and NASA space exploration photographs are clear examples of photographs that are made to offer descriptive information and function descriptively. A portrait done in a commercial studio is made to

flatter the sitter by lighting, focus, angle, background, and a variety of poses and expressions; an I.D. photograph, however, attempts only to show what a person looks like.

### **Explanatory Photographs**

Explanatory photographs are very dependent on the descriptive information they contain but are made to go beyond description in an attempt to provide answers to questions of a scientific nature. *Exploring Society Photographically* (Becker, 1981) is an exhibition catalogue of such photographs and contains the work and explications of the work of several photographers. Some are artists, and some are social scientists, though they all investigate society with the camera to explain it from anthropological or sociological perspectives. Included in the book are visual studies of migrant farm workers, a comparison of a family-run restaurant and a MacDonalds' and the effects of a husband's stroke on a young couple's marriage. *Suburbia* by Bill Owens (1973), an exploration of a southern California community in photographs and brief quotes from those photographed, is another celebrated example of this type of photographic endeavor. Physical scientists frequently make photographs to answer questions; M.I.T. physicist



Edward Muybridge, "Cockatoo Flying," from *Animal Locomotion*, 1887, an example of an "explanatory" photograph, one which provides visual answers for questions asked about birds in flight.

Harold Edgerton has several fascinating photographs of very fast moving objects, such as bullets frozen for study by his cameras and strobes. Many press photographers also attempt to explain, seeking answers by means of photographs to the questions of Who, What, and Where?

#### **Interpretive Photographs**

Photographers who make interpretive photographs also offer information about the world, explaining phenomena, but from a personal, idiosyncratic, and non-scientific point of view. Duane Michals (Bailey, 1975) has photographed sequences entitled "The Spirit Leaving the Body," "The Creation," and "Death Comes to the Old Lady." Jerry Uelsmann (1973) makes multiply-exposed images of hamburgers in the sky, trees hovering above water, and angels emerging from crevassed rocks. Ralph Gibson (1973) has published a trilogy of photographic novellas without words, *Deja-Vu*, *The Somnambulist*, and *Days at Sea*. Interpretive photographs are fictive, poetic, and metaphoric, usually using actors, models, or situations directed by the photographer. Although interpretive photographs make explanatory claims about the world, their claims would be hard to prove with empirical evidence, and acceptance of their truth is

based on a viewer's willingness to believe them. In cases of dispute regarding the claims of explanatory photographs, however, an appeal to empirical data would help determine their truth or falsity.

#### **Ethically Evaluative Photographs**

Ethically evaluative photographs make moral judgments, take political stances, promote social causes, and are often passionate pleas to right wrongs. *Minamata* by W. Eugene and Aileen M. Smith (1975) is a clear case. The book passionately portrays the suffering and crippling of Japanese village fishermen poisoned by willful industrial pollution of the sea. The Smiths lived, ate, and protested with Minamata villagers and photographed their struggles, bringing international pressure to bear on the situation. The anti-Nazi photo montages of John Heartfield during the 1930's and 40's are earlier examples, as is the work of Lewis and Hine. Advertising images also belong in this category as visual promotions of what some would have us accept as the good life.

#### **Aesthetically Evaluative Photographs**

The history of photography has several well known aesthetically evaluative photographs by such renowned masters as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams, plus a host of contemporary

photographers. Sometimes these photographs present landscapes, nudes, and still lifes as inherently beautiful and worthy of aesthetic attention though more often than not it is *as they are photographed*. Minor White, in particular, delighted in taking commonplace and mundane aspects of the world, such as bird droppings on rocks, and photographically transforming them into pictures for aesthetic delight. Others have chosen to make us aware of the aesthetically displeasing.

### Theoretical Photographs

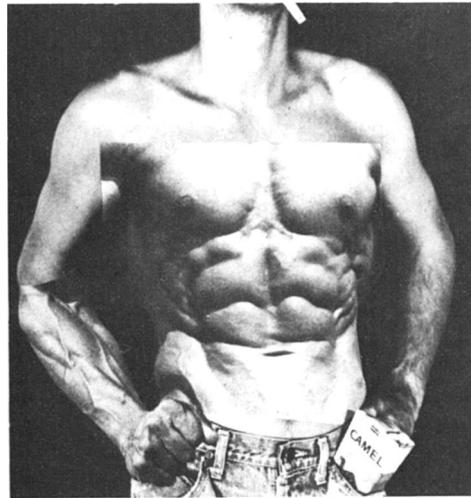
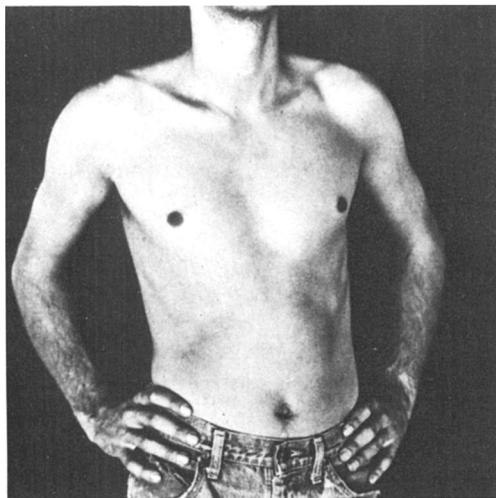
An increasing amount of photographs are not so much about life as they are about art, functioning as visual art criticism, art about art, or photographs about photography. Much of the photography under the label of conceptual art, in the 1970's, appropriately fits this category, and especially the post-Modernist photography of this decade. The recent re-photographing of other's works by Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince discussed in the original context section of Part II are good examples.

### Using The Categories

Attempts to place a photograph in one of these six categories is an interpretive act. As with all interpretations, placing a photograph into a category requires reasons in support of the placement, and any placement is open to counter-argument. Reasons for placement of a photograph in one category rather than another can be supported by appealing to information drawn from the photograph's contextual information: what is in the photograph, what surrounds the photograph on the gallery wall or in the book, what

else the photographer has done, and how others have considered the photographer. A photograph of an unknown person or object, in an unidentifiable place and time, by an unknown photographer, is very difficult to interpret and place within a category with any degree of confidence. In such cases where there is little information about the photograph apart from what is shown in it, the photograph can be run through all six of the categories to see where it might fit best or where it does not fit at all.

The categories are *overlapping*. All photographs are descriptive, contain explanatory and interpretive information, and implicit or explicit values. Most photographs can be enjoyed aesthetically, and all photographs are dependent on prior photographs and other art. To interpret a photograph by use of the categories, one seeks to decipher what the photograph is *most about*, how it was made to function, and how it is being used to function. Often a photograph is made for one purpose and is later used for a different function: a NASA photograph of the earth made from space functions descriptively in a NASA file drawer, but when that same photograph appears in *Time* magazine with a Mobil Oil logo or a jar of Tang, it becomes a promotional photograph for the company, an advertisement, and is ethically evaluative. Museum curators commonly displace photographs from other categories into the aesthetically evaluative category by hanging scientific, fashion, or press photographs on gallery walls. As critics and historians learn more about some photographs, their understanding of them



Ann Fessler, "Macho Sequence," Hand-tipped collage, 1980. An example of an "ethically evaluative" photograph which satirizes male macho values.

changes: when little was known about the work of Atget, his photographs were seen as informational documentaries, descriptive photographs of Paris made for painters to paint from. As more of his work was found and more of his life was revealed through historical scholarship, his descriptive photographs were more accurately seen as aesthetically evaluative and, today, his photographs are known as one of the great oeuvres of art photography.

By concentrating on the overlapping nature of the categories, one can run a photograph through all the categories and ask what if this were seen as descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, and so forth, and continuously garner new points of view and increased awareness about the photograph. Once a photograph has been interpretively considered and has been confidently placed in one of the categories, with supporting reasons, the photograph may also be *evaluated* by means of the categories. Does an ethically evaluative photograph sufficiently move us to moral outrage? Does an ethically evaluative photograph of the sufferings of victims of the conflict in Central America distract us from the suffering it is meant to depict by its composition, color, and general aesthetic appeal? Does an explanatory photograph present its subject objectively, or is it subtly imbued with covert judgments? What has been left in the camera's frame, and what has been left out, and why? What are the effects of these decisions?

#### Advantages Of The Categories

There are other ways of categorizing photographs. Long standing divisions are by the labels "straight" and "manipulated," "science" and "art," and by subject matter, such as nude, landscape, still life, or portrait. The straight-manipulated division is misleading because it assumes that there can be photographs that are unmanipulated, though it was shown in Part I that all photographs are highly selected images made by idiosyncratic individuals who necessarily transform and manipulate what they picture. The science-art division leaves too many photographs between its extremes; division by subject matter is division by the obvious. The six "descriptive," "explanatory," "interpretive," "ethically evaluative," "aesthetically evaluative," and "theoretical" categories are inclusive of all photographs and aid viewers in interpreting photographs they see.

To see a photograph of a face of a man and to comfortably label it as a "portrait" is not of much interpretive value. To see a photograph of a face of a man, however, and ask whether it is primarily descriptive, an attempt to interpret the personality of the man or a condemnation of the man, or whether it is commenting on the difference between painting and photographing a face is to ask important interpretive questions that, if answered, lead viewers to a decision as to what the photograph is about. Once a viewer has *interpreted* a photographic portrait to be, for example, a portrayal of the man as evil and malicious, (an "ethically evaluative" photograph),

the viewer can go on to *judge* the effectiveness of the photograph according to this function.

These categories can also be used as the bases for making photographs. As an assigned project, any of the categories give student photographers cause to consider what they are making a landscape or a portrait or a still life about. The assignment would not be to make a good or beautiful photograph, but to use the camera and darkroom to express something significant about what they are photographing. An assigned category leads photographers to bases for making judgments about the effectiveness of their photographic expression. A descriptive photograph of an object shot from too far away does not describe well, and an ethically evaluative photograph of suffering, made to conform to aesthetic criteria, may be so attractive as to distract from the suffering it is meant to express.

#### Conclusion

This series of three articles offers art teachers and students different ways to think and talk about photographs that they and others make. Part I discussed the nature of photography in a way that maximizes differences between photography and other art forms so that viewers can thoughtfully appreciate what photographs uniquely offer. Part II argued for the necessity of investigating photographs contextually based on a photograph's causal genesis: all photographs have been excised from the physical world, no matter how much they transform their original subject matter. Imaginatively placing the piece back into the whole is an important means of deciphering what the photograph is about. The six categories of this Part are a further aid to interpretation which renders the overwhelming multiplicity of photographic images into a manageable set of six functions.

When thoughtfully examining any photograph, any one of the concepts presented here may be used as a starting point. Interpretive activities can start or end with attempted category placements, contextual investigations, considerations about a photograph's use of time or space, or its look of authority. Photographs are considerably more than the automatic recordings of portable picturing machines and deserve detailed attention. ■

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