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Select Contemporary and Vintage Photography

The Language of the Camera Eye

Ansel Adams and Beaumont Newhall



Nancy Newhall (1908 - 1974)
Ansel Adams, Death Valley, 1947

The contributions of Ansel Adams (1902 - 1984) to further photography's acceptance as an art form are many. Besides his artistic works, he spent much of his time educating photographers in both the technical aspects of the medium and the formal aspects of image making. His highly technical system of exposure and development called the Zone System offered photographers the ability to control the tonalities in an image to the point that one could turn black to white or white to black. This complex system of understanding exposure and development when using traditional black and white materials liberated photographers from the technical side of things to concentrate fully on the image.

To my mind, Ansel Adams was the pioneer of what we call "The Photo Workshop". For years his Yosemite workshops educated photographers not just in technique but also in the Art of Photography and what life as a photographer looks like. His tireless efforts and generosity with his students are legendary.

Ansel was also an author. Publications of his own work are well known, but, in the late forties Adams, along with his co-author Robert Baker, began publishing *The Basic Photo Series*. Ansel devoted each of the five volumes to one essential aspect of the medium and explained it in depth: *Camera and Lens*, *The Negative*, *The Print*,

and *Natural Light and Artificial Light*. In the day, these books were “required” reading and I don’t think I ever entered someone’s darkroom or studio without seeing them on a shelf.

In the 1960’s KQED-TV, the public television station in San Francisco produced a series of films with Ansel Adams and Beaumont Newhall loosely modeled after *The Basic Photo Series*. These five films address such topics as *Photography as an Art*, *Points of View*, and *Technique*.

The film we are posting today is *The Language of The Camera Eye*. You will meet a young Ansel and Beaumont, somewhat stiff trying to follow a script. Although the feel of the film is dated, the content is not! Also, enjoy the piano music at both the beginning and end of the film. That’s Ansel playing!



Alfred Stieglitz (1864 - 1946)

Considered by many the father of the *art* of photography both as a noted gallerist, artist, and through his efforts as editor of both *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work*, two publications dedicated to elevating peoples understanding of the photographic medium. As a promoter of photography and modern art in America in his gallery An American Place he was first to exhibit many notable European and American artists integrating photography alongside other artistic mediums.

Stieglitz’s own photographic artworks broke new ground and understanding of the potential for the photographic medium. He was first to produce truly abstract imagery with the camera. His *Equivalent*s are seemingly cloud studies but they serve as visual metaphors for his emotional state at the time he pressed the shutter. His work demonstrates that the photographer’s tools are subservient to the artist’s vision and intent.

Stieglitz made a few hundred photographs that he considered *Equivalent*s. All feature clouds in the sky. Almost all of them are printed dark so that the sky often appears black or nearly black. However, the contrast between sky and the much lighter clouds is striking in all but a few of the prints. Some images include the sun, either as a distant element in the photograph or as a illuminating force behind the clouds. He

wrote, "I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in 40 years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life - ... my aim is increasingly to make my photographs look so much like photographs that unless one has eyes and sees, they won't be seen - and still everyone will never forget them having once looked at them."



Alfred Stieglitz (1864 - 1946)
Equivalent, Series XX No. 9, 1929



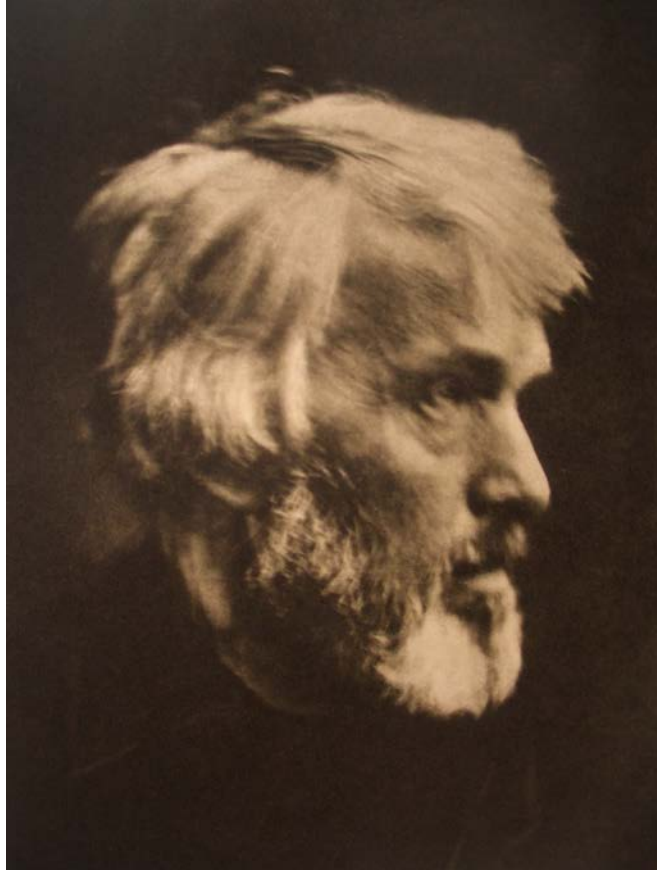
Alfred Stieglitz (1864 - 1946)
Equivalent, Set C2 No. 4, 1929



Frederick Evans (1853 - 1943)
Height and Light in Bourges Cathedral, 1903
Photogravure from *Camera Work IV*



Clarence H. White (1871 - 1925)
Telegraph Poles, 1903
Photogravure from *Camera Work III*



Julia Margaret Cameron (1815 - 1879)
Carlyle, 1893
Photogravure from *Alfred Lord Tennyson and His Friends*

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 - 2004)

Cartier-Bresson is considered the father of *reportage* or street photography. He is most known for the phrase, *The Decisive Moment*. Although his works are steeped in surrealism and his compositions define, *The Golden Rule*, he is most responsible for elevating work with a small 35mm camera to that of an art form.

In the 1947 catalogue for Henri Cartier-Bresson's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, Beaumont Newhall wrote:

Cartier-Bresson's photographic technique is simple and straightforward. He uses a miniature camera with an apparently effortless reflex action. When a subject presents visual possibilities, he seeks the most revealing camera position rapidly. At a split-second when the lighting, the form and the expression are one, he releases the shutter. The precise composition of the final print is determined at the peak of emotional intensity. So definite is this instantaneous reaction that the entire negative is used for the final print. ...There is nothing accidental or unforeseen in his photography. On the contrary, elements which are essential to the picture extend to the very limits of the negative. He will tell you that he likes his photographs sharp, aigu. By this he is referring not so much to the quality of the optical image as to the precision of plastic organization and the intensity of content. The problem of arrangement of form within the rectangle of the negative concerns him more than the mechanics of the medium. He feels that so much attention has been paid by photographers to mechanical technique alone, that style has been overlooked.



Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 - 2004)
Seville, Spain, 1933

Dorothea Lange (1895 - 1965)

Beaumont and Nancy Newhall had dreamed of founding a journal or quarterly magazine modeled after Alfred Stieglitz's legendary *Camera Work*. Never having the time or energy to do it themselves they shared this idea with colleagues at the historic 1951 *Aspen Conference*. This conference was attended by many leaders of the field including: Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Laura Gilpin, Frederick Sommer, Dorothea Lange, Eliot Porter, Minor White and numerous others. A number of photographic endeavors were born during this conclave, both SPE (Society for Photographic Education) and Aperture Magazine. Much is written about the *Aspen Conference* and I encourage you to read more about it. We are still benefitting from much of what was discussed during those days.



Beaumont Newhall (1908 - 1993)
Dorothea Lange at Aspen, Colorado (with Ansel Adams), 1951



Dorothea Lange (1895 - 1965)
Untitled, Diptych (Two Views of Kiva), New Mexico , 1938

These two photographs have a great story. According to Beaumont, Dorothea was not pleased with the classifications in his publication *History of Photography: Pictorial Photography, Straight Photography, and Art Photography* etc. She was especially unhappy with his chapters entitled *Documentary Photography* and *Photojournalism*. They were good friends and would discuss these labels at length and often joked about them. One day Beaumont received the two photographs illustrated above in the mail from Dorothea with a note,
"Which one is the Documentary photograph?"

Brett Weston (1911 - 1993)

Van Deren Coke described Brett Weston as the “child genius of American Photography”. He was the second of the four sons of Edward Weston and Flora Chandler. While living in Mexico with his father and Tina Modotti in 1925, he began taking photographs and by 1927 his work was exhibited. At age 17 his photographs were included in the International exhibition at *Film und Foto* in Germany and at 21, had his first one-man museum retrospective exhibition at the De Young Museum in San Francisco. I wrote last week that Brett was included among the members of Group f64 when he was invited to exhibit with them.

This photograph, *Untitled (Wire Cross)*, which was included in today’s film, is an exquisite vintage print that came from Brett to a family member.



Brett Weston (1911 - 1993)
Untitled (Wire Cross), 1956

W. Eugene Smith (1918 - 1978)

Considered the originator of “The Photo Essay” his journalistic projects covered the planet. Essays such as *The Country Doctor*, and *Nurse Midwife: Maude Callen* were presented in their entirety in *Life Magazine*. He photographed Albert Schweitzer’s clinic in Africa as well as tracing the mercury poisoning of a whole village in Minamata, Japan. His war photographs are as much a document of the horror of war as a plea against all war. Risking his life a multitude of times and having suffered numerous injuries he later turned his camera toward his family devoting his work to

“beauty” rather than the ills of war and the less fortunate. These family photographs were a departure for him and helped him heal from all he had seen.

This photograph is of his daughter Juanita holding her pet mice.



W. Eugene Smith (1918 - 1978)
Gus Gus, 1960