We see nature both instrumentally and as a refuge from our instrumentality; our systems of production mirror processes found in nature, yet we respond to each quite differently. When we are in awe of nature's processes it is because, rather than in spite of, nature's remoteness from human purpose. Nature is, intrinsically, elsewhere; nature has nothing to do with us; her back is turned way. To contemplate the ordinary landscape is a form of gazing into the abyss, absent any implication of fascination or horror. Nature's opacity seems a possible refuge from our own subjectivity, yet, somehow, we never really seem to close with nature. We might choose to believe, as did Rilke, that through the medium of art the landscape and man find one another. Yet this argument, for all its obvious appeal seems based more in hope than fact. Perhaps it is because we have less confidence in the power of our arts, or perhaps it is that we have come to understand that our estrangement is beyond reconciliation. This, I believe, is what is 'modern' in the landscape.

2 As one artist and critic, Mario Pfeiffer, recently did, not with Park City, but with The new Industrial Parks near Irvine, California. Editor's note: See Pfeiffer, Reconsidering The new Industrial Parks near Irvine, California by Lewis Baltz, 1974 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).
3 Joe Deal, several years later, coined the term 'optical democracy.' I wish I had.
4 I am indebted to Marvin Heiferman for the phrase "Landscape as real estate."


American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old To Rock, Too Young To Die

Some events pass more quickly in America than in Europe. The British Century, from Waterloo to Sarajevo, very nearly spanned its allotted ten decades; the American Century dispensed with itself in only three. Those thirty years were bracketed by two iconic images, the first of US Marines raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi in February 1945, the second of another American flag, folded and wrapped in plastic, being carried by the United States Ambassador to Cambodia, John Gunther Dean, as he walked out of Phnom Penh a few days before Khmer Rouge forces captured the city.1 The first image was one of the most widely reproduced photographs of its time. The second, portraying an equally historic moment, was not.

The two photographs reflect some of the innumerable ways that America's realities and perceptions changed over those thirty years, as well as the changed status of photography. In 1945 Americans communicated the appearance of the world's great events to each other through the medium of still photography; by 1975, by and large, they did not, and not even the recrudescence of the Lazarus-like Life magazine could gainsay that difference.

By the 1970s still photographs, so far as they could be claimed to document anything, recorded a more evanescent subject: America's sense of itself. Yet despite the shift from a mass audience to a more limited one – the word 'elite' does not really apply – the 1970s witnessed an intensity of photographic activity in America unequalled since the 1930s, and an acceptance of
photography as a major medium of expression unparalleled in our history. Photography was one of the brighter spots in that otherwise bleak decade. It is not more engaging to think of the 1970s as the years between Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman than to remember them as the decade that began with the Kent State killings and ended with the election of Ronald Reagan?

In the 1970s a number of institutions came into existence, or came to the height of their powers, that materially affected the enterprise of American photography. The most pervasive of these was the system of higher education. In 1945 very few photographers held academic degrees in photography or the fine arts; in 1975 most of those styling themselves photographers or artists were able to do so on the strengths of such academic credentials.

During the 1970s college and university offerings in the fine arts, and most especially in photography, metastasized at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, finding a place in the most respected institutions in the land. Princeton University endowed a chair in the History of Photography and Modern Art, and Yale University endowed a chair in the practice of photography. Even more crimson dowager of American universities, Harvard, while officially cleaving to the traditional line that the history of art is a proper subject of academic interest while its practice is not, none the less offered courses in the practice of photography taught by both resident faculty and distinguished visitors. Oddly enough, in view of such interests at the highest levels of the Ivy League, the most successful and prestigious program in photography was at the University of New Mexico, which attracted artists and scholars from around the nation and the world, many of whom would go elsewhere and initiate similar programmes in other universities.

Expanding enrollment and expanding employment in the university system (including both private and public colleges and universities, art schools, and two-year colleges) meant that higher education was becoming both major educator and employer of serious photographers. It is probable that teaching had supplanted commercial or magazine work as the 'other' work of most serious photographers by the mid-1970s; especially outside New York where relatively few opportunities existed for the newly-made Master of Fine Arts other than to return as an employee to the system he or she had just left. Such academic recidivism (teachers teaching students to become teachers, who would teach students to become teachers ad infinitum) was only imaginable in a rapidly expanding sector of a healthy economy. Needless to say it did not last into the 1980s.

While the system was expanding, its benefits were obvious. For the student financial support and, in the 1960s and early 1970s, some shelter from military conscription — the war in Vietnam had made a generation of scholars. For the professor a secure, if not large pay cheque, an employer more tolerant of artistic freedoms than most, and a power base of sorts. The drawback was that most of this produced a photography that was academic in the most unflattering sense of that word.2

One of the most salutary effects upon photography of this willy-nilly schooling was, as John Szarkowski noted,3 not to serve but to create a need. The thousands of students who encountered photography as a fine art, officially encouraged in the highest halls of learning — even those with the good sense to seek their vocations elsewhere — would nevertheless retain something from that contact and might come to form the nucleus of an educated, critical, informed and demanding audience
for serious photography. As yet, the goal has been met only imperfectly. Nevertheless it does represent a small step toward the creation of such an audience. And if that audience exists anywhere, European friends would have us believe it is here in America, however far short it has fallen of our best expectations.

Another institution that was seminal in the support of American photography during the 1970s was the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency chartered to provide public funding for the arts in the United States. Originally discussed seriously during the Kennedy administration, it, like so many Kennedy proposals, became a reality only after his death. And, like so many Kennedy programmes passed into law under Lyndon B. Johnson, languished in relative obscurity. After a lacklustre White House Festival of the Arts in 1965, with poet Robert Lowell and photographer Paul Strand publically refusing to attend, LBJ’s ardour for the arts was dampened. Guns, butter, and culture seemed to strain our resources too far.

Ironically, it was during the Nixon administration that the NEA began to receive the massive funding that made it the major single factor in American cultural life during the 1970s. Ironic, because of Nixon’s well-advertised loathing for the intelligentsia, who had returned his contempt since his early days as a Red-baiting junior Congressman. Reliable sources have it that one of Nixon’s advisers suggested that he neutralize the American cultural community by the time-honoured method of buying them off – at an annual cost vastly less expensive that a few hours of war-making in Indio-China. For whatever reason, and with whatever hopes, Nixon agreed to fund the NEA at a level that would make it the most visible presence in American cul-

tural life. The intelligentsia accepted the money and continued to despise Nixon.

One corollary to this was that funding for the arts, if it was to reflect credit on the administration, must be free of any partisan political influence; must be, in fact, above any such suspicion. Toward that end the NEA was staffed by outstanding professionals, whose loyalties were demonstratably toward furthering the arts in America than toward the government, and it remained the least politicized of any federal agency. It resembled in parts both the Canadian and British Art Councils, although at its zenith its funding surpassed either.

As a photographer one often felt that there was an unstated attitude, if not policy, of affirmative action toward those mediums least able to survive in the private sector: artists’ films, video, performance, and, especially, photography. In its heyday the NEA funded programmes – often several in each category – to sponsor the making, exhibition, publishing, public collecting, and criticism of photographs by living Americans. So pervasive was government funding that one wit suggested an ‘audience participation’ grant: close the circle of funding random citizens to go and look at all this product. It is good to remember when such an observation could still be humorous: with the triumph of the know-nothing wing of the Republican party and the election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency in 1980, funding for the arts was sharply reduced. The NEA remains intact today, but with far less influence than it had in the previous decade, and one doubts that even the valiant souls who steer this ship through its present stormy seas would really argue that it is now merely a tighter, ‘leaner’ vessel.

A major recipient of assistance from the National Endow-
ment for the Arts was American museums, and nowhere was the effect of this funding more evident that in the area of photographic exhibitions and collections. A number of American museums, including some of the most respected, had an historical commitment to photography in the arts, but the avalanche of interest in the 1970s made nearly every American museum desirous of making, if not a full programme, at least a respectable showing in the area of fine-art photography. Photography was relatively inexpensive to exhibit, acquire, and ship. It had a broad public appeal that did not go unnoticed by museum directors eager to report expanding attendances. And, finally, it was becoming fashionable in the most elite art circles. The 1960s had brought a building boom to the museum world, and a number of cities had impressive edifices without correspondingly impressive collections or exhibitions schedules. Photography was part of the solution to that problem.

In the 1950s and 60s a handful of museums dominated the exhibition and collection of photography, most notably the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the George Eastman House in Rochester. Other museums were usually content to accept the often excellent circulating exhibitions that these two leaders organized. NEA funding, more than any other single reason, broke this monopoly. If the NEA had any stated bias it was against the aggregation of culture in one metropolitan centre and in favour of a regional, pluralistic approach to the arts. With NEA assistance regional museums could organize their own exhibitions, become exporters rather than importers of photographic attitudes and works; and most took advantage of this opportunity, using NEA funds as seed money to develop local interest and support in photographic programmes.

Two museum persons dominated the discourse that surrounded the exhibition of contemporary photography in the United States during the 1970s; both were, themselves, photographers. John Szarkowski, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Van Deren Coke, at George Eastman House 1970-3, University Art Museum, University New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1973-9 and at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from 1979 onward, were the two leading figures whose views defined the range of mainstream contemporary curatorial attitudes toward photography in the 1970s. Szarkowski favoured photography in the documentary style, with a special interest in the American vernacular; Coke was more internationalist, his interest lying more in the areas of cross-fertilization between photography and the other visual arts. Taking nothing away from the efforts of other distinguished scholars and curators, there were no other museum figures who either by temperament or position exerted such a strong influence on American photography during the 1970s and beyond.

Outside the sphere of established museums, and often even more reliant upon public funding, were alternative spaces, though in America these venues play a far less important role than in the U.K. Conceived as exhibition halls for works too non-commercial for private galleries and too radical, politically or stylistically, for established museums, alternative spaces for photography turned out, for the most part, to be a disappointment, exhibiting work that was identical in kind, if not quality, to that of their more established counterparts. The effect was less to challenge prevailing attitudes than to institutionalize them even in their less accomplished manifestations.

Most of the conditions favouring photography in America in
the 1970s would be familiar, in some degree, to photographic audiences in any modern industrial democracy. But the development of a large, active, private market for contemporary photography would be quite unfamiliar. And no surprise: before the 1970s it was almost unheard of even in America.

In 1969 the late Lee Witkin opened the first commercially viable New York art gallery devoted exclusively to the exhibition and sale of photographs as fine art. To the surprise of most, he prospered. Two years later Light Gallery opened its doors on New York's fashionable upper Madison Avenue, dedicated to an equally daring proposition, the exhibition and sale of the works of living photographers. Light, too, flourished throughout the decade. Similar galleries began appearing in New York, as well as Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Houston, San Francisco, Seattle and other regional centres.

More important in the taking of photography out of its ghetto was its incorporation into the exhibition programme of the most prestigious painting and sculpture galleries during the 1970s: Castelli, 1971; Ileana Sonnabend Gallery, 1972; Pace Editions, 1973; John Weber Gallery, 1974; Marlborough Gallery, 1975; Prakapas Gallery and Robert Miller Gallery in 1977. Other galleries followed. While it was extremely difficult to see photographs exhibited as art on New York galleries walls in 1967, by 1977 it was extremely difficult not to.

With a few stunning and well-publicized exceptions, the economic consequences for most photographers was slight. More important was the new aura of respectability, attendant on any enterprise in America that is perceived to be lucrative. That, and an inchoate hope for the future: if things continued to go as they had, a serious photographer might someday be able to earn,

from the sale of his or her artwork, a living commensurate with that of an automobile mechanic or university lecturer. Events gave the lie to this overly sanguine view of the future; it gave heart to women and men who were doing as they always had and always would, supporting their photographic activity with jobs in other, remunerative fields.

The market interest in photography prompted a new level of media interest. Important art journals allocated ever-increasing editorial space to photography. The apotheosis of this was the September 1976 issue of the leading establishment art journal, Artforum, which was devoted entirely to photography. The lofty New York Times regularly published critiques of current photography exhibitions, as did the somewhat less lofty Village Voice. Both were, in very different ways, national newspapers, and the effect of this coverage was felt far outside New York City.

But none of this adequately answers two questions: why photography? And why now? No one answer can suffice, but an observation by Marvin Heiferman, then Director of Castelli, sounds as plausible as any. The art world, he said, seems to have a cyclical interest in photography that lies dormant for thirty years, then re-erupts in a flurry of excitement for a few years, a behaviour pattern rather like that of a hyperkinetic child discovering a new toy.

One must consider this in the perspective of what other toys were lying about the art world in 1970. In fact there were surprisingly few. As in every decade since Dadaism the artistic and critical vanguard in the 1960s were cheerfully heralding the 'death of Art'. Oddly enough, in a very small way, and for a very brief period of time, their jeremiad was correct. Which is not to deny that in 1970 there were scores of significant artists produc-
ing work of enduring interest and worth. Merely that, by 1972 at
the very latest, most of the major movements that had emerged
in the previous decade - Minimalism, Post-Painterly Abstrac-
tion, Process Art, Earth Art, Linguistic Conceptualism, to name a
few - had plateaued, insofar as their major issues had already
been announced, major players already identified, and major
works already made and entered in the culture. There was rela-
tively little to see that one did not already know something
about, and little visible on the horizons of painting, sculpture or
conceptualism promised to be as interesting as the work that
proceeded them.

The few remaining unexploited areas were video (with
artists' films), performance, and photography. Laurie Anderson
notwithstanding, the audience for performance, though passion-
ate, is usually small. That left video artists' films and photo-
graphy. Most knowledgeable observers favoured the former, heed-
less of the inherent suspicion attending 'real-time' art works and
heedless as well of the notion that though the vanguard audi-
ence's masochism is great, it is not infinite. The knowledgeable
observers were wrong, not for the first time.

Many of the reasons for photography's art-world ascendance
were shameful, or irrelevant. As the acerbic H. L. Mencken
observed fifty years ago, no one ever went broke underestimat-
ing the taste of the American public. Mencken's spiritual descen-
dant, Tom Wolfe, further noted in his broadside The Painted
Word, that the American art audience, even at its most sophisti-
cated levels, hankers deep down for imagistic art; if possible, fig-
urative art, an art with recognizable forms and an anecdotal
degree. Most photographs automatically satisfy this in some
degree. While abstraction held the high ground in American

painting and sculpture since 1945, it has remained, for a num-
ber of reasons, only a factional style in American photography.
 Critics, most of whom if trained at all are trained as writers, also
prefer artwork that yields up to literary interpretations. It is,
after all, easier to write about a Diego Rivera painting, or a
Cartier-Bresson photograph, than it is to confront the obdurate
materiality of, for instance, a Carl Andre sculpture.

Thus photography inherited some of that portion of the
American art audience too intellectually torpid to understand,
much less take interest in, the kinds of issues raised by the best
American art of the 1960s. Photography appeared more easily
accessible. Which it is, though only superficially. The fact that
the most intelligent photographic works hold a range of prob-
lematic issues as demanding as those raised by any other art of
major ambition, either came as a rude shock to this segment of
photography's public, or else was overlooked by it altogether.

Another less than noble reason why photographs, rather
than video or performance art, dominated the stage in the 1970
was because photographs, unprepossessing though they may be,
nevertheless can be shown as tangible objects in a way that
video and performance cannot. Not only are photographs a
tangible commodity, but, judging from auction prices during
the 1970s, a vastly underpriced one at the start of the decade.
More than one observer has conjectured that before 1970 it
would probably have been possible to purchase every twentieth-
century photograph in the Museum of Modern Art's exemplary
Masters of Photography installation for less than the price of one
major contemporary painting. This inequity was more than
redressed by the early 1980s when a Los Angeles television
producer allegedly paid over $70,000 for an uneditioned
mural-sized print of Ansel Adam's celebrated Moonrise Over Hernandez, New Mexico.

Another development in American photography during the 1970s was the unprecedented quantity and quality of photographers' and artists' publications, some in the form of portfolios or original prints, some in the traditional form of a monograph by an established publishing house, but most often, in the form of inexpensively printed, self-published 'artist's bookworks' that dealt with a single subject or theme. A number of external circumstances contributed to help make this a possibility for photographers in the 1970s: support from the ubiquitous NEA; improvements in the technology of photographic reproduction; the formation of book distributors and retailers specialized in artists' books; and the aforementioned college-age public, which was interested in photography but whose affluence extended to posters and books rather than to original prints. Most important, though, was that this form of organizing and disseminating photographic images responded to a concern generated in photography during the 1970s.

Long constrained by the preciosity of the 'master' print and dismayed by the informational limitations of the single image, many photographers chose to work in groups of serial or sequential images, often narrative but many times not. These photographers came to regard the single print as an element of a larger entity: the series, sequence or group, which was, rather than the individual photography, the indivisible unit. Further, many of these photographers were coming to resent the reduction of the photograph to commodity status, costly and rare, and preferred to make their ideas and images available at a low cost to the widest possible audience. At the same time they were wary of the magazine as a means of dissemination, being all too aware of the dubious role played by editors in 'mediating' the photographers' intentions. The self-published book seemed an appropriate vehicle.

Among the earliest 'book works' was the witty and visually intelligent Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations, published by Ed Ruscha in 1962. The modest little paperbound book contained exactly twenty-six photographs of gasoline stations, fulfilling to the letter the claim of its title. Though Ruscha did not, and does not consider himself a photographer as such, this little book, and others by him that followed, had an enormous impact on photography. Far from being stigmatized as 'vanity' books, artists' and photographers' books increasingly came to be seen as the most vital and interesting area of art publishing, so much so as to rob the high-ticket productions of established publishers of their traditional prestige. It was generally understood that any innovative, serious photography could only be produced through some form of self-publication, leaving the large commercially houses as the dinosaurs of the field, able only to produce safe crowd-pleasers: Ansel Adams monographs, or the celebrity photos of a Linda McCartney.

The most interesting publications during the 1970s were usually done outside commercial channels, as bound portfolios of original prints, self-published efforts, very small presses, such as Lustrum, university presses, or not-for-profit publishing houses, most notably Aperture. The most interesting of these publications were the thematic works such as Robert Adams' The New West (1974), Denver (1977), and From The Missouri West (1980); Larry Clark's genuinely shocking Tulsa (1971); Linda Connor's Solos (1979); Robert Cumming's Picture Fictions (1973) and The
Weight Of Franchise Meat (1971); William Eggleston's Election Eve (1976), an epic portfolio of 100 images; Lee Friedlander's classics Self-Portrait (1970) and The American Monument (1976); Ralph Gibson's The Somnambulist (1970), which suggested new possibilities of sequencing; John Gossage's Gardens (1978), a bound book of original prints with a text selected by Walter Hopps; Chauncey Hare's Interior America (1978); and Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan's remarkable Evidence (1977), to name a few of the best. The Age of Mechanical Reproduction had begun to filter down to the working photographer.

Perhaps the last institution to be mentioned might be the critical press, if only because it disappointed so many of the expectations it raised. One of the hopes for photography in the 1970s was that it would attract the critical attention of leading writers and thinkers outside the photographic community. This much at least was fulfilled: photography exerted a fascination for art writers who had made substantial reputations for their critical views on the other plastic arts. However, almost without exception they failed to come to terms with photography in any but the most superficial way. The astuteness that had gained them such success in other areas was abandoned as they became seduced by the most trivial instances and trivial issues in photography. Few retired from the field with their reputations un tarnished; many were in tatters.

The most egregious example was Susan Sontag's On Photography, an edited anthology of articles written for the New York Review of Books in the early 1970s. One critic was unkind enough to remark that since Sontag could no longer think nor write she should consider not publishing the results of her losing struggle. Though perhaps too harsh a judgment, there is little doubt that On Photography, with its unsupported assertions, poorly reasoned arguments, and internal contradictions, is not Sontag's finest work. Nevertheless the book became the nearest thing to a bestseller that photographic criticism had yet enjoyed, and most right-thinking American readers believed that they could learn everything necessary about photography, both as a cultural artefact and as a form of aberrant behaviour, in the pages of this simplistic book.

By the late 1970s the only predictably serious source of critical writing about photographs came from the Marxist point of view. To their credit, Marxist critics were among the few who addressed photography in terms of social issues, who advertised their biases, and campaigned actively for what little of the photographic they found that met their ideological requirements. To their discredit they, with few exceptions (one thinks here of the often droll Alan Sekula), expressed their convictions in a hectoring, turgid prose, so riddled with appropriated jargon as to be virtually unreadable to any but the initiated. Some found it ironic that the last convincing humanist philosophy would present itself in such elitist trappings; others found the disengagement of theory from practice, and the emphasis on theory, transparently self-serving.

Nevertheless, the Marxists represented the only body of photographic criticism taking a position of militant advocacy during the 1970s. This seemed to result from a view that most non-Marxist critics took of their own role: they perceived their first duty as taking a censorious position toward work which they deemed inadequate, rather than articulating and supporting the aesthetic of works in which they believed. Such a position may be adequate for newspaper writing but it parts company with the
best of twentieth-century art criticism, from Apollinaire to Greenberg, which saw its role as defining and advancing a particular position in the arts, and calling attention to artists and works that advanced that position in practice.

It would be unwise to overlook the terrible creative and destructive energies in American society, how they were brought to bear upon photography in the 1970s, and how these energies transformed the material and philosophical circumstances of American photography. It would be equally unwise to forget that had there not existed a large, vital body of photographic practice in America, the support systems would have counted for little. One could also argue that it was the claims of American photography that brought the support systems into being. Both views are tendentious. In fact the interaction between the large and committed body of photographic practice and existing institutions brought lasting changes to both.

Few would dispute the insularity of serious photography in America prior to the 1970s, although there is disagreement about whether this isolation was benign or stultifying. Photographer Robert Fichter compared photography with a Greek island, in the best sense; a sunny, carefree place in the mind where visitors were welcome to bask. A less generous observer might have characterized it differently: as a mixture of a Rotary meeting and a Klan gathering, replete with secret handshakes, arcane shibboleths, and a fiercely defensive assertion of its parochial values in the face of a harsh and indifferent world. Photography’s entrance into the mainstream of American culture changed all of that, the good and the bad, permanently. Henceforth photographic practice and theory would be held to the same standards used to assess other ambitious contemporary art, and a number of practices and attitudes from the 1950s and 60s would no longer play. Traditional photographers could no longer have the luxury of disguising the bankruptcy of their vision behind technically ‘perfect’ prints and pseudo-spiritual utterances; soi disant ‘experimental’ photographers could no longer pretend that Robert Rauschenberg had not gotten there first, and done it better, ten years before. Those stables, and others, were being swept, and those who were brushed aside complained that photography had lost its innocence.

Much of the American photography of the 1970s seems curiously affectless and divorced from the political, social, and interpersonal issues that surfaced during the decade. If it is so, it is less the blame of uncaring photographers than of those same photographers’ chastened view of the powers of their medium. During the 1950s and 60s ‘concerned’ photography was perceived, at least by its makers, as a form of activism. By the 1970s it became clear to more thoughtful photographers that was, in truth, the antithesis of effective social involvement: a form of elitist play-acting, morally satisfying to the player, but without serious political or social consequence. If one wished to influence social or political issues, then images were no substitute for direct political struggle. Photography’s value lies elsewhere: in describing the surfaces of the phenomenal world in a manner unique to itself; hoping, at best, to contribute a precise, if necessarily limited, understanding of the objects and events in front of the lens, and some insight into the mind behind it.

These attitudes did not begin, nor have they ended with the 1970s. Many of the dominant attitudes, issue, styles and personalities of that decade have their origins in the 1960s and, by extension, in the entire history of photography. For those issues
inherited from the near past, the 1970s were a culmination and a fulfillment: to such a degree that they could be said to belong to the 1970s, as much as to any other decade.

In the late 1960s three extremely influential exhibitions introduced what would become the mainstream issue in American photographic work throughout the 1970s. These exhibitions were Toward a Social Landscape, Twelve Photographers of the American Social Landscape and The New Documents. Two of the three exhibitions incorporated in their title the term ‘Social Landscape’, a phrase coined by Lee Friedlander some time earlier. Friedlander, along with his two colleagues Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, formed the nucleus of ‘Social Landscape’ photography.

It was a useful term to embrace the cool, laconic, post-Pop look of much of the best of contemporary American photographs in the 1960s and 70s. Its subject was an America no longer post-war, and it’s hidden agenda a redefinition of photographic formalism. Formalism is usually taken in photography in its smaller sense: the orderly and considered distribution of elements within the frame to achieve a ‘pleasing’ arrangement of shapes, tones, etc. With the works of Friedlander and Winogrand, formalism in photography came to take on the broader definition that critics such as Greenberg and Fried has assigned to it in painting: the investigation of the material and historic possibilities of a medium, using that medium as the tool of investigation. In other words, a definition, in practice, of the extreme frontiers of what may be deemed as ‘photographic’ seeing. This, and not the adoption of the snapshot as a vernacular model, as Janet Malcolm suggested, is the way in which photography became ‘Modernist’.

‘Social Landscape’ had another antecedent than the snapshot: the work of Walker Evans. For a great number of American photographers he is what Cartier-Bresson is to the French: an artist with an inexhaustible heritage. Be this true or false, Evans’ ironic, dialectical images informed much of the sensibility of the ‘Social Landscape’ photographers. Evans’ irony was more than a detached superiority, it was, at its best, a form of reserved judgment, an appropriate stance from which to view a society whose ideals, fortunes, and individuals are in constant flux, and this lesson was not wasted on the generation of photographers who came to artistic maturity in the 1960s and 70s.

In very different ways the three leading photographers of ‘Social Landscape’ challenged the prevailing ideas of what photographs must look like. Diane Arbus’ artless, straightforward portraits resemble nothing more than fashion portraiture gone horribly wrong. Photographing the dark underside of American society, Arbus found horror and desolation not only in the most freakish of her subjects but, more eloquently, in the faces, postures, and costumes of ‘normal’, average Americans. No American photographer had ever taken such a relentless, surgical look at what lay beneath the surface of American society. Her closest counterpart might be the writer William Burroughs, whose Naked Lunch shared many of the elements of Arbus’ sensibility.

Arbus’ photographs posed troublesome ethical questions, about her as a photographer, and about ourselves as viewers. Did her work exceed the limits of her subjects’ ‘informed consent”? And how much are we, seduced by her vision, implicated with her — and with the depravity she so often photographs? For, if Arbus’ photographs are sensational, voyeuristic, and exploitative, they are also undeniably compelling for reasons that seem
to transcend, or at least short-circuit, our moral responses. There has never been anyone quite like Arbus in the history of American photography and, despite her suicide in 1971, her presence was felt throughout much of the decade of the 1970s.

Garry Winogrand’s photographs are possibly the highest expression of the phenomenal approach to photography in our time. His work illustrates, explains and fulfils his much quoted aphorism that he photographed in order to see what things would look like in photographs. He was a gifted and often scathing caricaturist, the American Daumier; and in their formal organization Winogrand’s images pushed at the boundaries of photography vérité.

Taking nothing from the contributions of his contemporaries, Lee Friedlander stands out as the colossus whose work dominated American photography in the period 1967-80 and beyond. He is the only American photographer working whose images have assured him a place of honour among the photographers he admires: Atget, Evans, Cartier-Bresson, and Frank. His crowded, tense and often humorous images, and skein-like interlocking of pictorial elements were so complex, and so thoroughly defied traditional notions of photographic composition, that they were, literally, incomprehensible to many upon initial viewing, and were interpreted by some as metaphors for the obdurate chaos that is modern life. In retrospect that seems naïve. As Jonathan Green observed, for all their apparent disorder the images have a sophisticated and compelling logic, not unlike that of a Rauschenberg assemblage.7 Like Rauschenberg, who wished to work in the area ‘between art and Life,’ Friedlander’s seemingly haphazard compositions allowed his viewers to ponder the dialectic of curiously opposed objects and events that meet with-

in his photographs much as they meet in out everyday vision. Friedlander has modified his strategies over the years, encompassing within his photographs a far wider variety of subjects and situations than any photographer working today.

But if a movement is to be worthy of a name, its vitality must be tested not only by the strength of its progenitors but by the strength of succeeding generations of workers as well. And it is against this critical test the ‘Social Landscape’ proved so durable, attracting, for a period, a group of photographers as interesting and diverse as Mark Cohen, Bill Dane, William Eggleston, Anthony Hernandez, Tod Papageorge, and Henry Wessel, Jr. Many of these photographers have found their mature expression in styles widely divergent from the ‘Social Landscape’ aesthetic, others have extended the idiom and forged it from an instrument of strong personal expression. But it touches, at one time or another, all of these prominent photographers of the 1970s and many made their work in that style.

Another powerful hold over from the 1960s was the increased use of photographs by artists not usually thought of as photographers. At first these works surfaced as documentation of body art, earth-works and performance pieces; but by the mid-1960s artists such as Jan Dibbets, Douglas Huebler and Bruce Nauman were producing conceptual pieces in photography that could, in fact, only be executed as photographs. The 1970s saw an acceleration of the use of photographs in conceptual art, and by the mid-1970s artists, such as John Baldessari, Lucas Samaras, and William Wegman, not usually considered as photographers, were producing bodies of work that were decidedly photographic, both in concerns and in materials. The only argument for creating a distinction between these photographs and ‘photography’
was the price gradient between photographs and other mediums, a powerful enough argument in a capitalist society.

Muddying the waters further were a number of persons, generally thought to be primarily photographers, such as Thomas Barrow, Michael Bishop, Robert Cumming, Jan Groover, Ken Josephson, Ray Metzker, and Eve Sonneman, whose work addressed a broad sweep of issues previously considered the domain of other visual arts.

One further development of this trend was a heightened interest on the part of late-1970s American photographers in working in the controllable environment of the studio rather than the haphazard out-of-doors. In the studio, the photographer could direct, exactly and specifically, the content of his or her images, in a way common to other artists, and common to commercial photographers, but unusual in art photography. By changing from an analytic to a synthetic mode, photographers could lay to rest the last doubts regarding the issues of intentionality in their work. One thinks here of the works of JoAnn Callis, Barbara Kasten, Olivia Parker, and Sandy Skoglund. And especially one thinks of Cindy Sherman, whose enormously popular self-portraits utterly parted company with the ‘still-life’ look of so much made-in-studio work of the 1970s and resonate with associations of media imagery, autobiography, performance art, feminist role-investigations, and, in an oddly unsentimental sense, nostalgia.

The third, and less pervasive interest inherited from the 1960s that was to find its fulfillment in the years 1970-80 was mixed-media photography. It was a genuine attempt to take photography beyond the physical limitations of the unaltered photographic print and enhance it with the plasticity, objecthood, and visual surface of the other graphic arts. This work failed to gain wide acceptance outside the academic world for two reasons: first, few photographers working in this vein were able to transcend their indebtedness to Robert Rauschenberg’s late 1950s work and second, the complexity of facture usually took precedence over the nominal content of the work, reducing photography from a relatively simple art to an extremely demanding craft. An exception should be made here for the work of Robert Heinecken during this period whose best efforts escape self-conscious facture and convey wit, intelligence, sexuality and rage. Two movements, or trends, seem to belong exclusively to the 1970s, the first, ‘New Topographics’ (after an exhibition in 1975 of that name), the second, what one might call, for want of a better phrase, ‘The Rush to Color.’

‘New Topographics’ offered a radically reductive view of the American environment. Where those images that could be gathered under the rubric of ‘Social Landscape’ had the appearance of candour and immediacy, taking as they had Robert Frank as their mentor and the snapshot as their vernacular model, Topographic photographers opted to a chiller vision, arid and dispassionate. Their mentor was Timothy O’Sullivan and their vernacular model the commercial real-estate photograph. One useful description of the working ideology was given by photographer Joe Deal in the New Topographics catalog, “In making these photographs I attempted to make a series of images in which one image is equal in weight or appearance to another. Many of the conscious decisions made while the series was evolving has to do with denying the uniqueness in the subject matter in one exposure as opposed to another in the belief that the most extraordinary image might be the most prosaic.”
The conscious attempt to, if not eliminate, at least minimalize the appearance of ‘style’ informed this approach to photography, as did the programmatic rejection of most of the elements and devices traditionally employed to make the world seem ‘interesting’ in photographs. These choices alone might explain why New Topographics work so alienated photographic audiences, defeating as it did the very expectations that they had been taught to bring to photographs.

This approach, unyielding as it may appear, was arrived at through more than sheer perversity. More positive reasons exist for the emergence of this style at this particular historical moment. As Barbara Rose observed, in a culture lacking a direct link with the mythologies of the classical world, an established church that encouraged religious art, or a monarchy to define the pinnacles of its social order, American art has traditionally found its most elevated subject matter in the natural landscape, often endowing it with qualities that transcend its literal appearance.9

Needless to say, this has been even truer of photography in America, where landscape has been among its most important and enduring subjects. Unfortunately, by the late 1960s there was no convincing school of landscape photography in America. The vital West Coast School, founded by Edward Weston, had entered its late-mannerism phase, typically producing oversized, overworked calendar pictures of mountains and black skies, while the Equivalent, with its roots in Stieglitz and carried through by Minor White, has degenerated into self-indulgent mystification.

Redeeming the American landscape for photography seemed a worthy task and more difficult than one might imagine. The present generation of Americans, for the most part, never expe-

rienced the landscape without experiencing its counterface, industrialism, and it seemed likely than without this dialectic the entire notion of ‘pre’ landscape might seem so estranged from ordinary reality as to appear escapist and sentimental. In this awareness topographic photographers surveyed the ‘new’ American landscape, attempting to see it whole and see it clear; motorways, shopping centres, housing tracts and all of the other elements that inform our perception of a landscape neither wholly natural nor wholly an agglomeration of industrial artefacts, the ‘middle landscape’ of late industrial pastoralism. This, even more than the heightened degree of traditional American photographic irony, was the vision that animated topographic photography in America during the last decade.

During the latter half of the 1970s American photography was overshadowed by one pervasive pseudo-issue, The Rush to Color, which blurred many of the existing lines demarcating areas of photographic practice and, in the end, cast a treacly pall over the entire enterprise. Unlike most of the trends operating in the 1970s, which had diverse and arguable beginnings, the Rush to Color began on 25 May 1976. On that date that Museum of Modern Art, New York, opened an exhibition of seventy-five dye-transfer color prints by contemporary Memphs photographer William Eggleston, accompanied by the publication of a book, William Eggleston’s Guide, the first exclusively color monograph published by the Museum. Two months after the closing of the Eggleston exhibition the Museum opened its second one-person show of work by the contemporary color photographer, Stephen Shore.10 MoMA, arguably the most prestigious single institution dealing with photography in America, had placed its imprimatur on color photography.
MoMA could hardly be faulted for its choices, however controversial they were at the time. Both Eggleston and Shore were and are photographers of exceptional talent and integrity, and cannot be held answerable for the flood of ingratiating rubbish that followed them into the museums and gallery any more than the QEII can be taken to task for the flotsam that accumulates in her wake. Despite radical differences in style, technique, and temperament, Eggleston and Shore shared a commitment to the use of color as a descriptive, as opposed to decorative, element in their photographs. They were among the last to do so and by the end of the decade it seemed as though their work, almost solely, redeemed the entire shallow, dismal affair that was America’s flirtation with photographic color.

The dominant, or at least prevalent, body of color photographs that one saw at the shank of the seventies was vapid, overscaled, coffee-table art, the end-product of photography’s first demand/supply style of photography: Soft Contemporary, user-friendly pap devoid of any content save color and any ideology save pettiness. The nearest parallel in recent history is with the second-generation color painters of the early 1970s, stain-painting and the like. The lesson of this style was to demonstrate that even painting, with its inherent physicality, plasticity, greater scale, and, of course, historical momentum, could not build a workable aesthetic upon color alone. And what was not possible for painting in the early 1970s was even less possible for photography at the close of the decade. Photography had made its blood sacrifice to the twin altars of interior decoration and corporate collecting, and in so doing strained the credulity of its audience, perhaps the most credulous on earth.

Photography’s career in the mainstream of America’s art world was meteoric, coming and going. Summoned into the limelight in the early 1970s photography was dismissed with equal suddenness in favour of Neo-Expressionist painting, a largely European style that captured the attention of the American art world in 1980 and holds it still. In the public sector Reagonomics dictated the rationale for sweeping reductions in public arts funding, a decision that one cannot help suspect was based as much on ideological as fiscal motives. Reflecting the general hardening of attitudes in the late 1970s and 80s, student enrolment in art and photography courses stabilized and began to diminish. Economics, as well as hubris and poor business sense closed a number of the photographic galleries that had opened in the 1970s and reduced others to a skeletal version of their former selves. Most of the other art galleries that adopted photography into their programme in the 1970s continue to maintain their commitment to the medium, although not at the frenetic pace of eight years ago. If we have not seen – by any means – the end of photography in the art world, we have seen its limits. Nothing, as the cliché tells us, lasts forever.

On the positive side, nearly all of the photographers represented in this section are alive and working, and many are producing the most significant work of their careers. A new generation of color photographers has emerged, young enough to see color as simply another aspect of the medium rather than an issue apart or an ornament, and old enough to hold no extravagant hopes for popularity. At least two commercial galleries have opened in New York since 1980 with a commitment to photographic works: Pace MacGill which exhibits photography exclusively and the influential Metro Pictures which has exhibited the works of such post-modernists as Louise Lawler, Richard Prince,
and Cindy Sherman. If photography has lost editorial space in the leading art journals, we may be consoled that Afterimage (from the Visual Studies Workshop), like the poor of the Bible, is always with us. A number of attitudes, issues, and personalities had to be cast aside when photography made its move upward in the world, and even more as it fell from grace. Yet it seems doubtful, in retrospect, if so many of those triaged photographers' ideas and works will be so sorely missed after all.

Consistent with the Puritanical strain of American thought that views the world and all its contents as temptations placed before us to test our souls, one might view the situation of American photography during the 1970s as such a test. Having survived for so long in obscurity and privation, could the corpus of American photography endure success, even popularity, as well? The answer, from the perspective of the mid-1980s is yes, after a fashion. If our present decade seems less favourable to the enterprise of photography generally, it seems significantly more favourable to certain photography. This decade has proved more discriminating than the last; it could hardly be otherwise. And, if that is not enough, there is a final consoling thought: perhaps Marvin Heiferman was correct, that America's interest in photography is cyclical, and in another thirty years the love affair between America and her photography will blossom once more. Photography will be brought from the shelf and, once again, made much over. And those of us who live long enough can have the 1970s all over again.

1 Editor's note: The former image is "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" taken by Joe Rosenthal on February 23, 1945, which first appeared in Life on March 26, 1945. The latter image was published as the cover photograph for Newsweek on April 21, 1975.
10 For practical purposes I am ignoring an earlier Helen Levitt exhibition from 1974 based on projected transparencies.