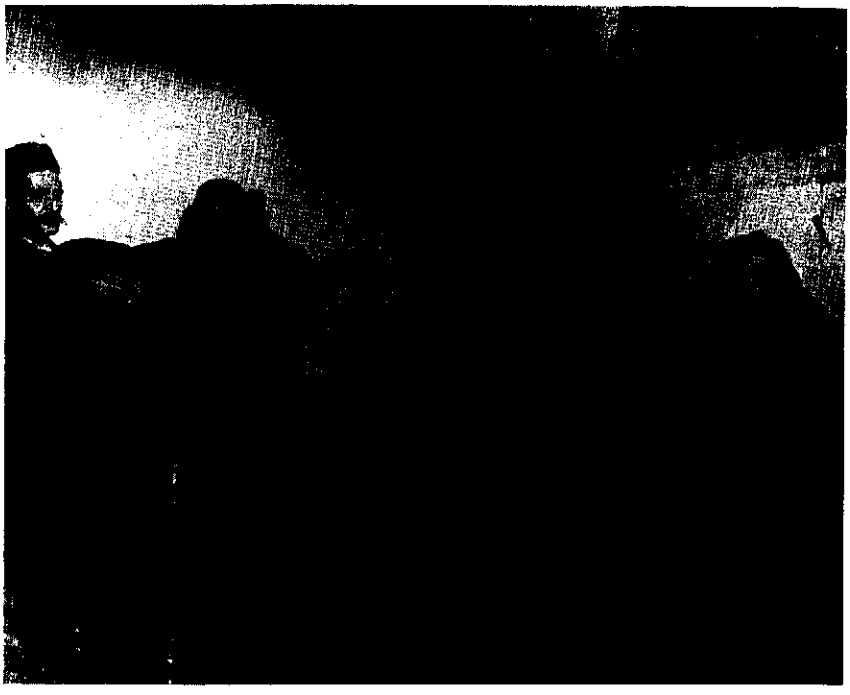
MARTHA ROSLER

In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)

The Bowery, in New York, is an archetypal skid row. It has been much photographed, in works veering between outraged moral sensitivity and sheer slumming spectacle. Why is the Bowery so magnetic to documentarians? It is no longer possible to evoke the camouflaging impulses to "help" drunks and down-and-outers or "expose" their dangerous existence.

How can we deal with documentary photography itself as a photographic practice? What remains of it? We must begin with it as a historical phenomenon, a practice with a past. Documentary photography[1] has come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery (though its roots are somewhat more diverse and include the "artless" control motives of police record keeping and surveillance). Photo documentary as a public genre had its moment in the ideological climate of developing state liberalism and the attendant reform movements of the early-twentieth-century Progressive Era in the United States and withered along with the New Deal consensus some time after the Second World War. Documentary, with its original muckraking associations, preceded the myth of journalistic objectivity and was partly strangled by it. We can reconstruct a past for documentary within which photographs of the Bowery might have been part of the aggressive insistence on the tangible reality of generalized poverty and despair—of enforced social marginality and finally outright social uselessness. An insistence, further, that the ordered world of business-as-usual take account of that reality behind those images newly seen, a reality newly elevated into consideration simply by *being photographed* and thus exemplified and made concrete.



Jacob Riis, *Hell on Earth*, 1903. Riis commented: "One night, when I went through one of the worst dives I ever knew, my camera caught and held this scene.... When I look upon that unhappy girl's face, I think that the Grace of God can reach that 'lost woman' in her sins; but what about the man who made profit upon the slum that gave her up to the street?" From "The Peril and Preservation of the Home," in *Jacob Riis, Photographer and Citizen*, ed., Alexander Alland, Sr. (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1974).

In *The Making of an American*, Jacob Riis wrote:

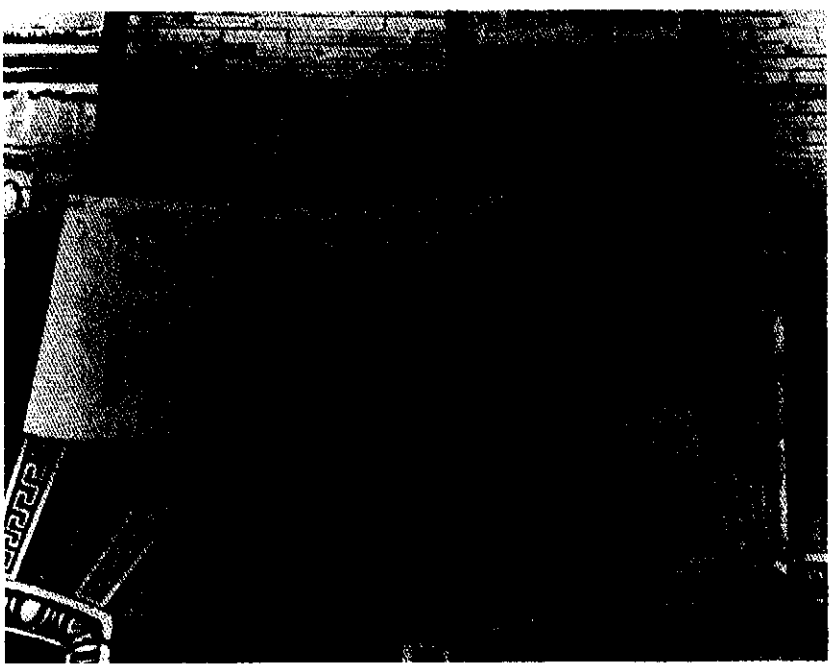
> We used to go in the small hours of the morning to the worst tenements . . . and the sights I saw there gripped my heart until I felt that I must tell of them, or burst, or turn anarchist, or something . . . I wrote, but it seemed to make no impression. One morning, scanning my newspaper at the breakfast table, I put it down with an outcry that startled my wife, sitting opposite. There it was, the thing I had been looking for all those years. A four-line despatch from somewhere in Germany, if I remember right, had it all. A way had been discovered, it ran, to take pictures by flashlight. The darkest corner might be photographed that way.[2]

In contrast to the pure sensationalism of much of the journalistic attention to working-class, immigrant, and slum life, the meliorism of Riis, Lewis Hine, and others involved in social-work propagandizing argued, through the presentation of images combined with other forms of discourse, for the rectification of wrongs. It did not perceive those wrongs as fundamental to the social system that tolerated them—the assumption that they were tolerated rather than *bred* marks a basic fallacy of social work. Reformers like Riis and Margaret Sanger[3] strongly appealed to the worry that the ravages of poverty—crime, immorality, prostitution, disease, radicalism—would threaten the health and security of polite society as well as by sympathy for the poor, and their appeals were often meant to awaken the self-interest of the privileged. The notion of *charity* fiercely argued for far outweighs any call for self-help. Charity is an argument for the preservation of wealth, and reformist documentary (like the appeal for free and compulsory education) represented an argument within a class about the need to give a little in order to mollify the dangerous classes below, an argument embedded in a matrix of Christian ethics.

Documentary photography has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics. Even the bulk of work of the U.S. version of the (Workers') Film and Photo League[4] of the Depression era

Lewis Hine, *Cannery Workers Preparing Beans*, c. 1910. From *America and Lewis Hine: Photographs 1904–1940* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1977).

Leo Seltzer, *Rent Strike, Upper East Side, New York City, 1933.* Seltzer was a member of the New York (Workers') Film and Photo League. His work in photography and film seems more consistently militant than that of many other members.

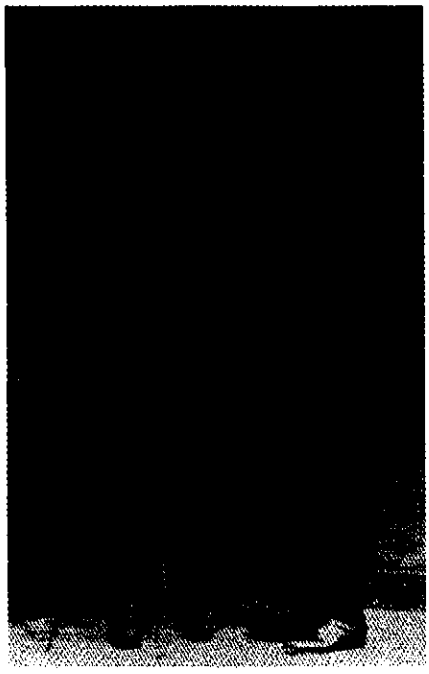


shared in the muted rhetoric of the popular front. Yet the force of documentary surely derives in part from the fact that the images might be more decisively unsettling than the arguments enveloping them. Arguments for reform—threatening to the social order as they might seem to the unconvinced—must have come as a relief from the *potential* arguments embedded in the images: With the manifold possibilities for radical demands that photos of poverty and degradation suggest, any coherent argument for reform is ultimately both polite and negotiable. Odious, perhaps, but manageable; it is, after all, social *discourse*. As such, these arguments were surrounded and institutionalized into the very structures of government; the newly created institutions, however, began to prove their inadequacy—even to their own limited purpose—almost as soon as they were erected.

Let us consider the Bowery again, the site of victim photography in which the victims, insofar as they are nov victims of the camera—that is, of the photographer—are often docile, whether through mental confusion or because they are just lying there, unconscious. (But if you should show up before they are sufficiently distracted by drink, you are likely to be met with hostility, for the men on the Bowery are not particularly interested in immortality and stardom, and they've had plenty of experience with the Nikon set.) Especially now, the meaning of all such work, past and present, has changed: the liberal New Deal state has been dismantled piece by piece. The War on Poverty has been called off. Utopia has been abandoned, and liberalism itself has been deserted. Its vision of moral idealism spurring general social concern has been replaced with a mean-minded Spencerian sociobiology that suggests, among other things, that the poor may be poor through lack of merit (read Harvard's Richard Hernstein as well as, of course, between Milton Friedman's lines[5]). There is as yet no organized national Left, only a Right. There is not even drunkenness, only "substance abuse"—a problem of bureaucratic management. The exposé, the compassion and outrage, of documentary fueled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting—and careerism.

Yet documentary still exists, still functions socially in one way or another. Liberalism may have been routed, but its cultural expressions still survive. This mainstream documentary has achieved legitimacy and has a decidedly ritualistic character. It begins in glossy magazines and books, occasionally in newspapers, and becomes more expensive as it moves into art galleries and museums. The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position; especially the latter, now that even the veneer of social concern has dropped away from the upwardly mobile and comfortable social sectors. Yet this reminder carries the germ of an inescapable anxiety about the future. It is both flattery and warning (as it always has been). Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind. (*It is them, not us.*) One may even, as a private person, support causes.

Documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful. In the set piece of liberal television documentary, Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame,* broadcast the day after Thanksgiving in 1960, Murrow closes with an appeal to the viewers (then a more restricted part of the population than at present) to *write their congressmen* to help the migrant farm workers, whose pathetic, helpless, dispirited victimhood has been amply demonstrated for an

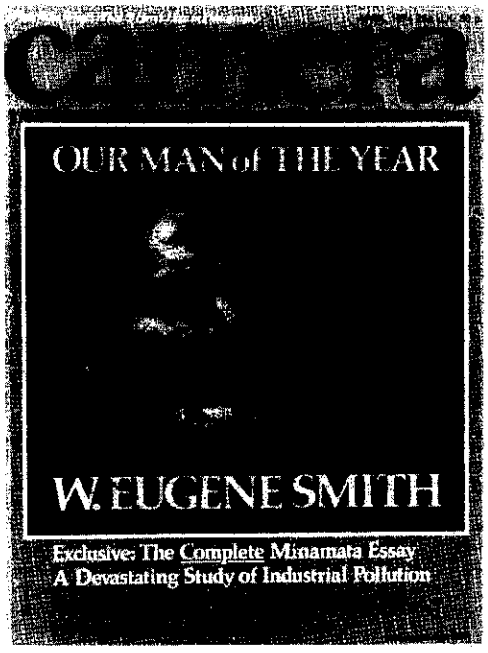


Ellen Grounds, age 22, a "pit broo wench" (pit-brow worker) at Pearson and Knowles's Pits, Wigan, with Munby beside her "to show how nearly she approached me in size." *Carte-de-visite* by Robert Little (or Mrs. Little), Wigan, September 11, 1873. From Michael Hiley, *Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1979)

hour—not least by the documentary's aggressively probing style of interview, its "higher purpose" notwithstanding—because *these people* can do nothing for themselves. But which political battles have been fought and won by someone for someone else? Luckily, Cesar Chávez was not watching television but rather, throughout that era, was patiently organizing farm workers to fight for themselves. This difference is reflected in the documentaries made by and for the Farm Workers' Organizing Committee (later the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO), such works as *Sí, Se Puede* (Yes, We Can) and *Decision at Delano;* not radical works, perhaps, but *militant* works.

In the liberal documentary, poverty and oppression are almost invariably equated with misfortunes caused by natural disasters: casuality is vague, blame is not assigned, fate cannot be overcome. Liberal documentary blames neither the victims nor their willful oppressors—unless they happen to be under the influence of our own global enemy, World Communism. Like photos of children in pleas for donations to international charity organizations, liberal documentary implores us to look in the face of deprivation and to weep (and maybe to send money, if it is to some faraway place where the innocence of childhood poverty does not set off in us the train of thought that begins with denial and ends with "welfare cheat.")

Even in the fading of liberal sentiments one recognizes that it is impolite or dangerous to stare in person, as Diane Arbus knew when she arranged her satisfyingly immobilized imagery as a surrogate for *the real thing,* the real freak show. With the appropriate object to view, one no longer feels obligated to suffer empathy. As sixties' radical chic has given way to eighties' pugnacious self-interest, one displays one's toughness in enduring a visual assault without a flinch, in jeering, or in cheering. Beyond the spectacle of families in poverty (where starveling infants and despairing adults give the lie to any imagined hint of freedom and become merely the currently tedious poor), the way seems open for a subtle imputation of pathetic-heroic choice to victims-turned-freaks, of the seizing of fate in straitened circumstances. The boringly sociological becomes the excitingly mythological/psychological. On this territory a more or less overt sexualization of the photographic image is accomplished, pointing, perhaps, to the wellspring of identification that may be the source of this particular fascination.[6]



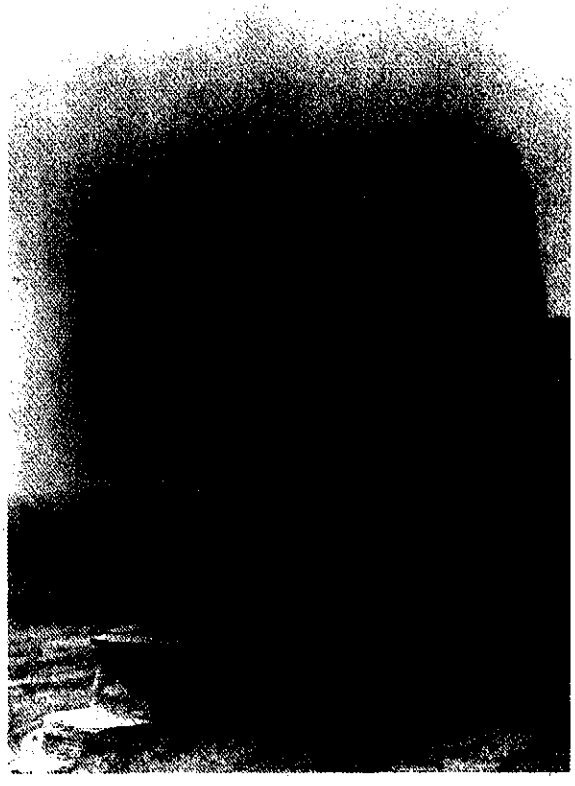
Cover of *Camera 35* (April 1974). Photograph of Smith by Dick Swift.

It is easy to understand why what has ceased to be news becomes testimonial to the bearer of the news. Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery or (dare we name it?) the manipulativeness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble. Or who, like the astronauts, entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go. War photography, slum photography, "subculture" or cult photography, photography of the foreign poor, photography of "deviance," photography from the past—W. Eugene Smith, David Douglas Duncan, Larry Burrows, Diane Arbus, Larry Clark, Danny Lyon, Bruce Davidson, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Walker Evans, Robert Capa, Don McCullin, Susan Meiselas . . . these are merely the most currently luminous of documentarian stars.

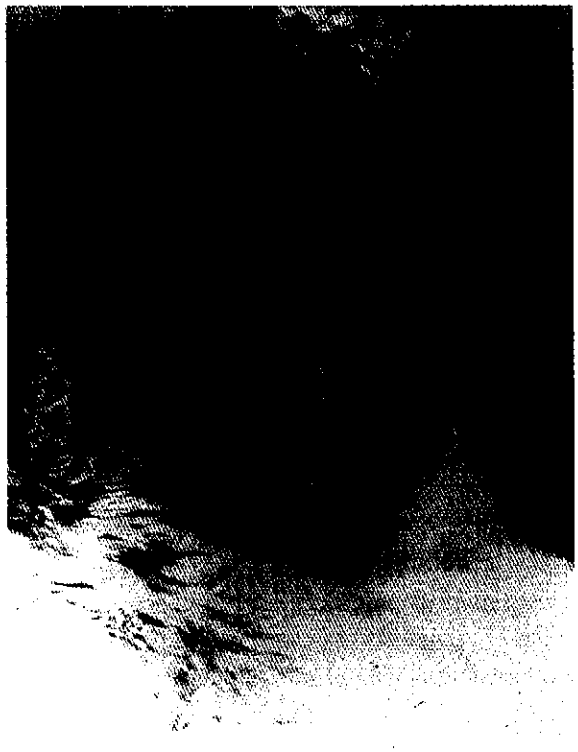
W. Eugene Smith and his wife Aileen Mioko Smith spent the early 1970s on a photo-and-text exposé of the human devastation in Minamata, a small Japanese fishing and farming town, caused by the heedless prosperity of the Chisso chemical firm, which dumped its mercury-laden effluent into their waters. They included an account of the ultimately successful but violence-ridden attempt of victims to gain redress. When the major court fight was won, the Smiths published a text and many photos in the American magazine *Camera 35*[7]. Smith had sent in a cover photo with a carefully done layout. The editor, Jim Hughes, knowing what sells and what doesn't, ran *a picture of Smith* on the cover and named him "Our Man of the Year" ("*Camera 35*'s first and probably only" one). Inside, Hughes wrote: "The nice thing about Gene Smith is that you know he will keep chasing the truth and trying to nail it down for us in words and pictures. And you know that even if the truth doesn't get better, Gene will. Imagine it!"[8] The Smiths' unequivocal text argues for strong-minded activism. The magazine's framing articles *handle* that directness; they convert *the Smiths* into *Smith;* and they congratulate him warmly, smothering his message with appreciation.

Help preserve the "cultural heritage" of the mudmen in New Guinea, urges the travel editor of the Vancouver *Province.* Why should you care?, he asks; and he answers, to safeguard the value received for your tourist dollar (Canadians also love Disneyland and Dis-

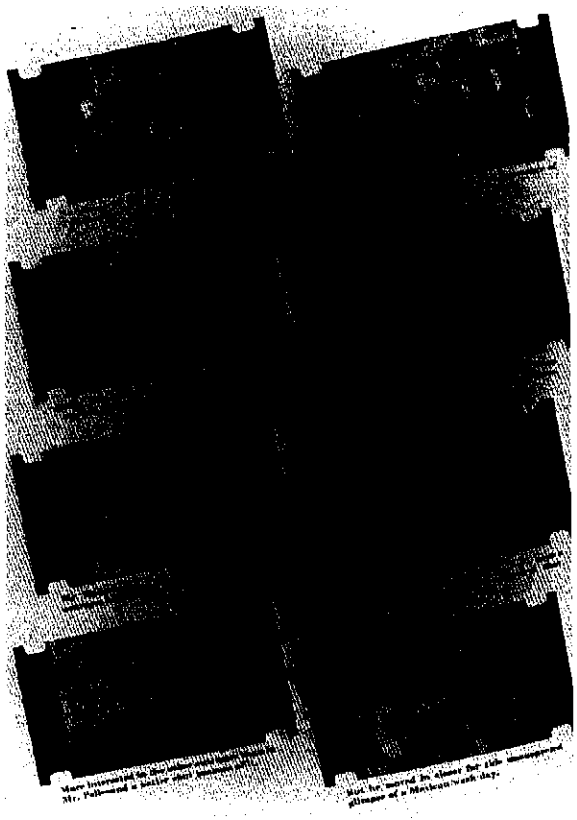
Canadian Club whiskey advertisement, 1971



Edward S. Curtis, *Hopi Girls*, c. 1900. Original is gold toned.

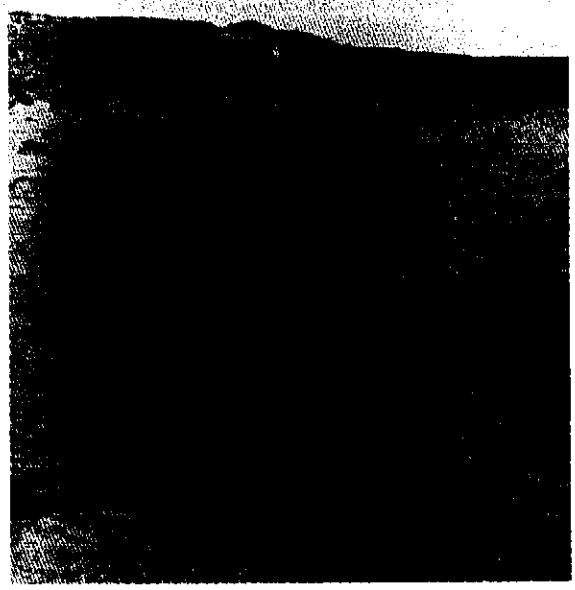


Robert Flaherty, c. 1914. Woman identified as "Allegoo (Shining Water), Sikoslingmuit Eskimo Woman, Southern Baffin Lands," but she may be a woman named Kanaju Aeojiealia. Published in March 1915 in a Toronto newspaper, with the caption, "Our little lady of the snows . . . makes a most engaging picture." From *Robert Flaherty, Photographer/Filmmaker: The Inuit 1910–1922* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1980).



From *How to Make Good Movies* (Rochester, NY: Eastman Kodak Company, n.d.)

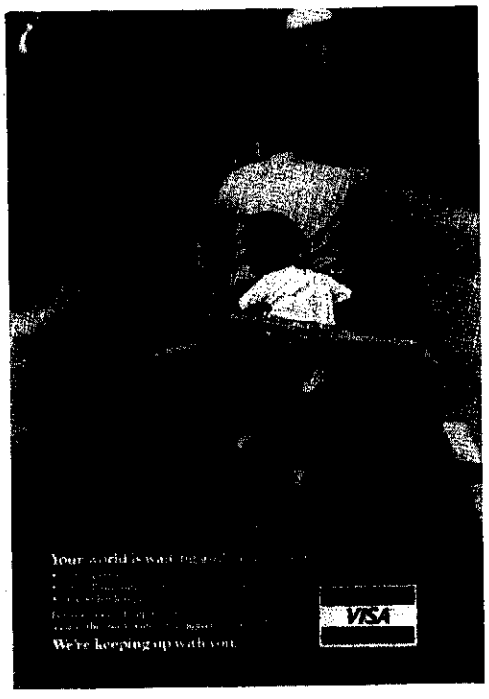
ney World). He is asking for donations to a cultural center. The "mudmen" formerly made large, grimacing pull-on masks to frighten their opponents in war and now wear them in adventure ads for Canadian Club ("We thought we were in a peaceful village until . . ."). The mudmen also appear in the "small room" of Irving Penn's *Worlds in a Small Room,*[9] an effete mimicry of anthropological documentary, not to mention in photos with the Queen. Edward S. Curtis was also interested in preserving someone's cultural heritage and, like other itinerant photographers operating among native North American peoples, he carried a stock of more or less authentic, more or less appropriate (often less, on both counts) clothing and accoutrements with which to deck out his sitters.[10] Here, as with Robert Flaherty a bit later,[11] the heritage was considered sufficiently preserved when captured within the edges of the photographic record and in the ethnographic costume shops then being established in museums of "natural" history. In Curtis's case, the photographic record was often retouched, gold-toned, and bound in gold-decorated volumes selling for astonishing sums and financed by J. P. Morgan. We needn't quibble over the status of such historical romances, for the degree of truth in them may (again) be more or less equivalent to that in any well-made ethnographic or travel photo or film. An early—1940s, perhaps—Kodak movie book[12] tells North American travelers, such as the Rodman C. Pells of San Francisco, pictured in the act of photographing a Tahitian, how to film natives so that they seem unconscious of the camera. Making such photos heightened patriotic sentiments in the States but precluded any understanding of contemporary native peoples as *experiencing subjects* in impoverished or at least modern circumstances; it even assisted the collective projection of Caucasian guilt and its rationalizations onto the "Indians" for having sunk so and having *betrayed their own heritage.* To be fair, some respect



Adam Clark Vroman, *Hopi Towns: The Man with a Hoe,* 1902. From *Photographer of the Southwest, Adam Clark Vroman, 1856–1916,* ed. Ruth Mahood (New York: Bonanza Books, n.d.).

was surely also gained for these people who had formerly been allowed few images other than those of abject defeat; no imagination, no transcendence, no history, no morals, no social institutions, only vice. Yet, on balance, the sentimental pictorialism of Curtis seems repulsively contorted, like the cariogenic creations of Julia Margaret Cameron or the saccharine poems of Longfellow. Personally, I prefer the cooler, more "anthropological" work of Adam Clark Vroman.[13] We can, nevertheless, freely exempt all the photographers, all the filmmakers, as well as all the ethnographers, ancillas to imperialism, from charges of willful complicity with the dispossession of the American native peoples. We can even thank them, as many of the present-day descendants of the photographed people do, for considering their ancestors worthy of photographic attention and thus creating a historical record (the only visual one). We can thank them further for *not* picturing the destitution of the native peoples, for it is difficult to imagine what good it would have done. If this reminds you of Riis and Hine, who first pictured the North American immigrant and native-born poor, the connection is appropriate as far as it goes but diverges just where it is revealed that the romanticism of Curtis furthered the required sentimental mythification of the Indian peoples, by then physically absent from most of the towns and cities of white America. Tradition (traditional racism), which decreed that the Indian was the genius of the continent, had nothing of the kind to say about the immigrant poor, who were both fodder for the Industrial Moloch and a hotbed of infection and corruption.

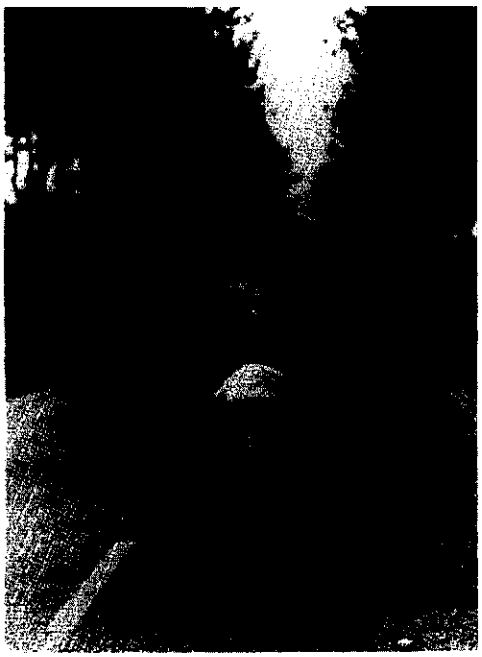
Or consider a photo book on the teeming masses of India—how different is looking through it from going to an Indian restaurant or wearing an Indian shirt or sari? We consume the world through images, through shopping, through eating. . . .



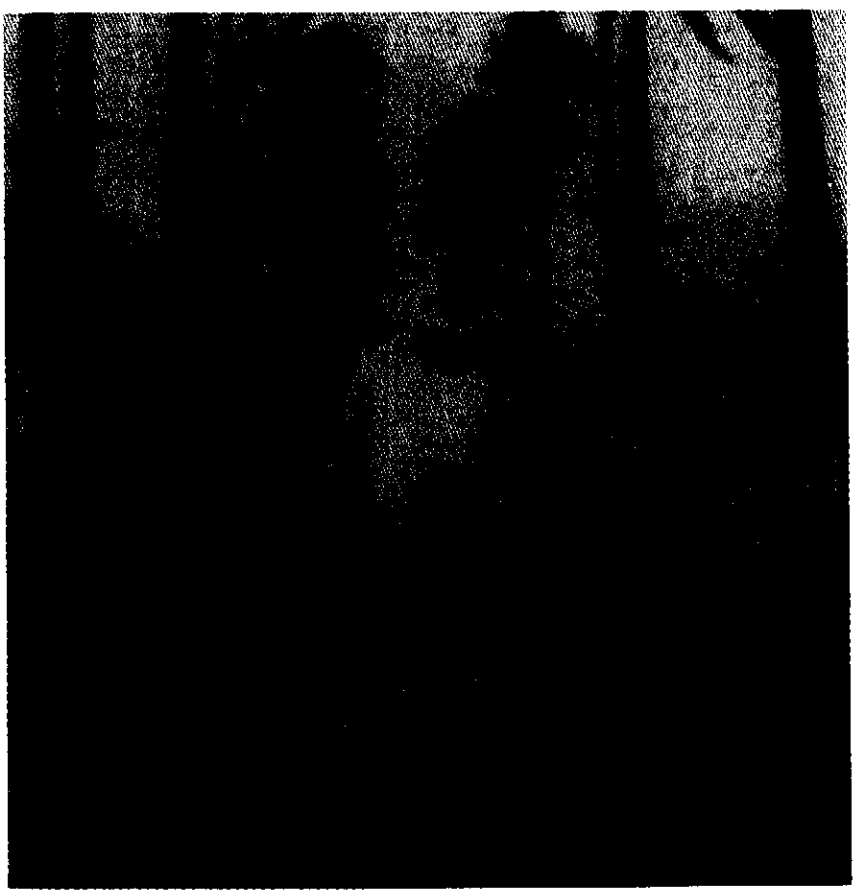
VISA credit card advertisement, 1979. Photo by Elliott Erwitt. Original in color. For the ad campaign, this scene was also restaged, twenty years after Erwitt made these stills, by the producer of a (moving) television commercial.

Your world is waiting and Visa is there.
120 countries
2.6 million shops, hotels, restaurants and airlines
70,000 banking offices
For traveling, shopping and cash advances . . .
Visa is the most widely recognized name in the world.
We're keeping up with you.

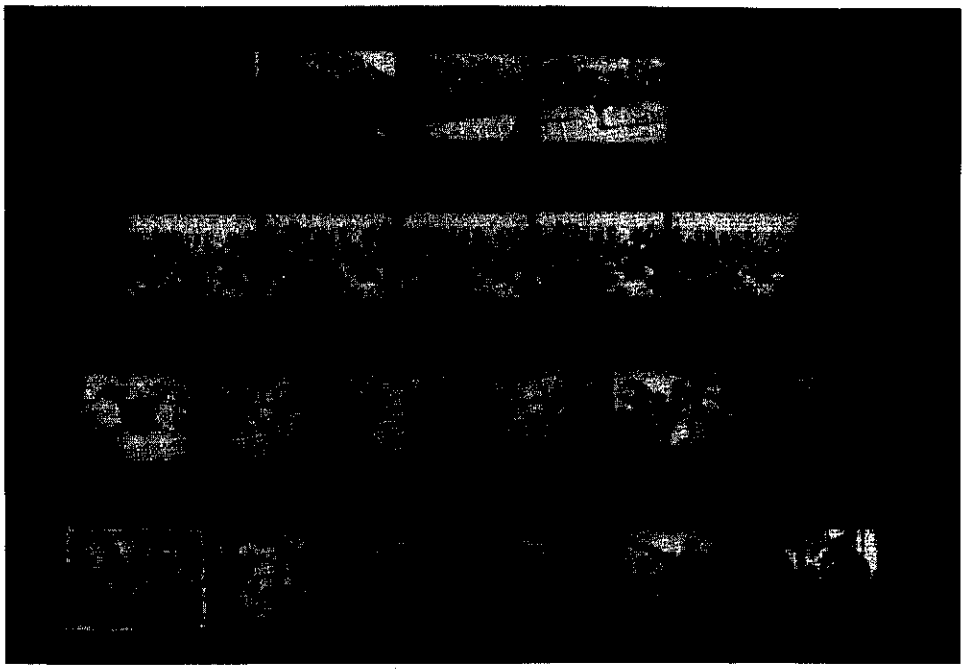
This current ad campaign includes photographs taken here and there in the world, some "authentic," some staged. One photo shows a man and a boy in dark berets on a bicycle on a tree-lined road, with long baguettes of bread tied across the rear of the bike: rural France. But wait—I've seen this photo before, years ago. It turns out that it was done by Elliott Erwitt for the Doyle Dane Bernbach ad agency on a job for the French office of tourism in the fifties. Erwitt received fifteen hundred dollars for the photo, which he staged using his driver and the man's nephew: "The man pedaled back and forth nearly 30 times till Erwitt achieved the ideal composition. . . . Even in such a carefully produced image, Erwitt's gift for documentary photography is evident," startlingly avers Erla Zwingle[14] in the column "Inside Advertising" in the December 1979 issue of *American Photographer*—which also has articles, among others, on Bill Owens's at best ambivalent photos of mid-American suburbs, leisure activities, and work ("sympathetic and honest, revealing the contentment of the American middle class," according to Amy M. Schiffman), on a show of the Magnum news-photo agency photos in a Tokyo department store ("soon after the opening [Magnum president Burk] Uzzle flew off to hunt down refugees in Thailand while Glinn remained in Japan, garnering much yen from assignments for the likes of IBM, Seagram, and Goldman Sachs," says E. F.), on Geoff Winningham's photos of Texas high-school football ("Inevitably one can compare him with the legendary Robert Frank, but the difference . . . is that . . . Winningham clearly loves the craziness [more on craziness later] he dwells upon," writes Schiffman), on Larry Clark's photos of Tulsa speed freaks ("A beautiful, secret world, much of it sordid" and "although there is plenty of sex, death, violence, anxiety, boredom . . . there is no polemic apparent . . . so it doesn't really matter whether or not we can trust these photos as documents; to see them as photo-



Elliott Erwitt, on an assignment for the French office of tourism in the 1950s (Agency: Doyle Dane Bernbach). Original in color.



A colonial variant. . . . Photo by Allée Dumanoir, in the Sunday *New York Times* travel section for November 22, 1981, captioned, "Riding home with a French loaf at Capesterre on Basse-terre." Basse-Terre is part of Guadeloupe in the French West Indies. Frank J. Prial's accompanying article, "A Francophile's Guadeloupe," avers that despite U.S. tourism, "thank heaven, everything has remained resolutely French, or at least French-Caribbean."



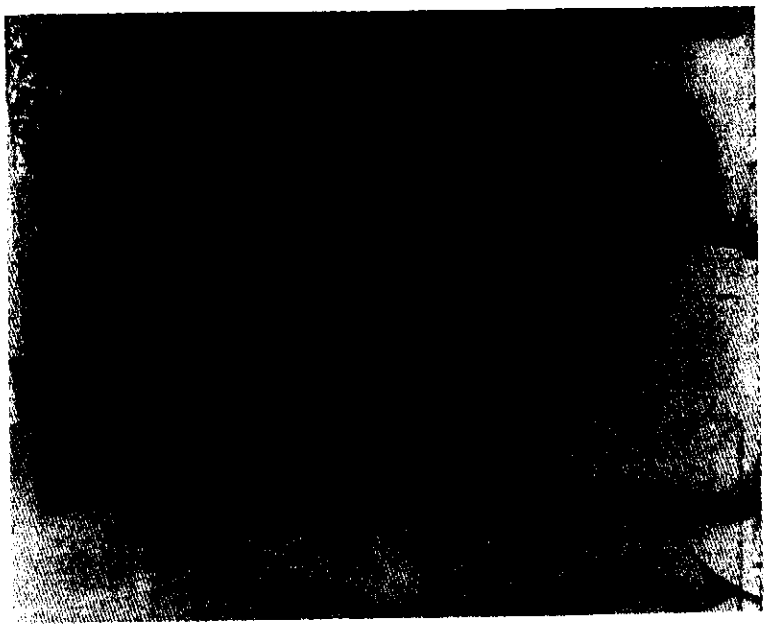
David Burnett, contact sheet showing prisoners detained at the stadium, Santiago, Chile, September 1973. From *American Photographer* (December 1979).

David Burnett, *Detained Prisoners*, September 1973. From *American Photographer* (December 1979).

graphs, no more and no less, is enough," remarks Owen Edwards). There is a Washington column by James Cassell complaining that "the administration frowns upon inspired photojournalism" and a page on Gamma photographer David Burnett, who arrived in Santiago de Chile a few days after the brutal putsch in 1973. On a government tour of the infamous stadium where people were detained and shot, he and other photographers "noticed a fresh batch of prisoners." Burnett says, "The Chileans had heard many stories about people being shot or disappearing [in a war does one learn of death from hearing stories?] and they were terribly frightened. The haunting gaze of one man in particular, whose figure was framed by two armed soldiers, . . . caught my eye. The picture has always stayed with me." We see a contact sheet and that image enlarged. The article, by Yvette E. Benedek, continues: "Like most agency photographers, Burnett must shoot both color and black and white to satisfy many publications in different countries, so he often works with three Nikons and a Leica. His coverage of the coup . . . won the Overseas Press Club's Robert Capa Award . . . 'for exceptional courage and enterprise.' "

What happened to the man (actually, men) in the photo? The question is inappropriate when the subject is photographs. And photographers. The subject of the article is the photographer. The name of the magazine is *American Photographer.* In 1978 there was a small news story on a historical curiosity: the real-live person who was photographed by Dorothea Lange in 1936 in what became *the world's most reproduced photograph.* Florence Thompson, seventy-five in 1978, a Cherokee living in a trailer in Modesto, California, was quoted by the Associated Press as saying, "That's my picture hanging all over the world, and I can't get a penny out of it." She said that she is proud to be its subject but asked, "What good's it doing me?" She has tried unsuccessfully to get the photo suppressed. About it, Roy Stryker, genius of the photo section of the Farm Security Administration, for which Lange was working, said in 1972: "When Dorothea took that picture, that was the ultimate. She never surpassed it. To me, it was *the* picture of Farm Security. . . . So many times I've asked myself what is she thinking? She has all of the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too. . . . You can see anything you want to in her. She is immortal."[15] In 1979, a United Press International story about Mrs. Thompson said she gets $331.60 a month from Social Security and $44.40 for medical expenses. She is of interest solely because she is an incongruity, a photograph that has aged; of interest solely because she is a postscript to an acknowledged work of art. Mr. Burnett's Chilean photograph will probably not reach such prominence (I've never seen it before, myself), and we will not discover what happened to the people in it, not even forty-two years later.

A good, reasonably principled photographer I know, who works for an occupational-health-and-safety group and cares about how his images are understood, was annoyed by the articles about Florence Thompson. He thought they were cheap, that the photo *Migrant Mother,* with its obvious symbolic dimension, stands over and apart from her, is *not-her,* has an independent life history. (Are photographic images, then, like civilization, made on the backs of the exploited?) I mentioned to him that in the book *In This Proud Land,*[16] Lange's field notes are quoted as saying, "She thought that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me." My friend the labor photographer responded that the photo's publication caused local officials to fix up the migrant camp, so that although Mrs. Thompson didn't benefit directly, others like her did. I think she had a different idea of their bargain.



Associated Press (photographer unknown), Florence Thompson in her trailer home with a framed copy of her photo and the book *In This Proud Land*. From *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1978.

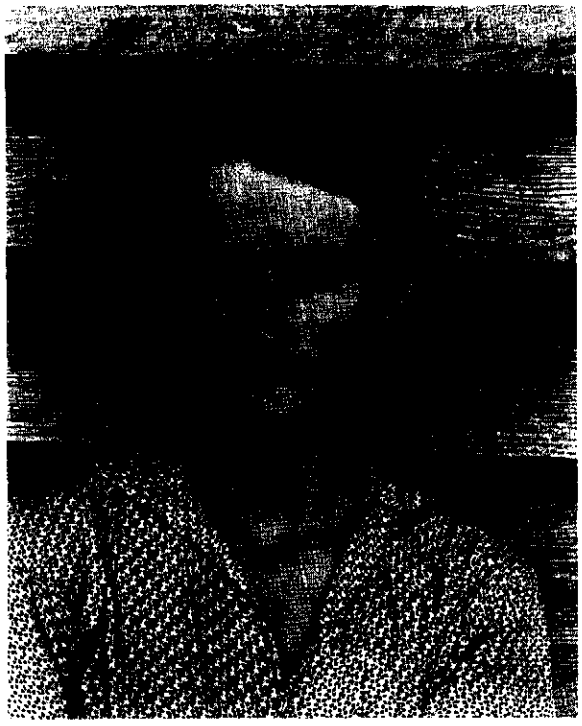
Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother* series, March 1936, as reproduced in a promotional sheet for *American Photographer*, late 1970s. The famous photo, usually captioned *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936*, is on the right.

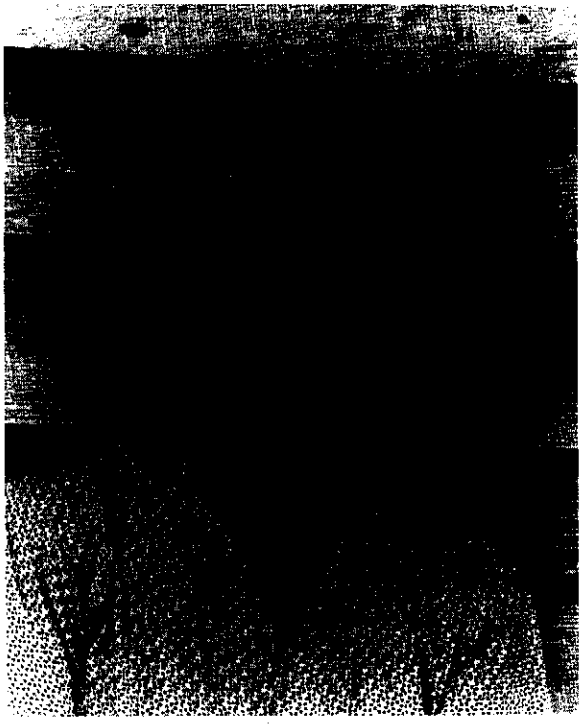
I think I recognize in his response the well-entrenched paradigm in which a documentary image has two moments: (1) the "immediate," instrumental one, in which an image is caught or created out of the stream of the present and held up as testimony, as evidence in the most legalistic of senses, arguing for or against a social practice and its ideological-theoretical supports, and (2) the conventional "aesthetic-historical" moment, less definable in its boundaries, in which the viewer's argumentativeness cedes to the organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic "rightness" or well-formedness (not necessarily formal) of the image. This second moment is *a*historical in its refusal of *specific* historical meaning yet "history minded" in its very awareness of the pastness of the time in which the image was made. This covert *appreciation* of images is dangerous insofar as it accepts *not* a dialectical relation between political and formal meaning, not their interpenetration, but a hazier, more reified relation, one in which topicality drops away as epochs fade, and the aesthetic aspect is, if anything, enhanced by the loss of specific reference (although there remains, perhaps, a cushioning backdrop of vague social sentiments limiting the "mysteriousness" of the image). I would argue against the possibility of a nonideological aesthetic; any response to an image is inevitably rooted in social knowledge—specifically, in social understanding of cultural products. (And from her published remarks one must suppose that when Lange took her pictures she was after just such an understanding of them, although by now the cultural appropriation of the work has long since removed it from this perspective.)

A problem with trying to make such a notion workable within actual photographic practice is that it seems to ignore the mutability of ideas of aesthetic rightness. That is, it seems to ignore the fact that historical interests, not transcendental verities, govern whether any particular form is seen as adequately revealing its meaning—and that you cannot second-guess history. This mutability accounts for the incorporation into legitimate photo history of the work of Jacob Riis alongside that of the incomparably more classical Lewis Hine, of Weegee (Arthur Fellig) alongside Danny Lyon. It seems clear that those who, like Lange and the labor photographer, identify a powerfully conveyed meaning with a primary sensuousness are pushing against the gigantic ideological weight of classical beauty, which presses on us the understanding that in the search for transcendental form, the world is merely the stepping-off point into aesthetic eternality.

The present cultural reflex of wrenching all artworks out of their contexts makes it difficult to come to terms with this issue, especially without seeming to devalue such people as Lange and the labor photographer, and their work. I think I understand, from the inside, photographers' involvement with *the work itself,* with its supposed autonomy, which really signifies its belongingness to their own body of work and to the world of photographs.[17] But I also become impatient with this perhaps-enforced protectiveness, which draws even the best intentioned of us nearer and nearer to exploitiveness.

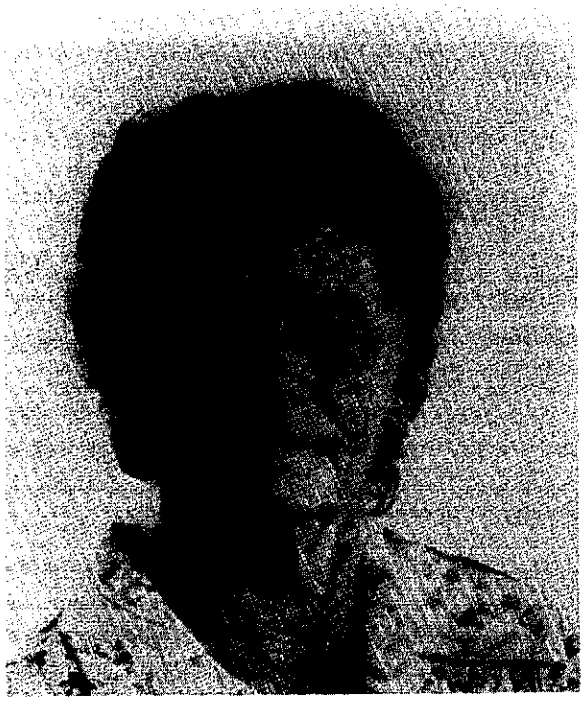
The Sunday *New York Times Magazine,* bellwether of fashionable ideological conceits, in 1980 excoriated the American documentary milestone *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (written by James Agee and photographed by Walker Evans in July and August of 1936, in Hale County, Alabama, on assignment from *Fortune* magazine, but not published until 1941).[18] The critique[19] is the same as that suggested in germ by the Florence Thompson news item. We should savor the irony of arguing before the ascendent class fractions represented by the readership of the Sunday *New York Times* for the protection of the sensibilities of those marginalized sharecroppers and children of sharecroppers of forty





Walker Evans's photograph of Allie Mae Fields Burroughs appears, captionless, in Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941); in that work she is called Annie Mae Woods Gudger. It also appears in *Documentary Photography* (New York: Time-Life, 1972), captioned *Tenant Farmer's Wife, Hale County, Alabama, 1936*, and in Walker Evans, *First and Last* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), captioned *Allie Mae Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.*

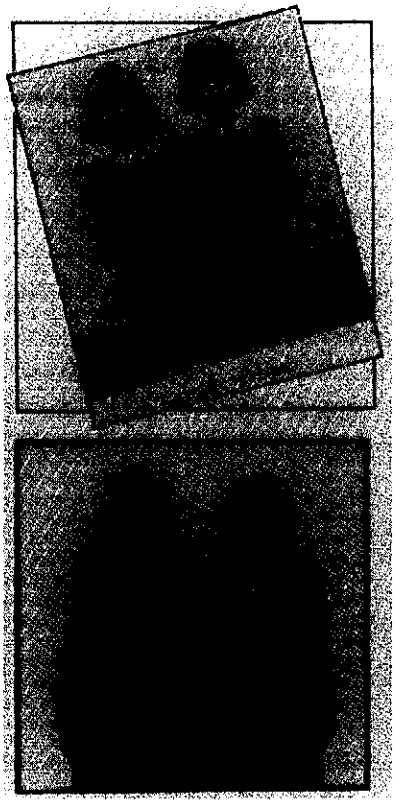
This second photo, no doubt taken at the same time as the preceding, is reproduced in Evans's *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), captioned *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer's Wife, 1936* and in *Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), captioned *Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of a Cotton Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama, Summer, 1936.* There are few references to the existence of more than one "Allie Mae" with different expressions. Many writers depend on there being just one, the preceding. For example, Scott Osborne, in "A Walker Evans Heroine Remembers," *American Photographer* (September 1979), quotes Agee as calling the image "a fraction of a second's exposure to the integrity of truth."



Scott Osborne, *Allie Mae (Burroughs) Moore, in her trailer home.* From *American Photographer* (September 1979).

years ago. The irony is greatly heightened by the fact that (as with the Thompson story) the "protection" takes the form of a *new* documentary, a "rephotographic project," a reconsignment of the marginal and pathetic to marginality and pathos, accompanied by a stripping away of the false names given them by Agee and Evans—Gudger, Woods, Ricketts—to reveal their real names and "life stories." This new work manages to institute a new genre of victimhood—the victimization by *someone else's* camera of helpless persons, who then hold still long enough for the indignation of the new writer to capture them, in words and images both, in their *current* state of decrepitude. The new photos appear alongside the old, which provide a historical dimension, representing the moment in past time in which these people were first dragged into history. As readers of the Sunday *Times,* what do we discover? That the poor are ashamed of having been *exposed* as poor, that the photos have been the source of festering shame. That the poor remain poorer than we are, for although *they* see their own rise in fortunes, their escape from desperate poverty, we *Times* readers understand that our relative distance has not been abridged; we are still doing much better than they. Is it then difficult to imagine these vicarious protectors of the privacy of the "Gudgers" and "Ricketts" and "Woods" turning comfortably to the photographic work of Diane Arbus?[20]

The credibility of the image as the explicit trace of the comprehensible in the living world has been whittled away for both "left" and "right" reasons. An analysis which reveals social institutions as serving one class by legitimating and enforcing its domination while hiding behind the false mantle of even-handed universality necessitates an attack on the monolithic cultural myth of objectivity (transparency, unmediatedness), which implicates not only photography but all journalistic and reportorial objectivity used by mainstream media to claim ownership of all truth. But the Right, on contradistinction, has found the attack on credibility or "truth value" useful to its own ends. Seeing people as



Layout from *Modern Photography*, July 1980. The top photo is the cover of the Diane Arbus monograph published by Aperture in 1972, featuring *Identical Twins, Roselle, N. J., 1967*. The bottom photo is *Arbus Twins Revisited* by Don Lokuta, 1979.

fundamentally unequal and regarding elites as natural occurrences, composed of those best fitted to understand truth and to experience pleasure and beauty in "elevated" rather than "debased" objects (and regarding it as social suicide to monkey with this natural order), the Right wishes to seize a segment of photographic practice, securing the primacy of authorship, and isolate it within the gallery-museum-art-market nexus, effectively differentiating elite understanding and its objects from common understanding. The result (which stands on the bedrock of financial gain) has been a general movement of legitimated photography discourse *to the right*—a trajectory that involves the aestheticization (consequently, formalization) of meaning and the denial of content, the denial of the existence of the political dimension. Thus, instead of the dialectical understanding of the relation between images and the living world that I referred to earlier—in particular, of the relation between images and ideology—the relation has simply been severed in thought.

The line that documentary has taken under the tutelage of John Szarkowski at New York's Museum of Modern Art—a powerful man in a powerful position—is exemplified by the career of Garry Winogrand, who aggressively rejects any responsibility (*culpability*) for his images and denies any relation between them and shared or public human meaning. Just as Walker Evans is the appropriate person within the history of street photography to compare with Lee Friedlander, the appropriate comparison for Winogrand is Robert Frank (who is compared with almost everyone), whose purloined images of American life in the 1950s suggest, however, all the passionate judgments that Winogrand disclaims.[21] Images can yield any narrative, Winogrand says, and all meaning in photography applies only to what resides within the "four walls" of the framing edges. What can,

in Frank's work, be identified as a personally mediated presentation has become, in Szarkowski's three "new documentarians," Winogrand, Arbus, and Friedlander, a privatized will o' the wisp:

> Most of the those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago . . . made their pictures in the service of a social cause. . . . to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right. . . . A new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and frailties of society. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational. . . . What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.[22]

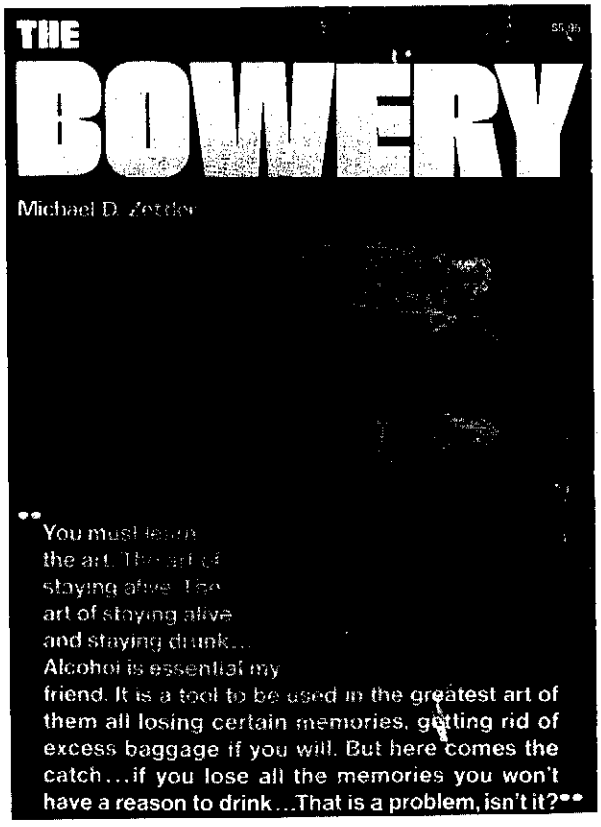
Szarkowski wrote that introduction to the *New Documents* show in 1967, in an America already several years into the "terrors" and disruptions of the Vietnam War. He makes a poor argument for the value of disengagement from a "social cause" and in favor of a connoisseurship of the tawdry. How, for example, do we define the boundaries and extent of "the world" from looking at these photographers' images, and how can we be said to "know it"? The global claim he makes for their work serves to point out the limits of its actual scope. At what elevated vantage point must we stand to regard society as having "frailties" and "imperfections"? High enough to see it as a circus before our eyes, a commodity to be "experienced" the way a recent vodka ad entices us to "experience the nineteenth century" by having a drink. In comparison with nightmarish photos from Vietnam and the United States' Dominican adventure, the work of Friedlander, Winogrand, and Arbus might be taken as evidencing a "sympathy" for the "real world." Arbus had not yet killed herself, though even that act proved to be recuperable by Szarkowski's ideological position. In fact, the forebears of Szarkowski are not those "who made their pictures in the service of a social cause" but bohemian photographers like Brassaï and the early Kertész and Cartier-Bresson. But rather than the sympathy and almost-affection that Szarkowski claimed to find in the work, I see impotent rage masquerading as varyingly invested snoop sociology—fascination and affection are far from identical. A dozen years later, aloofness has given way to a more generalized nihilism.

In the San Francisco Sunday paper for November 11, 1979, one finds Jerry Nachman, news director of the local headline-and-ad station, saying:

> In the Sixties and Seventies all-news radio had its place in people's lives: What was happening in Vietnam? Did the world blow up last night? Who's demonstrating where? . . . Now we're on the cusp of the Eighties and things are different. To meet these changes KCBS must deliver what's critical in life in a way that's packaged even perversely. . . . There's a certain craziness that goes on in the world and we want people to understand that we can chronicle it for them.

Nachman also remarks, "Our broadcasters tell people what they saw out there in the wilderness today." The wilderness is the world, and it inspires in us, according to this view, both anxiety and perverse fascination, two varieties of response to a spectacle.

Imperialism breeds an imperialist sensibility in all phases of cultural life. A safari of images. Drunken bums[23] retain a look of threat to the person. (Not, perhaps, as well as foreign prisoners . . . .[24]) They are a drastic instance of a male society, the lumberjacks or prospectors of the cities, the men who (seem to) choose not to stay within the polite

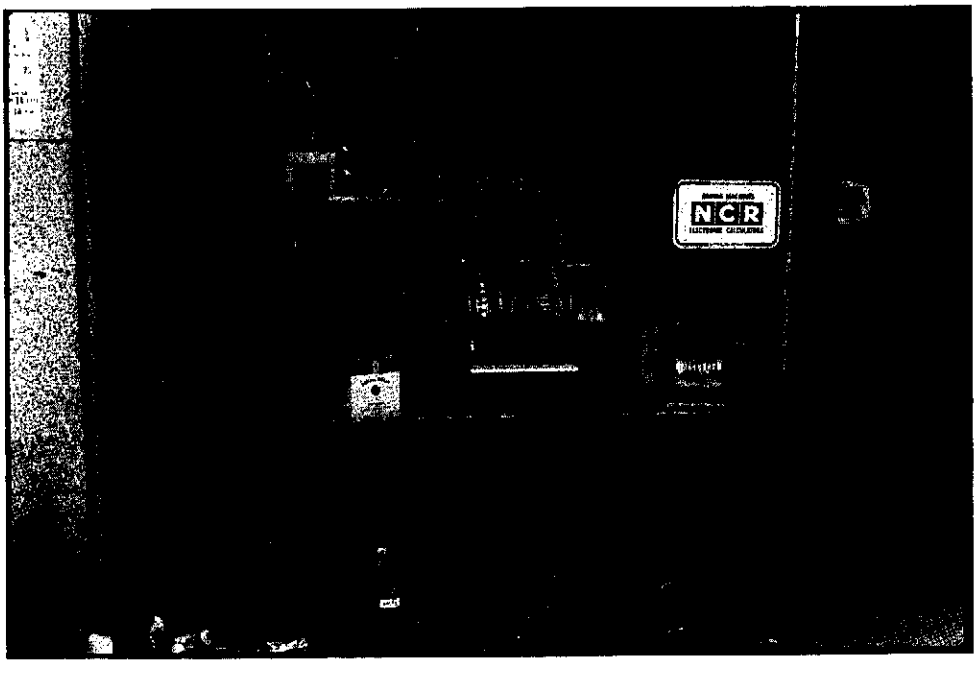


Cover of Michael D. Zettler's *The Bowery* (New York and London: Drake Publishers, 1975)

bourgeois world *of* (does "of" mean "made up of" or "run by" or "shaped by" or "fit for"?) *women and children.* They are each and every one an unmistakably identifiable instance of a physically coded social reality. The cynicism they may provoke in observers is far different from the cynicism evoked by images of the glitter world, which may end in a politically directed anger. *Directed toward change.* Bums are an "end game" in a "personal tragedy" sort of chance. They may be a surreptitious metaphor for the "lower class" but they are not to be confused with a social understanding of the "working class." Bums are, perhaps, to be finally judged as *vile,* people who deserve a kick for their miserable *choice.* The buried text of photographs of drunks is not a treatise on political economy, on the manipulation of the unemployment rate to control inflation and keep profits up and labor's demands down, on the contradictory pressures on the institution of the family under capitalism, on the appeal of consciousness-eradicating drugs for people who have little reason to believe in themselves.

The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems is a work of refusal. It is not defiant antihumanism. It is meant as an act of criticism; the text you are reading now runs on the parallel track of another descriptive system. There are no stolen images in this book; what could you learn from them that you didn't already know? If impoverishment is a subject here, it is more centrally the impoverishment of representational strategies tottering about alone than that of a mode of surviving. The photographs are powerless to *deal with* the reality that is yet totally comprehended-in-advance by ideology, and they are as diversionary as the word formations—which at least are closer to being located within the culture of drunkenness rather than being framed on it from without.

stewed
boiled
potted
corned
pickled
preserved
canned
fried to the hat



Martha Rosler, from *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*

There is a poetics of drunkenness here, a poetry-out-of-prison. Adjectives and nouns built into metaphoric systems—food imagery, nautical imagery, the imagery of industrial processes, of militarism, derisive comparisons with animal life, foreignisms, archaisms, and references to still other universes of discourse—applied to a particular state of being, a subculture of sorts, and to the people in it.

The words begin outside the world of skid row and slide into it, as people are thought to slide into alcoholism and skid to the bottom of the row. The text ends twice, comprising two series. First the adjectives, beginning with playful metaphor to describe the early, widely acceptable stages of intoxication and moving toward the baldness of stupor and death. A second series begins, of nouns belonging firmly to the Bowery and not shared with the world outside. Occasionally the texts address the photographs directly; more often, if there is a connection, it is the simultaneous darkening of mood as the two systems run along concurrently.

The photos represent a walk down the Bowery seen as arena and living space, as a commercial district in which, after business hours, the derelict residents inhabit the small portal spaces between shop and street. The shops range from decrepitude to splendor, from the shabbiest of ancient restaurant-supply houses or even mere storage spaces to astonishing crystal grottoes whose rapt cherubim entwined in incandescent fixtures and whose translucent swans in fountains of fiber-optic tubes relentlessly dripping oil blobs into dishes radiate into the street. Above the street, the now-infrequent flop houses and their successors the occasional, unseen living lofts, vary from mean raw space to constructed tropical paradises, indoor boweries whose residents must still step over the sleeping bums in the doorway and so are not usually the type who think of having kids. None of this matters to the street, none of it changes the quality of the pavement, the shelter or lack of it offered by the doorways, many of which are spanned by inhospitable but visually discreet rows of iron teeth—meant to discourage sleep but generally serving only as peas under the mattress of a rolled-up jacket. While the new professional-managerial urban gentry devour discarded manufactories and vomit up architectural suburbiana in their place, the Bowery is (so far) still what it has been for a hundred years and more. Bottles, and occasionally shoes, never flowers, are strewn on the Bowery, despite a name that still describes its country past.

The photos here are radical metonymy, with a setting implying the condition itself. I will not yield the material setting, though certainly it explains nothing. The photographs confront the shops squarely, and they supply familiar urban reports. *They are not reality newly viewed.* They are not reports from a frontier, messages from a voyage of discovery or self-discovery. There is nothing new attempted in a photographic style that was constructed in the 1930s when the message itself was newly understood, differently embedded. I am quoting words and images both.

Sure, images that are meant to make an argument about social relations can "work." But the documentary that has so far been granted cultural legitimacy has no such argument to make. Its arguments have been twisted into generalizations about the condition of "man," which is by definition not susceptible to change through struggle. And the higher the price that photography can command as a commodity in dealerships, the higher the status accorded to it in museums and galleries, the greater will be the gap between that kind of documentary and another kind, a documentary incorporated into an explicit anal-

ysis of society and at least the beginning of a program for changing it. The liberal documentary, in which members of the ascendant classes are implored to have pity on and to rescue members of the oppressed, now belongs to the past. The Jacquelines of the world, including Jacqueline, dance on its grave in upholstered mausoleums like the home of "Concerned Photography," Cornell Capa's International Center for Photography, at its ritzy New York address.[25] The documentary of the present, the petted darling of the monied, a shiver-provoking, slyly decadent, lip-smacking appreciation of alien vitality or a fragmented vision of psychological alienation in city and town, coexists with the germ of another documentary—a financially unloved but growing body of documentary works committed to the exposure of specific abuses caused by people's jobs, by the financier's growing hegemony over the cities, by racism, sexism, and class oppression, works about militancy, about self-organization, or works meant to support them. Perhaps a radical documentary can be brought into existence. But the common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary.

Addendum: Notes on Quotes

The photos in *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* might as well be quotations. They aren't, but they are purposely situated within a certain photographic tradition and so can be said loosely to quote that tradition.

Quotation, often as college, threads through twentieth-century art and literature fugally entwined with the countertheme of "originality." In quotation the relation of quoter to quote, and to its source, is not open and shut. Quoting allows for a separation between quoter and quotation that calls attention to expression as garment and invites judgment of its cut. Or, conversely, it holds out a seamless cloak of univocal authoritativeness for citers to hide behind. Although there is nothing unprejudiced about any representation, in the modern era attempts at a necessarily false "objectivity" in relation to meaning have periodically been made—whether in art, as in the German Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), or in journalism, United States style. Photography, dressed as science, has eased the path of this feigned innocence, for only photography might be taken as directly impressed by, literally formed by, its source.

Because of the power and pervasiveness of the social myth of photographic literalism, there has been a great deal of energy devoted to the demolition of that myth of directness. At various times the aim has been to invest the image with marks of authorship. Lately, the idea has been to expose the social—that is, the ideological—thrust of the myth, its not-accidental character.

Quotation has mediation as its essence, if not its primary concern, and any claims for objectivity or accuracy are made in relation to representations of representations, not representations of truth. The effect of this has tended to be a closure at the level of representation, which substantially leaves aside the investigation of power relations and their agencies.

But beyond the all-too-possible reductive-formalist or academic closure, in its straining of the relation between meaning and utterance, quotation can be understood as confessional, betraying an anxiety about meaning in the face of the living world, a faltered confidence in straightforward expression. At its least noble it is the skewering of the romantic consciousness on the reflexive realization of the impossibility of interpretational

adequacy followed by a withdrawal into a paranoic pout. Pointing to the existence of a received system of meaning, a defining practice, quotation can reveal the thoroughly social nature of our lives. In a society in which personal relations are characterized by fragmentation while the trend of history is toward reorganization into a new, oppressive totality in which ideological controls may be decisive, quotation's immanent self-consciousness about the avenues of ideological legitimation—those of the State and its dominating class and culture—or, more weakly, about routes of commercial utterance, can accomplish the simple but incessantly necessary act of making the normal strange, the invisible an object of scrutiny, the trivial a measure of social life. In its seeming parasitism, quotation represents a refusal of socially integrated, therefore complicit, *creativity.*

In this aspect, quotation is alienated sensibility. At certain historical junctures, quotation allows a *defeat* of alienation (alienation as psychological state, not as a structural disconnection of human beings and their labor power as described by Marx and Lukács), an asserted reconnection with obscured traditions. Yet the revelation of an unknown or disused past tradition emphasizes a rupture with the present and the immediate past, a revolutionary break in the supposed stream of history. The writing of history is always controlled by the dominant class, which selects and interprets events according to its own successes and which sees history's goal, its *telos,* as the triumph of that class. This use of quotation, that is, the appropriation of elements from the dustbin of official historiography, is intended to destroy the credibility of those reigning historical accounts in favor of the point of view of that history's designated losers. The homage of quotation is capable of signaling not self-effacement but rather a strengthening or consolidating resolve. Thus, for feminists in the past decade the resuscitation of a great variety of earlier works in all cultural fields was accompanied by energetic new production. The interpretation of the meaning and social origins and rootedness of those forms helped undermine the modernist tenet of the separateness of the aesthetic from the rest of human life, and an analysis of the oppressiveness of the seemingly unmotivated forms of high culture was companion to this work. The new historiographic championing of forgotten or disparaged works served as emblem of the *countering* nature of the new approach. That is, it served as an anti-orthodoxy announcing the necessity of the constant reinterpretation of the origin and meaning of cultural forms and as a specifically anti-authoritarian move.

Not incidentally, this reworking of older forms makes plain the essential interpenetration of "form" and "content." Yet bourgeois culture surrounds its opposition and, after initial rejection, assimilates new forms, first as a parallel track and then as an incorporated, perhaps minor, strand of the mainstream. In assimilating the old forms now refurbished, the ideological myths of the conditions of cultural production and the character of its creators are reimposed and substituted for the unassimilable sections of the newly rewritten histories that rejected or denied the bourgeois paradigms of cultural production. Today, we are witnessing the latter part of this process, in which critical and divergent elements in art are accepted but at the expense of the challenge to the paradigms of production or even, increasingly, at the expense of the challenge to institutionalized art-world power. Most particularly, there seems to be little challenge remaining to conventional notions of "success."

In general, it is through irony that quotation gains its critical force. One speaks with two voices, establishing a kind of triangulation—(the source of) the quotation is placed *here,* the quoter over *here,* and the hearer/spectator *there*—and, by inflection, one saps the

authority of the quote. Irony, however, is not universally accessible, for the audience must *know* enough to recognize what is at stake.

Irony certainly functions within the wider culture, but at present it seems to do so differently from the way it does in high art, where it is still pursued by those following from the Pop tradition. In the Pop era, quotation represented a two-faced literalism: a retying of connections to a social life beyond artistic expression that nevertheless offered a final refuge in formalism with a newly assimilated imagery. (This process has also affected some feminist quotation of styles extricated from their historically extinguished moment—it has served as a transfusion mechanism, a source of borrowings, and the same myths of individualized production have reappeared.) Pop also returned consciousness and presentness to art and artists (and intensified a tug-of-war with critics).

In the United States, the direction of Pop's quotational irony was so faintly inscribed (and so often denied) as to offer the public at large the sense of monumentalized approbation of the banal commercial commodity, that is, of its form, without *critique*—except possibly a critique of *execrable taste*. . . . or, inversely, its exultant acceptance (a version of the romantic pout). As "art," Pop may have given the public a pain (it wasn't transcendent or Beautiful) or a thrill (it acknowledged their taste for the decorative), but as a source of new merchandise, the cheap commercial "spin-offs," it was just plain fun, slightly outrageous in its brashness. Liking it was not just a way of worshipping Moloch; it was a way to fly in the face of boringness while placing oneself under the up-to-date signs of cultural power: corporate symbology.

In society at large, irony is sporadic and cathartic. It permits an outlet for relatively unexamined and sometimes only superficially understood feelings of resentment and exclusion. In high culture, the pervasive irony toward cultural production is well understood as connected to a developed critique of social structure or of the conditions of human existence. What seems culpable from the vantage point of high culture may appear whimsical, clever, or cute from the perspective of mass culture; seeing cultural elements as implicating all culture is very different from seeing them as randomly produced, isolated entities.

With quotation, as with photography, meaning is heavily weighted by the frame. Simply introducing something where it has been excluded—mass-culture imagery in an elite-culture setting (Pop) or photographs of the unphotographed poor or of subcultures—can be a radical opener, until familiarity dissipates the shock and closure is again made, with the disruptive elements now inside. Quotes, like photos, float loose from their framing discourses, are absorbed into the embracing matrix of affirmative culture (see Marcuse on this and on repressive tolerance). The irony of Pop quotation, which hardly allowed for even the sustained moral indignation that photos of the poor conceivably might, was short, for not only was no coherently critical framework provided for Pop, but even partial attempts were refused by its critics and artists. And it is even easier to admire designs from the graphic lexicon or decorations from mosque mosaics or incidental Chinese illustrations than a photo of some poor victim somewhere, no matter how familiar it has become and no matter how rich the narrative you have managed to invest it with (though in time the human content of the former photo of protest will likely raise its esteem above high-art quotation of mass-culture detritus).

Pop's irony is now nearly exhausted, but quotation is still used by artists to give form to irony and critique. "So hard to do anything original any more" betrays the dilemma of avant-garde sentiment at a time when a true avant-garde is absent and may be structurally impossible. In considering the recent critical practice in photography, we have to

differentiate art-world photography from photoworld photography. In the latter, a situational irony, external to the work, now exists as it has not before: previously, aestheticizing photographic practice, like art, was high-minded, but the past twenty years' history in the art world has made that position too stodgy. Photographers, particularly those with art-school educations, search for new looks as the omnivorous commodification of photography makes photos into art-historical material. Photos quote painting, drawing, conceptual-art diagrams, advertising, other photos, generally as a tactic of upward mobility, embracing the authority of the source and avoiding *socially* critical practice. (Even documentary photography is marked by fragmentation, subjectivization, and the distortion of images stemming from surrealism and its offshoot advertising strategies.) There is little irony intended in relation to the sources of such work (or should I say little received?): This is quotation from (or for) the aesthetically minded Right, which naturally prefers aesthetics to politics in art.

As capitalism-in-depression attempts to refurbish itself and to reimpose a business-is-king ideology that stresses competition along with rank and privilege, a predictable restructuring of the art world is under way.[26] Painting and sculpture, shepherded by dealers and surrounded by suitably adulatory critical effusions, are the preeminent art-world commodities of the era of reaction. In considering the repopularization of quotational ("neo-") expressionist and even fascist art now, much needs to be said about its relation to economic and ideological warfare, but that is beyond my concern here. Most of the quotational expressionism is lavish in its homages, though to some extent a loose Freudianized iconography has replaced mythological elements traditionally presented or tricked up as street figures. This newer work, the intensely capitalized and promoted production of Italian, German, and some American artists, ferociously attempts a return to "transcendent" art, with at best a weak and convoluted irony toward its own historical meaning. Expressionism's return, even apart from the meaning of the imagery, cannot be greeted with a consideration of the search for "authenticity" integral to its first debut. In relation to society, Lukács has provided an illuminating analysis of expressionism (in literature) in his essay of 1934, "Expressionism, Its Significance and Decline." In confronting a class-divided society in intense conflict, expressionists see only the wrenching sorrows imposed on the individual by "civilization." There is no need to take sides, only to wash one's hands of the whole thing.

> As an opposition from a confused anarchistic and bohemian standpoint, expressionism was naturally more or less vigorously directed against the political right. And many expressionists and other writers who stood close to them only took up a more or less explicit left-wing position in politics. . . . But however honest the subjective intention behind this may well have been in many cases, the abstract distortion of basic question, and especially the abstract "anti-middle-classness," was a tendency that, precisely because it separated the critique of middle-classness from both the economic understanding of the capitalist system and from adhesion to the liberation struggle of the proletariat, could easily collapse into its opposite extreme: into a critique of "middle-classness" from the right, the same demagogic critique of capitalism to which fascism later owed at least part of its mass basis.[27]

One of the splashiest quotational artists draws directly on fascist iconography, dressing it in "classical modern" formal clothing. His claim to be attacking the dog-eat-dog world of corporate high finance won't do. Nazis attacked big business as well—that accounts for the "socialist" in National Socialist. Fascism commonly masquerades as populism while secretly serving big business; that's the point of John Heartfield's much-reproduced col-

lage "The Meaning of the Hitler Salute," subcaptioned "Millions Stand Behind Me" and "Little Man Asks for Great Gifts." What fascists offer the "little men" is only the chance to feel connected, through merely mythic identification, to power. Using mythic forms and exacerbating irrational doubts do not lead to progressive social transformation. Instead, they hasten people's acceptance of authoritarian, presumably patriarchal, "leadership" (subjugation).

It also won't do to deny responsibility for fascist content by projecting it onto the audience, further weighting the balance with guilt and uncertainty. The work in question, in performance, sculpture, and graphics, offers a vast monumentalization of male power—phallic columns, images of the troubled hero, the suffering god—and contorted bodies, uniforms of power, weaponry, and stark lighting. It recreates, in most blatant fashion, fascist art.

Finally, it won't do to suggest that the work embodies social critique. As analysis of Western capitalism, the label "fascist" is simply incorrect. In betraying the reality of our society (which deserves the analysis and criticism appropriate to it), this misuse of the term serves to glorify fascism, which seems intriguing and not at all unendurable. What does it mean to put fascist ideas and images center stage when there is a broad streak of adulation for them in punk-new wave and when one need only open the *New York Times* to find a full-page illustration taken straight from the fascist lexicon advertising Bergdorf's department store?

In contrast to these reactionary works, there is a much-needed practice of critical photography and text currently in the art world. It is getting feverish attention from the sectors of the critical establishment unwilling to swim with the tide of reaction. It is concerned with a critical engagement with the images of mass culture, visual and verbal, and with those of photography (and art) as a practice. It is quotational ("appropriational") and ironic. But there are serious problems with some of it, which, despite its aggressiveness and sometimes globalized claims, seems at times quite timid in relation to its own material.

Appropriation and analysis are at issue in critique. The difference between them must be appreciated. Appropriation sharply depends on context to provide the critical movement—generally, as I've remarked, through irony. Appropriative strategies do not in principle exclude either analysis or synthesis (but the ones currently receiving the most attention tend to do so). But replicating oppressive forms, whether by quoting them directly or through the fashioning of simulacra, may replicate oppressiveness. Further, the works at issue imply a totalizing or systemic critique. Implicating a whole system is logically unsatisfactory; if an assertion encompasses an entire universe, there is no vantage point outside from which to make or understand the critique. Thus, I will argue that using the language of advertising or melodrama or a simulated series of "cultural-unconscious" utterances in fact leaves their systems uncriticized and reproduces their power-seeking and anxiety-provoking gambits far too well. The work, in its stringency, is didactic in relation to other art production. Just as it locates itself logically above other art, the critical discourse needed to support it is put in the same relation to it.

Irrationalism, companion of reaction, is furthered by withdrawal from direct social analysis. Rationalism implies and fosters certitude, and doubt and ambiguity deepen social distress, as I've already noted.[28] Simulacra of ideological discourses, whether in images (say, of women) or verbal stereotypes, without analysis offer no foothold within the work but instead throw up a treacherous and contradictory dream world that encourages pro-

jection and myth. In his essay on expressionism Lukács quotes Karl Pinthus, whom he calls "one of the leading expressionist theorists":

> We felt ever more clearly the impossibility of a humanity that had made itself completely dependent on its own creation, on its science, technology, statistics, trade and industry, on an ossified social order, and bourgeois and conventional customs. This recognition meant the beginning of a struggle against both the epoch and its reality. We began to resolve the surrounding reality into the unreality it is, to penetrate through the phenomena to the essence, and to surround and demolish the enemy by assault on the mind. We sought first of all to distance ourselves from our environment by ironic superiority, by grotesquely jumbling its phenomena, floating easily through the viscous labyrinth . . . , or rising into the visionary with the cynicism of the music-hall.[29]

Later in the essay Lukács remarks that "this 'essence' is . . . presented by the expressionist as the poetic reality. . . . He does this in poetry . . . by gathering together as a literary form his own inability to arrange and master the objective reality in thought, making this into the chaos of the world itself and simultaneously the sovereign act of the writer."[30]

In work based on advertising, the critique is of domination congealed into photographic images (not necessarily from ads) and language, and the presentation draws on magazine, billboard, and other display techniques. As in advertising, the relation of text to image is generally ironic: contradictory, perhaps, or revelatory. Yet there is no *particular* critique of these forms as concreted oppression, instrumentalities of selling. Advertising is merely dirtied by backwash from other critical elements in the work; although the forms are shown as constrained, they are not deeply criticized, for they carry a new, critical message. Works using television gambits suffer from the same problems. Each locates clear instances of oppressive, sometimes sensationalist, imaging, generally ones which target women or sensationalize violence, and each repeats oppressive formal strategies of the chosen industry (advertising, television) such as authoritative phrasing and type design or rapid editing, organized into an up-to-date format. Predictably, as these artists have developed their oeuvres, the work has come to seem more and more locked in fascination to its own material.

The ambivalence toward the appropriated material is evident in the form's being pressed into service of a new authoritativeness, a new mastery. This ambivalence contributes to the formalist cast of the work, for the polish may seem more powerful than the criticism. For those without a preexistent critical relation to the material, the work seems a slicked-up version of the original, a new commodity. In fact, much of this work has proved quite salable, easy to show, easy to write about, easy to sell. Epigrammatic and rhythmic, the work's effect is to tend to foreclose thought rather than to stimulate it, to replace criticism and analysis with sloganeering. No one, neither critic nor viewer, has to do the hard work of understanding the social relations alluded to in the work.

The flat refusal of "new production" (which mistakenly assumed that reproduction is no production) of some quotational artists is deeply romantic in continuing to identify creativity as the *essence* of art. This jettisons, for example, a more open-ended idea of art as stemming from and returning to lived relations. The cry of the isolated producer, the spectator of social life, represents a choice behind which lies a profound stasis. The work is immobile while critics do their work on it, "Nature" to their "Culture," female to their male (more on this later). What does it mean to reproduce well-known photos or photos of well-known artworks directly? Explanations have been inventive: removing the works from their rarified niches and making them more widely accessible (from a respectable curator); claiming them as part of our cultural unconscious (a recent *New York Times* article); exposing the commodity status of all art in the age of mechanical reproduction

(European-influenced critics); protesting the glut of existing imagery (a friend). Each explanation remains in its own domain of meanings. (The clearest explanation the artist has been able to offer has been remarks about ambivalence.)

What alternative vision is suggested by such work? We are not provided the space within the work to understand how things might be different. We can imagine only a respite outside social life—the alternative is merely Edenic or Utopic. There *is* no social life, no personal relations, no groups, classes, nationalities; there is no production other than the production of images. Yet a critique of ideology necessitates some materialistic grounding if it is to rise above the theological.

Some of the problems with the new quotational work make sense, as I've suggested, in the light of our current historical situation. The force behind its irony is not derived from a process of politicization, although it claims a politics. Consider the irony of political movements. Consider the cartoons, plays, and songs, for example, of past movements, many of which have entered official histories cut from their contexts of political ferment. The irony and parody of oppressive social institutions and their representatives contained in these works are resilient with anger and a forward motion, a resolve toward change that seems convinced of the direction of history. Most of this work stems from working-class movements, having bourgeois and petty-bourgeois allies such as intellectuals and artists. But the lack of a coherent oppositional movement now in the United States leaves artists with the easy institutional alliance that they (we), along with intellectuals and other "cultural workers," form with the controlling classes.

The critical art I have been discussing winds up traditionally modernist in its reliance (with some exceptions) on gallery and museum and critical supports. A hybrid practice, it combines the obsessiveness of (abstract) expressionism with the stringency of conceptualism (or, more properly, minimalism). Compared with the multiply inventive, directorial, and entrepreneurial activity of Andy Warhol's Pop or the self-confidently shaping intelligences of conceptual art, much of this work seems ready-made for the critic. Most of the sympathetic critics concern themselves only with art that has already found its location in commercial art galleries and museums, so that the process of legitimation is presupposed to exclude either a wider practice, a non-New York (or non-European) practice, or one that neglects or refuses commitment to the showing and selling institutions of high culture. The conservatism (and laziness) of this restricted critical practice is confirmed in its methods of intensively "working" a few artists, usually "single move" artists, most of whom provide relatively passive subjects of critical attention.

Some of the opposition to bourgeois cultural hegemony has taken on the Althusserian direction of "theoretical praxis," which claims as revolutionary the theoretical work that bares the structures of capitalist domination in the field of ideology. (Lukács stresses the theory orientation of expressionists.) However, this work remains locked within the relations of production of its own cultural field. For critics and other sympathetic producers, this functionally modernist closure reinforces their own sense of opposition to hegemonic bourgeois culture without raising difficult questions about their relation to political movements (although Althusser was a member of the French communist party even through its Stalinist period). Critics and the artists they write about engage in mutual confirmation that questions of civilization and culture must be dealt with within the universe of meaning circumscribed by the internationalized art world, mutual confirmation of the impossibility of engaging with political questions that challenge rather than simply *highlighting* power relations in society. The oppressiveness of social institutions and social relations is overstated in the art I am considering, leaving no room for oppositional human

agency—a charge that has been made against Althusser's work as well. Amid deepening uncertainty, criticism has retreated further from an "engaged" stance. The still emergent criticism deriving from the work of Jacques Derrida tends to deny any possibility of unambiguous political stands (though recently Derrida was supposedly backed against a wall by some French reporters and made to proclaim his belief in the need for social transformation), along with a denial of authorship that may paradoxically help in dusting off the view of the artist as a passively creating, disconnected figure.

The return to the trappings of genius (or, less histrionically, the lone producer) fits interestingly with questions of feminism. It is not at all accidental that most of the artists at issue are women. Women are more likely than men to be critical of existing power relations, since they have less of the power. But particularly in the highly conscious intellectual community, where feminism is still taken seriously, femaleness tends now to be the token for all markers of difference; appreciation of the work of women whose subject is oppression exhausts consideration of all oppressions. This arraying of oppressions mirrors that in the rest of society, which divides and conquers. The difference is that in the art world, race and class (for example) can be left out. This is not to say that for the art world the rest of society is obliterated. If New York is sometimes Culture to the rest of society's Nature, the world of artists and intellectuals is also sometimes Culture while the rest of culture, as either bourgeois-generated mass culture or as popular or street culture, is Nature. Nature, of course, provides setting and raw material.

The separation from, not to say contempt for, working-class and minority life and culture that many critics and intellectuals experience disappears as an issue in their championing of the female oppressed. (We need not cast blame.) Single-move art needs strong support systems, as I've said. This support can be literally patronizing: Svengali and Trilby may be too extreme a model for this relationship, but there are elements of performer and manager here, nonetheless. The dominance of critical discourse over the artist's expressive utterances is a guilt-denying dominance, for it is carried out in the logical superiority of metalanguage over language and thus exculpates the individuals involved. If the woman artist, asserting herself (and all of us?) to be a prisoner of phallocentric language, refuses to try to speak, her refusal, coupled with her continuing to seek, through ordinary art-world channels, the validation of critics, curators and buyers, confirms the image of woman as bound and impotent. The ornithological interest of some critics in the song of the caged bird fits the pattern set by previous doomed actresses and singers. One critic tempered his praise of each woman he discussed with a sobering assessment of the "weaknesses" of her approach, a strategy he has never applied to men.

Some of the new quotational work exists in relation to "the street." "The street" is interesting only in metropolitan locales with deeply divided class structure and conflict, and perhaps where the impoverished and excluded are also ethnically different. Operating in New York's closed and self-reinforcing art world but often living among its dispossessed populations, artists may identify with their neighbors but aspire to art-world success. Coming to New York is regarded as a dangerous rite of passage through which only the strong pass victorious. However deeply felt in matters of daily life, this situation becomes a fantasy drama in the matter of making art. The street and its culture become both a source of style and a theatrical setting for an art still aimed at high-culture audiences and the intermediary subcultures of young producers and supporters.

Locating art sites in impoverished neighborhoods presents a real dilemma, for the facts of social power and privilege can hardly be wished away. Neighborhood people, often kids, enter as relatively unselfconscious producers and undoubtedly gain from their experiences. But careers are built for the (mostly white) artists—careers that, in their gallery incarnations, are as docilely individualized as any. The bludgeoning of human sentiments and the truncation of social life, whose continuing vitality testifies to human resiliency under terrible conditions—conditions that activists and social critics point to as evidence of the destructiveness of capitalism—are transformed into exciting, even sensational, sources of artistic experiment and imagery, with no accompanying acknowledgment of oppression and need. That which was evidence becomes a cause for celebration. An encounter through which art audiences are satisfied that the poor are happy where they are, God bless 'em, is as supportive of the status quo as art that leaves them out.[31]

Quotation is a larger practice than I have considered here. Although some of both types, critical and mystificatory, is done by both men and women, it is evident that neo-expressionism, at least, is now (and has been) a male strategy, part of whose burden is the painful loss of individual mastery for all but a few men (and part of whose social use is "backlash"). Concomitantly, most of the socially critical, largely photographic work is made in response to the oppressive power of unauthored ideological domination as expressed in imagery of the female and logically, therefore, is done by women. Because women, in aiming for self-determination and success, have had to downplay their "expressiveness," this work is stringent and tough. Vacating the field of expression left it open for men to rush into and stake their claims (and leaving room for the feminine Mary Boone to remark entrepreneurially that men are more expressive than women and to simultaneously claim, in *People* magazine's issue for April 12, 1982, "I'll always take a great woman artist, but the museum hierarchies won't accept them").

The gutting of feminism in society makes the continuation of feminist art essential. But if women artists fit too easily into the institutional patterns of the art world, it seems plausible that feminist art will be just a competing style of the sixties and seventies and will be outdated by fashion. Repeating the images of woman bound in the frame will, like Pop, soon be seen as *confirmation* by the "post-feminist" society. We need to find a way to maintain not just a critical but a countering practice, as I mentioned at the start of these notes. Quite possibly it will be developed by those who have forged the critical practice I have considered here or by others much like them, as well as by men who refuse the kinds of rewards now offered by an art world more and more tied to the interests of those bent on control over society.