

Art Photography in America

by Howard S. Becker

*Essay on four new books
traces how Stieglitz, Weston,
and Evans struggled to
establish photography as an
authentic form of artistic work.*

Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer by Dorothy Norman. New York: Random House, 1973. 254 pages, 80 reproductions, 90 illustrations. \$35.00

Edward Weston: Fifty Years, an illustrated biography by Ben Maddow. Miller-ton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1973, 284 pages, 150 reproductions. \$40.00

Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938. An illustrated catalogue of 488 photographs. New York: DaCapo Press, 1973. \$25.00

In This Proud Land: America 1935-1943 As Seen in the FSA Photographs by Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973. 191 pages, 200 photographs. \$15.00

Within a few years of Daguerre's publication of his method for fixing photographic images on a metal plate, the United States was a hotbed of photographic activity. Professionals offered their services, selling scenic views, portraits, and whatever else customers were willing to pay for. As the daguerrotype was replaced by the tintype and then by many versions of the negative-positive process, the uses to which photography could be put multiplied. Not surprisingly, some people thought the new processes could produce "art" and devoted their efforts to that end.¹ Photographers are still trying to settle the question of whether what they do is or is not art. Four books, detailing the lives and accomplishments of some of the leaders in the struggle for artistic status, provide the occasion for a look at the processes involved in that struggle.

¹ Taft (13) gives an excellent account of the early years of photography in the United States; see also Newhall (7).

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Before looking at the lives and work of Stieglitz and Weston, Evans and the other members of the FSA photographic unit, let me lay some groundwork and propose a particular way of viewing the question of whether photography (or any other activity) is or isn't art. We might look at it as many photographers in fact have: establish criteria of "real" art, and see how the candidate for artistic activity stacks up. Photographers like to do that so that, by demonstrating that they meet the criteria, they can win the rewards that go with artistic status: museum exhibitions, sales to collectors, critical acclaim, teaching positions in art schools, and so on. In so doing, they use a strategy used by many previous candidates, one analogous to that common in other lines of work which busy themselves seeking recognition as professions.

To win the theoretical battle, it is not enough just to say that you meet the criteria.

You must also be able to counter skepticism with solid evidence that you meet them, and the best way to do that is to create the full institutional apparatus of some activity whose status as art is unquestioned, such as painting, sculpture, concert music, grand opera, or Shakespearean theater. If you have all the organizations and activities one of those has, no one can deny that you are an "art," any more than a trade which manifests the full organizational apparatus of organized medicine or law can be denied the status of "profession."

What makes up the full institutional apparatus of art? It depends, of course, on the art. What is necessary for a performing art to convince the world it is the real thing differs from what an art that produces objects needs. Photography, early on, took painting as its model of a fine art, and thus, to make its case, had to produce the kinds of organizations painting had developed into a fullblown art world. Christopherson (2), in the course of explaining photography's difficulties getting others to recognize it as fine art, gives a minimum list of what is needed: critics and a critical vocabulary, schools, museums and galleries, an audience, and unique original works. He also shows how photographers in the San Francisco Bay Area (where he did his research) have failed to produce the full institutional world of a recognized art; the argument applies to other geographical areas as well. I don't think Christopherson is completely right. Even his interviewees have had modest successes, and the New York area supports a much more elaborate establishment. Indeed, there is a good case that what is missing is increasingly being provided (there is even a Society of Photographic Educators!). But Christopherson is right enough; those are among the elements needed, and fine art photography doesn't quite have them.

Why doesn't fine art photography have full organizational embodiment in an art world? Why do its spokesmen still find it necessary, as they do, to argue that it "really is art"? In another paper (3), Christopherson suggests that artist-photographers have had to fight against the definitions of

the photograph as mere technique, as mere product, and as mere snapshot; and that, insofar as they fail to substitute for these a definition of photography as belonging to an existing artistic tradition, as distinguished by artistic intent, and as evincing artistic talent, they fail to get acceptance of their work as art. That view slights some organizational matters of great importance. I would prefer to say that photography's troubles have come about in some part because of its failure to free itself from the organizational restraints of the institutions it was embedded in, rather than solely from its failure to win an ideological dispute.

Most artists, of course, work within some kind of organization, and any work done in an organizational context is subject to some constraints. (I say *most*, rather than *all*, because it is theoretically possible for a person to do the whole thing himself, thereby winning a freedom from organizational constraint, at the price of producing work that is not available to others and, often, not intelligible or interesting to them either. That is another story, which I have gone into elsewhere [1].)

But some constraints are conventionally accepted as "reasonable," as necessary components of any artistic activity, as simply setting the bounds within which serious work can go on, as constituting the basis of tradition on which the art depends and grows—in a word, as constraints which are internal to the art and without which it could not exist. Accepting those boundaries, the artist thinks of himself (and others similarly think of him) as pursuing his ideas to their logical technical and emotional conclusions, constrained perhaps by the scarcity of support and resources, but nevertheless institutionally encouraged to engage in such a pursuit. Other constraints seem to artists and others to come from "outside," from organizations not defined as integral to the artistic enterprise, but seen rather as intrusive and alien, as imposing constraints which place arbitrary and capricious limits on what can be done.

Since photographers have never developed the full panoply of institutions to support their conception of artistic work, they have had to work within organizations devoted to other purposes, producing illustrations for journalistic publications, portraits for those who could afford them, illustrations for advertising. Rosenblum (10) studied the effect of working under those conditions for news and fashion photographers, explaining in telling detail how characteristic features of their photographs reflected the constraints imposed on them by their work environment. Those constraints interfere enormously with the work of photographers who want to demonstrate that they are artists, imposing arbitrary criteria that make it almost impossible to follow any idea to its logical conclusion in a finished work. If, for example, an advertising client demands that the photograph display an item of clothing to best advantage, the photographer must arrange lighting, composition, and all the other elements of the picture to serve that end. He will have to remove the wrinkle in the material or the shadow that might serve an expressive purpose for someone whose sole aim was to create a work of art. Under these circumstances, the photog-

rapher can hardly afford to worry about art and concerns himself instead with craft, with doing the job as skillfully as it can be done within the imposed constraints. (Edward Steichen's work for *Vogue* [11] embodies this point exactly.)

Even before most of these kinds of commercial work were available, prior to the invention of the halftone process and the telegraphic communication of pictures (7), photographers who wanted the freedom recognized artists had also had to fight free of the essentially craft standards of the large number of amateur photographers organized in local camera clubs, their work exhibited in the clubs' annual "salons." It's hard to characterize the camera club aesthetic, other than to say that prizes are often awarded in a way analogous to the way they are awarded in dog shows: so many points for composition, so many for printing, so many for presentation. (The ethos is somewhat caricatured in the remark a former member made to me, explaining why he had given photography up: "I won first prize in black-and-white one year, and first prize in color the next year, so there was nothing left to shoot for.") Such a view, enforced by the collective opinion and practices of local groups, exercises a strong constraint on the freedom of artist-photographers to pursue an idea.

*Photographers have tried to construct organizations
that would provide the freedom by which
we know that people are acting "artistically."*

Rosenblum (10) studied art photographers and found the characteristic feature of their work to be the freedom to explore ideas and do work that differed from established craft standards; which is not to deny the tyranny of the academic standards groups of artists develop and enforce through their control of museums and schools. The work of Stieglitz, Weston, and Evans and the other FSA photographers is of sufficient artistic and intellectual interest to merit critical analysis and discussion in its own right. But I want to concentrate here on the way their careers and work illustrate the processes by which photography, insofar as it successfully has, escaped the bonds imposed by those other organizations and established its own organizations designed to protect freedom and autonomy and thus provide evidence for the rhetorical claim that photography is in fact an art.

Stieglitz preceded the other two, and his fight for photography's artistic status went on longer, was fought more consistently, and perhaps accomplished more than the activities of Weston and Evans. When he began, there was no business of commercial photography tied to advertising, nor was there any strong connection between the businesses of photography and journalism. But the salons, competitions, and organizations of essentially amateur photographers existed in great numbers and strength, both nationally and internationally. Alfred Stieglitz himself was deeply involved as an exhibitor, editor of the *American Amateur Photographer*, and vice-



Excavating, New York, 1911 by Alfred Stieglitz

president of the New York Camera Club, always pushing for a more serious and artistic approach. His early pictures, a few of which are reproduced in Dorothy Norman's biography, show how much he drew on that amateur tradition. But he soon broke with the clubs, partly because his own vision outstripped their conventional standards and partly because he liked to run things his own way, without interference from well-meaning amateurs. Free from the camera club atmosphere and politics, in rapid succession he organized the Photo-Secession (1902), began publication of *Camera Work*² (1903), and opened a gallery exhibiting photographs as works of art (1905). He had already, as much as ten years earlier, begun to make the magnificent photographs of the buildings, machines, and people of New York which made it clear that his work was something special.

In a very brief time, then, Stieglitz produced (on a small scale, to be sure) much of the institutional paraphernalia to justify the claim that photography was an art: a gallery in which work could be exhibited, a journal containing fine reproductions and critical commentary which provided a medium of communication and publicity, a group of mutually supportive colleagues, and a new subject matter and style departing definitively from the imitations of painting then in favor. Stieglitz was a difficult man

² Aperture has just published (4) a selection of prose and pictures from the full run of *Camera Work*, an excellent companion piece to the Stieglitz biography.

and soon fell out with his colleagues of the Photo-Secession. That falling out led to another enormous step in the consolidation of photography's artistic status, the cementing of the connections between photographers and the artistic community of painters and sculptors. Steichen was already in close contact with Rodin, whom he had photographed in his studio, and he became the conduit through which first Rodin, then Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso, and other French artists sent their work to be shown in Stieglitz's gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. Steichen was also responsible for Stieglitz's exhibiting John Marin's work and thus coming into contact with such other young American painters as Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove. As Stieglitz ceased showing photographs exclusively, he filled the gallery with modern drawings, paintings, and sculpture. He acquainted painters and photographers with one another, and taught them to take each other's work into account, not in the imitative style of the earlier "painterly" photographers, but in a more mutually complementary way. Some of Paul Strand's work, recently seen nationally in a giant retrospective exhibit (12), exemplifies this; Strand exhibited in Stieglitz's gallery and his photographs appeared in *Camera Work*. The connection became domestic in the liaison and marriage of Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe, the great painter who also served as the subject of a stunning series of Stieglitz portraits. It persisted throughout Stieglitz's long career, his role as promoter and exhibitor of modern art being as important in the history of American painting as his own work is in the history of photography.

The Norman biography describes that long career somewhat superficially but gives enough names, dates, and events to be of interest. The 80 beautifully reproduced full-page photographs, and the 90 smaller pictures, many of them by Stieglitz, give the book its real value. They show how he periodically shifted the focus of his attention, violating the conventions his own work had earlier created, as when he embarked on the series of "Equivalents," pictures of clouds and other natural phenomena, which are heavily symbolic, evoking through the play of tones emotions more compelling than the commonplace subject matter warranted. The photographs, like his prose, let us know they are from an earlier era when Whitmanesque celebrations of the works of God and Man did not have an ironic ring, but they are no less moving for that.

*The one problem Stieglitz did not solve
in building an art world around photography was
perhaps the most serious of all. He never found
a way to make a living out of making photographs.*

His contemporaries and successors, if they were to work at photography full-time and be more than camera club amateurs, had to find a way. If Stieglitz could not make a living selling prints as though they were paintings, no one could, and photographers had to do the work others were willing to pay for, work which could not straightforwardly explore an idea

or emotion photographically. Steichen, for instance, had early learned to do commercial portraits; later he photographed fashionable women in fashionable clothes and stars of the stage and movies for *Vogue*, and still later did work for the government. In all of these activities, the final product had to satisfy extraneous (i.e., alien to the tradition and history of the art) standards: make the subject of the portrait or the clothing "look good," or satisfy a bureaucrat's or military man's public relations needs. Some people became very adept—Steichen certainly did—at turning out work of real quality under such constraints. But those organizationally based constraints made it virtually impossible for photography to be more than a minor art form, imprisoned in extraneous craft standards tied to the necessity of doing someone else's business in order to make a living. The typical art photographer (10), then and now, has maintained an uneasy balance between the work he did for others and that he did for himself (with the exception, relatively recent, of those who manage by teaching).

Many photographers found portraiture the least compromising and distracting form of paying work. Edward Weston relied on it through most of his life, even though he hated the necessity of making a picture that would please the subject (rather than him) in a sitting of perhaps an hour. Those were the craft standards he had to escape, standards enforced in the loose organization of fee-for-service professional work. Ben Maddow's excellent biography of Weston tells how he did it; the accompanying portfolio of 150 photographs reproduced full-size, and many more smaller ones, shows the results. Weston is one of the major stars of American art photography, and, though I focus here on matters of sociological concern, readers should remember that the book is most valuable for the chance it gives us to study a large body of his work. (One of the consequences of photography's not being a "real" art has been the lack of substantial publicly available collections, either in museums or books, so that it has been very difficult for any but the most serious student to know what the great body of work by someone like Stieglitz or Weston consists of.³)

Weston's organizational accomplishments are not as impressive as Stieglitz's. He founded the "f64" group in San Francisco, dedicated as the name suggested to an ideal of sharp clear photographs rather than soft-focus "arty" ones. Both the form and the goal are reminiscent of Stieglitz. Though he was given to the same kind of highflown philosophizing, Weston never founded a magazine. He was the first American photographer to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship, a form of support which, while it has never sustained any photographer's career, has allowed many of them to do important photographic projects. His influence, passed on by friends, sons, disciples, and imitators, has been enormous, especially but not solely on the West Coast.

Like Stieglitz, Weston made a connection between conventionally recog-

³ Students of Weston should consult his daybooks (8) and an earlier Aperture monograph (9).



Community Sing, Pie Town, New Mexico, June 1940 by *Russell Lee*

nized fine art and photography. In his case, it was the Mexican muralists. Weston's personal life was disorderly (as you read the chronicle of his romances you wonder when he found time to photograph), and the disorder began in 1923, when he left his wife and family in California and moved to Mexico with Tina Modotti and one of his sons. The Mexican artistic community took him in as one of them; he seems to have been quite close to Diego Rivera, for one, and his exhibitions resulted in substantial sales as well as critical praise.

Perhaps it was the example and influence of the muralists; perhaps it was just the freedom from having to satisfy the vanity of sitters who were paying for their pictures. Whatever the cause, Weston freed himself from the conventions of portrait photography and made a series of unposed portraits of great beauty and intensity. Two of the best were of Orozco and Rivera. He freed himself from many other photographic conventions, revitalizing the still life, landscape, and genre picture as well. In every case, by making the picture for himself, rather than for a sitter or publisher or whoever might be commissioning and buying the work, Weston found it possible to bring to life subject matter that had become trite and stereotyped. Ignoring what had become taken-for-granted craft standards in favor of standards that allowed him to use those subjects to project a new understanding of them, he developed a style that combined a stern realism with a knowing use of the symbolic effects of photographic tonalities. Throughout his life, he photographed his friends and lovers, dunes and rocks, common household

scenes and effects, and even, in a spectacular inspiration, vegetables, all in ways that revealed what really looking at a thing could let you see in it and simultaneously evoked profound emotional reactions. Ironically, Weston's original insights became straitjackets others happily buckled themselves into and even attempted to put on Weston himself (he hated being told that his bitter and satirical late works were not "real Westons").

Walker Evans belongs to a later generation. He seems to have defined his work, in opposition to the romanticism of Stieglitz and others, as (in John Szarkowski's phrase) reticent, understated, and impersonal. Two books under review call attention to the work he did as a member of Stryker's photographic unit in the Farm Security Administration. The Da Capo Press book catalogues the bulk of Evans's work for the FSA, so that you can see the corpus from which the most famous pictures came. *In This Proud Land* reproduces almost 200 pictures from the entire stock produced by the whole crew, with good sense concentrating less on the well-known work of Evans and Dorothea Lange than on material that is harder to find, especially the photographs of Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein. The text cannot compare to F. Jack Hurley's *Portrait of a Decade* (5, 6) for coverage, useful detail, or analytic insight, though the reproductions are better.

Hurley has recounted the story and import of the FSA unit's work, and I will not repeat what he has to say. With respect to the problems I've been discussing, the important thing is the way Evans, Lange, and the others transcended still another constraining format tied to another set of organizational imperatives: in this case, the government publicity campaign, with its press kits, canned news stories, and accompanying photographs showing what a good job the Agency has done. Stryker, a protégé of Rex Tugwell's and a sort of social scientist, ran interference for his photographic crew, giving them the leeway to explore subjects at length, without interference and without having to come up with predetermined images or with the "right" point of view. At the same time, he gave them a substantial dose of social science thinking about what they were photographing, which acted, I think, to insulate them against the tendency to deal in current stereotypes of art, politics or public relations, and helped spawn the unit's characteristic "documentary" style. (Which is not to say that Evans and Lange had not already begun to develop such a vision before working with Stryker.)

Though the work of the FSA was political or scientific or documentary in its original intent, Evans and most of the others had in mind to make some art, too. Evans was friendly with artists in a variety of fields: Ben Shahn⁴ (who joined the unit as a photographer himself for a short time), Hart Crane, and James Agee (with whom he collaborated on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), among others. His mind, his eye, and his critical working standards reflected his membership in that artistic community. Which meant, of course, that he was quite unwilling to make even minimum con-

⁴ Da Capo has recently published a catalogue of Shahn's FSA photographs (14).



Roadside Stand, Birmingham, Alabama, 1936 by Walker Evans

cessions to the discipline Stryker sought to impose on his crew; not surprisingly, he was not with the unit very long. But it was long enough to deeply influence his own work and that of the others and to create a style that raised the documentary photograph to a level painters and other established artists took seriously.

*In the three cases represented by these books,
American photographers moved toward the goal
of acceptance of their work as art.*

They found ways to free themselves from the constraints imposed on their work by non-artistic institutions within which they operated. They developed new conventions which allowed them the freedom to explore ideas and techniques fully. They created, with less success, organizations to support an artistic definition of their work: groups of supportive colleagues, media of communication, places to exhibit and sell their work. Their struggle continues.

One final thought. Almost all of the activity devoted to securing artistic status and privileges for photography has taken painting as the model to be imitated. An increasing worldwide shortage of silver, the photosensitive material in the conventional print, has made the production of original

prints potentially obsolete. If we do not create original prints in the classic style, what is the alternative? One obvious answer is to make literature the model, with the final product taking the form of a printed book. What if photography had long ago taken that route? What would the differences be, in strategies, history, and prospects?

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