Objects and Actions of Consequence

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by

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The photographs presented in my thesis exhibition reflect semantic, semiotic, and philosophical interests. They also describe formal concerns – by framing contrasting surfaces and architectural anomalies, I hoped to exaggerate qualities inherent in the objects and create a further perceptual discrepancy. The pictures are decidedly unmediated descriptions of real world phenomena. In this way, the photographs demonstrate my on-going commitment to making work in and of the world.

Regarding my photographic process - I am somewhat bilingual, making use of both analog film and digital technologies. I primarily shoot large format sheet film with a view camera because of the amount of control the camera provides and the rich, descriptive negative the process yields. The image is output in the form of archival pigment prints which are then sprayed with a clear coat that enhances the blacks of the print. The prints are produced using a drum scanner and large format printers which provide a high degree of control, sharpness, and description that is imperative to my work and not possible in the dark room.

In the removed sign works (fig. 1-6), I photographed residual adhesive attached to walls after signs have been removed. Confined by the rectangle of the photographic frame or the sign's outline - the adhesive remnant, stripped of it's utility, may emerge as a kind of found, gestural abstraction. In lieu of the expected directives on the surface of
these deteriorating walls are accumulated, anonymous, abstract marks that would
seemingly announce: all structures are unstable. Even concrete is abstract.

Other works describe similar surfaces - like those signs works previously
mentioned, one image (fig. 7) depicts the base of a monument rendered anonymous via
it's displaced placard. Another (fig. 8) shows accumulated, road-side refuse and lingering
evidence suggesting a recent trauma has occurred. Another (fig. 9) recounts the tectonic
collision (or separation) of seemingly incongruous architectural elements. A final
photograph, “Guttersigh” (fig. 10) describes both a stain and the gutter from which it
seems to have emerged. To those viewers looking for meaning in such a photograph, the
gutter might appear as a black hole, the stain may come to resemble something cosmic.
Others may observe the work on a superficial level – the hole and it's accompanying stain
may not only appear unremarkable, but also meaningless.

Regardless of their expressive potential and the impassivity with which these
seemingly inert surfaces are described – I hope the pictures allude to things beyond the
photographic frame. Cut stucco, gutter hole, black stains, bricks, scrapes, scraps, trash,
crushed concrete and cracks – unremarkable subjects, relatively static, further concretized
by the photograph that might suggest these seemingly insignificant things are not only in
flux but also part of a bigger picture and by proxy, of some consequence.
The pictures may initially seem to detail causal relationships. We are made aware that something has occurred but are offered little in the way of who, what, when, where, or why. In their refusal to supply context (those matters of fact that have seldom been photography's proper jurisdiction), they reveal themselves to be one-sided, offering only effect. Without a cause, the photographs function as a partial account of incidents and accidents to which the camera was not even privy. The liminal space between the camera's plain description, speculation about how it came to be, and curiosity in regard to its significance are my primary interests. Likewise, my highest aspiration is that the photographs will engender the same kinds of imaginative and subjective conceptions within an audience.

In the window works (fig. 12-13), I've documented construction sites in which contractors have primitively cut into stucco as they attempt to unearth the architecture's original windows. The notion that one would bury a window is, of course, distressing to a photographer - I've committed my life to seeing through them. Much has been written about the window and photography - with these things in mind, the latent windows come to represent much more to me - truth, transparency, a desire to see beyond the skin of things, or an attempt to apprehend meaning. At first, the intent to liberate such a window seems a noble endeavor - and later, appears futile. Beyond the stucco? For the frustrated contractor, a brick wall. For the delighted photographer, one more surface and an unexpected metaphor that exemplifies the absurdity of his entire undertaking.
2.

In a 1966 review of the imagist poet Marianne Moore's “Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics,” James Dickey asks:

“what kind of heaven would Miss Moore's be? Much, most probably, like the earth as it is, but refined by responsiveness and intellect into a state very far from the present one; a state of utter consequentiality. For what is heaven, anyways, but the power of dwelling eternally among objects and actions of consequence? Miss Moore's heaven, would have a means of recording such objects and actions – it would have a history, and a way of preserving its discoveries and happenings... it would be... a realm of facts. It would include an enormous amount of matter for there to be opinions about, and so it would make possible vivid and creative and personal parallels between things, and conclusions unforeseeable until they were made. It would take forever from the Fact the deadness of being only fact, for it would endow what Is with the joyous conjunctions that only a personality itself profoundly creative, profoundly accessible to experience – a personality called a soul – can find among them.” (Dickey, Online)

Shared resemblances of poet and photographer aside - the kind of heaven Dickey describes and the way in which it is made manifest have been both the intended and accidental dominion of photography for nearly 200 years.

In 1888, muckraking journalist Jacob Riis makes a photograph that would originally be published in The New York Sun (fig. 13). The title (“An Ancient Lodger and the Plank on which She Slept”) which is really a caption, provides context for the picture that would appear in an article about poverty and tenement housing titled “Flashes from the Slums.”

It seems useful to address the undebatable aspects of the photograph. They are the “discovered, recorded, and preserved objects and actions” that make up the very “realm of facts” of which Dickey speaks. On a strictly formal level, the photograph has been cut
into three parts. On the left side of the frame, a white patch with cracking around it on a weathered wall – the patch interrupts two surfaces of different tonality so as to appear slightly raised. In the middle, the entirety of a large wooden plank next to a woman of nearly equal size. The woman's feet have been cut off by way of the photographer's framing. The third and most palatial section of the photograph includes more wall foregrounded by a single hand holding a small wire that appears from the right side of the frame. Subjects of interest in the “background” of the photograph (those things which appear on the already-mentioned wall) are mostly shadow. One from the woman cast both onto the wall just slightly on the raised white patch and a second elongated shadow belonging to that anonymous individual who holds the foregrounded wire that grazes her modest bed creating a small, triangulated shadow of it's own.

The facts of the photograph speak of the mediums perfunctory capacity to relay information. And yet this photograph, like many others, withholds much in the interest of producing something else, consciously or not. There is the cropping of the woman's feet. What would generally be considered an error in framing on the part of the photographer has produced the surreal sense that this woman is floating. The surreal notion is reinforced by the fact that her eyes are closed, she appears transfixed. The caption, like the photograph, reaffirms only facts for us: we are bearing witness to an elderly woman, we are made aware that this plank is a sleeping apparatus. It fails, however, to acknowledge other aspects of the photograph - that the woman is both ungrounded and
upright although she also appears to be asleep. Her bed is similarly upended – along with our understanding of both photographer and photograph's purported objective. The uncanny relationship between suspected sleepwalker and erect bed creates several relationships – formally, it addresses her own severed body, in a surreal sense it confuses our understanding of her and her sleep, and in the most literal sense, it engenders the intended socio-economic read: this woman is of little means.

There is a hand severed by the framing of this photograph. It represents another fragment of the image that could easily be dismissed as amateur error and yet it also manages to balance an otherwise tenuous composition. On first glance, the hand appears to be pointing. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the hand is holding a wire. For viewers less inclined to know the details of photography's technical history, the inclusion of the hand might be confusing, exciting, or both. For those interested in buttressing the argument for the picture as a kind of accidentally surrealist-documentary photograph, it could be argued that the hand functions both as a formal device and also possesses clandestine meaning. With respect to any interpretation of the image, the hand likely belonged either to photographer or assistant and the wire is simply the ignition material for the very crude flash that made Riis's picture possible. Given this information, the inclusion of the hand and the wire demystifies one of the photograph's most interesting and otherwise perplexing details. In some respects, this breaking of the photograph's fourth wall might upset the earlier prescribed, surrealist interpretation. It
brings our attention back to the facts and quite literally, to the hand of the author, his subjectivity, and the subsequent construction of this photographic “document.” In other respects, the revelation complicates the image further, turning it into a kind of self-reflexive metaphor – a mirror, so to speak - that reflects the complexity inherent in the manufacture of photographic document and construed meaning. The paradox presented by pictures like Riis' “Ancient Lodger,” accidental or not, are what make photography such a captivating medium.
In the introduction to the catalog for the Museum of Modern Art's seminal 1978 exhibition, “Mirrors & Windows: American Photography since 1960,” curator John Szarkowski describes the multitude of ways in which then-contemporary photographers were working. Szarkowski very carefully sets up, without judgment, several potential dichotomies between “straight” and “synthetic” photography, self expression and exploration, and what he calls “romantic” and “realist” photographers. At the end of the essay, having already admitted that “ultimately all art is concerned with self expression,” (Szarkowski, 18) he asks the reader to consider whether the photograph (any photograph) “is a mirror, reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it, or a window, through which one might better know the world?” (Szarkowski, 25) Given the generosity with which he has already written and the rhetorical nature of the already pithy question, it becomes apparent that Szarkowski knows the answer and isn't willing to supply it – to do so would be in bad taste, a kind of photographic equivalent to the aphoristic bumper sticker that reads “wherever you go, there you are.” In his earlier comment regarding self-expression, Szarkowski has already made clear the impossibility of avoiding one's subjectivity. Photographer's making work in the world are thus presented with a dilemma: how or whether to embrace the undeniable fact of their interior lives and still speak, through a machine, of material things.
It seems relevant now to consider two significant artists of the same generation who, through either their assumed or declared intentions and ideology, reflect vastly different approaches in photographic thought and practice.

A 1947 photograph by Minor White depicts several surfaces (fig. 14). A wooden fence with vertical slats contrasted by the horizontally arranged wood of an adjacent building. There is also a brick wall, a window darkened by its screen, and another wooden fence which stands in the shadow of a building that inhabits the majority of the photographic frame. In the foreground, the back of a parked car and beneath it, a cracking concrete curb. The light is even, it appears to be the middle of the day. All of the elements previously mentioned would suggest that this is, at best, a picture describing a confluence of surfaces, carefully arranged by a skilled photographer – and they are. The photograph is decidedly full - architecture and automobile are meticulously framed but also framing the suspected motivation for the entire arrangement: a stain. The dark blemish near the center of the frame is puzzling. For one, it occupies the only area of the photograph that doesn't feel completely crowded. The marks appear to undulate in spite of their stasis as a still photograph and within the otherwise congested framework. They also appear to be evidence – but of what? An oblique title, “Something Died Here,” complicates the cursory reading and introduces more questions. Given the suggestive title, it becomes difficult to look at the the darkened window and not read it symbolically – it suggests lamentation. Likewise, the oscillatory concrete marks appear animate relative to the
lifelessness of the rest of the photograph. The parked car, inoperative and likely unoccupied, appeal to a burgeoning sense of emptiness. The combined elements turn the picture into an emblem of living and deadness – static objects and fixed photograph paired with suggestive title convey a kind of animacy within the photograph while also implying that there has been and will be, a life before and after it's genesis. Like so many aforementioned photographs, the picture alludes to an un-photographed (or un-photographable) antecedent and begs several questions: What produced the marks? Is the death a literal or figurative one? Of what significance is this death to the photograph's author?

In 1936, Walker Evans made a photograph of a dirt mound (fig. 15). The mound, surrounded by sand and weeds, is book-ended by a cinder-block and a wooden plank. There is a single plate on top of the mound. The seemingly unremarkable subject-matter is made more prosaic by way of the photographer's decision to frame the subject from above – the vantage point of the photograph is the author's eye level, a kind of photographic first-person perspective. As a result, we are implicated in the making of the photograph - it is as though we are the one's making the discovery that is the mound-plank-block-plate assemblage in Evan's picture. The photographer's impassive framing and artless vantage point endorse our conclusion – there is nothing of significance here. The arrangement, however, is curious – these are the kind of accumulated materials more likely to be found at a construction site than somewhere sacred and yet, returning to the
plate directly atop the mound, one can't help but notice the modest objects have been arranged with great care. Upon further inspection, the block and sprouted weed resembles a head. The short, upright plank suggests feet. Having recognized the mound as a body surrogate, the empty plate functions two fold: as obvious stomach symbol and as a site that solicits an unrealized offering – an emblem of scarcity made more apparent by the surrounding topography. In spite of the photographer's detached approach to the subject, it quickly becomes clear that these objects mark a burial. The title of the photograph, “Grave,” conveys not only the tragedy of death but also the tragedy that it goes scarcely acknowledged by the unexceptional monument. Evans may appear dispassionate in his description of such a loss but this is somehow appropriate – the photograph manages to convey a sense of resignation. Further, through his dead-pan approach, Evans makes explicit the perfunctory nature with which grave and photograph have been constructed. The lack of monumentality ascribed to the grave speak not only of it's makers presumed sentiment but also describes Evans' general photographic approach as well as his symbolic employment of the photograph in it's original context. “Grave, 1936” originally appeared as part of a collaborative book with author James Agee. “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” initially intended as a commissioned story about the marginalized American poor during the Dust Bowl only came to fruition following the project's rejection by “Fortune” magazine on the grounds that it was offensive. The book's sardonic title was culled from an old testament passage, “Let us now praise famous men,
and our father's that begat us... their bodies were buried in peace but their name liveth
forevermore.” The heavy-handed, acerbic title of the book would suggest a kind of social
commentary – Is this “praise” being given to those fore-fathers responsible for the state
of a then collapsing American economy? Will the subjects of these photographs be
remembered? In addition to the use of the photograph of this un-marked, anonymous
grave which nearly illustrates the irony of the book’s appropriated title, it is also worth
noting that Agee's writing for the project vacillates between reportage and internal dialog
- he acknowledges his participation and questions his own license. In doing so, he brings
our attention to his agency and subjectivity – those things that have similarly made
Evans' designation as a “documentary photographer” problematic and captivating.

Thinking about the alleged documentary agenda of both author's and their decision to
include a substantial amount of information in the form of captions that locate and
identify the subjects of the photographs, the marked lack of supplementary information
for “Grave, 1936” is curious. Further, the book title's somewhat cynical allusion to the
bible would suggest that this story is a timeless one. The anonymous, meager grave is
then made to function not in terms of specificity like the other photographs but as a kind
of universal logo for death within the compendium. Further, it becomes difficult to
determine whether these pictures are specifically about The Great Depression and Dust
Bowl or if Evans' interest lies also in the subjects capacity to embody a universal struggle
with which the photographer can empathize.
In Evans case the specificity and directness of the photograph is subverted by the surprising lack of context in the otherwise banal photograph – like White's picture, we are left to speculate about who, how, or why someone has died - we are left wanting information that the photograph and it's accompanying caption refuse to supply – is this death significant? Or is it of interest to the photographer only in it's inconsequentiality? It is here that “Grave, 1936” reveals it's potential as a metaphorical device within the larger body of work – it represents a death that could be figurative, metaphoric, or both.

Conversely, White's photograph, is born out of his interest in the concept of photographic Equivalency – he employs formal beauty as a means of seducing the viewer into engaging with the photograph which has been imbued with pathos by way of the artist's sentience and choice of title, “Something Died Here.” Regardless of their differing approaches, both White and Evans' work illuminate photography's inherent potential to illustrate consequence, manufacture index, and suggest metaphor concurrently.
Bibliography


Photograph 1. *Curves (from Objects and Actions of Consequence)*  
25x30, Framed Archival Pigment Print  
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Photograph 13. Jacob Riis, *An Ancient Lodger and the Plank on Which She Slept*, 1890


Photograph 15. Walker Evans, *Grave*, 1936