

HOLLIS FRAMPTON

IMPROMPTUS ON EDWARD WESTON: EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

D390916

"The greatest potential source of photographic imagery is the human mind."

-- Leslie Krims

"By all means tell your Board [of Trustees] that pubic hair has been definitely a part of my development as an artist, tell them it has been the most important part, that I like it brown, black, red or golden, curly or straight, all sizes and shapes."

-- Edward Weston, in a letter to Beaumont Newhall, 1946

A In 1960, a few days before Christmas, a midwestern museum mounted, for the first time since 1946, and three years after the [redacted] artist's [redacted] death, a major retrospective of the photographs of Edward Weston. I had been sojourning in Ohio for some months, and decided to see that exhibition before returning to New York. I arrived in the early afternoon of the only day I had allotted myself, to discover that over 400 prints were on view. Finding those few hours too short a time to spend with the work, I hastily changed my plans, and stayed in town for another day.

A

The flight that I would otherwise have taken, inbound from Minneapolis, collided in midair over Staten Island with another aircraft. The sole survivor, a ten year old boy, fell two miles into the streets of Brooklyn. I well remember a newspaper photograph from that day: the broken child, surrounded by ambulance attendants and police, lay on the pavement in front of <sup>an</sup> iglesia pentecostal called Pillar of Fire.

A

Since then, I have never been able to decide whether Weston [redacted] tried to kill me, or [redacted] saved my life. For reasons more abstract, I suspect that many photographers, over the past thirty or forty years, have felt the same way.

"...If the recording process is instantaneous and the nature of the image such that it cannot survive corrective handwork then it is clear that the artist must be able to visualize his final result in advance. His finished print must be created in full before he makes his exposure, and the controlling powers...must be used, not as correctives, but as predetermined means of carrying out that visualization."

A

Out of the Ages we seem to have retained no more than a few hundred saints. But modernism in the sciences and in the arts seems to bring forth secular saints at the drop of a hat. Sainthood for artists seems to derive from a terse refusal to address oneself to questions about one's work, disguised as a moral aphorism.

4 Among major sculptors, Auguste Rodin and David Smith will never achieve sainthood; but Constantin Brancusi, who is on record with no more than ten prose sentences, achieves a sanctity that tends to make his work invisible, tacitly admonishing against critical examination. Somewhere in the firmament, at this very moment, the cunning Roumanian soul announces once more that Direct Cutting Is The True Path To Sculpture, and choiring angels sing hosannas around him.

4 The roster definitely includes such mortifiers of the flesh as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Alban Berg, who qualifies as a kind of crazy saint, like Mechtild von Magdeburg. Those not yet fully canonized, but definitely among the beatified, include Martha Graham, Diane Arbus, Georgia O'Keeffe, and a number of other candidates to whom no miracles have yet been attributed (not even the minor one of resuscitating otherwise stagnant academic careers). Wherever there are saints, there must also be heresiarchs like Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, and heretics. For this last category I would like to recommend Michael Snow and the photographer Leslie Krims.

4 Heresiarchs are chiefly of interest to other heresiarchs; whereas saints are of interest to everyone who, aspiring to sainthood, recoils before the heretical suggestion that any work of art that can be killed by critical scrutiny is better off dead. As for the rest of us who toil upon the sands and seas of art, we are just Workers, and our myth is still "under construction," though it dates at least to J. S. Bach, who once answered a question with the words: "Ich musste fleissig arbeiten."

A If still photography has produced a single saint, then that one is indisputably Edward Weston. St Edward is one of your manly, businesslike saints, like Ignatius Loyola, who received his vocation only in maturity, after a time of roistering and soldiering. In Weston's case, the two halves of that career seem constantly to be superimposed. The assertion perpetually quoted, that The Photograph Must Be Visualized In Full Before The Exposure Is Made, is scarcely an example of the complex wit of a grand aphorist. Rather, it comes to us as a commandment, brooking no reply or discussion. The Weston Codex abounds in such utterances, any of them a match for Brancusi.

A The tone is invariably resounding, reassuring, and, above all, utterly proscriptive. We recognize it in the advice of a Japanese master of sumi painting, who tells us that the ink is best ground by the left hand of a fourteen year old virgin (presumably she must be right-handed!), as in Ad Reinhardt's animadversions on pure spirits of turpentine and the preparation of canvases: it always proposes an amelioration in its proper art — and always gives rise, eventually, to a mean and frigid academicism.

A As we cut direct in wood or stone or metal, we are told, we must surely be on the True Path to Sculpture. If we can but learn to Previsualize the Photograph in its Entirety, then we can be certain that we have mastered the first prerequisite to ascending the photographic Parnassus. To so much as hear the words of the commandment magically curses the hearer: he can neither obey nor disobey; for to disobey is to forfeit the very possibility of making art; and to obey is to declare oneself, at best, a disciple of the Master. The very possibility for work, for the construction of a praxis, has been preempted. Perhaps the photographer would be better advised to shoulder a tripod, and walk inland until someone asks if it is a prosthetic device. It was in some such fashion that sculptors, for a time, transformed their chisels into tools to dig in the earth.

"Since the nature of the photographic process determines the artist's approach, we must have some knowledge of the inherent characteristics of the medium in order to understand what constitutes the aesthetic basis of photographic art... The photographer...can depart from literal recording to whatever extent he chooses without resorting to any method of control that is not of a photographic (i.e., optical or chemical) nature."

¶ There is this to say about the possession of a thinking apparatus (what we call a mind, in this case): one cannot not think; even to attempt to do so, is painful. But it is also difficult to think; and it is the more difficult because one has got to think about something in particular.

¶ In the act of listening to music, of hearing, apprehending it, one thinks, vigorously, without thinking about anything in particular; so that one is given the pleasure of exercising the instrument of thought without the pain of having to direct that exercise toward anything that is not, as it were, already taken into thought, that is outside the instrument itself. Whence, then, the 'universality' of music. We might pause to ask what we mean when we say we understand a piece of music. Presumably we mean something different from what we mean when we say we understand a spoken utterance or written text in a natural language.

¶ There is one sort of understanding that we can attribute to both: a grammatical and syntactic understanding which we have from real-time analysis of the harmonic structure, the rhythmic structure, of a piece: the retrieval, let us say, of a generating dodeca-  
phonic row, and the manner in which that row is manipulated in order to produce what we hear... which seems to resemble the pro-

cess of understanding a sentence by parsing its grammatical structure. In order to understand a natural language artifact in this way, we must strip it of all specific reference: for "Jack ran," we might write, "proper noun/verb intransitive." Thus far, our understanding of language is like our understanding of music: or this is the largest part of what we mean when we say we understand music — whereafter, the musical work is immediately transparent to its mediating culture. Music is a code stripped of everything but its own specifications.

A But that is not all that we mean when we say we understand a natural language artifact. In that moment when one suddenly comprehends, encloses within one's own thought, a work in music... or a mathematical theorem... the sensation is not that of having determined the referent of a word (an immediate, but minor, gratification that language offers). Rather, one experiences the sensation of being struck by thought itself.

A It has been possible to say that pictorial spaces, the spaces generated and inhabited by the visual arts, may be parsed: that it is possible to recover from these artifacts a 'grammar,' a 'syntax,' and indeed more: a 'diction.' Images are socially comparable to music, in that an uncertain understanding of them can and does cross psycholinguistic boundaries. It is possible to strip painting of everything but its own specification. After we have got rid of the putti, bananas, tigers, naked women, it is nevertheless still possible to have painting: a code stripped of all but a description, a 'metapainterly' specification of grammar, syntax; what was called Style has often amounted to no more than statistics on the potential size of a 'diction.'

A It would seem impossible to strip the photograph in the same way, because the photograph, in assuring us of the existence of its pretext, would appear to be ontologically bound to it: Nature (that is, everything on the other end of the lens), is all of

grammar, all of syntax, Diction of dictions, alpha and omega, Oversight of Signs. If we attempt to strip the photographic image to its own specifications, we are left, in the case of the projected image, with a blank screen, with an Euclidean surface; if we strip the photographic print, we run aground upon an emptied specification that is no longer a photograph. It is only, and exclusively, a piece of paper.

¶ Why do we undertake to strip the photographic code? To determine the absolute, irreducible set of specifications for a code is a typically modernist enterprise in the arts. Expunging item after item from the roster of cultural imperatives, we come, eventually, to a moment when the work at hand is no longer recognizably picture or poem; in this moment, we know that we have mapped at least a single point on the intellectual boundary of what must constitute an image or a linguistic artifact. During this century, music, painting and sculpture, dance and performance, have entered into this process of self-definition... a process, moreover, into which film has recently invested new and massive energies. We find, for instance, an entire body of work which has been seen as a critique of cinematic illusionism, testing whether illusionist space itself is properly part of the grammar of film, or only part of its diction: I refer to the work of Paul Sharits.

¶ This enterprise has not, however, been systematically pursued with seriousness, or anything approaching rigor, in still photography, which has therefore tended to remain isolated, an enclave within modernism, a practice atavistic in its unselfconsciousness, a magnificent but headless corpus, an esthetic brute whose behavior is infallible, perfectly predictable, and doomed by its own inflexibility.

At this extremity, then, it is only fair to point out that Edward Weston was virtually the first photographer to make an effort to define the bare set of specifications for a still photographic art.

A Weston adopted a strategy that is perfectly familiar to us, proposing to identify the work of art with its own material rather than with its pretext. This reduced his problem to that of determining the nature of the material, and in turn suggested a second common strategy, that of circumscribing as drastically as possible the list of attributes of the photographic material. If we are not always convinced that Weston thought through his posture with utter clarity, nonetheless we must take care to note the severity with which he applied his chosen set of axioms in his artistic practice.

A Still, to identify the photograph wholly with its own material could not completely satisfy Weston, and indeed it cannot satisfy us, because the photograph is, in fact, like language, doubly identified: once with itself, and once again with its referent; thus, modernism has had to set for itself a second grand problem, namely, to strip the pretext of the visual image or the referent of the linguistic artifact to its own proper set of specifications as well.

A The very presence of a natural language utterance in the world already asserts two things: that something is being said, and also that some Thing is being said. It is not difficult for us to perceive in the mature writing of Samuel Beckett, of Jorge Luis Borges, of Alain Robbe-Grillet, a determination to strip the Thing that is being said, the referent of the discourse, to its own set of specifications, by making the very substance of the text refer to the materiality of language. We may trace the origins of this latter process of definition, within literature, through Joyce and Valéry to Mallarmé and Flaubert. It goes without saying that the work of specifying not only the possibility of saying, but also what may be said at all, is long and arduous, so that we never received from his own hand the delicious project that Flaubert had hoped to begin after the completion of Bouvard et



Pecuchet, that is, the writing of a novel about Nothing. But how is an artist who would attempt to recover both the bare specifications for a photographic image and the bare specifications for the photographic pretext to proceed with the second task? We cannot make a photographic image that is a picture of nothing.

A But perhaps there is a way out, after all. Literary modernism in its latter development adopts a strategy which we might call displacement, whereby temporal and causal connections within the text are systematically forced out, made virtually irrelevant, their claims annihilated, by 'equating' the literary text with an illusionist pictorial image. Again and again, we find texts that amount to nothing other than minute descriptions, in flat, declarative sentences, of spaces, of objects disposed within those spaces, of the surface and volumetric attributes of those objects. In Beckett, in Robbe-Grillet, in Borges, we are accustomed to notice, at first, that nothing appears to be happening. Causality and temporality having been dispossessed from the text, we are left free to enjoy the gradual construction of that space within our consciousness which the text will occupy, as we experience the process of reading in a time, that of the spectator, which is explicitly and entirely disjunct from the atemporality of the text itself.

A I would suggest that we might detect in Weston's photographs the nascence of a similar strategy of displacement. The possible set of pretexts for a photograph is reduced to a set of abstract categories deliberately taken wholesale from illusionist painting-- Portrait, Landscape, Nude, Nature Morte-- which, taken together, make up a rigid spatial typology. Weston repeatedly abjures the "snapshot," with a vehemence that enlarges that term to encompass most of the photographs that have ever been made. In the midst of a century and a half of photographic activity, during

which the frame has been populated by an overwhelming profusion of spaces, as its rectangle has become that indivisible point, that Borgesian aleph within which we see all the universe, that blank arena wherein converge at once the hundred spaces that Paul Klee longed for, this is extraordinary. The incessant reiteration of such a decision throughout a vast body of work finally transcends the polemical.

A We must also remember that there may be strategies more elegant and powerful for accomplishing the same end, that are simply and permanently rendered inaccessible by Weston's a priori refusal to manipulate, to lay a hand on, his photographs, confining his bodily intervention to their subjects, his objects. Such strategies, however, are not to be discovered, like smooth, round stones on a beach, and dropped into an overcoat pocket. They must be invented. Some have reasoned that they are all of invention.

●   ●   ●

"In the time the eye takes to report an impression of houses and a street the camera can record them completely, from their structure, spacing and relative sizes, to the grain of the wood, the mortar between the bricks, the dents in the pavement... In its ability to register fine detail and in its ability to render an unbroken sequence of infinitely subtle gradations the photograph cannot be equalled by any work of the human hand."

A To the sparse list of spatial caricatures annexed from representational painting, Weston appends one further item: he photographs surfaces; and, as well, he sometimes so deprives deep spaces of their perspectival indicators that they appear to us as surfaces during the appreciable interval required by our effort to re-instate, from scanty evidence, the lost pretextual space. Arguing

from a narrow experience of painting (which includes, as we know, the Mexican muralists Rivera and Orozco) he presupposes that he can permanently evade the troublesome paradoxes of illusionist painting, with its perpetual oscillation between inferred depth and aggressive materiality, by suppressing its recognizable marks of craft, of manual labor; by mechanizing the act of making, he would evacuate the maker, put him resolutely out of the picture. The photographed surface, and it is always an insistently 'interesting' one, replete with entropic incident, is at once ennobled by and corroborates the condescendingly lapidary surface of the photographic print, which stoops to conquer everything under the sun.

Ⓐ Twenty years ago, one heard it boasted in New York that some painters had achieved work that 'looked like' nothing else except painting. If we are willing to set aside such concerns as scale, chromaticity, and thumbprint evidence of human intervention (and the Abstract Expressionists must have been willing to do so, else they would not have admired Aaron Siskind's contemporaneous photographs of surfaces) then we confront a double irony: that Weston, exclusively equating painting with its procedures, and disregarding its appearance, had made photographs that proleptically were to resemble paintings to be made a generation later; and painters had finally achieved, in that future, work that looked like photographs that had been made twenty years before. If Abstract Expressionism echoes and amplifies the expectations of Symbolist poetry, aspiring to prove that the materials of the art could be depended upon to bring forth paintings as surely as language itself secretes the poem, then these antique photographs must charm by virtue of their authenticity, suggesting that the broad side of a barn is at least as likely to produce the appearance of art (which is nothing if not appearance) as all our strivings and conundrums. The photographic act, furthermore, gathers to itself a certain prizeworthy power: with a swiftness and parsimony that makes

the utterance of a single word seem cumbersome, it accomplishes its ends in an instantaneous, annunciatory gesture. Finally, Edward Weston meets an aphoristic requirement: he does not stop photographing when the dinner bell rings, but only when he reaches the edge of the frame.

¶

For all that the photographer's frame derives from the painter's, regurgitating it whole, and shares with it a fundamental rectilinearity, differences between the two remain to be accounted for. The painter's frame marks the limits of a surface which is to be filled with the evidences of labor; the photographer's frame, sharing the accustomed rectangle with the standardized opportunities of painting and, also, with those of the printed page, resuscitates its own distant origins in post-and-lintel fenestration: it purports to be, not a barrier we look at, but an aperture we look through. Most bodies of work in still photography may readily be seen as picaresques whose denuded protagonist is none other than the abstract delimiter of the frame, bounded in a nutshell but travelling through infinite spaces howsoever fate, or desire, or vicissitude may command; while, from the very first, Daguerre's dioramas entertain the notion of a photographic imagery as big as life, photographs have largely remained small, contenting themselves in matters of proportion (or what is called aspect ratio) and ignoring those of scale. ¶ The frame presents itself to the painter as a set of options and to the photographer as a constellation of severe constraints. Photographic materials 'come' in sizes and proportions dictated by industrial conveniences disguised as cultural givens, and limit the secondary ratio between the absolute size of an image and what can reside within our field of vision at normal reading distance...much as the arbitrary width of the canvasmaker's weft and the nominal dimensions of urban architectural spaces have, within recent memory, set a limit upon the scalar ambitions of painting.

And yet, it is not quite correct to say that Weston's photographs of surfaces 'look like' Abstract Expressionist paintings, not even at those relative viewing distances from which both subtend a visual angle small enough to transform them into unitary signs centered on the retina. Rather, they resemble monochrome reproductions of such paintings, or, better still, reproductions of meticulous renderings, by a trompe-l'oeil painter, of Abstract Expressionist canvases, done in miniature, with the sensuous delicacy of line and minute attention to the suppression of painterly surface of an Ingres. <sup>A</sup> And yet Ingres, although he is an illusionist of volumes and of a strict subset of the properties of surfaces (color, and yieldingness or hardness) effaces most of the tactile indicators that we ordinarily associate with his cherished pretexts, the nude female body and such other car-essables as blossoms, pelts, fabrics: an irreducible iconography of eroticism. But it is a detactilized eroticism. Our pleasure in the work derives not at all from any suggestion that we might enter the space of the painting (we are blandly excluded from it) and touch its pretext; what Roland Barthes would call the jouissance that we may have from an Ingres painting arrives when, with a certain indrawing of the breath, we suddenly comprehend that there are ecstasies of restraint as well as ecstasies of abandon.

<sup>A</sup> Ingres' line, in his drawings, is nominalized, standardized, and displayed upon a surface of industrial featurelessness, as if produced by a machine of extreme precision designed to do something else entirely, which generates the drawing that we see to document a proof that that other thing is being, indeed has been, accomplished. Were such drawings to be made by human beings it would be necessary to train away the stubbornness of the drawing hand, replacing it with the patient, infinite exactitude of the tip of the tongue. <sup>A</sup> Weston repeatedly asserts, <sup>that</sup> the qualities of the photographic print are dependent upon, derive from, qualities of the artist's perception at the moment of making, of exposing a member of that unique class of objects, the photographic negative.

no A  
This must imply, in what Weston likes to call "lay language," that the photograph can never be fully intelligible without reference to the photographer; and it presents us, as spectators, with a dilemma: we can neither discard these precious scraps of paper whose immanence, whose copious presence, enters a strong claim on our attention... nor can we ever hope to understand them fully. Do Weston's photographs somehow look different now that he is gone? We can never know. But it seems clear that in the hour of his passing they did not, for instance, turn crimson and explode. What, then, is it that the artist may be supposed to share with his photographs?

A  
The photographic image, for Weston, affirms the existence and enforces the persistence of its immediate pretextual object and thereby of its grand pretext, namely, the space in which that object subsists. The artist reaffirms his own existence through gradually replacing the space of the given world with the inventory of spaces of all the photographs he has made. It may be that Weston's refusal to emancipate his images from the patriarchal house of his own perceptions amounts to nothing more than the simple declaration of a territorial claim. A The artist is fugitive; the photographs aspire to the monumental permanence of empty signs; the rectangle of the frame is made a stage upon which the photographer mounts a high drama of contingency, disputing with his chorus of things the absolute ground of existence. The photographs mutually affirm the claim of the artist and the existence of his object. Neither lobe of this simultaneous affirmation is impaired by the absence, or exalted by the presence, of the other. Through the mediating power of illusion Weston may coinhabit, with a host of strangers, dumb things, lovers, Space Itself. The photographer, Event that he must know himself to be can join in the easy commerce of spatial intercourse with his pretexts, because he has conferred upon them the status of Eternal Objects, drastically redefining their claim, as aggressive as

his own, upon the crucial territory. It is remarkable that Weston never quite gets around to making an honest woman of his own esthetic doctrine, forever insisting upon his right to deny it, and yet united with it in that special, inextricable bond reserved for longstanding commonlaw relationships.

A Eroticism, in all its implicit and explicit forms, is a particular mode of knowing; more than that, it is a school of thought, that insists not only upon the physical body of the object of desire, but also upon what we might call its temporal body; gesture, habit, modulation, establish, in time, within the mind of the knower, a virtual space whose contours are those of the temporal body of the known; and, if all goes well, it is this creature of time that becomes the true object of desire. What are called things, which behave not and are susceptible only of corruption, are without such temporal bodies and so we habitually confer them, endlessly manufacturing brief experimental fetishes out of doorknobs and paperweights. The dish ran away with the spoon.

A If it <sup>so</sup> happens that nothing, including ourselves, can fully be known until it is somehow made the object of desire, and if our knowledge must forever be mediated by codes and by illusions, then the still photograph, as expounded by Weston, in perpetuating a single instant in time, must remain, for all its repletion of knowables, a defective way to know, leaving something to be desired. Savages naked in the dawn of mechanized illusion though they may have been, the aborigines of that continent we call the 19th century must have sensed this, else they would not have struggled so to bring into the world a cluster of artistic means which we still call cinema, a compound way to know the temporal body of the world. Film was born into that silence bequeathed it by the still photograph, saving its first cries for the end of its adolescence. Is Eros mute?

"The photograph isolates and perpetuates a moment of time: an important and revealing moment, or an unimportant and meaningless one, depending upon the photographer's understanding of his subject and mastery of his process. The lens does not reveal a subject significantly of its own accord."

¶ In a celebrated passage in THE CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON, Immanuel Kant concludes that the three categories available to human reason are Space, Time, and Causality. Weston is everywhere concerned, as are so many other still photographers, with the annihilation of time. The image is to subsist, not in a time, but in all of time, taking for its duration the supreme temporal unity of eternity. In reclaiming the noun from the depredations of the verb, Weston snatches his beloved things from the teeth of causality, orphically rescuing them from the hell of entropy; and, orphically again, at the snap of the shutter, as if at the utterance of a word or the incantation of a song, causing these opacities to compose themselves into durable and serene hieratic geometries, Euclidean rather than Pythagorean, worthy of Eduard Tissé.

¶ In so detaching these apparitions from causality and from time, Weston binds them to his own purposes, immobilizes them, transfixes them in an airless Space, rendered aseptic as if by a burst of lethal radiation. At the moment of their eternalization, Weston delivers his things to himself and to us, much as William Carlos Williams once said that he wanted his words: "...scrubbed, rinsed in acid, and laid right side up in the sun to dry."

¶ That generic space, so prepared, is one with which we have been familiar for some time. It is composed only of visibilities imbedded in their own vicinities, uniformly and brilliantly illum-



inated. The factual surface upon which they are to be made available to us, by the processes of projective geometry, is featureless, but nonetheless distinctly present, firm but slightly yielding, either perfectly black or perfectly white, according to the needs of the moment. It is, in short, the surface of a dissecting table upon which all the most intimate secrets of the object are to be laid bare. It is a space within which, or surface upon which, we have long since come to expect to find beauty in chance encounters. Weston's self-confessed and notorious tendency to serendipity inflects the quality of these encounters, by extending their range: if there are neither umbrellas nor sewing machines, there are egg slicers and bedpans, and their strangeness repunctuates the prose of rocks, trees, animals, and the human body, into a syntax that argues at once for the intolerably familiar and the gratifyingly alien.

●            ●            ●

"Photography must always deal with things--it can not record abstract ideas--but far from being restricted to copying nature...the photographer has ample facilities for presenting his subject in any manner he chooses... The photographer is restricted to representing objects of the real world, but in the manner of portraying those objects he has vast discretionary powers."

9 What is there, by now, to be said of that grand category, Space Itself, a careful invention that comes to us from two thousand years of occidental diligence in science and art, within whose awful dominion reasonable facsimiles of all things that are may be disposed and arrayed?

---

Stripped to its specifications, this Space may be described in the following ways: it is infinite, but it may be bounded; it is perfectly uniform throughout its extent; the position of any point within it may be perfectly described with reference to only three mutually perpendicular axes; it is structureless, perfectly uniform throughout its extent, and may be regularly subdivided; it is inert, colorless, odorless, tasteless; and it is absolutely empty. It was created for a single purpose: to recertify the existence of things released from, purified of, the contingencies of our other two splendid fictions, **Causality** and **Time**. When we bother to perceive it, we do so chiefly through only two senses: those of sight and hearing.

Finally, it may contain, enclose, define only one thing: Matter. Stripped to its specifications, matter has two qualities. First of all, you guessed it, it occupies space. Furthermore, it does something else: it has mass; but that is no concern of ours, any more than causality and time are concerns of Weston's. Things are that they are.

Matter is what we cannot avoid, because, out of sight and earshot, it is never out of mind, self-verifying to the deaf and blind; because, for us, a thing is real or it is not, in measure as it is palpable. Whatever is "out of touch" cannot ever be fully present to consciousness, because things must be verifiable by all our senses. Failing even a single sensory test, we are obliged to assume that we are in the presence of an illusion; or else that something has gone badly wrong, and we are "seeing things," or "hearing things." Thus the voiceless visual illusion, colorlessly volumetric, can never, for Weston, sufficiently testify to, perfectly enunciate, that irradiated vacuum within which alone things may be definitely measured off against Cartesian coordinates, and thereby proved to exist. It is as though the artist were obliged to discard his convictions about the prior

existence of the things of the world, to rebuild them upon a rigorous philosophical foundation, before he may permit himself the luxury of assuming them as pretextual objects. Otherwise, there is always the danger that the illusion of volume may break down, defaulting to the material paper surface upon which the illusion transpires.

¶ Hence, then, the overwhelming importance for Weston of the rendering of tactile surface detail. Not even the commonplace set of visual marks that we decode, by reflex, into tactile sensations... accessories, so to speak, that are invisibly packed in the box with every new camera... are enough to content Weston. He must have more than the smooth and rough, the wet and dry, hard and soft, the dense and the friable; he must contrive, if he can, to bring to his images the hot and the cold, the hirsute and the glabrous, the rigid and the limp, the unreceptive and the lubricious.

¶ Then, in order to preserve the purity of Space against the premature conclusions of desire, to maintain some equipoise in this torrent of retinal concupiscence, Weston falls back upon ancient strategies: like sculpture, like painting, like drawing, the photographs decontextualize (metonymically truncating, but seldom amputating); they typefy; they render anonymous, faceless.

¶ Only the utmost conviction of the authenticity of the illusory context of a space guarantees the continuation of that space, sustains it, at once holds open its portals and maintains its elastic limits; so that it may be entered, may be possessed, without endangering the requirement that the one who enters, possesses, shall always be able to find his (yes, his) way out again.

¶ Thus we discover, in these images, a certain cryptic symmetry among ends and means. If the pursuit of an illusion of space suggests a heightened rendering of the tactile, and its capture necessitates a pervasive, generalized eroticism, the artist finally has forced upon him a monumental paradox: driven to the utter mastery and possession of an abstraction as extreme as Space Itself, Weston is invincibly propelled toward the sexualization, the genitalization even, of everything in sight.

¶ Finally we can begin to say what it is in Weston's photographs that at once attracts and repels us as our attention slowly oscillates, repeatedly penetrating the space of illusion, and withdrawing to the visibility of the projective surface. The photographs, as physical objects, are of a voluptuousness that rarely falls short of the exquisite. At the same time, they are only scraps of paper, held in the hand: typical nameless merchandise of the industrial age. That is the distance the photographer sets between himself and us.

●      ●      ●

"An intuitive knowledge of composition in terms of the capacities of his process enables the photographer to record his subject at the moment of deepest perception; to capture the fleeting instant when the light on a landscape, the form of a cloud, the gesture of a hand, or the expression of a face momentarily presents a profound revelation of life."

¶ Somewhere in a book whose name I have forgotten, Alfred North Whitehead proposes to correct two items of vulgar terminology. What we call "things," he says, we should, in fact, refer to as Events. A little more or less evanescent than ourselves, things

are temporary, chance encounters and collocations between and among particles of matter or quanta of energy each of which, engaged in a journey through absolute space and relative time, has compiled a history that is not yet finished. ¶ Contrariwise, what we call "ideas" should, according to Whitehead, be renamed Eternal Objects, since their perpetuation, while owing something to such events in the universal history of matter as this present *mind* which thinks or decipheres, and this ~~absent~~ <sup>absent</sup> hand which writes, are, once formulated, independent of the local frailties of matter, standing at once within and without it. An Eternal Object, furthermore, is more than what is to be inferred from the static description of an event; it is a behavior conducted by an event, or, perhaps, it is an event's notion of how to get other events. I do not remember whether or not the recurrent patterns we call myths qualify as Eternal Objects, contingent as they are upon such momentary proclivities of matter as sexuality, curiosity, or irony. But what we call Language, understood as the maximal set of language-like codes that includes music, the natural languages, mathematics, kinesics, and pheromones, qualifies as a prime candidate for the status of Eternal Object. ¶ Current neurophysiology and sociobiology regard the pheromone (a hormone-like medium that travels outside the body, and is decoded by the olfactory apparatus without being consciously perceived as an odor) as a protolinguistic sign operating in a single verbal mode: the jussive. Who receives the pher-

---

omonal message simply acts upon it, instantly, with the enthusiasm of a crocodile. Kinesic signals, purely neuromuscular in their expression and thus independent of glandular fallibility, represent, in this cartoon, a more intricate and parsimonious concatenation. Birds do it, laughing all the way. We might speculate, extrapolating from such principles, that the modes of the verb evolve in the order: jussive, imperative, optative, conditional, hortatory, subjunctive, declarative. The last named suspends, in a shared intellectual space between a message's sender and receiver, a representation of a mutually imagined object, unqualified with regard to what the sender expects the receiver to do about it. ¶ Since every natural language known to us comprehends some equivalent of every one of these modes, but some cultures are without [REDACTED] mathematics, or figuration, we may further speculate that a certain maturity of the declarative mode is prerequisite to language-like Objects more ambiguous than natural language itself. Mathematicians, for instance, may be understood to assess the beauty and elegance of a proof according to whether <sup>or not</sup> it achieves full declarativeness, suspending itself within the space of the mind in a posture that requires of us nothing less than perfect recognition.

¶ Like the pages of mathematical journals, Edward Weston's photographs present themselves to us bristling with indecipherable meanings, exhaling the certitude that somebody, somewhere, made this thing that is before us and understands it. To the uninitiate, the mathematician's whole page amounts to a single, indecipherable numen; to the initiate that opacity blossoms into discourse.

4 Weston's photographs entice us to discourse as well, promising, can we but learn to read their entrails, to deliver us, in their own voices, those absolute names of things that are identical with things themselves. Once so seduced, we can never fully withdraw; but neither can we fully enter, because the space of the discourse is not our own. The mysteries are offered, but the rites of passage are withheld.

"The appeal to our emotions manifest...is largely due to the quality of authenticity in the photograph. The spectator accepts its authority and, in viewing it, perforce believes he would have seen that scene or object exactly so if he had been there...it is this belief in the reality of the photograph that calls up a strong response in the spectator and enables him to participate directly in the artist's experience."

4 Whatever our apparent situation among the imaginary lines within their projective geometry, all of Weston's photographs present themselves to us at the same psychological distance, that is, in extreme closeup. Apostrophizing the significance of every last particle of matter, these images characteristically tell us more than we want to know; and yet, at the same time, they remain hopelessly distant, their glazed surfaces interposing, between spectator and spectacle, a barrier as impassable as language. As often as not, peering at or through or into these photographs, I have felt like a curmudgeon with my nose pressed to the window of a candy store whose goodies are offered at the single price of unconditional surrender. Take it or leave it. It remains

to be seen, however, whether this violent polarization of distances inheres unconditionally in the materials and processes of photography as a universal constant, like the speed of light, or is to be understood as a benchmark and limit of Weston's art.

¶ While they share with such other banalities of our culture as the printed page and the architectural façade a commonplace rectilinear planarity, painting, film and photography differ among themselves with regard to the distances that they invoke and enforce for both maker and spectator, and it might be worth our while to examine this family of distances from a strictly material point of view, as Weston would exhort us to do.

¶ The most elementary of these distances is that remove, normally subject to severe anatomical limitations, between the painter and his canvas, which once tended to limit the absolute size of the painted surface to that which could be seen whole, at arm's length, while standing foursquare in front of it. Thus we might imagine that the brief ascendancy of the roughly isotropic painting of mammoth dimensions proceeded from an impulse to exceed anatomical scale without making the painter walk too far or overstrain his imagination, and that such seeming tactics of physical distancing as Jackson Pollock's paint-slinging and Yves Klein's use of a flame thrower amounted to temporary strategies, transforming the vast surface of the workplane into a miniature and extending across the interval of an enlarged studio the long arm of painting itself.

¶ The spectator's distance from painting is of an elasticity normally limited only by the size of the architecture, except in such rare cases as James Rosenquist's F-111, whose panoramic format turns inside out the normal perceptual situation of monolithic sculpture, and offers the spectator the odd sensation of being scrutinized,

---



from every side at once, by a reptilian gaze. Should we step within the confines of the velvet rope, the physical surface reassures us spectators that it is made up of nothing more alarming than kindly, benevolent old paint, which, as we already know, covers a multitude of sins.

¶ The spectator's distance from film is more difficult to discern with clarity, because he stares at once at two surfaces: a physical one, which he had better not see, upon which is mapped, at high magnification, the virtual image of a barely intelligible little shred of picture-bearing stuff, the film frame... and a temporal surface, which does not exist, but whose construction defines and circumscribes [redacted] his work as a spectator. A fundamental illusion of [redacted] cinema [redacted] is that the image itself, carrier of illusions, is 'there', before us. It is not. Both physically and temporally, it is behind us. In film, the spectator's future is the artist's past. Within extremely wide limits, film images engage the spectator in a mutable dialogue on the nature and meaning of scale; but they are inherently sizeless. Thus the very notion of the spectator's distance from them must remain problematical.

¶ Held in hand or hung on a wall, the photographic print is normally examined at a distance that is defined culturally rather than metrically. I refer to what is called "reading distance." A photograph takes up about as much Lebensraum as a quarto page; in particular, Weston's prints, and those of his epigoni, hang on for dear life to that great gift of Eastman Kodak, the industrial 8 x 10' format, as though it were their pants, or derived from the Golden Section, or mosaically prescribed, like the chubby but sacred 1.33:1 aspect ratio of the cinema frame. Thus the photograph forever recollects, collides with, shares the space of another generalized and grossly meaningful mediator: the printed word. In fact, most of the photographic images we see

are not photographs at all, but half-tone reproductions accompanying text, indentured servants in the house of the word, usurping that white space of the page which Mallarmé was at such terrible pains to establish as an equivalent to the emptiness of blue air occasionally traversed by the projectiles of spoken utterance.

¶ Now the printed page is not something that is to be examined every which way, but yields its meaning as we scan its serial collōcation of signs in a carefully fixed order. In neither sense of the word is written language to be taken literally, for in pausing to examine typographic figures we lose the "sense," withdraw our culture, and become aware of seeing the page for what it really is: inherently meaningless marks inscribed upon a flat surface. These marks are, moreover, quite small and the reading of them requires of us a blindness, achieved through long training, to everything that lies outside the fovea of the eye. To read is to constrict physical vision to a microscopic point.

¶ If we were to attempt to examine an image in this same way, we would find ourselves traversing that image, in darkness, with a flying spot of light, reading it out as it were a line at a time; it is interesting to note that the video image analyzes and re-synthesizes its pretext in precisely this way, literally equating real spaces with the pages of a book. Clearly, though, looking at photographs in this way gets us nowhere fast. Photographs are small enough to be taken in whole, and yet large enough to afford the eye meandering and peripatetic opportunities which extend, like those offered by painting, over the entire area of the image.

¶ Most of Weston's photographs, however, like most photographs that have ever been made, do not even try to account for the entirety of their rectangle. Typically they simply center a recognizable, bounded and nameable icon within that rectangle and let the rest

of it trail off into pictorial indeterminacy. It is as though the photographer were, and insisted that the spectator be as well, blind to everything outside the center of the eye... as though the hypertrophied single sign had invaded the space of the text, like an isolated symbol ballooning to occupy a whole page. In the historically recent superimposition of the space of the photograph upon the space of the page, a polluted, hybrid space has arisen which offers, on the one hand, to return the printed book to the illegible magnificence of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and, on the other hand, reduces pictorial space to a membrane in whose neighborhood we are increasingly likely to find something neither more nor less complex than a written word or a letter of the alphabet.

---

A (The graecoroman form of the capital letter "A" recalls, in profile, the elevation of a pyramid, that is, the tomb of a Pharaoh, whose central chamber, when finally penetrated, is invariably found to be empty.)

A In photography and film, the artist's physical distance from his work can never be satisfactorily quantified, because the actual surface upon which the work transpires cannot be located, or even identified, with certainty. Aside from the vague sense in which a film emulsion may be understood to be defaced, optically deformed, and even that by remote control, the still photographer's negative or the filmmaker's row of sequential images cannot properly be regarded as the 'actual' work; both are, rather, complex tools uniquely constructed for the job at hand, the negative amounting to something like a foundryman's mould, and the filmstrip, to an intricately specific notation to be performed automatically by a canonical machine. Neither negative nor filmstrip are normally

---

seen by the spectator, who is unlikely, in most cases, to find them comprehensible, or their qualities crucially relevant to his experience of the work. What the spectator looks at, whether it be paper print or projection screen, is a standardized, nominally flat blankness, whose vicissitudes are immaterial to an understanding of the work, since they can never uniquely determine its appearance.

¶ Weston, finding in the physical world no surface that he can point to with certainty as his workpiece, is at pains to construct one: a doubled imaginary plane, one face of which lies within the artist's consciousness and the other within the spectator's, upon his own side of which he projects, 'previsualizes,' a print that is to be finished in more ways than one. Weston's acute concern for the print, the grave libidinal importance he attaches to it, comes from this: it is no mere expendable sheet of paper which he marks, but an entity within the mind of another which he delineates and authorizes.

¶ In so relocating the site of the photographer's work, Weston effects a divorce between photography and painting more consequential than the separation announced in his refusal to 'manipulate' the print. The painter's artifact is a unique material object which, once impaired in the slightest, is permanently destroyed, and lost forever to consciousness. The photographer's print, prodigy of craft though it may be, is a potentially indestructible scenario whose paramount quality is its legibility. Thus the photograph is made to resemble the word, whose perpetuation is guaranteed by the mind of a whole culture, safe from moth and rust; and the photographer's art becomes the exercise of a logos, bringing into the world, by fiat, things that can never escape. Is this what Weston means when he uses the adjective 'eternal?'

"Conception and execution so nearly coincide in this direct medium that an artist with great vision can produce a tremendous volume of work without sacrifice of quality."

A A photographer as prolific as Weston enjoys a peculiar and appalling opportunity, that is, to reduplicate the world in a throng of likenesses and possess it entirely. It is true, of course, that one cannot photograph all cabbages, but one can photograph one and generate from the negative a potentially infinite supply of prints, happy in the certainty that one will never run out of cabbages. No levity, no mere question of connoisseurship, can be involved in the selection of the precise cabbage to be photographed. It must be undefiled, incorrupt; no verb may intrude to pollute, delete in the slightest from, the fulsome purity of the noun. Into the workshop of the photographer who would remanufacture the world, only one or the other of two verbs may come, and it is obliged to wipe its feet at the door: take or make. Take your choice.

A The new universe, furthermore, must be, to put it mildly, more manageable than the old one. The noun must be modularized, made compact. By the operation of an algorithm that would seem to derive more from Lewis Carroll than from Procrustes, every noun must be shrunk or stretched to fit within the 8" x 10" rectangle. Were it a question of preserving the physical bodies of things, one might imagine them hollowed, bleached, pickled, and put up in endless rows of little glass jars, limp and folded like one of Salvador Dali's 'cuticles'. But the taking and storage of likenesses is ever so much more compact.

A There is, in the spectacle of Weston's accumulation of some sixty thousand 8 x 10 negatives, something oddly funerary. It is as if one had entered the tomb of a Pharaoh. The regal corpse, immured in dignity and gilt, is surrounded on every side by icons of all

that he will need to take with him into eternity: there must be food to eat, girls to fuck, friends to talk to, toys to play with; trivia and oddities to lend homely verisimilitude to that empty place; earth to walk upon and water to give the eye a place to rest; skies to put a lid on it all; other corpses to remind one that things have, indeed, changed; junk and garbage and rubbish to supply a sense of history; animals living and dead to admire, gawk at, or avoid; vistas to wander through when the spirit is weary.

¶ Certain comical perils attend the assemblage of this riot of nouns. Failing the accomplishment of the sorcerer, one is in danger of being inundated like his apprentice. Is Weston, a typical modernist of the generation of the 80's, like Ezra Pound, "shoring fragments against his ruin"?

● ● ●

"[The discriminating photographer] can reveal the essence of what lies before his lens in a close-up with such clear insight that the beholder will find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object."

¶ Iipse dixit!

● ● ●

It is now more than thirty years since Weston made his last photograph, and twenty since he escaped permanently from the domain of Time, joining the illustrious dead, and becoming an ancestor. But many of us cannot own him as an ancestor of ours. His splendors as a carnal parent are beyond contention; but as an intellectual parent, he amounted, finally, to one of those frowning, humorless fathers who teaches his progeny his trade and then prevents them from practicing it by blackballing them in the union. We are under no obligation to put up with this sort of thing. But since some sort of choice must be made, I would state a personal preference for a chimaera...a hybrid of Venus Geneatrix, who broods over the mountains and the waters, indifferently donating pleasure and pain to everything that lives, and Tim Finnegan, who enjoyed everything, and most of all his own confusion, and ended with the good humor to preside happily over his own departure...whose picture in the family album is no photograph at all, but an unfinished painting on glass, at once apparent within and transparent to this very space in which we live and work and must try to understand.

"He especially liked to find the coded messages, the surfaces behind surfaces, the depths below depths, that gave ambiguous accounts of the nature of things. He loved the Atget photographs that looked into store windows in Paris and combined the world within with confusing reflections of the world without. It was the kind of conundrum he found irresistible."

-- Charis Wilson

"Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression."

-- Michel Foucault, The Order of Things

H.F.

HOUSTON/SAN JUAN/BUFFALO

1977-78

Possibly straining fairness, these notes tend to insist upon the typical photographs and manifestoes of Weston's maturity, largely disregarding the maverick work in which he transgresses against his own doctrine. This latter category, while it is not as copious as Weston says it is, does include a considerable part of his last work, which proposes to supercede everything that had gone before. If it is so that the spectator or reader may understand more from a work than the artist understands, it is also true that he may understand other. For the consequences, in this writing, of exercising that last kind of understanding, I offer no apology. The quotations interspersed throughout are taken from an article, Techniques of Photographic Art, by "E.Wn.", written in 1941 and published in the Encyclopedia Britannica of that vintage.