

An Address by William E. Parker, January 25, 1989

Occasional Papers, no. 3, University Educational Services, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, NY, 1989.

Thank you, Director Mayer. It's wonderful to greet all of you. I'm quite honored to be here at the opening of this remarkable new facility which ensures that photography in Rochester has a great future. Indeed, we all know that period, not too long ago, when we were worried about whether the International Museum of Photography would remain in Rochester. When you visit the new building tonight, I think you'll recognize it guarantees for countless years ahead a permanent and paradigmatic environment for very important dimensions of photographic preservation, exhibitions, research, and educational programs that shall not only contribute to bring honor to this city, but strongly influence the field of photography throughout the world.

Tonight, I wish to speak briefly — in a rather “scattershot” way — on a few issues I think any museum or institution concerned with photography should consider as primary attentions in the future. And speaking of the future, let's consider a popular bellwether report. The November, 1988, issue of *Discover* magazine boldly announces on its cover: **IT'S ONLY 13 YEARS AWAY — 2001 — WHAT WILL LIFE REALLY BE LIKE?**

Among many future promises declared by the *Discover* issue, we are introduced to the potential of the microchip family doctor; basically, machines will monitor our health. Future foods will emerge from test-tube breeding techniques. You will be able to live as if inside your PC, and home computers will have no keyboards, but be controlled by ordinary speech. You will be levitating your way to work, traveling from place to place on trains that will fly on a magnetic cushion, riding a magnetic wave or in cars having a powerful integrated electronic nervous system and central brain that will do everything from monitoring the slightest engine hiccup to preventing tires from spinning out on the ice or skidding in a panic stop. There'll be robot maids up to watering the plants, feeding the pets, washing the car — maybe even grabbing us a beer, chips, and some guacamole from the refrigerator.

In the realm of forthcoming photographic media, combined with computer imaging processors, Paul Hoffman, editor-in-chief of *Discover*, states that With even more sophisticated digitizing techniques, we'll be able to create our own version of classic films, taking say *CASABLANCA* and replacing Bogart with Gable, Bergman with Cher. We'll even be able to play out our

deepest fantasies (Meryl, on Meryl) by inserting ourselves into a film. Following on the heels of coloration of black and white film classics, to me this substitutive potential of the cinematic predicts a rather depressing future for the aims of honest existence. I am reminded of a tongue-in-cheek statement made by Paul Hightower, a participant in a University of Iowa Visual Scholars Program, and preserved in Roy P. Nelson's book, *Publication Design* (1987). I beg to be excused for deliberately decontextualizing Hightower's remarks about the powers of today's photographers relative to editors, in order to serve my own notions about the futurity of photographic praxis, that day to come when the photographer, or for that matter anyone using emergent technologies, lifts buildings and walks under them, kicks locomotives off the tracks, catches bullets in his teeth and eats them, freezes water with a single glance, *is* God. I agree with Hoffman's *Discover* editorial remarks that if we can avoid blowing ourselves up, dissolving our forests, destroying our water, the dawn of the twenty-first century will be worth greeting, but one wonders, particularly with reference to the photographic images of the future, what will happen to human *memory*, to the psychic *significances* of natural occurrences and appearances in the world?

Let us consider a statement by William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the photographic negative/positive process, published in *The Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Science, etc.* (February 2, 1839) and recapitulated for us in Gail Buckland's splendid book, *Fox Talbot and the Invention of Photography* (1980):

"You make the powers of Nature work for you, and no wonder that your work is well and quickly done. No matter whether the subject be large or small, simple or complicated, whether the flower-branch which you wish to copy contains one blossom or one thousand; you set the instrument in action, the allotted time elapses, and you find the picture finished, in every part, and in very minute particular. There is something in this rapidity and perfection of execution, which is very wonderful. But, after all, what is Nature, but one great field of wonders past our comprehension? Those, indeed, which are of everyday occurrence do not habitually strike us, on account of their familiarity, but they are not the less on that account essential portions of the same wonderful Whole."

Talbot reminds us of the remarkable dimensions of photography: every photograph admits that once upon a time someone achieved a picture by working in cooperation with Nature; every photograph is but a temporarily arrested visual extract from a continuous plenitude of world appearances; the world that once *was* and now *is* intersect in the photographic image.

Nothing, not even the grossly familiar, is of less account for attention in the practice of trapping reflected light; there is significance in everything.

Talbot's recognition of the plenitudinous nature of the photographic image and its potential for intersecting the value of *all in the world* is echoed in a letter of 1937 to a Mr. Moe of the Guggenheim Foundation from Edward Weston, explaining his purposes for seeking what would become the first Guggenheim grant awarded to a photographer:

First, I would like to make a brief statement on photography. It is a new and vital medium, a way of seeing which has changed contemporary vision, extended horizons, touched every walk of modern life...My work-purpose, my theme, can most nearly be stated as the recognition, recording and presentation of the interdependence, the relativity, of all things, — the universality of basic form. In a single day's work, within a radius of a mile, I might discover and record the skeleton of a bird, a blossoming fruit tree, a cloud, a smoke-stack; each of these being not only a part of the whole, but each, — in itself, — becoming a symbol for the whole of life. So, the blossom of the fruit tree becomes more than the blossom; is the tree itself, — etc. And the recording of these becomes not just documentation of a given subject matter, but its sublimation, — the revealing of its significance."

Here we are in 1989, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the public announcement of photographic media in 1839; however, we need to recognize that photography was quested, longed for centuries prior to 1839. As but an example — and I am indebted to Robert Sobieszek, Curator of the Photographic Collections at this institution, who many years ago first called this reference to my attention — John Locke, in 1689, seeking a metaphor for knowledge in a comparison between functions of the human mind and the operations of the camera obscura, wrote in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

"Methinks the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light with only some little opening left, to let in external visible resemblances or ideas of things without: would the pictures coming into a dark room but stay there and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would e very much resemble the understanding of a man in reference to all objects of sight, and the ideas of them."

When we consider that Locke's mind/camera simile followed in the wake of the Cartesian dictum, *Cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am, emergent from a matrix of doubt about the world of matter that also sponsored Descartes' meditation of 1641 that the heavens, the earth,

colors, shapes, sounds, and all other external things, are nothing but illusions and dreams, we can be thankful that in 1839, photographic forms emerged to lie so orderly for our attentiveness, staying appearances in the world so that we might consider the *ideas of them*. Certainly, early photographic forms were believed to offer radiantly autographic manifestations of the world; the world's own reflected light passing through a lens impressed the world's familiar appearances on a light-sensitive metal or paper tablet within the camera. And we should all pay our respects to Sir John Herschel, the British astronomer and scientist who discovered that treating an exposed tablet with a solution of hyposulfite of soda dissolved any remaining unexposed silver compounds, thereby rendering the image originally defined within a camera insusceptible to further actinic effects. It was Herschel who enabled light impressions to be fixed, who enabled the world's own presentations to stay so we might engage the ideas of photographic remembrances of things past. And today, considering photography on its sesquicentennial anniversary, I think Stanley Cavell was absolutely right when he wrote in his book, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971): "The camera has been praised for extending the senses; it may, as the world goes, deserve more praise for confining them, leaving room for thought."

Ever since Niepce, Daguerre, Talbot and Bayard enabled Nature to automatically reproduce herself by the action of light on receptive *matière*, photography has continued to provide humankind the most convincing means of bringing to visual arrest the facts of a fugitive world so that we might ponder the meaning of its captive presences. No other pictorial medium subject to the interpretative instincts or reasonings of consciousness, of perception, seems to have served as convincingly as photography the constant human need to *take* the world into account not only as actual appearance but as factual idea. Also, no other pictorial medium seems so acutely declarative of variable human attitudes toward its usages and about evidential or proleptic images of the world the medium is believed to be able to convey.

When we seriously encounter photographs, we are not only to see mimetic world identifications; we should be encouraged to ponder issues beyond formal and technological concerns. To do so would lead us to recognize that photographs are born of and prompt purposive attitudes that are incredibly varied. In a great museum such as the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, we can discover that a photograph is not considered from a single perspective of consciousness, but from many perspectives: to name a few, a photograph:

...may be considered an act of preservation; a measure of scientific inquiry.

... is a pictorial definition of an environment prompting thoughts about, even a revisitation of, its subject source as a place for potential human occupancy, appropriation, or exercise of transformative power.

... is evidence of an often awesome world that prompts aesthetic delight or wonder, humility, or fear.

... is not a *picture of*, but an *object about* the world.

... might explicitly define persons, places, things, or events for the sake of sponsoring psychic intrigue or physiological reaction; cultivating projections of sentiment, of sexual longing, of love, of envy, of exploitative desire.

... is a surrogate form of reality; a symbol, a metaphor, an equivalent for reality.

... is reality.

... is not concerned with what the world looks like, but is basically a sign of what someone has felt about the world, what someone wanted or wants the world to mean.

... may urge us to escape or to accept the world, to witness its identification as sacred or profane; to consider the world as elegant or ugly, the world as ennobled or demeaned.

... is a construct of signs that must be iconographically deconstructed to prove or to disprove ideological — political, social, psychological — biases or aims.

... is mnemonic trace.

Consider what John Berger has written about photography and memory. In *Another Way of Telling* (1982), Berger states:

“A photograph preserves a moment of time and prevents it being effaced by the supersession of further moments. In this respect photographs might be compared to images stored in the memory. Yet there is a fundamental difference; whereas remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience, a photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant. And

in life, meaning is not instantaneous. Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development.... An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.”

Earlier on, in the essay “The Uses of Photography,” in his *About Looking* (1980), Berger also reminded us that:

“There is never a single approach to something remembered. The remembered is not like a terminus at the end of a line. Numerous approaches or stimuli converge upon it or lead to it.... A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic.”

Any museum concerned with photography needs to recognize Berger’s advisements so that all who visit its exhibitions or engage study and research in its precincts, shall be able to engage the ideas of photographic images and to extend the mnemonic capacities of photographs toward expanded historical, social, and experimental import. On the foundations of what it has already achieved in saving to preserve, present, and interpret our photographic heritage and the photographic forms and ideas of today, and from the very threshold of its magnificent new facility, the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, is prepared to become the signal institution for the realization of a new consciousness of photography.

Finally, I would remind you that the Roman Marcus Agrippa was the one who, over two thousand years ago, first announced the importance of a public museum. He lamented the exodus of so many works of art to the country villas of the wealthy, and he urged that all pictures and statues be made available to the public. This was the first recorded explicit declaration of the value of an art collection as a cultural heritage, and of the right of the public to share its enjoyment. As you enter the great hall of the new museum building and witness its marvelous peristyle design, you will have just begun a grand adventure in discovering how superbly defined a museum facility for serving to foster public awareness of the heritage and many dimensions of photography can be. And know that in witnessing this new building, you shall be experiencing a stunningly impressive future for the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, *now!* Thank you.