

D I A N A & N I K O N
E S S A Y S O N P H O T O G R A P H Y

by Janet Malcolm

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Preface to the Original Edition

Rereading these essays (which were written irregularly over a period of four years and, with one exception, published in the *New Yorker*) makes me think of someone trying to cut down a tree who has never done it before, isn't strong, has a dull axe, but is very stubborn. In these pieces, I have been hacking away at the enigma of photography—circling it, trying this side and that, returning over and over to certain yielding places. The relationship of photography to painting, the polarity of the fine-art and the vernacular traditions, the connection between photography and modernism are some of the topics to which I have kept returning, but with changing views. As the depth of the cut determines the stroke of the axe, so my thinking has changed as it has touched deeper levels of the subject.

The arrangement of the essays is chronological. It is only about midway through the volume that I think I begin to get hold of the subject, and in the ninth essay, "Two Roads," that I untangle some of its knottier issues.

My thanks go to John Szarkowski, whose directorship of the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art has quietly transformed photography from a loose end to a force in contemporary art, and has created a climate in which serious critical writing about photography is possible.

Janet Malcolm

Preface to the Aperture Edition

Part I of this book is the original text of *Diana & Nikon*, published in 1980, and Part II is made up of five essays written since then. The newer pieces, like the old ones, were written in response to particular occasions—photography exhibitions or publications of books of photographs—and, as the reader will see, are no less preoccupied with the question of how and why a man or woman aiming a camera in a certain way at a certain segment of visual reality will occasionally, mysteriously, produce a work of art. Photography has continued to fascinate and baffle me. It calls attention to itself in a way no other medium does, insisting on being noticed, refusing to be put in its place—indeed, defying anyone to say what exactly its place in the arts is. The force of this singular orneriness is felt by every critic of photography and gives writing about photography its own peculiar atmosphere of unease and uncertainty. Clarence White's photograph of a game of blind man's buff (opposite and on the cover) provides a nice metaphor for the work—and play—of photography criticism.

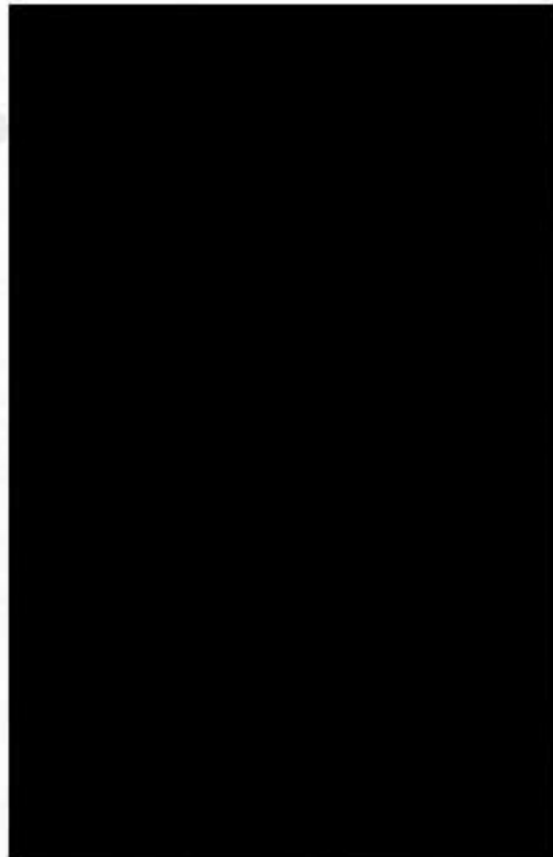
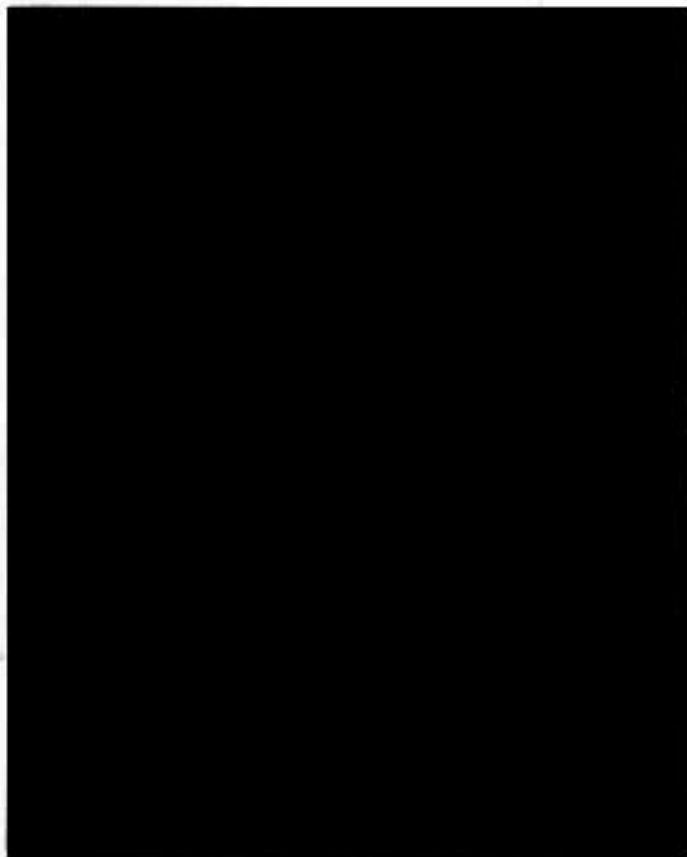
The book's editor at Aperture, Michael Sand, has steered it through the straits of publication with awesome skill and grace. An author does not often liken the experience of being published (especially when the book in question is an illustrated text) to a stay at a spa. But this is exactly what being published in this instance has been like.

Janet Malcolm

Diana and Nikon

The house of American photography has many mansions, which, until a few years ago, were completely sealed off from one another. There was the exalted cult of art photography, founded by Alfred Stieglitz and enshrined first in Stieglitz's beautiful, unreadable journal *Camera Work* and at his 291 gallery, and subsequently at the Museum of Modern Art and the George Eastman House in Rochester. There was photojournalism, brought into being by the Brady group during the Civil War and coming of age in the pages of *Life* and *Look*, where it achieved a universality that photography had never previously enjoyed. There were the various forms of commercial photography: advertising, publicity, textbook illustration, studio portraiture, scientific and technical. There was the special field of fashion photography. There was the field, limited to a few collectors, of antique photography. Finally, scarcely noticed but increasingly ubiquitous, there was snapshot photography, which put the portrait studio out of business as cameras became cheaper and easier to use and families could create their own records of marriages, births, graduations, etc., as well as any less momentous incident of family life at which someone happened to aim a Kodak.

In 1966, John Szarkowski of MOMA had the novel idea of removing the walls between all these compartments and looking at photography whole, as a phenomenon that embraces the family snapshot as well as the Weston



[left] 32. Edward Weston, *Nahui Olin*, 1924.

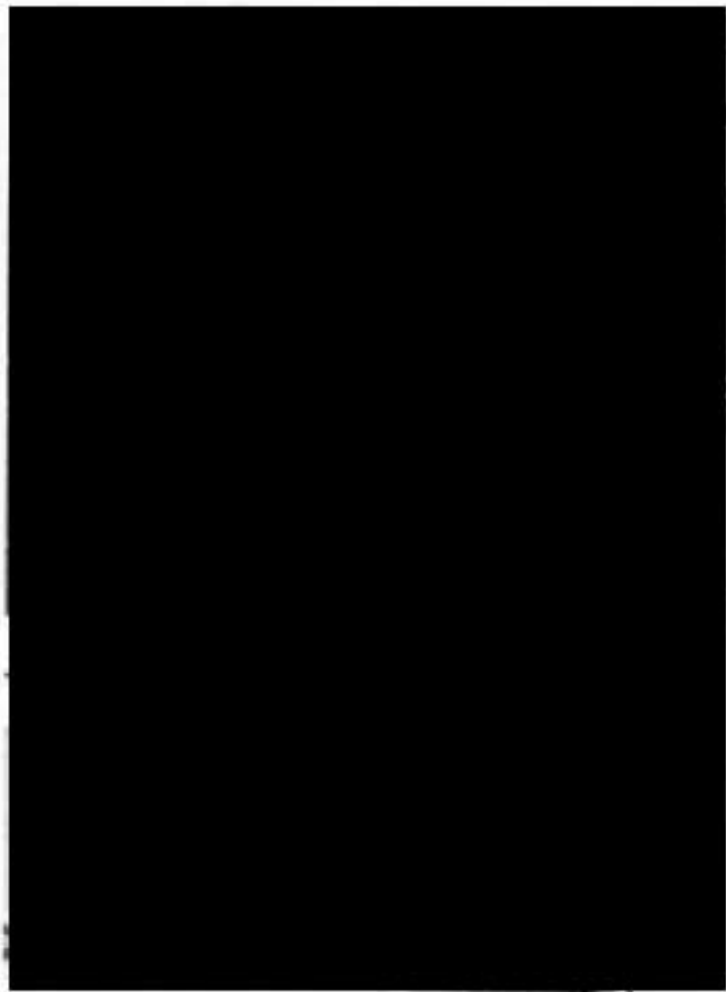
[right] 33. Joel Whitney, *Chief Medicine Bottle*, 1864.

pepper, and that has properties inherent in every photograph taken. With his critical anthology *The Photographer's Eye*, Szarkowski proposed to get at photography's essential nature by examining nineteenth-century *cartes de visite*, newspaper pictures, technical and scientific photographs, snapshots, and other vernacular forms, rather than just the art photographs by Nadar, Cameron, Stieglitz, Steichen, Weston, and the rest. A further novelty of this "investigation of what photographs look like, and of why they look that way" was Szarkowski's idea of plucking the photographs from their familiar contexts as newspaper pictures or snapshots or art photographs and arranging them according to how they might exemplify and illuminate five "characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium," which Szarkowski had isolated and named "The Thing Itself," "The Detail," "The Frame," "Time," and "Vantage Point." Accordingly, in the chapter devoted to "The Thing Itself," Edward Weston's portrait of Nahui Olin [32] appears next to an unknown nineteenth-century photographer's portrait of Chief Medicine Bottle in captivity [33]; in the section on "Time," Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Children*

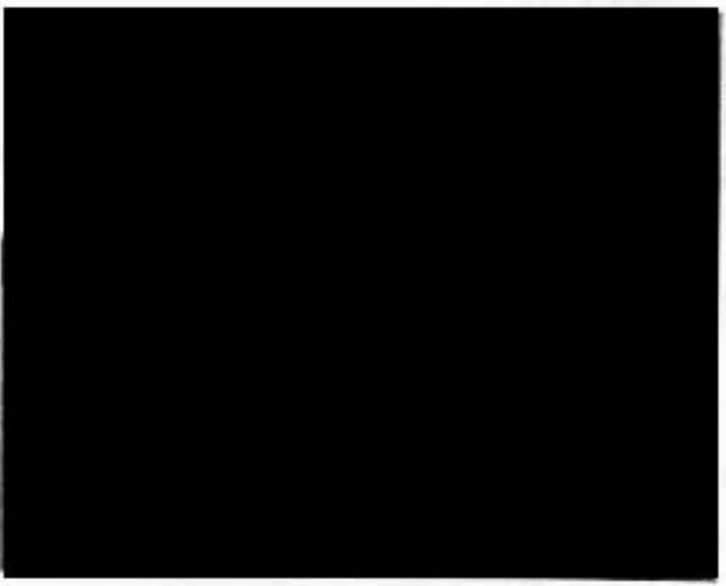
Playing in Ruins faces a picture of some men hanging around a barbershop taken by another anonymous photographer; and under "The Frame," André Kertész's *Billboard* [34] is placed next to a snapshot taken by Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt of her husband playing ball with children at Oyster Bay [35].

A surprising and disturbing impression emerges from this mélange of artistic and non-artistic photographs. One would expect the artless pictures to suffer when compared to the conscious works of art that surround them, but, oddly enough, they do not. The picture of the Indian chief is as beautiful and as moving as the Weston portrait; the moment captured by the photographer in front of the barbershop is no less decisive than Cartier-Bresson's

in the ruins; Mrs. Roosevelt's snapshot may even have an edge on Kertész's somewhat static composition. Perusing *The Photographer's Eye* is a shattering experience for the advocate of photography's claims as an art form. The accepted notion that in the hands of a great talent, and by dint of long study and extraordinary effort, photography can



34. André Kertész, *Billboard*, 1962.



35. Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt Playing Ball with Children at Oyster Bay*, 1894.

overcome its mechanical nature and ascend to the level of art is overturned by Szarkowski's anthology, whose every specimen is (or, as the case may be, isn't) a work of art.

Szarkowski cites John A. Kouwenhoven's seminal *Made in America*—in which vernacular forms of design, architecture, painting, writing, and music are resuscitated from neglect, held up as expressions of our most vital national energies, and contrasted with the less vigorous fine-art forms derived from aristocratic European sources—as the inspiration for his approach in *The Photographer's Eye*. But there is a significant difference between the two studies. For where Kouwenhoven's examples underscore the contrast between the "fine-art" and the "functional" traditions, Szarkowski's create the opposite impression—one of their *sameness*. The "functional" photographs in his book not only are the aesthetic peers of the "fine-art" photographs but are in every other way indistinguishable from them. It almost seems as if every master photograph strainfully created by an art photographer has an equivalent in the unselfconscious vernacular of commercial or news or amateur photography. The cover picture of *The Photographer's Eye*, for example—a view of a poor person's bedroom, which one immediately recognizes as a Walker Evans interior, with its chipped metal bedstead, cheap wooden dresser, small marble sink, dense arrangement of photographs on the flower-papered wall, and (the characteristic incongruous detail that gives Evans's work its startling metaphorical eloquence) a medical eye chart nailed to the door—turns out not to be by Evans at all but to be a picture by an unknown photographer found in the files of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin [36].

Any question of Szarkowski's having mischievously stacked the deck—of his having illustrated *The Photographer's Eye* with rare, uncharacteristically artful vernacular works—has been dispelled by developments that followed the book's publication. Thousands of vernacular photographs that have since been unearthed have aesthetic qualities that equal, if they do not surpass, anything in the book, and show the same singular lack of stylistic distinctiveness....