



language of light

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A Survey of the Photography Collection

of

the University of Kansas Museum of Art

The University of Kansas Museum of Art

February 3 - February 24, 1974

We should always bear in mind that photography is a language—a means of conveying thought, information, interpretation and expression. All too often we find it is a confused jargon—confused because of the unclear mixtures and distillations of mechanics, concepts, tastes, habits and expediencies. Now, what is photography? Factually, it is the production of images through the agency of light. Cameras, lenses, films and accessories, exposure and development, etc. are merely the tools used in manipulating light reflected from the subject to produce an image.

Ansel Adams

“Reprinted from Image #1, March 1959, Permission of the International Museum of Photography.”

Cover:

Edward Weston, Nude with Shawl, c. 1923 (upper left), fig. 9

Rene Gelpi, Twins, 1973 (upper right), fig. 56

Todd Walker, Twins, 1966 (lower left), fig. 51

Bruce Davidson, Horse, Welsh Series, 1960s (lower right), fig. 37

This exhibition represents the first comprehensive showing of the Museum's photography collection since its inception in 1968. The exhibition was organized and the catalogue was written by five students: Elizabeth Broun, Terry Kafka, Rayna Lancaster, Ronald Schneider, and Randolph Youle. Their participation in the exhibition and catalogue was part of a special art history seminar on photography.

Special thanks are due to Ruth Lawner, editor of Museum publications, who devoted much time and effort to maintaining a standard of quality in this publication consistent with all Museum publications. In this case her task was doubly difficult since she had not only to blend five individual approaches but had first to teach the students the language of catalogue editing and organization.

As Curator of Photography I am particularly grateful to Mr. Bret Waller and Dr. Charles Eldredge, who, as respective directors of the Museum of Art, have provided the necessary funds and encouragement for the formation of the collection as it exists today.

J. L. E.

INTRODUCTION

The fulcrum on which the exhibition "Language of Light" and this catalogue rest is the collection itself. For half a decade works ranging from the earliest masters to America's most promising young contemporaries have been purchased and given to the Museum. The primary consideration common to the acquisition of each has been the potential of the photograph to contribute to the progress of art as a unique medium.

The collection exists to serve the artist and the public. It is the Museum's responsibility to support and encourage the artist; it is privileged to preserve for the public the best its artists have to offer. Only the future on becoming the past can accurately judge the success of a collection. The photography collection is no more concerned with being definitive than it is with being absolute. The works simply represent a choice in quality with a self-consciousness toward objectivity and breadth of representation. Myopic views of any nature are counter to change and growth.

All works of art are equal in terms of respect for them and are separated only by our obsessions. For these reasons the exhibition of the collection is not hung chronologically, historically, or by any other arbitrary category. Rather, it is hung giving first consideration to the aura of each image. The result has been a subtle division between those works that are primarily cognitive or "experimental" with less formal considerations and those that are the perfections or unique usages of extant traditions and approaches. This means that in hanging the exhibition, ordinary categories like "straight" and "documentary" become useless since an image as obviously straight and documentary as one by Diane Arbus, is also just as cognitive and experimental as a photogram by Robert Heinecken. In a sense the exhibition is divided between those photographers who ask us first to consider the meaning of the photograph and second its physical pleasures, and those who direct our thinking through the tactile qualities of the photograph itself.

The following three essays were written by students with varying backgrounds and interests in photography. Two are graduate art history majors, and one is an undergraduate humanities major. Their styles and abilities vary according to their experience and knowledge, yet they all have the most important qualification in common: a love of photography.

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Curator of Photography