

The Art Motive in Photography

Paul Strand, *The British Journal of Photography*, Vol.70, pp. 612-15, 1923

A discussion of all the ramifications of photographic methods in modern life would require more time and special knowledge than I have at my disposal. It would include all the diverse uses to which photography is being put in an essentially industrial and scientific civilization. Some of these applications of the machine, the camera, and the materials which go with it, are very wonderful. I need only mention as a few examples the X-ray, micro-photography, photography in astronomy as well as the various photo-mechanical processes which have so amazingly given the world access to pictorial communication in much the same revolutionary way that the invention of the printing press made extensive verbal communication possible and easy.

Of much less past importance than these in its relationship to life, because much less clearly understood, is that other phase of photography which I have particularly studied and worked with, and to which I will confine myself. I refer to the use of the photographic means as a medium of expression in the sense that paint, stone, words, and sound are used for such purpose. In short, as another set of materials which, in the hands of a few individuals and when under the control of the most intense inner necessity combined with knowledge, may become an organism with a life of its own, as a tree or a mountain has a life of its own. I say a few individuals because they, the true artists, are almost as rare a phenomenon among painters, sculptors, composers as among photographers.

Now the production of such living organisms in terms of any material is the result of the meeting of two things in the worker. It involves, first and foremost, a thorough respect and understanding for the particular materials with which he or she is impelled to work, and a degree of mastery over them, which is craftsmanship. And secondly, that indefinable something, the living element which fuses with craftsmanship, the element which relates the product to life and must therefore be

the result of a profound feeling and experience of life. Craftsmanship is the fundamental basis which you can learn and develop provided. you start with absolute respect for your materials, which, as students of photography, are a machine called camera and the chemistry of light and other agents upon metals. The living element, the plus, you can also develop if it is potentially there. It cannot be taught or given you. Its development is conditioned by your own feeling which must be a free way of living. By a free way of living I mean the difficult process of finding out what your own feeling about the world is, disentangling it from other people's feelings and ideas. In other words, this wanting to be what may truthfully be called an artist is the last thing in the world to worry about. You either are that thing or you are not.

Now the general notion of artist is quite a different matter. This notion uses the word to describe anyone who has a little talent and ability, particularly in the use of paint, and confuses this talent, the commonest thing in the world, with the exceedingly rare ability to use it creatively. Thus everybody who slings a little paint is an artist, and the word, like many other words which have been used uncritically, ceases to have any meaning as a symbol of communication.

However, when you look back over the development of photography, when you look at what is being done today still in the name of photography in Photograms of the Year in the year book of the pictorial photographers, it is apparent that this generally erroneous notion of artist has been and is the chief worry of photographers and their undoing. They, too, would like to be accepted in polite society as artists, as anyone who paints is accepted, and so they try to turn photography into something which it is not; they introduce a paint feeling. In fact, I know of very few photographers whose work is not evidence that at bottom they would prefer to paint if they knew how. Often, perhaps, they are not conscious of their subjugation to the idea of painting, of the absence of all respect and understanding of their own medium which this implies and which sterilizes their work. But, nevertheless, either in their point of view toward the things they photograph, or more often in the handling of certain unphotographic materials, they

betray their indebtedness to painting, usually second-rate painting. For the pathetic part is that the idea which photographers have had of painting is just as uncritical and rudimentary as this popular notion of the artist. There is every evidence in their work that they have not followed the whole development of painting as they have not perceived the development of their own medium.

You need not take my word for this. The record is there. You can see for yourself the whole photographic past, its tradition, in that extraordinary publication, *Camera Work*. For photography has a tradition, although most of those who are photographing today seem to be unaware of the fact. That is at least one of the reasons why they are prey to the weaknesses and misconceptions of that tradition and are unable to clarify or to add one iota to its development. So if you want to photograph, and if you are not living on a desert island, look at this tradition critically, find out what photography has meant to other people, wherein their work succeeds or fails to satisfy, whether you think you could hang it on the same wall with a Durer woodcut, a painting by Rubens or even Corot, without the photograph falling to pieces. For this is, after all, the test, not of Art, but of livingness.

In my own examination of the photographic tradition I have found out for myself, and I think it can be demonstrated, that there are very few photographs which will meet this test. And they will not because, although much of the work is the result of a sensitive feeling for life, it is based, nevertheless, on that fundamental misconception that the photographic means is a short cut to painting. But from the point of view of genuine and enthusiastic experimentation, however it may have been on the wrong track, this work will always have great historical importance, will be invaluable to the student. The gum prints of the Germans, Henneberg, Watzek, the Hofmeisters and Kuhn, those of Steichen, will never happen again. Nobody will be willing to spend the time and energy or have the conviction necessary to the production of these things. And it is when one finds, as one does today, photographers all over the world, in England, Belgium, Germany, in this country, going right ahead as though nothing had ever happened, using this and other manipulative processes without one one-thousandth of the intensity or ability with

which their predecessors worked, that such work ceases to have any meaning and becomes merely absurd.

Let us stop for a moment before discussing further the photographic past and present, to determine what the materials of photography really are; what, when they are not perverted, they can do. We have a camera, a machine which has been put into our hands by science. With its so-called dead eye, the representation of objects may be recorded upon a sensitive emulsion. From this negative a positive print can be made which without any extrinsic manual interference will register a scale of tonal values in black and white far beyond the power of the human hand or eye. It can also record the differentiation of the textures of objects as the human hand cannot. Moreover, a lens optically corrected can draw a line which, although different from the line drawn by hand, let us say the line of Ingres, for example, may nevertheless be equally subtle and compelling. These, the forms of objects, their relative color values, textures, and line, are the instruments, strictly photographic, of your orchestra. These the photographer must learn to understand and control, harmonize. But the camera machine cannot evade the objects which are in front of it. No more can the photographer. He can choose these objects, arrange, and exclude, before exposure, but not afterwards. That is his problem, these the expressive instruments with which he can solve it. But when he does select the moment, the light, the objects, he must be true to them. If he includes in his space a strip of grass, it must be felt as the living differentiated thing it is, and so recorded. It must take its proper but no less important place as a shape and a texture, in relationship to the mountain, tree, or whatnot, which are included. You must use and control objectivity through photography because you cannot evade or gloss over by the use of unphotographic methods.

Photography so understood and conceived is just beginning to emerge, to be used consciously as a medium of expression. In those other phases of photographic method which I mentioned, that is, in scientific and other record making, there has been at least, perhaps of necessity, a modicum of that understanding and control of purely photographic qualities. That is why I said these other phases were nearer to a

truth than all the so-called pictorialism, especially the unoriginal, unexperimental pictorialism which today fills salons and year-books. Compared with this so-called pictorial photography, which is nothing but an evasion of everything truly photographic, all done in the name of art and God knows what, a simple record in the National Geographic Magazine, a Druet reproduction of a painting or an aerial photographic record is an unmixed relief. They are honest, direct, and sometimes informed with beauty, however unintentional. I said a simple record. Well, they are not so simple to make, as most of the pictorial photographers would find out if they threw away their oil pigments and their soft-focus lenses, both of which cover a multitude of sins, much absence of knowledge, much sloppy workmanship. In reality they do not cover them for anyone who sees.

Gums, oils, soft-focus lenses, these are the worst enemies, not of photography, which can vindicate itself easily and naturally, but of photographers. The whole photographic past and present, with few exceptions, has been weakened and sterilized by the use of these things. Between the past and the present, however, remember that there is this distinction—that in the past these extrinsic methods were perhaps necessary as a part of photographic experimentation and clarification. But there is no such excuse for their continued use today. Men like Kuhn and Steichen, who were masters of manipulation and diffusion, have themselves abandoned this interference because they found the result was a meaningless mixture, not painting, and certainly not photography. And yet photographers go right on today gumming and oiling and soft-focusing without a trace of that skill and conviction which these two men possessed, who have abandoned it. Of course, there is nothing immoral in it. And there is no reason why they should not amuse themselves. It merely has nothing to do with photography, nothing to do with painting, and is a product of a misconception of both. For this is what these processes and materials do—your oil and your gum introduce a paint feeling, a thing even more alien to photography than color is in an etching, and Lord knows a colored etching is enough of an abomination. By introducing pigment texture you kill the extraordinary differentiation of textures possible only to photography. And

you destroy the subtlety of tonalities. With your soft-focus lens you destroy the solidity of your forms, likewise all differentiation of textures, and the line diffused is no longer a line, for a significant line, that is, one that really has a rhythmic emotional intensity does not vibrate laterally but back, in a third dimension. You see, it is not a question of pure or straight photography from a moral point of view. It is simply that the physical, demonstrable results from the use of unphotographic methods, do not satisfy, do not live, for the reasons I have mentioned. The formless halated quality of light which you get at such cost with a soft-focus lens will not satisfy. The simplification so easily achieved with it, and with these manipulative processes will not satisfy. It is all much too easy, as I know, because I have been through the mill myself. I have made gum prints, five printings, and I have Whistlered with a soft-focus lens. It is nothing to be ashamed of. I had to go through this experience for myself at a time when the true meaning of photography had not crystallized, was not so sharply defined as it is today, a crystallization, by the way, which is the result not of talk and theorizing, but of work actually done. Photography, its philosophy, so to speak, is just beginning to emerge through the work of one man, Alfred Stieglitz, of which I will speak later.

In short, photographers have destroyed by the use of these extrinsic methods and materials, the expressiveness of those instruments of form, texture and line possible and inherent in strictly photographic processes. And these instruments, although they are different in the source and manner of production, therefore different in the character of their expressiveness, from those of any other plastic method, are nevertheless related to the instrumentation of the veritable painter and etcher.

For if photographers had really looked at painting, that is, all painting, critically as a development, if they had not been content to stop with the superficial aspects of Whistler, Japanese prints, the inferior work of German and English landscape painters, Corot, etc., they might have discovered this—that the solidity of forms, the differentiation of textures, line, and color are used as significant instruments in all the supreme achievements of painting. None of the painting just referred to comes in that category. Photographers, as I have said before, have been influenced by and

have sought to imitate either consciously or not consciously the work of inferior painters. The work of Rubens, Michelangelo, El Greco, Cezanne, Renoir, Marin, Picasso, or Matisse cannot be so easily translated into photography, for the simple reason that they have used their medium so purely, have built so much on its inherent qualities that encroachment is well-nigh impossible. And it is being demonstrated today that a photograph likewise built upon the basic qualities of photography cannot be imitated or encroached upon in any way by painter or etcher. It is as much a thing with its own unalienable character, with its own special quality of expressiveness, as any fully realized product of other media.

The unintelligence of present-day photographers, that is of so called pictorial photographers, lies in the fact that they have not discovered the basic qualities of their medium, either through the misconceptions of the past or through working. They do not see the thing which is happening, or which has happened, because they do not know their own tradition. This is proven by their continued puerile use of the unphotographic methods just dealt with, evidence that they are still dominated by a rudimentary, uncritical conception of painting, that they see in a half-baked, semi-photographic product, a short cut to what they conceive painting to be, and to the recognition of themselves as artists. But, above all, the lack of knowledge of their own tradition is proved by the fact that thousands of numbers of Camera Work lie idle today in storage vaults, in cellars, clutter up shelves. These marvelous books which have no counterpart or equal, which contain the only complete record of the development of photography and its relationship to other phases of life, to the publication of which Stieglitz devoted years of love and enthusiasm and hard work, photographers have left to rot on his hands, a constant weight upon him, physical and financial. That he has not destroyed every copy is a miracle. But he continues to preserve them as well as the collection of photographs representing this past development of photography, the only collection of its kind in existence, and most of which he purchased—all this he preserves perhaps, because he has faith in photography, in the work he has done, and in the young generations of students, who, he hopes, will seek them out and use them; that is, use all this past experiment,

not to imitate, but as a means of clarifying their own work, of growing, as the painter who is also an artist can use his tradition. Photographers have no other access to their tradition, to the experimental work of the past. For whereas the painter may acquaint himself with the development and past achievements of his medium, such is not the case for the student worker in photography. There is no place where you can see the work of Hill, White, Kasebier, Eugene, Stieglitz as well as the work of Europe, on permanent exhibition. Yet the photographers do not seem to be interested. They have done nothing to help preserve or use these things. This is in itself a criticism of their intensity, and it shows in the quality of their work. All the way through there is this absence of faith in the dignity and worth of their own medium however used or misused, and, at the same time, the absurd attempt to prove to the world that they, too, are artists. The two things do not jibe. So I say to you again, the record is there, accessible to anyone sufficiently interested. If when you have studied it, you still have to gum, oil, or soft-focus, that is all right, that is your experience to go through with. The human animal seems unable for some reason or other to learn much from either the blunders, or the wisdom of the past. Hence the war. But there are, nevertheless, laws to which he must ultimately conform or be destroyed. Photography, being one manifestation of life, is also subject to such laws. I mean by laws those forces which control the qualities of things, which make it impossible for an oak tree to bring forth chestnuts. Well, that is what photographers have been trying to make photography do—make chestnuts, and usually old chestnuts, grow on an oak tree. I won't say it can't be done, but it certainly has not been done. I don't care how you photograph—use the kitchen mop if you must; but if the product is not true to the laws of photography, that is, if it is not based on the inherent qualities I have mentioned, as it will not, you have produced something which is neither an acorn or a chestnut, something which is dead. Of course, it does not follow that if you do make what has been called a good straight photograph, you will thereby automatically create a living organism, but, at least, you will have done an honest piece of work, something which may give the pleasure of craftsmanship.

And if you can find out something about the laws of your own growth and vision as well as those of photography you may be able to relate the two, create an object which has a life of its own, which transcends craftsmanship. That is a long road, and because it must be your own road nobody can teach it to you or find it for you. There are no short cuts, no rules.

Perhaps you will say: But wait, how about design and composition, or, in painter's lingo, organization and significant form? My answer is that these are words which, when they become formulated, signify, as a rule, perfectly dead things. That is to say when a veritable creator comes along, he finds the only form in which he clothes his feelings and ideas. If he works in a graphic medium he must find a way to simplify the expression and eliminate everything that is irrelevant to it. Every part of his picture, whether a painting, etching, or a photograph, must be meaningful, related to every other part. This he does naturally and inevitably by utilizing the true qualities of his medium in its relation to his experience of life. Now when he has done this transcendent thing, after much hard work, experiment, and many failures, the critic and the professors, etc., appear on the scene, usually fifteen or twenty years after the man has died, and they deduce from his work rules of composition and design. Then the school grows and academic imitation, until finally another man comes along, and, also naturally and inevitably, breaks all the rules which the critics and the professors have neatly tied up with blue ribbons. And so it goes. In other words, composition, design, etc., cannot be fixed by rules, they are not in themselves a static prescription by which you can make a photograph or anything that has meaning. They signify merely the way of synthesis and simplification which creative individuals have found for themselves. If you have something to say about life, you must also find a way of saying it clearly. And if you achieve that clarity of both perception and the ability to record it, you will have created your own composition, your own kind of design, personal to you, related to other people's, yet your own. The point I want to make is that there is no such thing as THE way; there is only for each individual, his or her way, which in the last analysis, each one must find for

himself in photography and in living. As a matter of fact, your photography is a record of your living, for anyone who really sees. You may see and be affected by other people's ways, you may even use them to find your own, but you will have eventually to free yourself of them. That is what Nietzsche meant when he said, "I have just read Schopenhauer, now I have to get rid of him." He knew how insidious other people's ways could be, particularly those which have the forcefulness of profound experience, if you let them get between you and your own vision. So I say to you that composition and design mean nothing unless they are the molds you yourselves have made, into which to pour your own content, and unless you can make the mold, which you cannot if you do not respect your materials and have some mastery over them, you have no chance to release that content. In other words, learn to photograph first, learn your craft, and in the doing of that you will find a way, if you have anything to say, of saying it. The old masters were craftsmen first, some of them artists, afterwards. Now this analysis of photography and photographers is not a theory, but derived from my own experience as a worker, and more than that even, is based on the concrete achievements of D. O. Hill, who photographed in 1843, and of Alfred Stieglitz, whose work today is the result of thirty-five years of experimentation. The work of these two men: Hill, the one photographic primitive, Stieglitz, who has been the leader in the fight to establish photography, not photographers, stands out sharply from that of all other photographers. It embodies, in my opinion, the only two fully realized truly photographic expressions, so far, and is a critical comment upon the misconceptions of the intermediary past and the sterility of the present. The work of both disclaims any attempt to paint, either in feeling or in handling.

The psychology of Hill is interesting. He himself was a painter, a member of the Royal Scotch Academy, and one of his commissions was to paint a picture in which were to appear recognizable portraits of some one hundred or more notable people of the time. He had heard of the lately invented process of photography, and it occurred to him that it might be of considerable assistance in the painting of his picture. He began to experiment with a crude camera and lens, with paper negatives,

exposures in the sun five or six minutes, and he became so fascinated by these things that he neglected his painting. He worked for three years with photography and then finally, when his wife and friends got at him and told him he was an artist wasting his time, in other words, gave him a bad conscience, he gave it up and, as far as we know, never photographed again. In other words, when Hill photographed he was not thinking of painting. He was not trying to turn photography into paint or even to make it do an equivalent. Starting with the idea of using photography as a means, it so fascinated him that it soon became an end in itself. The results of his experimentation reveal, therefore, a certain directness, a quality of perception which, with Hill's extraordinary feeling for the people whom he photographed, has made his work stand unsurpassed until today. And this, mind you, despite the crudity of the materials with which he had to work, the long exposures, etc., and in spite of the fact that George Eastman was not there to tell Hill that all he (Hill) had to do was to press the button and he (Eastman) would do the rest. He was not trying to paint with photography. Moreover, it is interesting to note that his painting, in which he was constrained by the academic standards of the time, has passed into obscurity. His photography, in which he was really free, lives.

The work of Stieglitz, from the earliest examples done thirty-five years ago, to the amazing things he is doing today, exhibits to even a more marked degree this remarkable absence of all interference with the authentic qualities of photography. There is not the slightest trace of paint feeling or evidence of a desire to paint. Years ago, when he was a student in Germany painters who saw his photographs often said, "Of course, this is not Art, but we would like to paint the way you photograph." His reply was, "I don't know anything about Art, but for some reason or other I have never wanted to photograph the way you paint." There you have a complete statement of the difference between the attitude of Stieglitz towards photography, and practically every other photographer. And it is there in his work, from the earliest to the latest. From the beginning Stieglitz has accepted the camera machine, instinctively found in it something which was part of himself, and loved it. And that is prerequisite to any living photographic expression for anyone.

I do not want to discuss in detail this work of Stieglitz, as another exhibition of his most recent photographs opens April 1 at the Anderson Galleries. Go and see these things yourselves. If possible, look at the earlier photographs in Camera Work, so that you can follow the development of his knowledge and of his perceptions. Stieglitz has gone much further than Hill. His work is much wider in scope, more conscious, the result of many more years of intensive experiment. Every instrument, form, texture, line, and even print color are brought into play, subjugated through the machine to the single purpose of expression. Notice how every object, every blade of grass, is felt and accounted for, the full acceptance and use of the thing in front of it. Note, too, that the size and shape of his mounts become part of the expression. He spends months sometimes just trying to mount a photograph, so sensitive is the presentation. Observe also how he has used solarization, really a defect, how he has used it as a virtue consciously, made the negative with that in mind. That is truly creative use of material, perfectly legitimate, perfectly photographic.

In other words, go and see what photography really is, what it can record in the hands of one who has worked with intense respect and intelligence, who has lived equally intensely, without theories. Stieglitz fought for years to give other people a chance to work and to develop, and he is still fighting. The photographers failed. They did not develop, did not grow. Stieglitz has done for photography what they have not been able to do. He has taken it out of the realm of misconception and a promise, and made it a fulfillment.

In his exhibition two years ago he set aside the question of whether photography is or is not art as of no importance to him, just as he did thirty-five years ago. Exactly, because nobody knows what art is, or God or all the other abstractions, particularly those who make claims to such knowledge. There are a few, however, who do know what photography is and what painting is. They know that there is as much painting

which is bad photography as most photography is bad painting. In short, they have some idea whether a thing is genuine and alive or false and dead.

In closing, I will say this to you as students of photography. Don't think when I say students that I am trying to talk down. We are all students, including Stieglitz. Some a little longer at it than the others, a little more experienced. When you cease to be a student you might as well be dead as far as the significance of your work is concerned. So I am simply talking to you as one student to others, out of my own experience. And I say to you, before you give your time, and you will have to give much, to photography, find out in yourselves how much it means to you. If you really want to paint, then do not photograph except as you may want to amuse yourselves along with the rest of Mr. Eastman's customers. Photography is not a short cut to painting, being an artist, or anything else. On the other hand, if this camera machine with its materials fascinates you, compels your energy and respect, learn to photograph. Find out first what this machine and these materials can do without any interference except your own vision. Photograph a tree, a machine, a table, any old thing; do it over and over again under different conditions of light. See what your negative will record. Find out what your papers, chloride, bromide, palladium, the different grades of these, will register. What differences in color you can get with different developers, and how these differences affect the expression of your prints. Experiment with mounts to see what shape and size do to your photograph. The field is limitless, inexhaustible, without once stepping outside the natural boundaries of the medium. In short, work, experiment and forget about art, pictorialism, and other unimportant more or less meaningless phrases. Look at Camera Work. Look at it critically, know at least what photographers have done. Look also just as critically at what is being done and what you are doing. Look at painting if you will, but the whole development; don't stop with Whistler and Japanese prints. Some have said that Stieglitz' portraits were so remarkable because he hypnotized people. Go and see what he has done with clouds; find out whether his hypnotic power extends to the elements.

Look at all these things. Get at their meaning to you; assimilate what you can, and get rid of the rest. Above all, look at the things around you, the immediate world around you. If you are alive, it will mean something to you, and if you care enough about photography, and if you know how to use it, you will want to photograph that meaning. If you let other people's vision get between the world and your own, you will achieve that extremely common and worthless thing, a pictorial photograph. But if you keep this vision clear you may make something which is at least a photograph, which has a life of its own, as a tree or a matchbox, if you see it, has a life of its own. An organism which refuses to let you think about art, pictorialism, or even photography, it simply is. For the achievement of this there are no short cuts, no formulae, no rules except those of your own living. There is necessary, however, the sharpest kind of self-criticism, courage, and hard work. But first learn to photograph. That alone I find for myself is a problem without end.