

U3AC Photography Forum
19th October 2018

***Looking at
Pictures***

Brian Human

Aim of Session

- **To encourage members to talk about photography and photographs as a creative medium, an art form.**
- **It's not about providing a framework or checklist for judging photographs**
- **Will consider:**
 - **Nature and challenges of photography**
 - **Some approaches to looking at pictures**
 - **Five examples for discussion**

The Nature of Photography

- **A mechanical means for making images**
- **There are qualities singular to the medium**
 - **Independent of technology & social function**
- **Capable of multiple reproduction**
- **Belongs to the realms of reality and imagination**
- **Photographs are magic**

Challenges

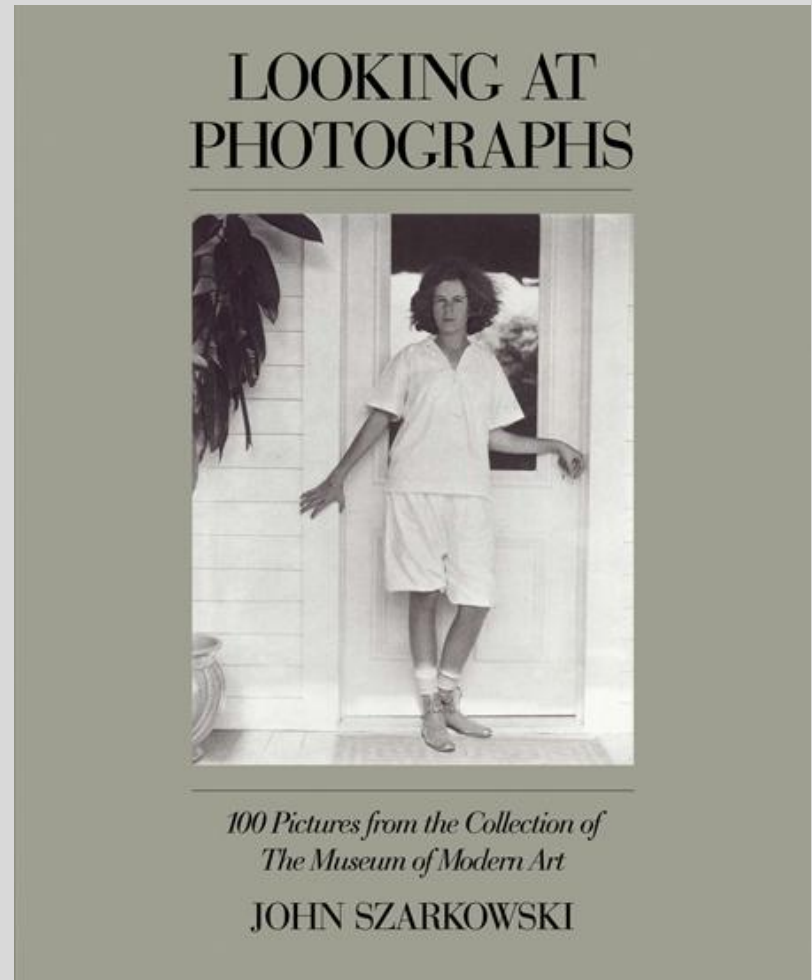
- **Record v expression – document v art**
- **Single image v wider body of work**
- **Uniqueness v multiplicity**
- **Technical quality v expressive medium**
- **Dependence on roles, applications and viewing context**
- **Ubiquity, commonplaceness of photographs**

Thinking about Photography

- *The limits of photography cannot yet be predicted.... The illiterates of the future will be the people who know nothing of photography rather than those who are ignorant of the art of writing.* Walter Benjamin, 1928
- *To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.* Susan Sontag, 1977
- *In an initial period, Photography, in order to surprise, photographs the notable; but soon, by a familiar reversal, it decrees notable whatever it photographs.* Roland Barthes, 1980
- *A photograph is a meeting place where the interests of the photographer, the photographed, the viewer, and those who are using the photographs are often contradictory. These contradictions both hide and increase the natural ambiguity of the photographic image.* John Berger, 2008

Looking at Photographs 1

- **For Szarkowski legitimate photography:**
 - Was straight
 - Was liberal in subject matter
 - Had strong formal content
 - Presented fragments of actuality pictorially organised
 - Reflected the photographer's strong personal vision



Looking at Photographs 2

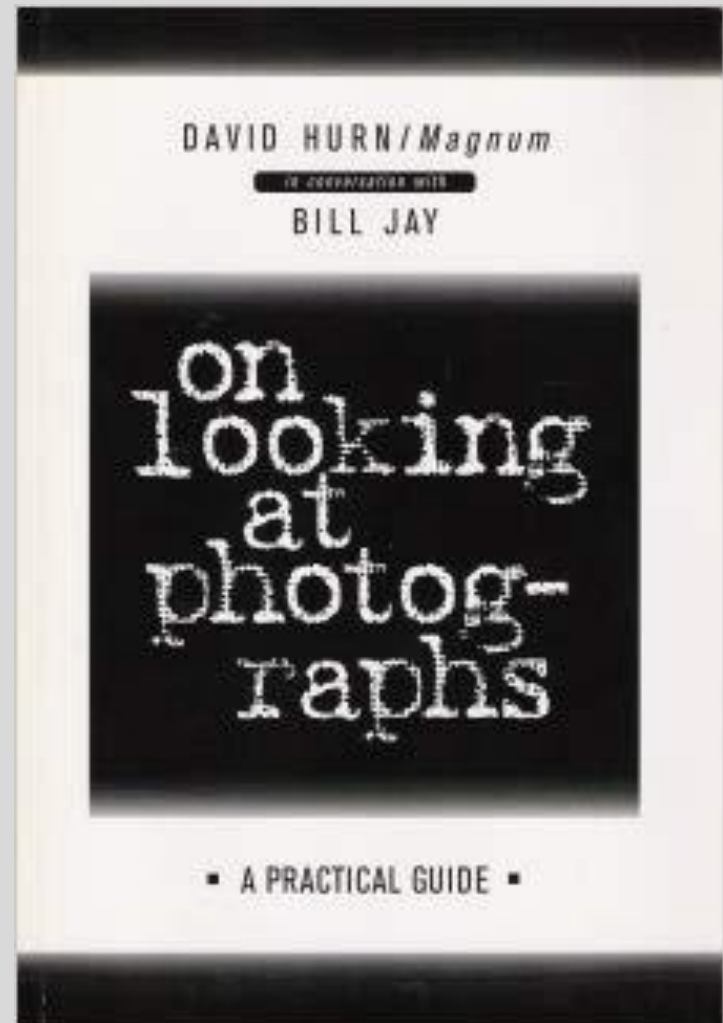
- Szarkowski's analysis:
 - Kertész' use of the 35mm camera
 - The unexpected detail
 - The ephemeral moment
 - The formal quality of the play between pattern and deep space
 - Likened to spider's web, the pedestrian as a fly
 - Distilled 'a free and childlike pleasure in the beauty of the world'



André Kertész, *The Stairs of Montmartre*, Paris 1926

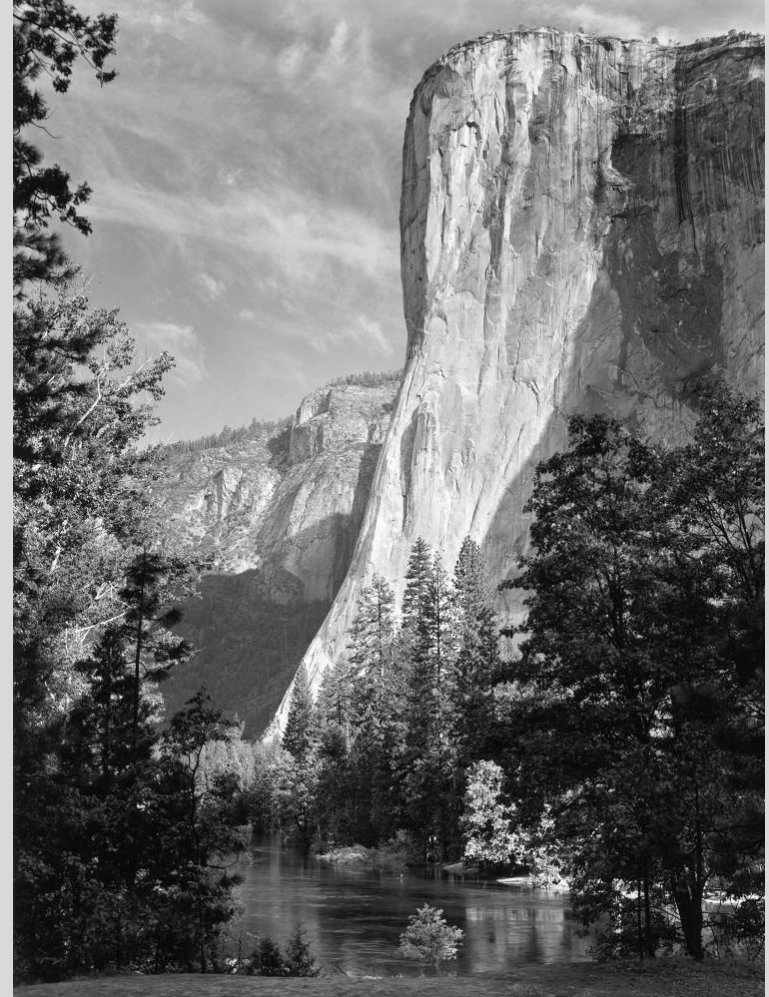
On Looking at Photographs 1

- **Hurn & Jay consider:**
 - **Four fundamental principle of photography**
 - **Meaning, and why it is so slippery**
 - **Merit, and why it is so rare**
 - **Art, and why it is so different**
 - **Morality, and why it is so important**
 - **Looking at photographs**



On Looking at Photographs 2

- **Photography's foundations:**
 - Subject evokes a reaction in the photographer
 - Maximum clarity for the full expression on the subject matter
 - Carefully composed
 - Exposure made at the right moment
- **Snapshot v good photograph:**
 - Looking at the subject unaware of the viewfinder
 - Using the viewfinder to compose the subject



Ansel Adams, *El-Capitan, Yosemite National Park, 1956*

On Looking at Photographs 3

- Consider: what is the photograph *of*?; what is the photograph *about*?
- What is a good photograph? Not the same as, *Important, Useful, Interesting, Likable*
- Three questions:
 - What's the intent of the photographer?
 - Is the intent realised?
 - Was it worth the effort?
- Single images or sequences?



Robert Frank, *Movie Premier – Hollywood, 1955*

Discussion 1



**Jane Bown, *Trevor Phillips*,
1999**

Discussion 2



Sebastiao Salgado, *Ice Castle, Weddell Sea, 2005*

Discussion 3



Robert Mapplethorpe,
Calla Lily, 1986

Discussion 4



Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Framework Houses*, 1959-73

Discussion 5



Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled (Ophelia)*, 2001