

U3AC 2023-24

Photo Forum

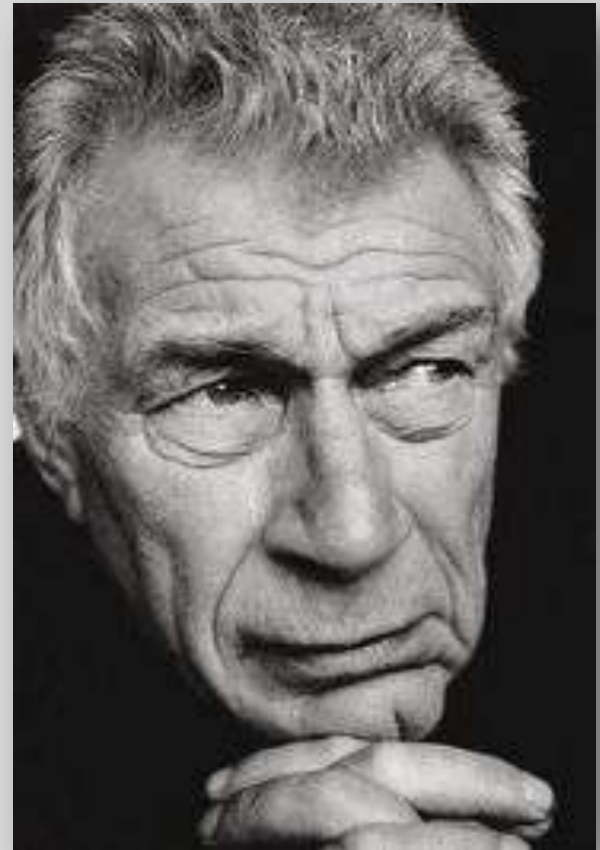
**Reading / Looking At
Photographs**

Brian Human

The Ambiguous Image

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



Aim

- To improve our critical appreciation and understanding of the photographs
- It is *not* about saying what are good or bad photographs

Consider:

- Shaping our reaction and reading
- Approaches to reading photographs
- Discussion

Shaping our Reaction - Ourselves



**Assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald, 24th November 1963,
Robert Hill Jackson**

Shaping our Reaction - Subject



**Rangers holding tusks of killed elephants Amboseli, 2011,
Nick Brandt**

Shaping our Reaction - Context



Don McCullin retrospective, Tate Britain, 2019

Shaping out Reaction - Time



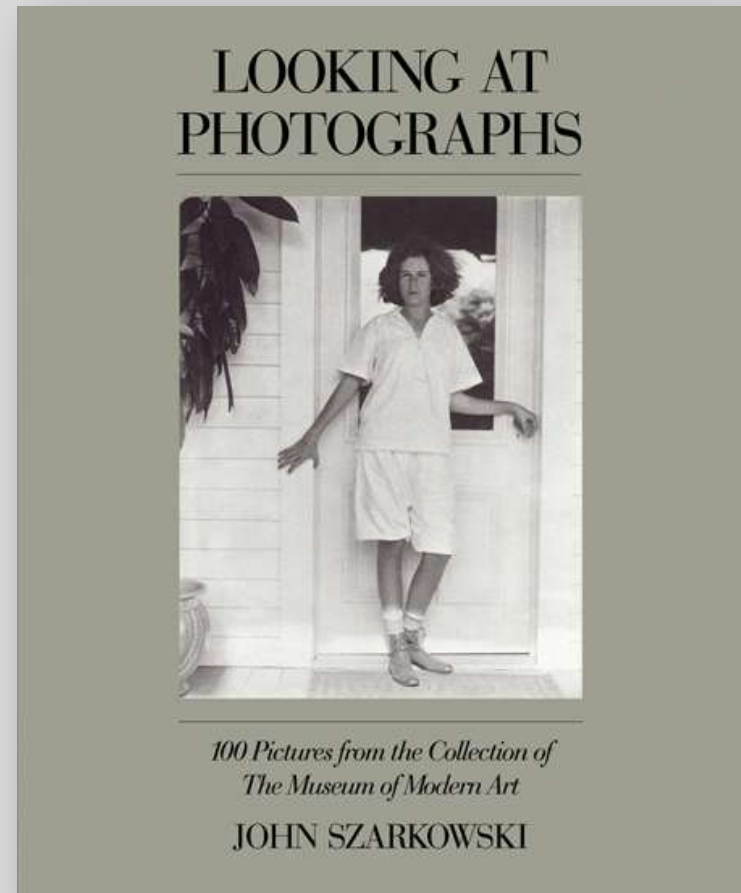
**Sandringham Road – Kingsland High Street, 10.42am - 11.37am,
15th June 2009, Chris Dorley-Brown**

Five Approaches to Reading Photographs

1. **John Szarkowski – Photographer and Director of Dept Photography MoMA**
2. **Susan Sontag – essayist and cultural commentator**
3. **David Hurn & Bill Jay – Magnum photographer; writer and teacher**
4. **Ian Jeffrey – writer on photography**
5. **Geoff Dyer – writer and cultural commentator**

Looking at Photographs 1

- **Emphasis on careful looking at the photograph**
- **For Szarkowski 'legitimate' photography:**
 - **Is 'straight' – using the medium's essential qualities**
 - **'the precise and lucid description of significant fact'**
 - **Has strong formal content**
 - **Presents fragments of actuality pictorially organised**
 - **Reflects the photographer's strong personal vision**



Looking at Photographs 1973

Looking at Photographs 2

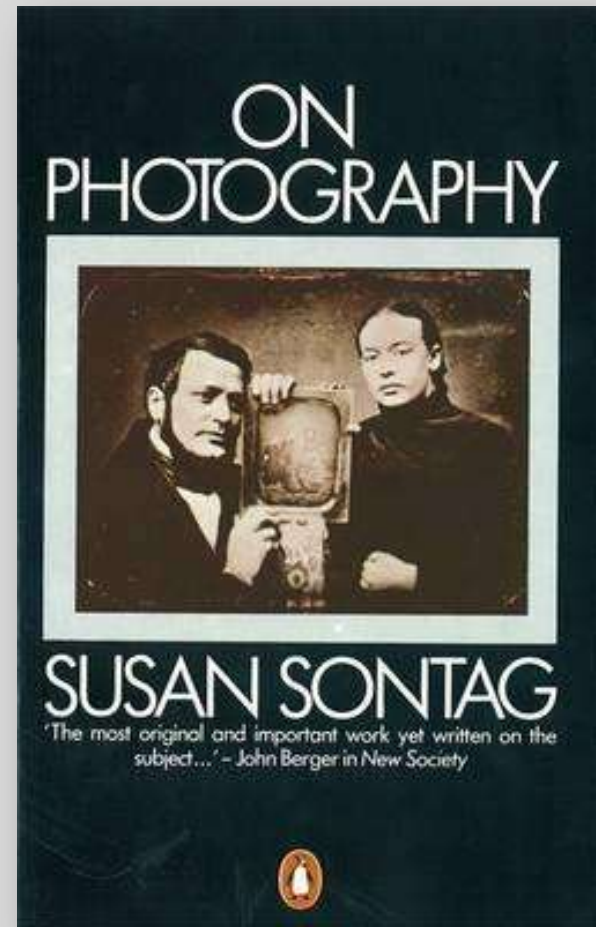
- **Szarkowski's analysis:**
 - **Koudelka heavily engaged in the subject**
 - **Strong narrative interest**
 - **Part of an epic drama**
 - **The village is gathered as witness; an officer records it on camera**
 - **Has Pattern and texture**
 - **Figure compressed into coffin shape**
 - **Tyre track leads him to place of execution**



**Gypsy guilty of murder, Jarabina,
Czechoslovakia, 1963,
Joseph Koudelka**

On Photography 1

- **More general commentary on the importance and nature of photography**
 - **Over abundance of visual material**
 - **What's right to view – leads to exploitation**
 - **Image replaces reality**
 - **Desensitises the viewer**



On Photography 1977

On Photography 2

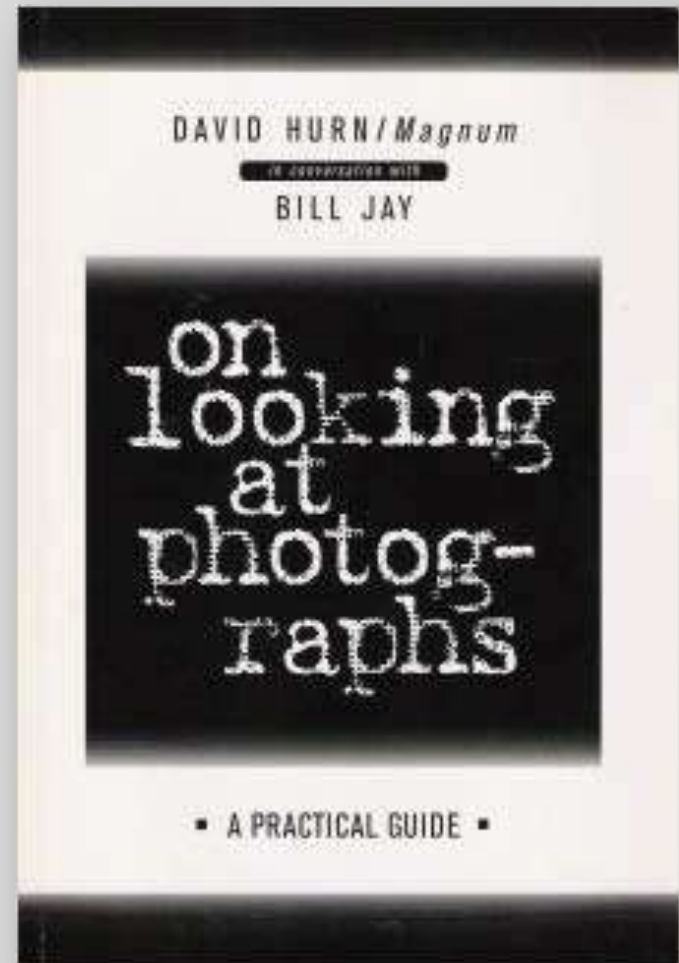
- **Diane Arbus photographs:**
 - **Taken with consent – self revelation**
 - **Frontal pose - pain legible**
 - **Otherness - ‘everybody is an alien’**
 - **Lacks compassion**
 - **Aggressive**



Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N. Y. C., 1962, Diane Arbus

On Looking at Photographs 1

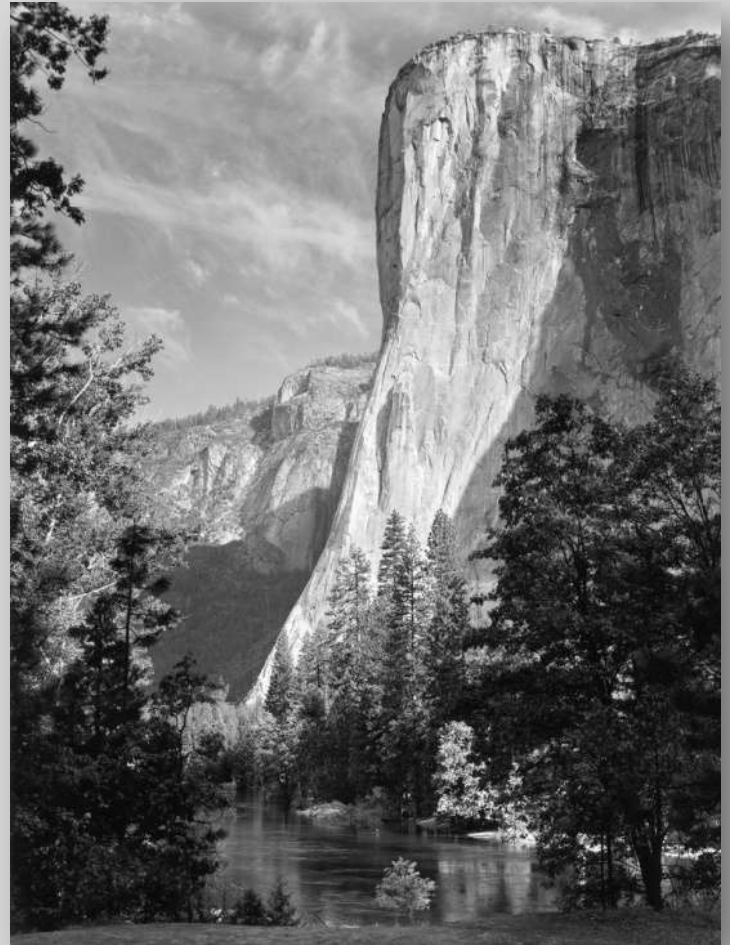
- Hurn & Jay ask us to consider:
 - What a photograph *of* and what it's *about*
 - What is a good photograph?
Not the same as, *Important, Useful, Interesting, Likable*
 - Single images or sequences



On Looking at Photographs, 2000

On Looking at Photographs 2

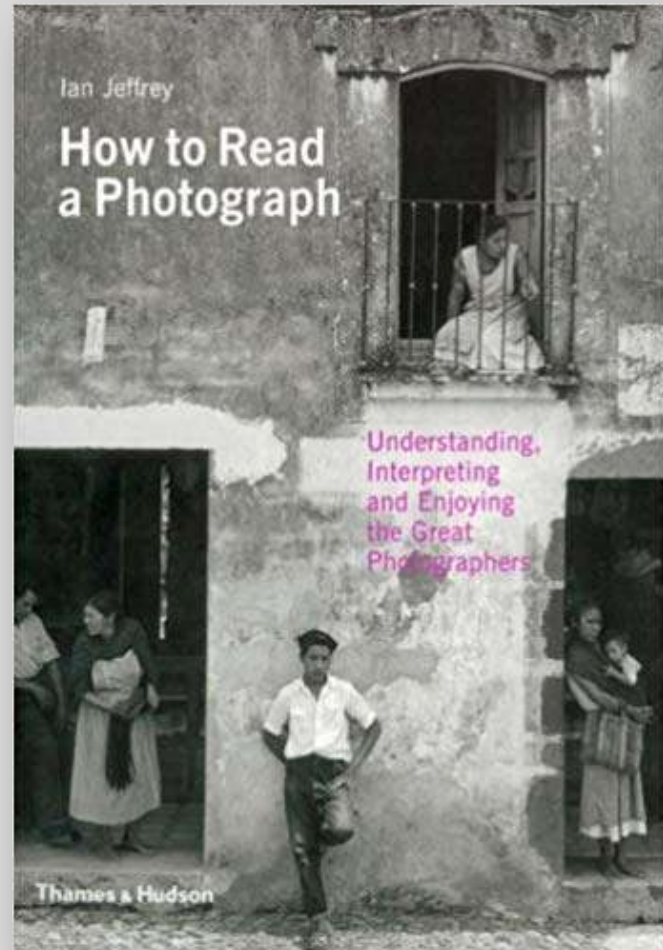
- **Photography's foundations:**
 - **Subject evokes a reaction in the photographer**
 - **Maximum clarity for the full expression on the subject matter**
 - **Carefully composed**
 - **Exposure made at the right moment**



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

How to Read a Photograph 1

- **Photographs are evidence of past times and evocations of feelings**
- **Jeffrey explores:**
 - **Biography of photographer**
 - **Technique**
 - **Subjects**
 - **Historical context**



How to Read a Photograph, 2008

How to Read a Photograph 2

- Dorothy Bohm (b.1924), refugee to Britain 1930s
- Working in Manchester, Paris, London
- Portraits and street photography
- Reflective photography
- **Sete:**
 - Apprehensive early adolescence
 - Signs of what lays ahead – satyr masks, flowers, muscular caratids
 - Glimpse of scene of normal life
 - Steering wheel emblematic of the path to be negotiated



Sete, France, 1986, Dorothy Bohm,

The Ongoing Moment & See Saw 1

- **Photography in wider contexts:**
 - Social
 - Cultural
 - History of the medium
- **Close reading**
- **It yields new knowledge**
- **May create confusion or perplexity**



2005

2021



The Ongoing Moment & See Saw 2



**99 cent, 1999,
Andreas Gursky**

Gursky:

- **Depicts non-places – digital manipulation**
- **A way of seeing our world of boom and plenty**
- **Reflects our obsession with size**
- **Space and time compressed – we are immersed, disorientated**

Discussion 1- Landscape



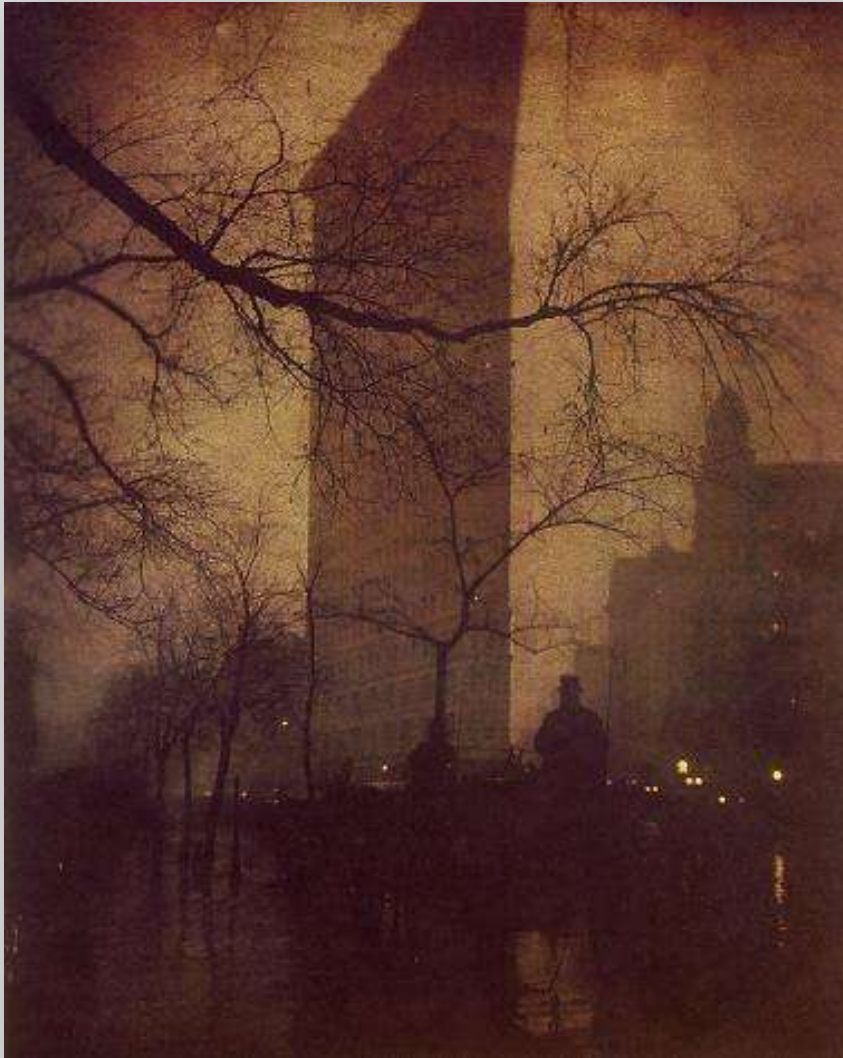
**Lines of Seaweed, Ji-do,
Shinan, Korea, 2012,
Michael Kenna**

Discussion 2 - Portraiture



Paisley, c. 2020, Simon Murphy

Discussion 3 - Cityscape



Flatiron Building, 1904, Edward Steichen

Discussion 4 – Street Photography



The Las Vegas Strip, Nevada, Las Vegas, USA 1981, Harry Gruyaert

Discussion 5 - Wildlife



Nubian Ibex, Zin Desert, Israel, 2023 WPY, Amit Eshel

Thoughts

- ***For a work of art to succeed it must go deeper than a mere visual record***

Frances Spalding

- ***A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.***

Diane Arbus

- ***Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.***

Susan Sontag

References

***Looking at Photographs*, John Szarkowski,
Museum of Modern Art, 1973**

***On Photography*, Susan Sontag, 1977**

***On Looking at Photographs*, David Hurn and Bill
Jay, LensWork 2000**

***How to Read a Photograph*, Ian Jeffrey, Thames
& Hudson, 2008**

***The Ongoing Moment*, Geoff Dyer, Canongate, 2005**

***See/Saw*, Geoff Dyer, Canongate, 2021**

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