Melancholy Objects

Photography has the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts. In fact, it is the one art that has managed to carry out the grandiose, century-old threats of a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility, while most of the pedigreed candidates have dropped out of the race.

Painting was handicapped from the start by being a fine art, with each object a unique, handmade original. A further liability was the exceptional technical virtuosity of those painters usually included in the Surrealist canon, who seldom imagined the canvas as other than figurative. Their paintings looked sleekly calculated, complacently well made, undialectical. They kept a long, prudent distance from Surrealism's contentious idea of blurring the lines between art and so-called life, between objects and events, between the intended and the unintentional, between pros and amateurs, between the noble and the tawdry, between craftsmanship and lucky blunders. The result was that Surrealism in painting amounted to little more than the contents of a meagerly stocked dream world: a few witty fantasies, mostly wet dreams and agoraphobic nightmares. (Only when its libertarian rhetoric helped to nudge Jackson Pollock and others into a new kind of irreverent abstraction did the Surrealist mandate for painters finally seem to make wide creative sense.) Poetry, the other art to which the early Surrealists were particularly devoted, has yielded almost equally disappointing results. The arts in which Surrealism has come into its own are prose fiction (as content, mainly, but much more abundant and more complex thematically than that

claimed by painting), theater, the arts of assemblage, and—most triumphantly—photography.

That photography is the only art that is natively surreal does not mean, however, that it shares the destinies of the official Surrealist movement. On the contrary. Those photographers (many of them ex-painters) consciously influenced by Surrealism count almost as little today as the nineteenth-century "pictorial" photographers who copied the look of Beaux-Arts painting. Even the loveliest *trouvailles* of the 1920s—the solarized photographs and Rayographs of Man Ray, the photograms of László Moholy-Nagy, the multiple-exposure studies of Bragaglia, the photomontages of John Heartfield and Alexander Rodchenko—are regarded as marginal exploits in the history of photography. The photographers who concentrated on interfering with the supposedly superficial realism of the photograph were those who most narrowly conveyed photography's surreal properties. The Surrealist legacy for photography came to seem trivial as the Surrealist repertoire of fantasies and props was rapidly absorbed into high fashion in the 1930s, and Surrealist photography offered mainly a mannered style of portraiture, recognizable by its use of the same decorative conventions introduced by Surrealism in other arts, particularly painting, theater, and advertising. The mainstream of photographic activity has shown that a Surrealist manipulation or theatricalization of the real is unnecessary, if not actually redundant. Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naive—the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be.

Surrealism has always courted accidents, welcomed the uninvited, flattered disorderly presences. What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself, and with a minimum of effort? An object whose beauty, fantastic disclosures, emotional weight are likely to be further enhanced by any accidents that might befall it? It is photography that has best shown how to juxtapose the sewing machine and the umbrella,

whose fortuitous encounter was hailed by a great Surrealist poet as an epitome of the beautiful.

Unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don't seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject—mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine, which is tireless, and which even when capricious can produce a result that is interesting and never entirely wrong. (The sales pitch for the first Kodak, in 1888, was: "You press the button, we do the rest." The purchaser was guaranteed that the picture would be "without any mistake.") In the fairy tale of photography the magic box insures veracity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience and rewards innocence.

The myth is tenderly parodied in a 1928 silent film, *The Cameraman*, which has an inept dreamy Buster Keaton vainly struggling with his dilapidated apparatus, knocking out windows and doors whenever he picks up his tripod, never managing to take one decent picture, yet finally getting some great footage (a photojournalist scoop of a tong war in New York's Chinatown)—by inadvertence. It is the hero's pet monkey who loads the camera with film and operates it part of the time.

The error of the Surrealist militants was to imagine the surreal to be something universal, that is, a matter of psychology, whereas it turns out to be what is most local, ethnic, class-bound, dated. Thus, the earliest surreal photographs come from the 1850s, when photographers first went out prowling the streets of London, Paris, and New York, looking for their unposed slice of life. These photographs, concrete, particular, anecdotal (except that the anecdote has been effaced)—moments of lost time, of vanished customs—seem far more surreal to us now than any photograph rendered abstract and poetic by superimposition, under-printing, solarization, and the like. Believing that the images they sought came from the unconscious, whose contents they assumed as loyal Freudians to be timeless as well as universal, the Surrealists misunderstood what was most brutally moving, irrational,

unassimilable, mysterious—time itself. What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past, and the concreteness of its intimations about social class.

Surrealism is a bourgeois disaffection; that its militants thought it universal is only one of the signs that it is typically bourgeois. As an aesthetics that yearns to be a politics, Surrealism opts for the underdog, for the rights of a disestablished or unofficial reality. But the scandals flattered by Surrealist aesthetics generally turned out to be just those homely mysteries obscured by the bourgeois social order: sex and poverty. Eros, which the early Surrealists placed at the summit of the tabooed reality they sought to rehabilitate, was itself part of the mystery of social station. While it seemed to flourish luxuriantly at extreme ends of the scale, both the lower classes and the nobility being regarded as naturally libertine, middle-class people had to toil to make their sexual revolution. Class was the deepest mystery: the inexhaustible glamour of the rich and powerful, the opaque degradation of the poor and outcast.

The view of reality as an exotic prize to be tracked down and captured by the diligent hunter-with-a-camera has informed photography from the beginning, and marks the confluence of the Surrealist counter-culture and middle-class social adventurism. Photography has always been fascinated by social heights and lower depths. Documentarists (as distinct from courtiers with cameras) prefer the latter. For more than a century, photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at scenes of violence—with a spectacularly good conscience. Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them.

Gazing on other people's reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal. In fact, photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire. The

photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the *flâneur* finds the world "picturesque." The findings of Baudelaire's *flâneur* are variously exemplified by the candid snapshots taken in the 1890s by Paul Martin in London streets and at the seaside and by Arnold Genthe in San Francisco's Chinatown (both using a concealed camera), by Atget's twilight Paris of shabby streets and decaying trades, by the dramas of sex and loneliness depicted in Brassaï's book *Paris de nuit* (1933), by the image of the city as a theater of disaster in Weegee's *Naked City* (1945). The *flâneur* is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations—an unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life that the photographer "apprehends," as a detective apprehends a criminal.

Returning to *The Cameraman*: a tong war among poor Chinese makes an ideal subject. It is completely exotic, therefore worth photographing. Part of what assures the success of the hero's film is that he doesn't understand his subject at all. (As played by Buster Keaton, he doesn't even understand that his life is in danger.) The perennial surreal subject is *How the Other Half Lives*, to cite the innocently explicit title that Jacob Riis gave to the book of photographs of the New York poor that he brought out in 1890. Photography conceived as social documentation was an instrument of that essentially middle-class attitude, both zealous and merely tolerant, both curious and indifferent, called humanism—which found slums the most enthralling of decors. Contemporary photographers have, of course, learned to dig in and limit their subject. Instead of the chutzpa of "the other half," we get, say, *East 100th Street* (Bruce Davidson's book of Harlem photographs published in 1970). The justification is still the same, that picture-taking serves a high purpose: uncovering a hidden truth, conserving a vanishing past. (The hidden truth is, moreover, often identified with the vanishing past. Between 1874 and 1886,

prosperous Londoners could subscribe to the Society for Photographing the Relics of Old London.)

Starting as artists of the urban sensibility, photographers quickly became aware that nature is as exotic as the city, rustics as picturesque as city slum dwellers. In 1897 Sir Benjamin Stone, rich industrialist and conservative MP from Birmingham, founded the National Photographic Record Association with the aim of documenting traditional English ceremonies and rural festivals which were dying out. "Every village," Stone wrote, "has a history which might be preserved by means of the camera." For a wellborn photographer of the late nineteenth century like the bookish Count Giuseppe Primoli, the street life of the underprivileged was at least as interesting as the pastimes of his fellow aristocrats: compare Primoli's photographs of King Victor Emmanuel's wedding with his photographs of the Naples poor. It required the social immobility of a photographer of genius who happened to be a small child, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, to confine subject matter to the outlandish habits of the photographer's own family and class. But essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own.

Perhaps the earliest model of the sustained look downward are the thirty-six photographs in *Street Life in London* (1877-78) taken by the British traveler and photographer John Thomson. But for each photographer specializing in the poor, many more go after a wider range of exotic reality. Thomson himself had a model career of this kind. Before turning to the poor of his own country, he had already been to see the heathen, a sojourn which resulted in his four-volume *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1873-74). And following his book on the street life of the London poor, he turned to the indoor life of the London rich: it was Thomson who, around 1880, pioneered the vogue of at-home photographic portraiture.

From the beginning, professional photography typically meant the broader kind of class tourism, with most photographers combining surveys of social abjection with portraits of celebrities or commodities (high fashion, advertising) or studies of the nude. Many of the exemplary photographic careers of this century (like

those of Edward Steichen, Bill Brandt, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Richard Avedon) proceed by abrupt changes in the social level and ethical importance of subject matter. Perhaps the most dramatic break is that between the pre-war and the post-war work of Bill Brandt. To have gone from the tough-minded photographs of Depression squalor in northern England to his stylish celebrity portraits and semi-abstract nudes of the last decades seems a long journey indeed. But there is nothing particularly idiosyncratic, or perhaps even inconsistent, in these contrasts. Traveling between degraded and glamorous realities is part of the very momentum of the photographic enterprise, unless the photographer is locked into an extremely private obsession (like the thing Lewis Carroll had for little girls or Diane Arbus had for the Halloween crowd).

Poverty is no more surreal than wealth; a body clad in filthy rags is not more surreal than a principessa dressed for a ball or a pristine nude. What is surreal is the distance imposed, and bridged, by the photograph: the social distance and the distance in time. Seen from the middle-class perspective of photography, celebrities are as intriguing as pariahs. Photographers need not have an ironic, intelligent attitude toward their stereotyped material. Pious, respectful fascination may do just as well, especially with the most conventional subjects.

Nothing could be farther from, say, the subtleties of Avedon than the work of Ghitta Carell, Hungarian-born photographer of the celebrities of the Mussolini era. But her portraits now look as eccentric as Avedon's, and far more surreal than Cecil Beaton's Surrealist-influenced photographs from the same period. By setting his subjects—see the photographs he took of Edith Sitwell in 1927, of Cocteau in 1936—in fanciful, luxurious decors, Beaton turns them into overexplicit, unconvincing effigies. But Carell's innocent complicity with the wish of her Italian generals and aristocrats and actors to appear static, poised, glamorous exposes a hard, accurate truth about them. The photographer's reverence has made them interesting; time has made them harmless, all too human.

Some photographers set up as scientists, others as moralists. The

scientists make an inventory of the world; the moralists concentrate on hard cases. An example of photography-as-science is the project August Sander began in 1911: a photographic catalogue of the German people. In contrast to George Grosz's drawings, which summed up the spirit and variety of social types in Weimar Germany through caricature, Sander's "archetype pictures" (as he called them) imply a pseudo-scientific neutrality similar to that claimed by the covertly partisan typological sciences that sprang up in the nineteenth century like phrenology, criminology, psychiatry, and eugenics. It was not so much that Sander chose individuals for their representative character as that he assumed, correctly, that the camera cannot help but reveal faces as social masks. Each person photographed was a sign of a certain trade, class, or profession. All his subjects are representative, equally representative, of a given social reality—their own.

Sander's look is not unkind; it is permissive, unjudging. Compare his 1930 photograph "Circus People" with Diane Arbus's studies of circus people or with the portraits of demimonde characters by Lisette Model. People face Sander's camera, as they do in Model's and Arbus's photographs, but their gaze is not intimate, revealing. Sander was not looking for secrets; he was observing the typical. Society contains no mystery. Like Eadweard Muybridge, whose photographic studies in the 1880s managed to dispel misconceptions about what everybody had always seen (how horses gallop, how people move) because he had subdivided the subject's movements into a precise and lengthy enough sequence of shots, Sander aimed to shed light on the social order by atomizing it, into an indefinite number of social types. It doesn't seem surprising that in 1934, five years after its publication, the Nazis impounded the unsold copies of Sander's book *Antlitz der Zeit (The Face of Our Time)* and destroyed the printing blocks, thus bringing his national-portrait project to an abrupt end. (Sander, who stayed in Germany throughout the Nazi period, switched to landscape photography.) The charge was that Sander's project was anti-social. What might well have seemed anti-social to Nazis was his idea of the photographer as an

impassive census-taker, the completeness of whose record would render all commentary, or even judgment, superfluous.

Unlike most photography with a documentary intention, enthralled either by the poor and unfamiliar, as preeminently photographable subjects, or by celebrities, Sander's social sample is unusually, conscientiously broad. He includes bureaucrats and peasants, servants and society ladies, factory workers and industrialists, soldiers and gypsies, actors and clerks. But such variety does not rule out class condescension. Sander's eclectic style gives him away. Some photographs are casual, fluent, naturalistic; others are naïve and awkward. The many posed photographs taken against a flat white background are a cross between superb mug shots and old-fashioned studio portraits. Unselfconsciously, Sander adjusted his style to the social rank of the person he was photographing. Professionals and the rich tend to be photographed indoors, without props. They speak for themselves. Laborers and derelicts are usually photographed in a setting (often outdoors) which locates them, which speaks for them—as if they could not be assumed to have the kinds of separate identities normally achieved in the middle and upper classes.

In Sander's work everybody is in place, nobody is lost or cramped or off-center. A cretin is photographed in exactly the same dispassionate way as a bricklayer, a legless World War I veteran like a healthy young soldier in uniform, scowling Communist students like smiling Nazis, a captain of industry like an opera singer. "It is not my intention either to criticize or describe these people," Sander said. While one might have expected that he would have claimed not to have criticized his subjects, by photographing them, it is interesting that he thought he hadn't described them either. Sander's complicity with everybody also means a distance from everybody. His complicity with his subjects is not naïve (like Carell's) but nihilistic. Despite its class realism, it is one of the most truly abstract bodies of work in the history of photography.

It is hard to imagine an American attempting an equivalent of Sander's comprehensive taxonomy. The great photographic

portraits of America—like Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1938) and Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959)—have been deliberately random, while continuing to reflect the traditional relish of documentary photography for the poor and the dispossessed, the nation's forgotten citizens. And the most ambitious collective photographic project ever undertaken in this country, by the Farm Security Administration in 1935, under the direction of Roy Emerson Stryker, was concerned exclusively with "low-income groups."* The FSA project, conceived as "a pictorial documentation of our rural areas and rural problems" (Stryker's words), was unabashedly propagandistic, with Stryker coaching his team about the attitude they were to take toward their problem subject. The purpose of the project was to demonstrate the value of the people photographed. Thereby, it implicitly defined its point of view: that of middle-class people who needed to be convinced that the poor were really poor, and that the poor were dignified. It is instructive to compare the FSA photographs with those by Sander. Though the poor do not lack dignity in Sander's photographs, it is not because of any compassionate intentions. They have dignity by juxtaposition, because they are looked at in the same cool way as everybody else.

American photography was rarely so detached. For an approach reminiscent of Sander's, one must look to people who documented a dying or superseded part of America—like Adam Clark Vroman, who photographed Indians in Arizona and New Mexico between 1895 and 1904. Vroman's handsome photographs are unexpressive, uncondescending, unsentimental. Their mood is the very opposite of the FSA photographs: they are not moving,

*Though that changed, as is indicated in a memo from Stryker to his staff in 1942, when the new morale needs of World War II made the poor too downbeat a subject. "*We must have at once*: pictures of men, women and children who appear as if they really believed in the U.S. Get people with a little spirit. Too many in our file now paint the U.S. as an old person's home and that just about everybody is too old to work and too malnourished to care much what happens…. We particularly need young men and women who work in our factories…. Housewives in their kitchen or in their yard picking flowers. More contented-looking old couples…".

they are not idiomatic, they do not invite sympathy. They make no propaganda for the Indians. Sander didn't know he was photographing a disappearing world. Vroman did. He also knew that there was no saving the world that he was recording.

Photography in Europe was largely guided by notions of the picturesque (i.e., the poor, the foreign, the time-worn), the important (i.e., the rich, the famous), and the beautiful. Photographs tended to praise or to aim at neutrality. Americans, less convinced of the permanence of any basic social arrangements, experts on the "reality" and inevitability of change, have more often made photography partisan. Pictures got taken not only to show what should be admired but to reveal what needs to be confronted, deplored—and fixed up. American photography implies a more summary, less stable connection with history; and a relation to geographic and social reality that is both more hopeful and more predatory.

The hopeful side is exemplified in the well-known use of photographs in America to awaken conscience. At the beginning of the century Lewis Hine was appointed staff photographer to the National Child Labor Committee, and his photographs of children working in cotton mills, beet fields, and coal mines did influence legislators to make child labor illegal. During the New Deal, Stryker's FSA project (Stryker was a pupil of Hine's) brought back information about migrant workers and sharecroppers to Washington, so that bureaucrats could figure out how to help them. But even at its most moralistic, documentary photography was also imperious in another sense. Both Thomson's detached traveler's report and the impassioned muckraking of Riis or Hine reflect the urge to appropriate an alien reality. And no reality is exempt from appropriation, neither one that is scandalous (and should be corrected) nor one that is merely beautiful (or could be made so by the camera). Ideally, the photographer was able to make the two realities cognate, as illustrated by the title of an interview with Hine in 1920, "Treating Labor Artistically."

The predatory side of photography is at the heart of the alliance, evident earlier in the United States than anywhere else, between

photography and tourism. After the opening of the West in 1869 by the completion of the transcontinental railroad came the colonization through photography. The case of the American Indians is the most brutal. Discreet, serious amateurs like Vroman had been operating since the end of the Civil War. They were the vanguard of an army of tourists who arrived by the end of the century, eager for "a good shot" of Indian life. The tourists invaded the Indians' privacy, photographing holy objects and the sacred dances and places, if necessary paying the Indians to pose and getting them to revise their ceremonies to provide more photogenic material.

But the native ceremony that is changed when the tourist hordes come sweeping down is not so different from a scandal in the inner city that is corrected after someone photographs it. Insofar as the muckrakers got results, they too altered what they photographed; indeed, photographing something became a routine part of the procedure for altering it. The danger was of a token change—limited to the narrowest reading of the photograph's subject. The particular New York slum, Mulberry Bend, that Riis photographed in the late 1880s was subsequently torn down and its inhabitants rehoused by order of Theodore Roosevelt, then state governor, while other, equally dreadful slums were left standing.

The photographer both loots and preserves, denounces and consecrates. Photography expresses the American impatience with reality, the taste for activities whose instrumentality is a machine. "Speed is at the bottom of it all," as Hart Crane said (writing about Stieglitz in 1923), "the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture indefinitely: the moment made eternal." Faced with the awesome spread and alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited. Kodak put signs at the entrances of many towns listing what to photograph. Signs marked the places in national parks where visitors should stand with their cameras.

Sander is at home in his own country. American photographers are often on the road, overcome with disrespectful wonder at

what their country offers in the way of surreal surprises. Moralists and conscienceless despoilers, children and foreigners in their own land, they will get something down that is disappearing—and, often, hasten its disappearance by photographing it. To take, like Sander, specimen after specimen, seeking an ideally complete inventory, presupposes that society can be envisaged as a comprehensible totality. European photographers have assumed that society has something of the stability of nature. Nature in America has always been suspect, on the defensive, cannibalized by progress. In America, every specimen becomes a relic.

The American landscape has always seemed too varied, immense, mysterious, fugitive to lend itself to scientism. "He doesn't *know*, he can't *say*, before the facts," Henry James wrote in *The American Scene* (1907),

> and he doesn't even want to know or to say; the facts themselves loom, before the understanding, in too large a mass for a mere mouthful: it is as if the syllables were too numerous to make a legible word. The *il*legible word, accordingly, the great inscrutable answer to questions, hangs in the vast American sky, to his imagination, as something fantastic and *abracadabrant*, belonging to no known language, and it is under this convenient ensign that he travels and considers and contemplates, and, to the best of his ability, enjoys.

Americans feel the reality of their country to be so stupendous, and mutable, that it would be the rankest presumption to approach it in a classifying, scientific way. One could get at it indirectly, by subterfuge—breaking it off into strange fragments that could somehow, by synecdoche, be taken for the whole.

American photographers (like American writers) posit something ineffable in the national reality—something, possibly, that has never been seen before. Jack Kerouac begins his introduction to Robert Frank's book *The Americans*:

> That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and music comes out of the jukebox or from a nearby funeral, that's what Robert Frank has captured in these tremendous photographs taken as he travelled on the road around practically forty-eight states in an old used car (on Guggenheim Fellowship) and with the agility, mystery, genius, sadness and strange secrecy of a shadow photographed scenes that have never been seen on film…. After seeing these pictures you end up finally not knowing any more whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin.

Any inventory of America is inevitably anti-scientific, a delirious "abracadabrant" confusion of objects, in which jukeboxes resemble coffins. James at least managed to make the wry judgment that "this particular effect of the scale of things is the only effect that, throughout the land, is not directly adverse to joy." For Kerouac—for the main tradition of American photography—the prevailing mood is sadness. Behind the ritualized claims of American photographers to be looking around, at random, without preconceptions—lighting on subjects, phlegmatically recording them—is a mournful vision of loss.

The effectiveness of photography's statement of loss depends on its steadily enlarging the familiar iconography of mystery, mortality, transience. More traditional ghosts are summoned up by some older American photographers, such as Clarence John Laughlin, a self-avowed exponent of "extreme romanticism" who began in the mid-1930s photographing decaying plantation houses of the lower Mississippi, funerary monuments in Louisiana's swamp burial grounds, Victorian interiors in Milwaukee and Chicago; but the method works as well on subjects which do not, so conventionally, reek of the past, as in a Laughlin photograph from 1962, "Spectre of Coca-Cola." In addition to romanticism (extreme or not) about the past, photography offers instant romanticism about the present. In America, the photographer is not simply the person who records the past but the one who invents it. As Berenice Abbott writes: "The photographer is the

contemporary being par excellence; through his eyes the now becomes past."

Returning to New York from Paris in 1929, after the years of apprenticeship with Man Ray and her discovery (and rescue) of the then barely known work of Eugène Atget, Abbott set about recording the city. In the preface to her book of photographs that came out in 1939, *Changing New York*, she explains: "If I had never left America, I would never have wanted to photograph New York. But when I saw it with fresh eyes, I knew it was *my* country, something I had to set down in photographs." Abbott's purpose ("I wanted to record it before it changed completely") sounds like that of Atget, who spent the years between 1898 and his death in 1927 patiently, furtively documenting a small-scale, time-worn Paris that was vanishing. But Abbott is setting down something even more fantastic: the ceaseless replacement of the new. The New York of the thirties was very different from Paris: "not so much beauty and tradition as native fantasia emerging from accelerated greed." Abbott's book is aptly titled, for she is not so much memorializing the past as simply documenting ten years of the chronic self-destruct quality of American experience, in which even the recent past is constantly being used up, swept away, torn down, thrown out, traded in. Fewer and fewer Americans possess objects that have a patina, old furniture, grandparents' pots and pans—the used things, warm with generations of human touch, that Rilke celebrated in *The Duino Elegies* as being essential to a human landscape. Instead, we have our paper phantoms, transistorized landscapes. A featherweight portable museum.

Photographs, which turn the past into a consumable object, are a short cut. Any collection of photographs is an exercise in Surrealist montage and the Surrealist abbreviation of history. As Kurt Schwitters and, more recently, Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz have made brilliant objects, tableaux, environments out of refuse, we now make a history out of our detritus. And some virtue, of a civic kind appropriate to a democratic society, is attached to the practice. The true modernism is not austerity but

a garbage-strewn plenitude—the willful travesty of Whitman's magnanimous dream. Influenced by the photographers and the pop artists, architects like Robert Venturi learn from Las Vegas and find Times Square a congenial successor to the Piazza San Marco; and Reyner Banham lauds Los Angeles's "instant architecture and instant townscape" for its gift of freedom, of a good life impossible amid the beauties and squalors of the European city—extolling the liberation offered by a society whose consciousness is built, *ad hoc*, out of scraps and junk. America, that surreal country, is full of found objects. Our junk has become art. Our junk has become history.

Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information. Photography has become the quintessential art of affluent, wasteful, restless societies—an indispensable tool of the new mass culture that took shape here after the Civil War, and conquered Europe only after World War II, although its values had gained a foothold among the well-off as early as the 1850s when, according to the splenetic description of Baudelaire, "our squalid society" became narcissistically entranced by Daguerre's "cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history."

The Surrealist purchase on history also implies an undertow of melancholy as well as a surface voracity and impertinence. At the very beginning of photography, the late 1830s, William H. Fox Talbot noted the camera's special aptitude for recording "the injuries of time." Fox Talbot was talking about what happens to buildings and monuments. For us, the more interesting abrasions are not of stone but of flesh. Through photographs we follow in the most intimate, troubling way the reality of how people age. To look at an old photograph of oneself, of anyone one has known, or of a much photographed public person is to feel, first of all: how much *younger* I (she, he) was then. Photography is the inventory of mortality. A touch of the finger now suffices to invest a moment with posthumous irony. Photographs show people

being so irrefutably *there* and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies. One's reaction to the photographs Roman Vishniac took in 1938 of daily life in the ghettos of Poland is overwhelmingly affected by the knowledge of how soon all these people were to perish. To the solitary stroller, all the faces in the stereotyped photographs cupped behind glass and affixed to tombstones in the cemeteries of Latin countries seem to contain a portent of their death. Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people. Some working-class Berliners in Robert Siodmak's film *Menschen am Sonntag* (1929) are having their pictures taken at the end of a Sunday outing. One by one they step before the itinerant photographer's black box—grin, look anxious, clown, stare. The movie camera lingers in close-up to let us savor the mobility of each face; then we see the face frozen in the last of its expressions, embalmed in a still. The photographs shock, in the flow of the movie—transmuting, in an instant, present into past, life into death. And one of the most disquieting films ever made, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1963), is the tale of a man who foresees his own death, narrated entirely with still photographs.

As the fascination that photographs exercise is a reminder of death, it is also an invitation to sentimentality. Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past. One recent book arranges in alphabetical order the photographs of an incongruous group of celebrities as babies or children. Stalin and Gertrude Stein, who face outward from opposite pages, look equally solemn and huggable; Elvis Presley and Proust, another pair of youthful page-mates, slightly resemble each other; Hubert Humphrey (age 3) and Aldous Huxley (age 8), side by side, have in common that both already display the forceful exaggerations of character for which they were to be known as adults. No picture in the book is without interest and charm, given what we know (including,

in most cases, photographs) of the famous creatures those children were to become. For this and similar ventures in Surrealist irony, naïve snapshots or the most conventional studio portraits are most effective: such pictures seem even more odd, moving, premonitory.

Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts for them, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs). A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations. And an increasingly common way of presenting photographs in book form is to match photographs themselves with quotes.

One example: Bob Adelman's *Down Home* (1972), a portrait of a rural Alabama county, one of the poorest in the nation, taken over a five-year period in the 1960s. Illustrating the continuing predilection of documentary photography for losers, Adelman's book descends from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, whose point was precisely that its subjects were not famous, but forgotten. But Walker Evans's photographs were accompanied by eloquent prose written (sometimes overwritten) by James Agee, which aimed to deepen the reader's empathy with the sharecroppers' lives. No one presumes to speak for Adelman's subjects. (It is characteristic of the liberal sympathies which inform his book that it purports to have no point of view at all—that is, to be an entirely impartial, non-empathic look at its subjects.) *Down Home* could be considered a version in miniature, county-wide, of August Sander's project: to compile an objective photographic record of a people. But these specimens talk, which lends a weight to these unpretentious photographs that they would not have on their own. Paired with their words, their photographs characterize the citizens of Wilcox County as people obliged to defend or exhibit their territory; suggest that these lives are, in a literal sense, a series of positions or poses.

Another example: Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), which also constructs, with the aid of photographs, a portrait of

a rural county—but the time is the past, between 1890 and 1910, years of severe recession and economic hardship, and Jackson County is reconstructed by means of found objects dating from those decades. These consist of a selection of photographs taken by Charles Van Schaick, the county seat's leading commercial photographer, some three thousand of whose glass negatives are stored in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; and quotations from period sources, mainly local newspapers and the records of the county insane asylum, and fiction about the Midwest. The quotations have nothing to do with the photographs but are correlated with them in an aleatoric, intuitive way, as words and sounds by John Cage are matched at the time of performance with the dance movements already choreographed by Merce Cunningham.

The people photographed in *Down Home* are the authors of the declarations we read on the facing pages. White and black, poor and well-off talk, exhibiting contrasting views (particularly on matters of class and race). But whereas the statements that go with Adelman's photographs contradict each other, the texts that Lesy has collected all say the same thing: that an astonishing number of people in turn-of-the-century America were bent on hanging themselves in barns, throwing their children into wells, cutting their spouses' throats, taking off their clothes on Main Street, burning their neighbors' crops, and sundry other acts likely to land them in jail or the loony bin. In case anyone was thinking that it was Vietnam and all the domestic funk and nastiness of the past decade which had made America a country of darkening hopes, Lesy argues that the dream had collapsed by the end of the last century—not in the inhuman cities but in the farming communities; that the whole country has been crazy, and for a long time. Of course, *Wisconsin Death Trip* doesn't actually prove anything. The force of its historical argument is the force of collage. To Van Schaick's disturbing, handsomely time-eroded photographs Lesy could have matched other texts from the period—love letters, diaries—to give another, perhaps less desperate impression. His book is rousing, fashionably pessimistic polemic, and totally whimsical as history.

A number of American authors, most notably Sherwood Anderson, have written as polemically about the miseries of small-town life at roughly the time covered by Lesy's book. But although works of photo-fiction like *Wisconsin Death Trip* explain less than many stories and novels, they persuade more now, because they have the authority of a document. Photographs—and quotations—seem, because they are taken to be pieces of reality, more authentic than extended literary narratives. The only prose that seems credible to more and more readers is not the fine writing of someone like Agee, but the raw record—edited or unedited talk into tape recorders; fragments or the integral texts of sub-literary documents (court records, letters, diaries, psychiatric case histories, etc.); self-deprecatingly sloppy, often paranoid first-person reportage. There is a rancorous suspicion in America of whatever seems literary, not to mention a growing reluctance on the part of young people to read anything, even subtitles in foreign movies and copy on a record sleeve, which partly accounts for the new appetite for books of few words and many photographs. (Of course, photography itself increasingly reflects the prestige of the rough, the self-disparaging, the offhand, the undisciplined—the "anti-photograph.")

"All of the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesques," Anderson says in the prologue to *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), the title of which was originally supposed to be *The Book of the Grotesque*. He goes on: "The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful…." Surrealism is the art of generalizing the grotesque and then discovering nuances (and charms) in *that*. No activity is better equipped to exercise the Surrealist way of looking than photography, and eventually we look at all photographs surrealistically. People are ransacking their attics and the archives of city and state historical societies for old photographs; ever more obscure or forgotten photographers are being rediscovered. Books of photography pile higher and higher—measuring the lost past (hence, the promotion of amateur photography), taking the temperature of the present. Photographs furnish instant history, instant sociology, instant participation. But there is something

remarkably anodyne about these new forms of packaging reality. The Surrealist strategy, which promised a new and exciting vantage point for the radical criticism of modern culture, has devolved into an easy irony that democratizes all evidence, that equates its scatter of evidence with history. Surrealism can only deliver a reactionary judgment; can make out of history only an accumulation of oddities, a joke, a death trip.

The taste for quotations (and for the juxtaposition of incongruous quotations) is a Surrealist taste. Thus, Walter Benjamin—whose Surrealist sensibility is the most profound of anyone's on record—was a passionate collector of quotations. In her magisterial essay on Benjamin, Hannah Arendt recounts that "nothing was more characteristic of him in the thirties than the little notebooks with black covers which he always carried with him and in which he tirelessly entered in the form of quotations what daily living and reading netted him in the way of 'pearls' and 'coral.' On occasion he read from them aloud, showed them around like items from a choice and precious collection." Though collecting quotations could be considered as merely an ironic mimetism—victimless collecting, as it were—this should not be taken to mean that Benjamin disapproved of, or did not indulge in, the real thing. For it was Benjamin's conviction that reality itself invited—and vindicated—the once heedless, inevitably destructive ministrations of the collector. In a world that is well on its way to becoming one vast quarry, the collector becomes someone engaged in a pious work of salvage. The course of modern history having already sapped the traditions and shattered the living wholes in which precious objects once found their place, the collector may now in good conscience go about excavating the choicer, more emblematic fragments.

The past itself, as historical change continues to accelerate, has become the most surreal of subjects—making it possible, as Benjamin said, to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. From the start, photographers not only set themselves the task of recording a disappearing world but were so employed by those hastening its disappearance. (As early as 1842, that indefatigable

improver of French architectural treasures, Viollet-le-Duc, commissioned a series of daguerreotypes of Notre Dame before beginning his restoration of the cathedral.) "To renew the old world," Benjamin wrote, "that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things." But the old world cannot be renewed—certainly not by quotations; and this is the rueful, quixotic aspect of the photographic enterprise.

Benjamin's ideas are worth mentioning because he was photography's most original and important critic—despite (and because of) the inner contradiction in his account of photography which follows from the challenge posed by his Surrealist sensibility to his Marxist/Brechtian principles—and because Benjamin's own ideal project reads like a sublimated version of the photographer's activity. This project was a work of literary criticism that was to consist entirely of quotations, and would thereby be devoid of anything that might betray empathy. A disavowal of empathy, a disdain for message-mongering, a claim to be invisible—these are strategies endorsed by most professional photographers. The history of photography discloses a long tradition of ambivalence about its capacity for partisanship: the taking of sides is felt to undermine its perennial assumption that all subjects have validity and interest. But what in Benjamin is an excruciating idea of fastidiousness, meant to permit the mute past to speak in its own voice, with all its unresolvable complexity, becomes—when generalized, in photography—the cumulative de-creation of the past (in the very act of preserving it), the fabrication of a new, parallel reality that makes the past immediate while underscoring its comic or tragic ineffectuality, that invests the specificity of the past with an unlimited irony, that transforms the present into the past and the past into pastness.

Like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that, even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to a sense of the past. But while traditional arts of historical consciousness attempt to put the past in order, distinguishing the innovative from the retrograde, the central from the marginal, the relevant from the irrelevant or merely interesting, the photographer's approach—like that of the collector—is

unsystematic, indeed anti-systematic. The photographer's ardor for a subject has no essential relation to its content or value, that which makes a subject classifiable. It is, above all, an affirmation of the subject's thereness; its rightness (the rightness of a look on a face, of the arrangement of a group of objects), which is the equivalent of the collector's standard of genuineness; its quiddity—whatever qualities make it unique. The professional photographer's preeminently willful, avid gaze is one that not only resists the traditional classification and evaluation of subjects but seeks consciously to defy and subvert them. For this reason, its approach to subject matter is a good deal less aleatoric than is generally claimed.

In principle, photography executes the Surrealist mandate to adopt an uncompromisingly egalitarian attitude toward subject matter. (Everything is "real.") In fact, it has—like mainstream Surrealist taste itself—evinced an inveterate fondness for trash, eyesores, rejects, peeling surfaces, odd stuff, kitsch. Thus, Atget specialized in the marginal beauties of jerry-built wheeled vehicles, gaudy or fantastic window displays, the raffish art of shop signs and carousels, ornate porticoes, curious door knockers and wrought-iron grilles, stucco ornaments on the façades of run-down houses. The photographer—and the consumer of photographs—follows in the footsteps of the ragpicker, who was one of Baudelaire's favorite figures for the modern poet:

> Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects…. He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.

Bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera's eye, as churches and pastoral landscapes. More beautiful, by modern taste. Recall that it was Breton and other Surrealists who invented the secondhand store as a temple of vanguard taste and upgraded visits to flea markets into a mode of aesthetic pilgrimage. The Surrealist ragpicker's

acuity was directed to finding beautiful what other people found ugly or without interest and relevance—bric-a-brac, naïve or pop objects, urban debris.

As the structuring of a prose fiction, a painting, a film by means of quotations—think of Borges, of Kitaj, of Godard—is a specialized example of Surrealist taste, so the increasingly common practice of putting up photographs on living-room and bedroom walls, where formerly hung reproductions of paintings, is an index of the wide diffusion of Surrealist taste. For photographs themselves satisfy many of the criteria for Surrealist approbation, being ubiquitous, cheap, unprepossessing objects. A painting is commissioned or bought; a photograph is found (in albums and drawers), cut out (of newspapers and magazines), or easily taken oneself. And the objects that are photographs not only proliferate in a way that paintings don't but are, in a certain sense, aesthetically indestructible. Leonardo's "The Last Supper" in Milan hardly looks better now; it looks terrible. Photographs, when they get scrofulous, tarnished, stained, cracked, faded still look good; do often look better. (In this, as in other ways, the art that photography does resemble is architecture, whose works are subject to the same inexorable promotion through the passage of time; many buildings, and not only the Parthenon, probably look better as ruins.)

What is true of photographs is true of the world seen photographically. Photography extends the eighteenth-century literati's discovery of the beauty of ruins into a genuinely popular taste. And it extends that beauty beyond the romantics' ruins, such as those glamorous forms of decrepitude photographed by Laughlin, to the modernists' ruins—reality itself. The photographer is willy-nilly engaged in the enterprise of antiquing reality, and photographs are themselves instant antiques. The photograph offers a modern counterpart of that characteristically romantic architectural genre, the artificial ruin: the ruin which is created in order to deepen the historical character of a landscape, to make nature suggestive—suggestive of the past.

The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates

that reality is fundamentally unclassifiable. Reality is summed up in an array of casual fragments—an endlessly alluring, poignantly reductive way of dealing with the world. Illustrating that partly jubilant, partly condescending relation to reality that is the rallying point of Surrealism, the photographer's insistence that everything is real also implies that the real is not enough. By proclaiming a fundamental discontent with reality, Surrealism bespeaks a posture of alienation which has now become a general attitude in those parts of the world which are politically powerful, industrialized, and camera-wielding. Why else would reality ever be thought of as insufficient, flat, overordered, shallowly rational? In the past, a discontent with reality expressed itself as a longing for *another* world. In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce *this* one. As if only by looking at reality in the form of an object—through the fix of the photograph—is it really real, that is, surreal.

Photography inevitably entails a certain patronizing of reality. From being "out there," the world comes to be "inside" photographs. Our heads are becoming like those magic boxes that Joseph Cornell filled with incongruous small objects whose provenance was a France he never once visited. Or like a hoard of old movie stills, of which Cornell amassed a vast collection in the same Surrealist spirit: as nostalgia-provoking relics of the original movie experience, as means of a token possession of the beauty of actors. But the relation of a still photograph to a film is intrinsically misleading. To quote from a movie is not the same as quoting from a book. Whereas the reading time of a book is up to the reader, the viewing time of a film is set by the filmmaker and the images are perceived only as fast or as slowly as the editing permits. Thus, a still, which allows one to linger over a single moment as long as one likes, contradicts the very form of film, as a set of photographs that freezes moments in a life or a society contradicts their form, which is a process, a flow in time. The photographed world stands in the same, essentially inaccurate relation to the real world as stills do to movies. Life is not about

significant details, illuminated a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are.

The lure of photographs, their hold on us, is that they offer at one and the same time a connoisseur's relation *to* the world and a promiscuous acceptance *of* the world. For this connoisseur's relation to the world is, through the evolution of the modernist revolt against traditional aesthetic norms, deeply implicated in the promotion of kitsch standards of taste. Though some photographs, considered as individual objects, have the bite and sweet gravity of important works of art, the proliferation of photographs is ultimately an affirmation of kitsch. Photography's ultra-mobile gaze flatters the viewer, creating a false sense of ubiquity, a deceptive mastery of experience. Surrealists, who aspire to be cultural radicals, even revolutionaries, have often been under the well-intentioned illusion that they could be, indeed should be, Marxists. But Surrealist aestheticism is too suffused with irony to be compatible with the twentieth century's most seductive form of moralism. Marx reproached philosophy for only trying to understand the world rather than trying to change it. Photographers, operating within the terms of the Surrealist sensibility, suggest the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it.