NBER WORKING PAPER SERIES

THE GREATEST PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

David Galenson

Working Paper 15278
http://www.nber.org/papers/w15278

NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH
1050 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
August 2009

The Greatest Photographers of the Twentieth Century
David Galenson
NBER Working Paper No. 15278
August 2009
JEL No. Z1,Z11

ABSTRACT

A survey of textbooks reveals that scholars consider Alfred Stieglitz to have been the greatest photographer of the twentieth century, followed in order by Walker Evans, Cindy Sherman, Man Ray, and Eugène Atget. Stieglitz, Evans, and Atget were experimental artists, who were committed to realism, whereas Man Ray and Sherman were conceptual innovators, who constructed images to express ideas. During much of the twentieth century, photography was dominated by the experimental approach and aesthetic of Stieglitz and his followers, but late in the century this changed; as photography grew increasingly central to advanced art in general, it came to be dominated by conceptual innovators. Sherman's celebrated creation of artificial scenes is characteristic of the almost exclusively conceptual uses that today's advanced artists make of its techniques and images, as technical and aesthetic considerations are generally subordinated to conceptual concerns.

David Galenson
Department of Economics
University of Chicago
1126 East 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
and NBER
galenson@uchicago.edu

Introduction

In 1960, the critic Siegfried Kracauer began his *Theory of Film* with a historical analysis of photography. He observed that:

> Throughout the history of photography there is on the one side a tendency toward realism culminating in records of nature, and on the other a formative tendency aiming at artistic creations. Often enough, formative aspirations clash with the desire to render reality, overwhelming it in the process. Photography, then, is the arena of two tendencies which may well conflict with each other. [1]

Kracauer explained that realists "enhance the camera's recording and revealing abilities and, accordingly, consider it their task as photographers to make the 'best statement of facts.'" These photographers favor motifs drawn from "unstaged reality," of which their works become records. In contrast, formative photographers "work the given raw material into creations of an expressive rather than reproductive order," and to this end "they use, and often combine, various artifices and techniques – among them negatives, photograms, multiple exposure, solarization, reticulation, etc. – in order to mount pictures which are palpably designed to externalize…'our subjective experiences, our personal visions, and the dynamics of our imagination.'" [2]

The division Kracauer referred to is effectively the same one I have identified in a number of other arts. [3] The photographers he considers realists are experimental innovators, who have aesthetic goals, whereas formative photographers are conceptual artists, who use their work to express ideas and emotions. Earlier research has demonstrated that experimental and conceptual innovators tend to make their greatest contributions at very different stages of their life cycles. The present study will extend the measurement of creative life cycles to the most important photographers of the twentieth century.

Ranking Photographers

Identifying the greatest photographers of the past century can be done with the same method as for painters, using textbooks that survey the history of photography. The first step was to select all the photographers who worked in the past century and whose work was illustrated a total of four or more times in five leading textbooks.[4] There were 20 photographers in this group. The second step was then to count the total illustrations of the photographs of each of these artists in all available textbooks, published in 2000 or later, that surveyed the history of photography throughout the past century.[5] Table 1 ranks the 16 artists whose photographs were most often reproduced in these books.

Table 1 demonstrates clearly that historians of photography consider Alfred Stieglitz to have been the greatest photographer of the twentieth century: the books surveyed contain nearly 40% more illustrations of his photographs than of any other photographer. Stieglitz is followed in the rankings by a group of very diverse photographers, who are only narrowly separated from each other in total illustrations. This paper will consider each of the five highest-ranked photographers in Table 1, in chronological order. For each, we will examine their goals, the nature of their achievement, and the timing of their greatest contribution.

Eugène Atget (1856-1927)

> I might say that I possess all of Old Paris.
>
> Eugène Atget, 1920[6]

In 1926, 70-year-old Eugène Atget sold one of his photographs to a group of younger artists, who intended to put it on the cover of their magazine, *La Révolution surréaliste*. After they had agreed on the price, Atget startled the younger men by telling them not to put his name in their publication. By way of explanation, he remarked that “These are simply documents that I

make."[7] For most of his life, Atget had had no contact with advanced art or artists. As his comment to the Surrealists implied, he did not consider himself an artist, and he was not part of Paris' art world. Most of the details of his life are consequently as obscure as those of most small tradesmen of his time: John Szarkowski remarked that "It is difficult to name an important artist of the modern period whose life and intention have been so perfectly withheld from us as those of Eugène Atget."[8]

After a failed career as an actor, Atget began to make photographs by the age of 32, and around 1890 he set up a studio in Paris. His initial intention was to sell landscape photographs to painters, who could use them to save the trouble of seeking subjects in the countryside. Yet by 1900 he had begun to specialize in views of Paris' historic districts – his calling card described him as "Creator and Purveyor of a 'Collection of Photographic Views of Old Paris'" – and his principal clients were historical libraries and museums, which bought large numbers of his prints of Paris' houses, churches, shops, and street life.

Few statements by Atget about his work survive, but these few are consistent with the belief that his primary concern was for his subject matter. In a letter of 1912 he wrote to a curator of the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris that his photographs were "made more for the love of Old Paris than for profit," and in 1920 he wrote to the Minster of Fine Arts that "Single-handedly and of my personal initiative I have made…a collection of artistic documents."[9] Atget spent much of his life recording the old buildings and streets of Paris that were being replaced by modern construction. Although his photographs of Paris numbered in the thousands, he was not comprehensive in his approach: so for example he never photographed such recent landmarks as the Arc de Triomphe (built in 1836), the Opera Garnier (1873), or the Eiffel Tower (1889).[10] He was not interested in the new elegance of Haussmann's Paris, but in

the dark and sooty corners of the old city. [11] His work was physically demanding, as his old bellows camera, with its glass plates, and a wooden tripod, weighed more than forty pounds (Man Ray offered to lend him a little Rolleiflex, but Atget refused, fearing – despite Man Ray's explanation – that the new camera would go "too fast"). Atget travelled Paris by bus and metro, carefully writing in a notebook the name of the subway station nearest each of his clients. [12]

Although Atget's objectivity and lack of affectation led some to characterize his work as "styleless," others have argued that the clarity of his work actually concealed subtle artistic devices. So for example Geoff Dyer argued that Atget reinforced the message of his images of ancient subjects by effectively making the passage of time itself a subject of his photographs: "Atget's steps rise out of or take us down into the past. Alleys become conduits for the narrow passage of time. Doorways afford glimpses of almost forgotten memories." Dyer contended that it was not only Atget's choices of motifs, but his composition, that made time a visual factor: "A key element in Atget's temporal geometry was the receding vista: a street or alley stretching or curving its way into the past."[13] Atget preferred to work early in the morning, and his photographs typically include few pedestrians or vehicles. The old buildings and streets look deserted, giving many of the images a feeling of silence and timelessness. Atget frequently returned to earlier motifs, perhaps to replace plates he had sold. But John Szarkowski noted that when he did this he never appeared to have tried to duplicate his earlier picture, as each time a new viewpoint created a new composition. [14]

Until late in his life, Atget's work was not known by other photographers. Their discovery of him came by chance, as a result of the coincidence that in 1922 Man Ray rented a studio on Paris' rue Campagne–Première, next door to Atget's apartment. Man Ray began buying Atget's photographs and praising him to his friends, and soon his work was owned by

such artists as Picasso and Braque.[15] Most important, however, were the efforts of the American photographer Berenice Abbott, who was working as Man Ray's assistant in 1925 when she first saw Atget's photographs. She immediately responded to them, as she later wrote that "There was a sudden flash of recognition – the shock of realism unadorned. The real world, seen with wonderment and surprise, was mirrored in each print."[16] Abbott took the only known portraits of Atget in the two years of his life that remained, and for decades after his death she worked tirelessly to have his photgraphs preserved and exhibited in museums. [17]

The conceptual Man Ray dismissed Atget as a "primitive," but Abbott was the first of a number of important experimental photographers who were deeply influenced by both the style and subject matter of Atget's art. Thus John Szarkowski observed that whereas Abbott was a studio photographer before she saw Atget's work, after seeing his photographs she devoted most of her efforts of the next two decades to documenting the architecture, street life, and commerce of New York, as Atget had done for Paris. [18] In a review of a book of Atget's photographs in 1930, Walker Evans wrote that Atget's "general note is lyrical understanding of the street, trained observation of it, special feeling for patina, eye for revealing detail, over all of which is thrown a poetry," and more than four decades later, in a lecture given just two days before his own death, Evans admitted that "I don't like to look at too much of Atget's work because I am too close to that in style myself…It's a little residue of insecurity and fear of such magnificent strength and style." [19] Szarkowski called Evans "Atget's greatest student," and observed that "It seems now that Evans worked his way through Atget's whole iconographical catalogue, save only the parks. Evans did the bedrooms and kitchens, the boutiques, the signs, the wheeled vehicles, the street trades, and the ruins of high ambition." [20] In another review of the 1930 Atget book, Ansel Adams wrote that Atget's work "is a simple revelation of the simplest aspects of his

environment. There is no superimposed symbolic motive, no tortured application of design, no intellectual ax to grind. The Atget prints are direct and emotionally clean records of a rare and subtle perception, and represent perhaps the earliest expression of true photographic art." [21] And when Edward Weston saw the same book, he recorded in his journal that "What I admire most is the man's simple honesty. He has no bag of tricks." [22]

Atget's humility and persistence, in the service of his goal of recording an external reality, make him a classic example of an experimental artist. He produced no single famous photograph, but over the course of decades made thousands of images that together recreate the visual past of a great city.

Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946)

> Photography is my passion. The search for Truth my obsession.
> Alfred Stieglitz, 1921[23]

Alfred Stieglitz fell in love with photography while studying chemistry as a college student: "The camera was waiting for me by predestination, and I took to it as a musician takes to the piano or a painter to the canvas." [24] When he first became a photographer, his interests were largely technical, as he wrote about his experiments with new developing solutions and printing techniques, but in time he came to be concerned almost exclusively with artistic issues. He was by nature a crusader, and one of his lifelong campaigns was to have photography accepted as an independent art. Thus he contended that "If a photographer has the aesthetic perception…he can get the spirit of it through the camera as well as the painter can through paint." [25]

For Stieglitz, the key to artistic photography was visual. In 1917, he declared that "the most difficult problem in photography is to learn to see." [26] In an early article on the new small

hand cameras, he urged patience: "choose your subject…and carefully study the lines and lighting. After having determined upon these watch the passing figures and await the moment in which everything is in balance; that is, *satisfies your eye*. This often means hours of patient waiting." [27] It was a favorite theme of his that artistic vision was a product of experience: "Seeing needs practice – just like photography itself." [28] The critic Lewis Mumford contrasted Stieglitz's selectivity with Atget's inclusive recording: "Stieglitz does not, like his Parisian contemporary, Atget, range the city from morning to night, deliberately composing a documentary history of its life, after the fashion of Zola. He not merely observes: he waits, he eliminates; he selects." [29]

Stieglitz consistently maintained that "the ability to make a truly artistic photograph is not acquired offhand, but is the result of an artistic instinct coupled with years of labor." [30] He believed that greatness in any art required a combination of innate ability and extended training, and could not be reduced to a system: "No formula can be drawn up for…an understanding of what constitutes good composition. To a natural taste must be added a careful and understanding study of the best accepted work of all forms of art, old and new." [31] His description of his most celebrated photograph, *The Steerage* of 1907, which portrayed passengers on the lower deck of a ship bound for Europe, stressed the importance of formal composition:

> A round straw hat, the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white draw-bridge with its railings made of circular chains – white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape. I stood spellbound for a while, looking and looking...I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life. [32]

Visual recording preceded interpretation: "I am interested in putting down an image only of what I have seen, not what it means to me. It is only after I have put down an equivalent of what has

moved me, that I can even begin to think about its meaning."[33]

Stieglitz's belief that great art required knowledge led him to return to familar motifs – Georgia O'Keeffe recalled that "I never knew him to make a trip anywhere to photograph. His eye was in him, and he used it on anything that was nearby." [34] Stieglitz's natural tendency was to work in series, that would effectively produce a composite image. Thus Peter Bunnell noted that Stieglitz used "what might be called a progressive or process approach, in which he did not photograph individual, tightly packed views but rather stimulating fragments as he moved through a region seeking suitable subjects…His approach to photography was as a sort of outing or hunt, in which similar motifs were photographed repeatedly."[35] One of his most famous series was his portrayal of O'Keeffe. Between 1917 and 1937, Stieglitz made nearly 500 prints of O'Keeffe's face and body that constitute not only one of the most remarkable composite portraits ever made of an individual, but also one of the most significant serial works ever made by a modern artist. [36] O'Keeffe explained that Stieglitz's "idea of a portrait was not just one picture. His dream was to start with a child at birth and photograph that child in all its activities as it grew to be a person and on throughout its adult life." [37] O'Keeffe reflected that Stieglitz's portraits of her had increased her knowledge of herself: "I can see myself, and it has helped me to say what I want to say – in paint." [38]

Stieglitz's experimental concern with process equally led him to be more interested in works of art as evidence of personal development than as independent products. So for example he wrote in 1910 that "As far as exhibitions are concerned, to me they are only of any meaning whatever if they are a public demonstration of a *positive advance* in or a *summing up* of the really genuine work that has been done in any field." [39]

Stieglitz's style changed over time, but his commitment to a visual goal remained

constant. Thus in 1892, at 28, he wrote that "My sole aim in making pictures is to reproduce what I see," and more than 30 years later, at 60, he complained, "Could I but photograph what I *see*!" Whatever the motif, he considered all his work to represent his "vision of life." [40] Visual art was not equivalent to language: "if the artist could explain in words what he has made, he would not have had to create it." [41] Yet in true experimental fashion, he did not make a fetish of consistency: "Asked to explain either his own photographs or art created by others, Stieglitz referred, with delight, to the Chinese saying that a single picture equals a thousand words, although he would at times employ some two thousand words to tell why the observation so pleased him." [42]

Stieglitz was not modest in his claims for photography. He wanted to raise the ethical standards of the world by using the aesthetic influence of art in general, and of photography in particular. Thus in 1908 he told a journalist that "We are looking for the ultimate truth, for the human being who is so simple in every way that he can look at things objectively, with a purely analytical point of view. We are striving for freedom of experience and justice in the fullest sense of the word…[W]e believe that if only people are taught to appreciate the beautiful side of their daily existence, to be aware of all the beauty which constantly surrounds them, they must gradually approach this ideal…And we believe the camera is one of the most effective means of teaching people to distinguish between what is beautiful and what is not." [43] Stieglitz's messianic agenda attracted a considerable following of devoted admirers. In 1927, for example, the journalist Waldo Frank declared that "Such a photographer as Stieglitz has never been. If you say Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist who ever lived, someone may dispute you by mentioning Aeschylus or Sophocles or even the French Racine. But if you say Alfred Stieglitz is the greatest photographer who ever lived, you're on sure ground." [44]

Lofty goals notwithstanding, Stieglitz never wavered in his experimental belief in the importance of hard-won experience: "Everything worthwhile means continuous struggle and concentration of effort – even in photography." [45] In a statement written for a major exhibition of his photographs in 1921, he declared that "My teachers have been life – work – continuous experiment." [46]

Man Ray (1890-1976)

> I want to be contradictory and irrational.
>
> Man Ray, 1966 [47]

Man Ray's first love was painting, but as a young artist in New York he began to photograph his canvases to document them. He quickly became expert at the techniques of photography, and this ultimately led to his most celebrated contributions as an artist, as he became not only a great portrait photographer, but also the most important technical photographic innovator of his time. His innovations stretched the boundaries of photography by violating traditional practices, with the classic rationale of the conceptual artist:

> Whenever I deviated from orthodox practice it was simply because the subject demanded a new approach; I applied or invented techniques for emphasis of the points that seemed important. Only superficial critics could accuse me of trickiness…Many so-called tricks of today become the truths of tomorrow. [48]

One of the key influences on Man Ray was the great conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp. The two met in New York in 1915, and quickly became close friends. Their friendship lasted more than 50 years, until Duchamp's death in 1968, and involved formal collaborations as well as a continuing informal exchange of ideas. So for example in 1920 Man Ray made a celebrated photograph of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which was signed by both artists and titled *Elevage de poussière* (*Dust Breeding*). [49]

When Man Ray first went to Paris in 1921, Duchamp met him at the Gare Saint–Lazare, and immediately introduced him to the Dadas, who welcomed him to their group. [50] Within a few months Man Ray made an innovation that was hailed by the Dadas and the Surrealists as a breakthrough. In New York, Man Ray had already made "aerographs" – paintings without a brush, using an airbrush and stencils – and he had found it "thrilling to paint a picture, hardly touching the surface – a purely cerebral act, as it were." [51] Now a chance discovery in the darkroom led him to make photographs without a camera, by direct exposure of objects on photosensitive paper. This was technically not a new process, for photograms had earlier been made in this way, but Man Ray obtained novel visual effects by moving the light source and shifting the objects, to add an illusion of depth and achieve greater variability of tone, and in honor of this he named the products "Rayographs." [52] Delighted with the ability of the Rayograph to distort and manipulate forms, the Dada poet Tristan Tzara applauded the new technique, declaring that Man Ray had "invented the force of a tender and fresh flash which exceeded in importance all the constellations destined for our visual pleasures." [53] The Surrealists greeted Rayographs as the visual equivalent of automatic writing, for their ability to eliminate conscious control of images, and the poet André Breton declared that Man Ray had succeeded in making photography a Surrealist tool: "far from entrusting himself to photography's avowed aims and making use, after the event, of the common ground of representation that it proposed, Man Ray has applied himself vigorously to the task of stripping it of its positive nature, of forcing it to abandon its arrogant air and pretentious claims." [54] In less elliptical language, John Szarkowski explained that with Rayographs "The final image was never precisely predictable: unexpected gradations in tone created imaginary vistas that were surprising and delightful. For Man Ray, to whom art was a sublime kind of play, the technique was perfect." [55]

After inventing the Rayograph, Man Ray wrote audaciously to a patron that "I have finally freed myself from the sticky medium of paint, and am working directly with light itself. I have found a way of recording it. The subjects were never so near to life itself as in my new work."[56] Portrait photography provided him with both financial support and celebrity, as Man Ray became the chief visual chronicler of Paris' remarkable artistic and literary society of the 1920s. In fact, however, he never fully abandoned painting. In his memoir, Man Ray complained that he was always annoyed when he was asked if he had given up either painting or photography: "There was no conflict between the two – why couldn't people accept the idea that one might engage in two activities in his lifetime, alternately or simultaneously?" [57] The basis for the choice was conceptual: "To express what I feel, I use the medium that is best suited to express that idea." [58] Critics were equally confused by his frequent changes of style, but Man Ray echoed his friend Duchamp, explaining that "I have no style. I am afraid of being bored." [59]

Man Ray's art has been an important influence on a number of conceptual artists who have emerged since the 1960s. So for example it was a visit to a 1966 retrospective of Man Ray's work that prompted Bruce Nauman to begin to make photographs, and one result was Nauman's 1967 photograph, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, a tribute to Marcel Duchamp that has become one of Nauman's most celebrated works. [60] Nauman has also cited that exhibition as the inspiration for his distinctive practice of consciously rejecting the development of a consistent style: "Man Ray seemed to avoid the idea that every piece had to take on a historical meaning. What I liked was that there appeared to be no consistency to his thinking, no one style." [61]

The poet Jean Cocteau called Man Ray "the poet of the darkroom." [62] Duchamp observed of his old friend that "it was his achievement to treat the camera as he treated the paint brush, a mere instrument at the service of the mind." [63] Man Ray changed photography by bringing to it a

highly conceptual sensibility, and a desire to expand its possibilities. Late in his life, he summarized his conceptual disregard for artistic conventions by musing that "Perhaps the final goal desired by the artist is a confusion or merging of all the arts." [64]

Walker Evans (1903-1975)

It is reality that photography reaches toward.
Walker Evans, 1969 [65]

As a young photographer, Walker Evans rebelled against the attitudes and aesthetic of the dominant figure in American photography, Alfred Stieglitz. As Evans later wrote of Stieglitz, "He was undoubtedly the most insistently 'artistic' practitioner of all time; with the adverse effect that it was he who forced 'art' into quotation marks and into unwonted earnestness. On the other hand, Stieglitz's overstated, self conscious aestheticism engendered a healthy reaction. We got a school of anti-art photography out of his protestations." The school in question was of course that of Evans himself, as he explained that "Stieglitz's veritably screaming aestheticism, his personal artiness, veered many young artists to the straight documentary style." [66] Stieglitz and his followers, who included Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, and Paul Strand, privileged the pursuit of beauty, avoiding subjects involving industry and commerce in favor of nature and idealized settings. Evans replaced this aesthetic with a direct approach that embraced the realities of the modern world, choosing deliberately ordinary subjects – automobiles, gas stations, billboards, pedestrians – in order to record the real world of daily life. [67] The critic Andy Grundberg described Evans as a "connoisseur of the commonplace, both in his choice of what to photograph and in how he photographed things," noting that "He avoided anything with romantic associations, anything that smacked of sentimentality, and anything tinged with syrupy artiness."[68] John Szarkowski observed that "Evans's work seemed at first almost the antithesis of

art: It was puritanically economical, precisely measured, frontal, unemotional, dryly textured, insistently factual, qualities that seemed more appropriate to a bookkeeper's ledger than to art."[69]

Evans' achievement lay in his ability to dignify the mundane, and make it appear timeless. Robert Hirsch observed that Evans' "deceptively transparent approach – that this is exactly what the viewer would have been drawn to had he been there himself – uncovers the essence of a place and allows the unexpected beauty of the everyday to reveal itself…Evans' self-effacing style made the relevance of the ordinary understandable. Evans could ordain a moment from the present as if it was the past." [70]

A key event in Evans' development came in 1929, when he first saw photographs by Atget that Berenice Abbott had brought back from Paris. Evans later recalled that when he first discovered Atget's work he was "quite electrified and alarmed;" Evans' biographer explained that "There was a shock of recognition. In Atget, it seemed, all of [Evans'] latent instincts were combined: a straight cataloguing method imbued with an inscrutable melancholy, a long look at neglected objects, and an unerring eye for the signs of popular culture transition." [71] In time, Evans would label his own style "lyric documentary," to refer to the combination of his subjective perceptions with the objective recording of fact, and he paid tribute to Atget as the "supreme lyric documentary photographer." [72]

Evans had no interest in photographing nature: "I am fascinated by man's work and the civilization that he's built. In fact, I think that's *the* interesting thing in the world, what man makes." [73] His work was based on instinct: "I used to analyze it, to try to figure out just exactly what I was doing all the time and that inhibited me, terribly, until I found out that I didn't need to go through all that at all. My work is like making love, if you'll forgive me. It has to spring from the moment, from what I feel at the moment." [74] The best photography was visual and instinctive:

"The meaning of quality in photography's best pictures lies written in the language of vision. That language is learned by chance, not by system." [75] Experience was the best teacher: "You learn as you go and do. It is a little slow, but I think that's the way to work." [76]

In an analysis of Evans' work, Peter Galassi wrote of the cumulative importance of comparison, "a sense that the full power of the art resides not in individual pictures, no matter how fine, but in an open-ended accumulation that progressively defines both a subject and the way of looking at it. This definition of photography's potential challenges the photographer to develop a consistent outlook through a sum of discrete observations, constantly susceptible to revision; and it challenges the viewer to discover that outlook by assessing the ways in which the photographs confirm, question, or otherwise inflect each other." [77] This principle, which Galassi considered "fundamental to [Evans'] art as a whole," is quintessentially experimental, as is Evans' emphasis on the primacy of vision and instinct.

Yet the profile of Evans' career was not typical of an experimental artist. The textbooks reveal that his best work was not made over an extended period, nor was it made late in his life: 18 of the 23 total illustrations of his work, or nearly 80%, were of photographs he made in the two-year span of 1935-36, when he was in his early 30s. These were the years when Evans worked for the New Deal's Resettlement Administration, making photographs intended to illustrate the hardships suffered by tenant farmers during the Depression. In the summer of 1936 Evans travelled to the Deep South with the writer James Agee, with the goal of finding a single sharecropper family to provide the personal story and images that could stand for the difficulties of all Southern tenant farmers. They found this in Hale County, Alabama, as Floyd and Allie Mae Burroughs and their extended family became the central figures in what eventually became the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, coauthored by Agee and Evans. When this was

published in 1941, Lionel Trilling declared that it was "the most realistic and the most important moral effort of our American generation." [78]

The collaboration with Agee may have added a key dimension to Evans' art. Agee was considerably more aggressive and extroverted than the reserved Evans. James Mellow wrote that "It is part of the legend that grew up around this book that Evans like Agee had stayed with the [Burroughs] family. But the likelihood is probably that the fastidious Evans may have had a few meals with the Burroughses but stayed at more restful vermin-free quarters in a nearby hotel." [79] Yet Agee and Evans were close friends, and clearly worked closely together in Alabama, as Mellow observed that "what is apparent is that the dialogue between the photographs and Agee's text was far more collaborative and persistent than has been recognized, even down to the scattering of flies on the white sheeting on the bedsteads in the rear bedroom which Floyd and Allie Mae shared." [80]

Agee immersed himself in his work – Evans later recalled that he "worked in what looked like a rush and a rage. In Alabama he was possessed with the business, jamming it all into the days and nights…He was driven to see all he could of the families' day." [81] Agee's intensity and charm won over the farmers, as Evans reflected that "it was really largely because they liked Agee who had a great gift of making people not only like him but love him. They only had to listen to him a little bit and they took him in. I just sort of followed his lead that way." [82] Evans' biographer noted that "Agee began his brief but extraordinary episode as a member of the Burroughs family, and it was not long before he persuaded Evans to join him there." [83] The force of Agee's personality thus appears not only to have broken down the barriers between him and his subject, but to have done the same for the more reserved Evans. As Evans himself later explained, Agee was less restrained in his approach to his art: "I had a much more objective

approach to artistic raw material. [Agee] was very subjective. He used to shock me. I have inhibitions about exposing the personal ego and feelings, and he seems to think that is *the* material and that that is one of the functions of an artist – exposing obscure and hidden parts of the mind."[84] Agee's influence is reflected in Evans' Alabama photographs, as his images of the family and their home are more intimate than his typical portraits. Agee's charismatic presence thus appears to have prompted Evans to overcome the usual distance – psychological as well as physical – that he placed between himself and his subjects, and in so doing to have added a greater empathy and power to his characteristically honest photographs. This extraordinary circumstance may explain why Evans produced his greatest work at the surprisingly early age of 33. In one respect, however, Evans' work of 1936 retained the mark of his experimental approach, for no single image from Alabama emerged as emblematic: the 14 images reproduced by the textbooks from that peak year represent 13 different photographs.

Cindy Sherman (1954-)

> [T]he one thing I've always known is that the camera lies.
> Cindy Sherman, 1987[85]

As a child, Cindy Sherman loved to play dress-up, using old clothes she had inherited from her grandmother.[86] She also loved to draw, and she practiced by studying her own face.[87] Art was her favorite subject in school, and when she went to college at Buffalo she intended to become a painter. The BFA curriculum required a photography course, and the first time Sherman took it she failed, because she "just couldn't grasp the technical aspects of it: the exposure, and the aperture, and all that."[88] When she repeated the course, however, she had a different teacher, who was aware of recent trends in Conceptual art: Sherman recalled that this teacher "felt that to have an idea was what mattered, and right away that made so much more

sense to me." [89] Sherman had become frustrated with painting – "I couldn't do it anymore, it was ridiculous, there was nothing more to say…and then I realized that I could just use a camera and put my time into an idea instead." [90]

In 1977, the year after she graduated from college, Sherman began to make the series of 69 photographs, collectively called the *Untitled Film Stills*, that have been recognized as "one of the landmarks of late-twentieth-century art." [91] Each photograph portrayed Sherman, alone, wearing a different costume and makeup, in settings that appeared to be taken from B-movies of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Sherman specifically "wanted them to seem cheap and tacky, something you'd find in a novelty store and buy for a quarter. I didn't want them to look like art."[92] She intended them as a comment on "the fakeness of role-playing," and she was bemused by their success in the art world: "I'm doing one of the most stupid things in the world…dressing up like a child and posing in front of a camera…And people seem to fall for it." [93]

Sherman does not consider herself a photographer, but instead describes herself as an artist whose medium is photography. [94] She has little concern with the distinctive properties of photography: "I think of myself as using the camera in the same way as someone could be using a paint brush although it takes a lot less time." [95] Lisa Phillips explained that Sherman and several of her contemporaries "have diverted the official course of the history of photography by rejecting its most revered conventions: the sacredness of the photographic paper, of the camera, the perfect exposure, and the immaculate print." [96] Sherman is not concerned with whether she takes her own photographs or has someone else snap them, and she has no interest in the technology of photography. [97]

Sherman's contribution is conceptual. Calvin Tomkins explained that "She has reclaimed the oldest trick in the book, storytelling, and given it new life in visual art. An amazing number

of younger artists have followed her lead; the galleries are full of what has come to be called setup photography, in which complex and often highly enigmatic scenarios are plotted, constructed, and photographed, and much of the newer painting and sculpture on view these days has a strong narrative content." [98] As Tomkins suggests, Sherman has transcended photography. In 1989 Peter Schjeldahl predicted that "she may very well emerge in eventual retrospect as the single most important American artist of the '80s," and a recent survey of textbooks published since 2000 revealed that art scholars in fact consider her to have been the most important artist of any nationality to have worked during the last quarter of the twentieth century. [99]

Old Masters and Young Geniuses

Table 2 uses the evidence of the textbook illustrations to assess when in their careers the five photographers considered above did their best work. The table shows the photographers' ages not only in the year from which they had the most illustrations, but also from the years of their earliest and latest illustrated photographs.

The experimental Atget and Stieglitz both had their single best year after the age of 40, and both had photographs reproduced that they made after 65. As noted above, Evans' single best year occurred relatively early for a great experimental artist, at age 33, but he did have work illustrated that he made at 71, just a year before his death.

The conceptual Man Ray's best year was at age 34. His latest illustrated work was from age 46, so he had no photographs reproduced from the last 40 years of his life. Sherman's best year was by far the youngest among this group, at age 24: this very early peak puts her in the company of a small group of very precocious modern artists, including Jasper Johns, whose best year was at 25, and Frank Stella, whose peak was at 23. And remarkably, like Johns and Stella, Sherman's peak was also the earliest age from which any of her work was reproduced, so that

her first significant work was also her most important. [100]

The evidence for four of the five photographers considered here is thus consistent with the generalization that conceptual innovators tend to produce their most important work earlier in their lives then their experimental counterparts. And leaving aside Sherman, whose career is not yet complete, the evidence for the other four photographers is consistent with the tendency for experimental innovators to produce significant work over longer periods, and until later in their lives, than their conceptual peers.

Conclusion

> The substantial distinction, then, is between treating the external world as a given, to be altered only through photographic means (point of view, framing, printing, etc.) en route to the final image, or rather as raw material, to be itself manipulated as much as desired prior to the exposure of the negative.
>
> A.D. Coleman [101]

This examination of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century clearly supports Siegfried Kracauer's claim that photography has been the province of two very different, and conflicting, tendencies. Eugène Atget, Alfred Stieglitz, and Walker Evans were experimental artists who were dedicated to realism, and to making viewers of their work perceive the world around them. In sharp contrast, Man Ray and Cindy Sherman are conceptual artists who have consistently created artificial settings for their own self-expression.

In 1977, Susan Sontag effectively described the decline of experimental dominance of photography and its replacement by a conceptual aesthetic:

> For a brief time – say, from Stieglitz through the reign of Weston – it appeared that a solid point of view had been erected with which to evaluate photographs: impeccable lighting, skill of composition, clarity of subject, precision of focus, perfection of print quality. But this position, generally thought of as Westonian – essentially technical criteria for what makes a photograph good – is now bankrupt…What position has replaced Weston's?

> A much more inclusive one…The new position aims to liberate photography, as art, from the oppressive standards of technical perfection; to liberate photography from beauty, too. It opens up the possibility of a global taste, in which no subject (or absence of subject), no technique (or absence of technique) disqualifies a subject.[102]

The same year Sontag's book was published, Cindy Sherman began making the *Untitled Film Stills*, which would quickly make her the most influential photographer of her era. Sherman's importance in today's art world is symptomatic of several key features of the role of photography in contemporary art. It is clear that photography is enormously important for today's advanced art. Whether they actually make photographs, like Sherman, Richard Prince, and Jeff Wall, or make paintings based on photographs, like Gerhard Richter, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst, a large number of today's most successful artists base their work on photographic images. But it is also clear that the use these artists make of photography is almost exclusively conceptual. Sherman and other leading contemporary artists do not use photographs to portray external reality, but instead to create artificial images, often carefully constructed by the artist. There are no fixed standards for what constitutes good photography, for technical and aesthetic considerations are generally strictly subordinated to conceptual concerns. Man Ray would no doubt be pleased by this state of affairs, for he believed that photography should be a means of expressing ideas. Alfred Stieglitz, however, would no doubt be much less pleased with the role of photography in today's art world. Stieglitz dreamed of establishing photography as an independent art, whose core values would be beauty and truth. It is difficult to point to prominent figures in today's advanced art world who share this dream.

Footnotes

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 11-12.

2. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 8, 10, 19-20.

3. David Galenson, *Old Masters and Young Geniuses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

4. See the appendix for a listing.

5. There were 16 such books. See the appendix for a listing.

6. Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p.219.

7. John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981-85), Vol. 2, pp. 9-31.

8. Szarkowski and Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. 1, p. 7.

9. Szarkowski and Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. 3, p. 9.

10. Szarkowski and Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. 1, p.13.

11. Laure Beaumont-Maillet, *Atget Paris* (Corte Madera, California: Gingko Press, 1992), p.28.

12. Beaumont-Maillet, *Atget Paris*, pp.25-26

13. Peter Barberie, *Looking at Atget* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 8; Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (New York: Vintage, 2007), p.225.

14. John Szarkowski, *Atget* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), p.76.

15. Neil Baldwin, *Man Ray* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1998), pp. 103,133; Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G.P. Putman's Son, 1977), p.92; Susan Laxton, *Paris as Gameboard* (New York: Columbia University, 2002).

16. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. 116.

17. Hank O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott, American Photographer* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), pp. 11-32.

18. Szarkowski and Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. 4, pp. 16-17.

19. Jeff Rosenheim and Douglas Eklund, *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), p. 81; Szarkowski and Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. 4, pp. 18.

20. Szarkowski, *Atget*, p. 17.

21. Szarkowski and Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, Vol. 1, p. 24.

22. Nancy Newhall, ed., *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (New York: Aperture, 1981), Vol. 2, p. 202.

23. Alfred Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2000), p. 226.

24. Richard Whelan, *Alfred Stieglitz* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 79.

25. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 229.

26. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. x.

27. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 68. Italics mine.

28. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 210.

29. Lewis Mumford, *Mumford on Modern Art in the 1930s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 53.

30. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 103.

31. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 184.

32. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 194-95.

33. Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. xvi.

34. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), not paginated.

35. Peter Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph* (New York: Aperture, 2006), p.20.

36. John Coplans, *Provocations* (London: London Projects, 1996), pp.77-92.

37. Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, np.

38. Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p.161.

39. Richard Whelan, *Alfred Stieglitz* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 240.

40. Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983), pp.26-27.

41. Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Random House, 1973), p.10.

42. Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz*, p.12.

43. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 210.

44. Joel Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), p.64.

45. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, pp. ix, 210.

46. Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography*, p. 226.

47. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. 335.

48. Man Ray, *Self Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), p. 174.

49. Roland Penrose, *Man Ray* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), p. 173.

50. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, pp. 82-83.

51. Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, p. 67.

52. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. 96.

53. Janus, ed., *Man Ray: The Photographic Image* (Woodburg, NY: Barron's, 1980), p. 214.

54. André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), p. 32.

55. John Szarkowski, *Looking At Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 82.

56. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. 99.

57. Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, p. 181.

58. Merry Foresta, et. al., *Perpetual Motif* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 75.

59. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. 352; Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York:

Da Capo, 1987), p. 37.

60. Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), p. 12; David Galenson, *Artistic Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 129.

61. Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 14; Peter Schjeldahl, *Let's See* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008), p. 111.

62. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. 139.

63. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), p. 152.

64. Baldwin, *Man Ray*, p. xiii.

65. Louis Kronenberger, ed., *Quality* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 171.

66. Kronenberger, *Quality*, pp. 206, 170.

67. Peter Galassi, *Walker Evans and Company* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), pp. 11-12.

68. Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real* (New York: Aperture, 1999), p. 6.

69. Szarkowski, *Looking At Photographs*, p. 116.

70. Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, second ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2009), p. 236-37.

71. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph*, p. 144; Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 48.

72. John Hill, *Walker Evans* (Gottingen: Steidl, 2006), pp. 13, 23.

73. James Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 292.

74. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 512.

75. Kronenberger, *Quality*, p. 171.

76. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph*, p.139.

77. Galassi, *Walker Evans and Company*, pp. 19.

78. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 447.

79. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 322.

80. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 324.

81. David Madden and Jeffery Folks, eds., *Remembering James Agee*, second ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p.99.

82. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, p. 313.

83. Rathbone, *Walker Evans*, p. 129.

84. Bunnell, *Inside the Photograph*, p.143.

85. Laurie Simmons, C*indy Sherman* (Tokyo: Parco, 1987), p. 42.

86. Calvin Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), p. 26.

87. Joanne Kesten, ed., *The Portraits Speak* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1997), p. 336.

88. Kesten, *The Portraits Speak*, p. 340.

89. Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 27.

90. Michael Kimmelman, *Portraits* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 146.

91. Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 31.

92. Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 30.

93. Wendy Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 312; Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 791.

94. David Brittain, ed., *Creative Camera* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.192.

95. Kimmelman, *Portraits*, p. 148.

96. Peter Schjeldahl and Lisa Phillips, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1987), p. 13.

97. Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 31; Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists*, p. 317.

98. Tomkins, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 25.

99. Peter Schjeldahl, *The "7 Days" Art Columns, 1988-1990* (Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1990), p. 114; David Galenson, *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press and NBER, 2009), Chap. 16.

100. Galenson, *Artistic Capital*, p. 55.

101. A.D. Coleman, *Light Readings*, second ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp.251-52.

102. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1990), p. 136.

Appendix: The textbooks surveyed for this study are listed below. The five books used to select the photographers for the study are indicated by asterisks.

1. Adams, Laurie, *Art Across Time*, third ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006).

2. Arnason, H.H., *History of Modern Art*, fifth ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2003).

3. Bell, Julian, *Mirror of the World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007).

4. Bouqueret, Christian, *Histoire de la Photographie en Images* (Paris: Marval, 2001).

5. *Davies, Penelope, *Janson's History of Art*, seventh ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007).

6. Edwards, Steve, *Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

7. *Foster, Hal; Rosalind Krauss; Yve-Alain Bois; and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

8. Govignon, Brigitte, ed., *The Abrams Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004).

9. *Hirsch, Robert, *Seizing the Light*, second ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2009).

10. Honour, Hugh; and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts*, sixth ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

11. *Hunter, Sam; John Jacobus; and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art*, third ed. (New York: Vendome Press, 2004).

12. *Kemp, Martin, *The Oxford History of Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

13. Lenman, Robin, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

14. Marien, Mary, *Photography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

15. Shore, Stephen, *The Nature of Photographs*, second ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 2007).

16. Walther, Ingo, ed., *Art of the 20th Century*, 2 vols. (Cologne: Taschen, 2005).

Table 1: Greatest Photographers of the Twentieth Century

Photographer	Date of birth	Date of death	Country of birth	N
1. Alfred Stieglitz	1864	1946	US	32
2. Walker Evans	1903	1975	US	23
3. Cindy Sherman	1954	--	US	22
4. Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitsky)	1890	1976	US	21
5. Eugène Atget	1857	1927	France	18
6. Dorothea Lange	1895	1965	US	16
7t. August Sander	1876	1964	Germany	15
7t. Edward Steichen	1879	1973	Luxemburg	15
7t. Edward Weston	1886	1958	US	15
10. John Heartfield (John Helmut Herzfelde)	1891	1968	Germany	14
11t. Alvin Langdon Coburn	1882	1966	US	12
11t. Paul Strand	1890	1976	US	12
13t. Bernd Becher and	1931	2007	Germany	11
Hilla Becher	1934	--	Germany	
13t. Lewis Hine	1874	1940	US	11
13t. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy	1895	1946	Hungary	11

Source: see text and appendix.

Table 2: Leading Photographers' Ages in Years of Earliest, Most, and Latest Illustrated Photographs

	Earliest	Most	Latest	Age of Death
Atget	41	44	68	70
Stieglitz	25	43	67	82
Man Ray	30	34	46	86
Evans	28	33	71	72
Sherman	24	24	38	--

Source: see text and appendix.