

Record of the International Symposium for the 20th Anniversary of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum:
Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?

Why Do We Need Dedicated Photography Museums?

Sandra Phillips

Emeritus Curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, U.S.

Why Do We Need Dedicated Photography Museums?

Sandra Phillips

This is a question that comes up frequently, and it is entirely appropriate to address it now as we celebrate the re-opening of this important museum — a museum that has been critical not only for Japanese photographers, but for the larger world of photography. We ask this question today because those of us who love photography and work with it have been very successful: we have made photography an important medium, a serious art form. There are other museums around the world that face this question too, so it is a timely moment to think about what these institutions do, whom they serve, and where they are headed. I firmly believe that photography museums are important and have a future.

Sometimes it is useful to look at the history of an issue, and so my talk today will describe how we got here — how photography became accepted as a kind of art — and what the ramifications of winning that long battle are. I would like to start with my personal experience, because I grew up as photography was becoming what it is now: a valued part of the art community and a welcome part of the art museum experience. I grew up in New York, and for whatever odd reason I liked going to museums. One of my favorite places was the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a very quiet place then, with very few visitors. One day, wandering around there, I came across a sign in a small hallway. It said something like: “The Edward Steichen Photography Center will open here soon.” This was in 1964. I thought, what a great idea! To put photographs up on the walls of a major art museum, to look at them like you would look at paintings? How exciting!

Only much later did I learn that there was a precedent for showing photographs in that museum. Like others of my generation I had grown up with *Life* magazine, and as a child I had seen Edward Steichen’s huge exhibition, *The Family of Man*. But the seriousness of that sign and the quietness of that space were something very different. Steichen’s *The Family of Man*, which was held at the museum in 1955 before touring the world, was fabulously popular — at least in the United States. It is now seen as an effort of American postwar advocacy, a kind of humanistic propaganda piece to encourage people from all over the world to get along and not make war —



because, after all, we are a family.

Prior to organizing the exhibition Steichen, who was then the head of MoMA's photography department, had had extensive experience in both journalism and advertising, and he felt that photography should be put to beneficial social use. On the other hand the interests of John Szarkowski, who was responsible for the sign I saw, were quite different. Szarkowski was appointed to succeed Steichen in 1962; his first real shows came the following year. His interests, and his way of exploring the medium, were similar to those of the museum's other curatorial departments, but the differences are also telling. I think it is useful to mention both here.

The Museum of Modern Art, which was founded in 1929, was in 1962 a very different institution from what it is today. It had begun as a place to contemplate modernism in different media: architecture, film, photography, and most important (because this is what the museum's wealthy trustees collected), painting and sculpture. MoMA's founding director, Alfred Barr, was a formalist: for him, as for most of the curatorial staff, art for the most part existed on an idealized, purified plane that was not really relevant to the everyday world. Barr was a brilliant scholar; he had studied modernism in Europe as it was developing and he and his colleagues and friends saw themselves as scholars, collectors, and advocates of modernism in New York. After the war, when America's economy boomed, they were able to obtain one of the finest collections — perhaps even the very finest collection — of European modern art in the world. They had a harder time accepting the efforts of American artists into their program.

By 1962 there had been some changes. In 1959 the museum had organized a major show on American abstract painting that toured European countries. The freedom and obvious self-expression found in classic Abstract Expressionism was used to convince populations outside the United States of the country's democratic nature, though this propagandizing effort was not obvious to most Americans. At the same time, the museum began to examine — somewhat seriously — the art of the next generation. The same year, 1959, they put on a show of the next generation of American artists, which included Frank Stella, Claes Oldenberg, and Robert Rauschenberg. In 1963 they organized a similar (but smaller) show, *Americans 1963*, while Szarkowski's department put on two exhibitions: *The Photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue* and *The Photographer and the American Landscape*. The following year the museum expanded, and the most important shows outside the photography department were dedicated to German artist Max Beckmann and French painter Pierre Bonnard. Photographs from the collection were shown in the Edward Steichen Photography Center, and the department also presented *The Photographer's Eye* and *André Kertész*. What does all this mean, especially in light of our essential question?

In some ways Szarkowski's program amounted to a continuation of the museum's wider program, but it was also something of a radical change. I suppose both Kertész and Lartigue could be seen as extensions of a tradition of modernist exhibitions in the photography department, but Lartigue's pictures had been taken when he was a child, and no paintings curator — certainly at that time — would have been open to exhibiting something so unconventional in his department. Unlike his predecessor, Szarkowski organized one-person shows, treating photographers like discrete artistic personalities instead of seeing them as members of a group with similar interests, as in *The Family of Man*.

More provocatively, he organized shows around ideas and included kinds of photography that had nothing to do with the practice of art. The photographs in his show *Once Invisible*, which were drawn from scientific archives, were described in the press release as “wondrous and beautiful images that exist in the world but cannot be seen by the human eye without the aid of photography.”^{❖1} Later he even put on a show called *One-Eyed Dicks: Automatic Photographs of Bank Robberies*, consisting of photos taken not by a person but by the banks' automatic cameras. Describing the distinctiveness of his program in 1964, Szarkowski said: “The photography program of the Museum of Modern Art is as unpredictable as the outcome of the searches and experiments of a thousand serious photographers. The Museum will try to remain alertly responsive to these searches, and to seek out and publish that work which makes a relevant human statement with the intensity that identifies a work of art.”^{❖2}

Probably the most important of his imaginative early exhibitions was the aforementioned *The Photographer's Eye*, presented in 1964. In the press release he describes it as “consisting of 200 photographs delineating the various aspects of the ‘special visual language’ of photography,”^{❖3} which sounds like the language of formalism (and perhaps it was) — but with an important difference, made evident in the cover image he chose for the catalog. It is the interior of a modest bedroom that looks as though it were taken by Walker Evans. Only it is not: it is an anonymous picture, found in the archives of the Wisconsin Historical Society. In the catalog, Szarkowski demonstrates the “special visual language of photography” by presenting different sections devoted to a way of composing pictures that is specifically photographic: The Thing Itself (of which I will speak in a moment), The Detail, The Frame, Time, and The Vantage Point. Of these five sections only one was represented by the work of a photographer who considered himself an artist: Alvin Langdon Coburn, who pointed his camera down into Washington Square Park, illustrated the last section, The Vantage Point.

Why would Szarkowski do this? What was he trying to accomplish? The reason we are considering this question is that Szarkowski was so successful. I think his attention to the whole range of photography was an intrinsic part of

❖ 1 Press release for the exhibition *Once Invisible*, MoMa, June 20, 1967, no 62.

❖ 2 Press release for the opening of the Steichen Photography Center, MoMa, March 1965, no. 27.

❖ 3 Press release for the exhibition *The Photographer's Eye*, MoMa, May 27, 1964, no. 20.

this success. Elegant, brilliant, a gifted writer and blessed with a charismatic personality, he was able to articulate the issues raised in photography and compel those of us who looked at his shows to take the medium seriously. Where Steichen had been a populist, Szarkowski was more of a formalist, though that description really does not do justice to the complexity of the man. His colleagues in other departments were examining the art of painting or sculpture — painting made to look like paint, sculpture that expressed the physicality of its specific material. Similarly, Szarkowski looked at photography in all its varieties of expression and form. He was certainly a formalist, but with a difference. His range of interests in those early years especially implied a radical democratic idealism.

Szarkowski's most important years were those early first decades, from the beginning of his tenure to his concentrated work on the French photographer Eugène Atget. He was drawn almost without exception to work that seemed natural, unselfconscious, even artless. For instance, he was not a particular admirer of Man Ray, the American surrealist, even though the museum owns a very large collection of Man Ray photographs. During Szarkowski's tenure they were only occasionally shown. He was invested in documentary photography, or what Walker Evans called "documentary style." Szarkowski's favorites were Walker Evans, Garry Winogrand, and Eugène Atget — photographers who were all very interested in what we call the vernacular, and whose work elevated commonplace seeing. This allegiance to the vernacular in photography constituted a radical departure from the direction of the more elitist painting and sculpture programs at the museum. He was thrilled to find snapshots that anticipated the work of Winogrand or Lee Friedlander, or pictures by old-fashioned studio photographers that resembled the apparent modesty and simplicity of Evans. Looking through the book *The Photographer's Eye*, which is based on the exhibition, is a thrilling experience: it makes you want to go looking at pictures everywhere you can find them. But, of course, these pictures are highly selected too.

Szarkowski's interest in vernacular, or non-formal, photography informed the work he did in his important first decade at the museum. In 1967 he organized a show he called *New Documents*, which presented the work of Diane Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand. It has been said of the show that it represented a "shift in emphasis" in the way the medium was received, and that it "identified a new direction in photography: pictures that seemed to have a casual, snapshot-like look and subject matter so apparently ordinary that it was hard to categorize." In other words, Szarkowski was looking at the essential elements that made producing photographs distinctive from, and not similar to, the ways paintings were constructed. As he said in *The Photographer's Eye*, the photograph's "most fundamental use and its broadest acceptance has been as a substitute for the subject itself — a simpler, more permanent, more clearly visible version of the plain fact." Or, to quote his essay on Eugène Atget, "one might compare the art of photography to the

❖ 4 Philip Gefter, "John Szarkowski, Curator of Photography, Dies at 81," *New York Times*, July 9, 2007.

Gefter also stated that Szarkowski "almost single-handedly elevated photography's status in the last half century to that of a fine art."

❖ 5 John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), Exhibition catalog, 12. Refer to the chapter titled "The Thing Itself". The exhibition took place in 1964.

act of pointing.”^{❖6} As far as I am concerned, this is radical thinking. At a time when painters were making pictures of mere paint, Szarkowski was saying that the subject — what you choose to look at — also counts.

❖6 John Szarkowski, “Atget and the Art of Photography,” vol. 1, bk. 4, *The Work of Atget, Old France* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 11-12.

If you look at the photographs in *The Photographer’s Eye* you see a society that scarcely exists today, at least in the United States. According to Szarkowski — and this is what seems so radical now — anyone can take a good or even a great picture. The quality of the picture does not depend on the education of its maker, or the fine quality of the materials, or who the “artist” is or who he knows, or where the picture is seen. The quality or value or memorability of the picture, Szarkowski says, depends only on the picture itself, the value of the “act of pointing,” the quality of seeing. In Atget’s case, his looking is conditioned by his vision (though Szarkowski will not call it that). He says: “The mystery of Atget’s work lies in the sense of plastic ease, fluidity, and responsiveness with which his personal perceptions seem to achieve perfect identity with objective fact.” These words sound radical but they come out of a tradition, embodied by the museum in which Szarkowski worked, of believing that every form of artistic expression has its own qualities and language, and should be studied within its own context. And further, that every kind of artistic expression be judged within its own department.

Through Szarkowski’s firm support, Atget in particular has been elevated to the level of a great master. Certainly this new status is most deserved — he was an artist, even though he was not valued as such by his contemporaries. Because of Szarkowski’s attentions, and the four exhibitions and beautifully printed books on him that the museum produced, Atget’s photographs acquired real monetary value. Like photography now generally, the work of Atget and others whom Szarkowski championed — Arbus, Winogrand, William Eggleston — is as important as other mediums; it is offered for sale in galleries and displayed in museums. This happened just as the craft possibilities of the medium declined, as it was no longer as viable to establish a photography studio as it once had been. Szarkowski started a revolution, and we are its beneficiaries.

All good things come with their own ambiguities and caveats. I believe it is appropriate to ask what we have lost as well as what we have gained in this still rather new territory. In the 1970s, but more fully in the next decade, we saw galleries for photography emerge, we witnessed auctions devoted to selling photographs, photography departments blossomed in museums all over the United States, and universities began to teach photography in new, dedicated departments. In 1970 the Museum of Modern Art opened an exhibition called *Information*, organized by Kynaston McShine, that included artists associated with conceptual art such as Hans Haacke, Dennis Oppenheim, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, a husband and wife “team.”

Szarkowski had a hard time admiring the Bechers’ work, since it stressed

the idea over the “art.” He was uncomfortable with pictures that were predetermined and that he felt were not about photography. He complained that the Bechers’ work did not reflect the real experience they encountered when they found their subject: he would say that surely there were days when the sun was shining, or the wind was blowing, but all evidence of the actuality of the moment has been subsumed under their desire to catalog these forms. These photographers, seen as conceptual artists, often considered the documentation of the real world, the experience of being there, as unimportant — that is, the banal manner of reproduction was an accepted aesthetic of the conceptual artists, and it constituted another thorn in the side for Szarkowski, who was more interested in photographic beauty. Gradually the battle lines were drawn. There was an increased willingness on the part of the Bechers first, and then from others, to see themselves as “artists” who happen to use photography. This difference became a difference in economics: the conceptualists were considered “artists,” and eventually their prices were higher than those of the practitioners who more modestly called themselves “photographers.”

Added to that is the evolution of the medium itself. While it was once possible (and in a modest way it still is) to make a living as a working photographer — to do all those useful things studio photographers once did like make wedding pictures and passport photographs — there are now fewer people who can live by the craft of photography. Instead, we have all become our own photographers, taking pictures on our cellphones — just as we now make our own travel arrangements, more or less eliminating the need for travel agencies.

Not all photography is art, and not all photography belongs in art museums. Maybe more importantly, we are in danger of forgetting the context of photography, the real culture of photography. With all the editing tools offered by the electronic devices we now use, many — even most — young photographers regularly change their pictures radically. I have no problem with that; in fact I think it is healthy, a wonderfully creative use of the medium, and an exploration of the new malleability of what we have sometimes assumed is an unchanging truth. However, these photographers feel most comfortable being called artists and their works are seen in art museums. I think we need dedicated photography museums to keep ourselves honest. We need them to preserve the large culture of photography, to remind us of the larger vernacular culture happening now, and its role in our society and art. We need them to tell us about who we are — that we are spying on our neighbors, perhaps, just as much as we still celebrate our children’s birthdays. We need sustained presentations of photography in museums because we need to remember the context, the culture from which photographs come. We need them because we will forget, and we will need them in the future because the photographs in the art museums will be only imperfect records of who we once were.