

# Looking at Photographs

**“Photography is a system of visual editing. At bottom, it is a matter of surrounding with a frame a portion of one’s cone of vision, while standing in the right place at the right time. Like chess, or writing, it is a matter of choosing from among given possibilities, but in the case of photography the number of possibilities is not finite but infinite.”**

**- John Szarkowski, photography curator at MOMA**

# Research Matters



**What is the symbolism of this photo?**



## **Pete Souza**

President Barack Obama sits on the famous Rosa Parks bus at the Henry Ford Museum after an event in Dearborn, Mich., April 18, 2012



## PETE SOUZA

*President Barack Obama sits in the famous Rosa Parks bus at the Henry Ford Museum after an event in Dearborn, Mich., April 18, 2012, 2012*

**ON 1 DECEMBER 1955**, in Montgomery City, Alabama, the seamstress and civil rights activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. She was in the 'coloured section', and the 'white section' was full. Parks was arrested for civil disobedience. At the time, she was the secretary of the Montgomery division of the National Association for the Advancement of Black People, which considered her best placed to make a court challenge. She was fired from her job and received death threats. The event triggered a widespread, year-long boycott by the black community of the privately owned Montgomery Bus Line, which lost around 70 per cent of its revenue.

A year later, Parks returned to the bus and was photographed sitting, looking out of the window. In 1956 a federal lawsuit ruled that 'the enforced segregation of black and white passengers on motor buses operating in the City of Montgomery violates the Constitution and laws of the United States.'

In 1971 the bus was retired. The parent company of Montgomery Bus Line suggested it should be destroyed, but it sat in a field outside Montgomery. It was then bought by Roy H. Summerford, a spare-time mechanic and stock-car racing enthusiast. Looking for some extra space for his activities, he stripped out the seats. Meanwhile, Rosa Parks's defiance, the boycott and the change in the law had become important landmarks in the post-war civil rights movement.

Interest in the rusting, seatless, engineless bus also began to grow. When Summerford died, his descendants put it up for sale on eBay. It was acquired for \$492,000 by the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. Restoration cost in excess of \$300,000. The bus finally went on display on 1 February 2003.

On 2 November 2008, three years after the death of Rosa Parks, Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected to the office of President of the United States of America. In 2012 he visited the Henry Ford Museum, and spent a few moments in Parks's place on Montgomery Bus Line vehicle no. 2857. He recalled: 'I just sat in there for a moment and pondered the courage and tenacity that is part of our very recent history, but is also part of that long line of folks who sometimes are nameless, oftentimes didn't make the history books, but who constantly insisted on their dignity, their share of the American dream.'

The photograph, which resembles the one of Parks from 1956, was taken by Pete Souza, the official White House photographer for Obama's presidency. Was Obama alone on the bus? Yes and no. Souza must have been there too, and no doubt there was a sizeable entourage of security and museum staff just beyond the frame. Is Obama thinking he is alone? Perhaps. All presidents are somewhat alone, and, as the first African American president, Obama was certainly in a category of one. He may have felt alone if he was imagining the bravery of Parks that day, or perhaps not alone if he was imagining her surrounded by the white faces of passengers and an arresting officer.



**No matter how you approach it, be open to the unexpected, be curious, ask questions, when you get the answer, it's time to ask new questions.**



**Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 2002**  
from the series *The Dream House*



# GREGORY CREWDSON

## Untitled

FROM THE SERIES 'THE DREAM HOUSE', 2002

'THE DREAM HOUSE' IS A SUITE of photographs envisioned by the North American artist Gregory Crewdson. They were all shot in an empty ranch house he had come across in Rutland, Vermont. A woman who had raised a family there had died four years earlier, leaving everything behind, untouched. It was a home deprived of the life that had once animated it.

Over several years, Crewdson had already established the central subject matter and approach for his art: carefully orchestrated scenes of mildly surreal disquiet amid white, middle-class semi-rural communities. The *New York Times* commissioned Crewdson to make images in the house. He invited several film stars to collaborate, including Gwyneth Paltrow, Tilda Swinton and Julianne Moore.

If Crewdson's images relate to cinema, it is in their preparation and collaboration, and their lighting codes. The people are not caught mid-gesture, as they might be in a single frame from a film. They tend to hold still and silent poses, as if troubled or traumatized into immobility. They act as if they are posing, or pose as if they are acting. Many film actors are familiar with this, since most movie productions have a 'stills' photographer who is tasked with working on set to turn unfolding cinematic scenes into single images for publicity purposes.

This image from 'The Dream House' features Julianne Moore, an actor who has developed a measured, highly restrained and minimal kind of performance style, reminiscent of movie stars from the silent era. In cinema, when the image is moving and the subject is dramatic, the viewer's gaze is more or less trained to watch for

facial expressions and bodily gestures. When the image is still and mute, the gaze is free to wander, taking in small details that would otherwise pass by. The viewer can study the image forensically. Moore's face is the focus of the composition, and its performance has clearly received a great deal of attention, from Moore herself, from Crewdson, from the make-up team, and from the lighting crew. And yet Moore's feet, parts of the body that cannot really perform, cannot act, are there to be looked at with equal attention, should you wish.

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**Weegee, Coney Island, 1940**

## WEEGEE

*Coney Island, 1940*

**'WEEGEE' WAS THE PSEUDONYM** of Arthur (Usher) Fellig (1899–1968), a freelance photographer who worked in New York's Lower East Side. His most renowned photographs were of the city's criminal nightlife. He would hang out at the local police station, and when word came in of a crime in the neighbourhood, he would try to beat the officers to the scene and get the first photograph, which he would then sell to an agency or tabloid newspaper.

Weegee also photographed at Coney Island, the nearest seaside resort to Manhattan, and a weekend destination for the city's working-class families. His best-known Coney Island photograph shows a vast crowd on the beach one hot summer's day. There is a crowd in this one too, but it forms the background of a more intimate and disarming scene.

Weegee was famed for getting himself in the right spot at the right time. Here, his view is so optimal that the space feels almost like a stage. What is going on? It seems as though a man is being resuscitated, perhaps by lifeguards or an ambulance crew. His body has been covered in a blanket but his arm is bare. He may have been in the water, which we can see in the background of the shot. Right in the centre of the frame is a woman in a bathing suit. Perhaps she is a friend of the rescued man. Consciously or unconsciously, she has posed and smiled for Weegee's camera. As a result, she seems to belong to a very different kind of photograph. A classical portrait within an urgent news picture.

For Weegee, this kind of incongruity was something of a specialism. He was alive to irony, contradiction and counterpoint, and able work them into his hard-hitting photographs. The forceful first impression opens on to a world of rich ambiguity, and human complexity. Each of his best images is a fragment of a story. There are enough clues to draw us in, but, as Weegee seemed to intuit, photographs can never give us the whole narrative.



**It is a merging of ideas, life experiences, education, culture, politics, morals, memories, ... history**

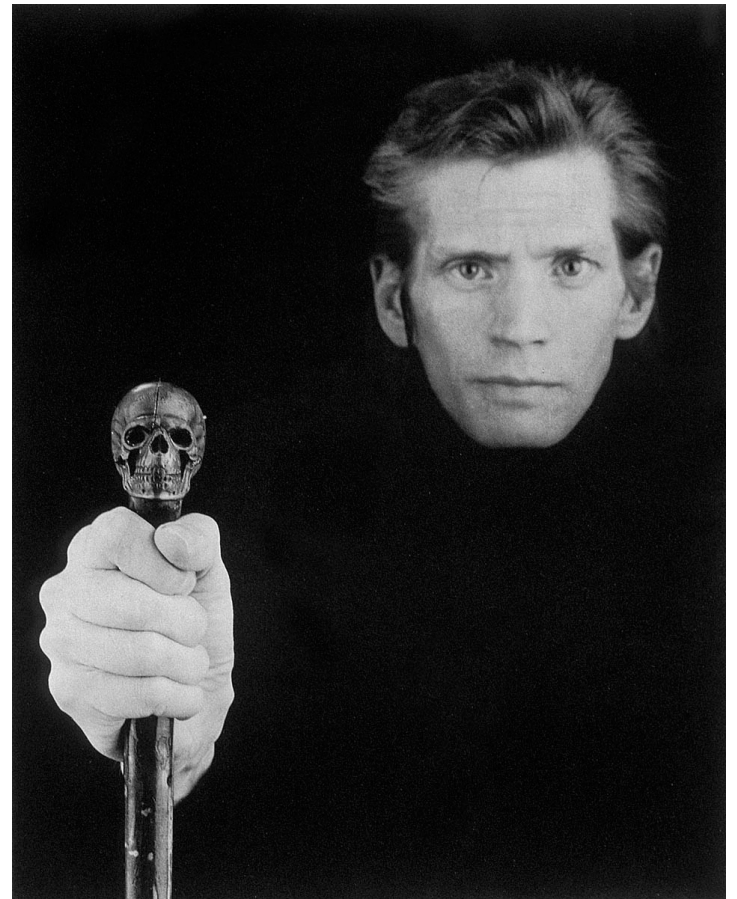


- **Photographs create meaning and can have a transformative aspect in its historical, political and social context.**
- **I want you to understand photography as a mean of communication that articulates ideas, memories, desires, etc. in your own individual prism.**
- **Photography is a visual language and we need to acquire a visual vocabulary.**
- **We read imagery like we read a text. This lecture is about identifying ways of reading and interpreting photos, making imagery more interesting.**

# How to read a Photograph

- It might help to articulate what is in the picture and how it is put together technically
- Often words will lead you to an interpretation

**Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989)**  
*Self-Portrait, 1988*



# Composition

- What is excluded is sometimes as important as what is included
- A good composition often makes it apparent as to why a picture was taken (e.g. leading lines to the main subject matter, depth of field, focus, light)



**Arno Minkinen (b. 1946)**  
*Narragansett, Rhode Island, 1973*



*THE ILLUMINATED MAN*

**Duane Michals (b. 1932)**  
*The Illuminated Man, 1968*

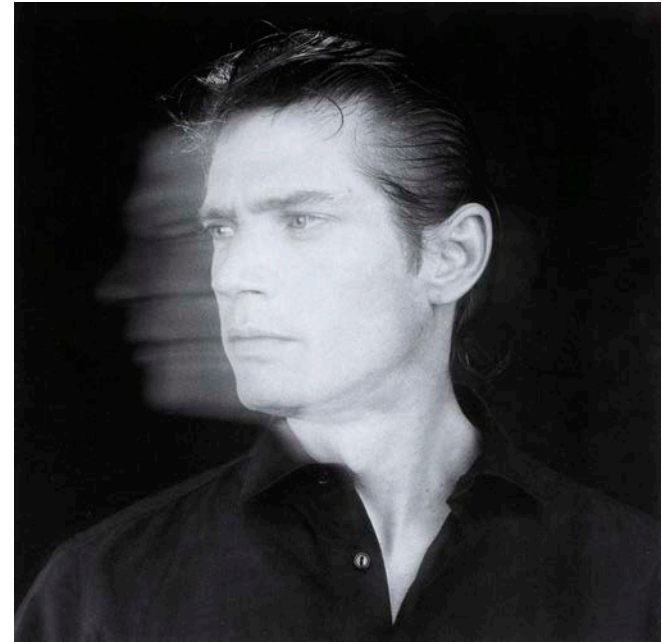


# Technical Choices

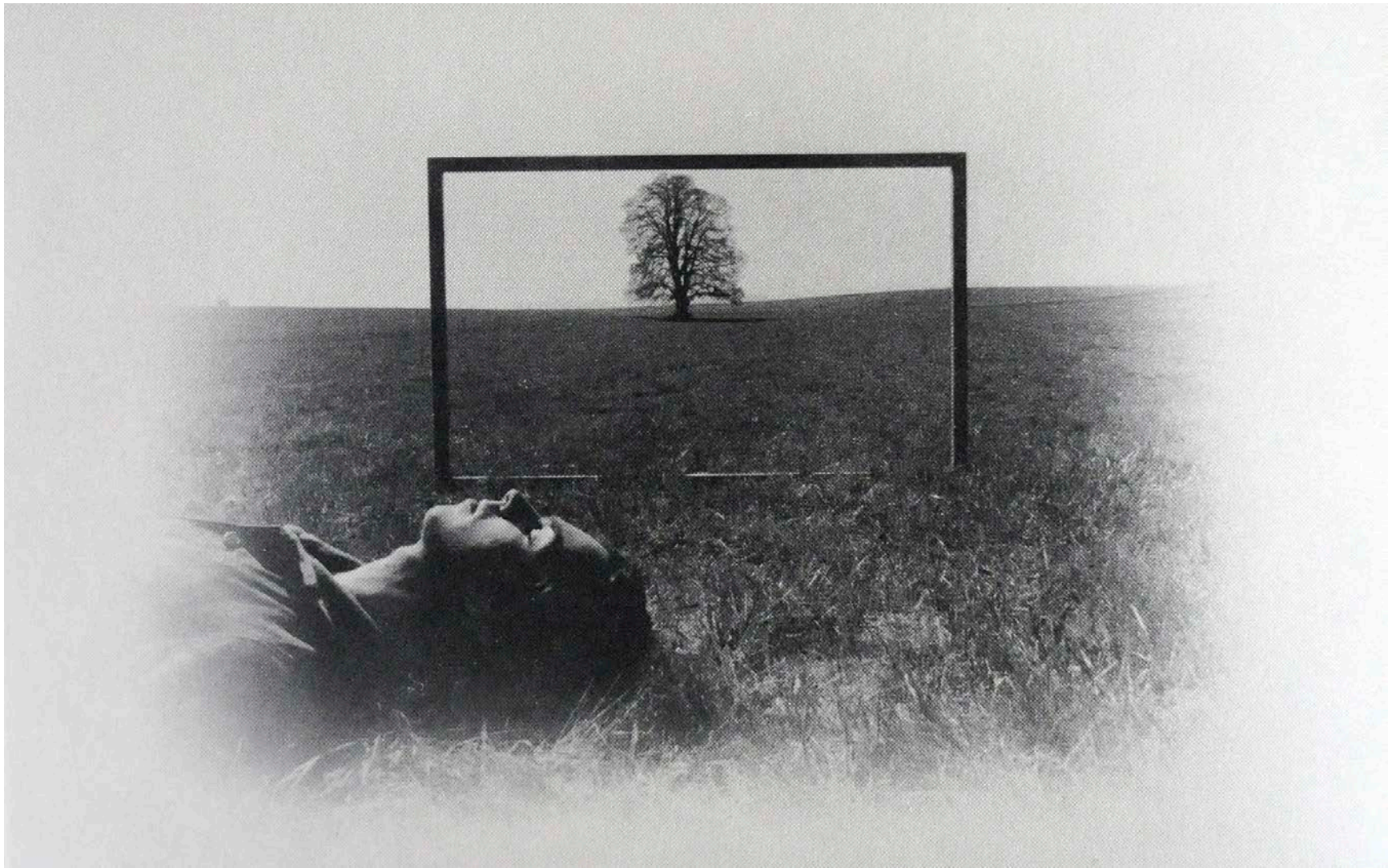
- Technical choices made by the photographer often help you understand his/her intentions
- The same technical approach might not necessarily mean the same thing



**Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989)**  
*Gregory Hines, 1985*



*Self-Portrait, 1985*



**Christian Vogt (b. 1946), *Frame Series*, 1975-76**

**“Make the invisible visible” - Christian Vogt**

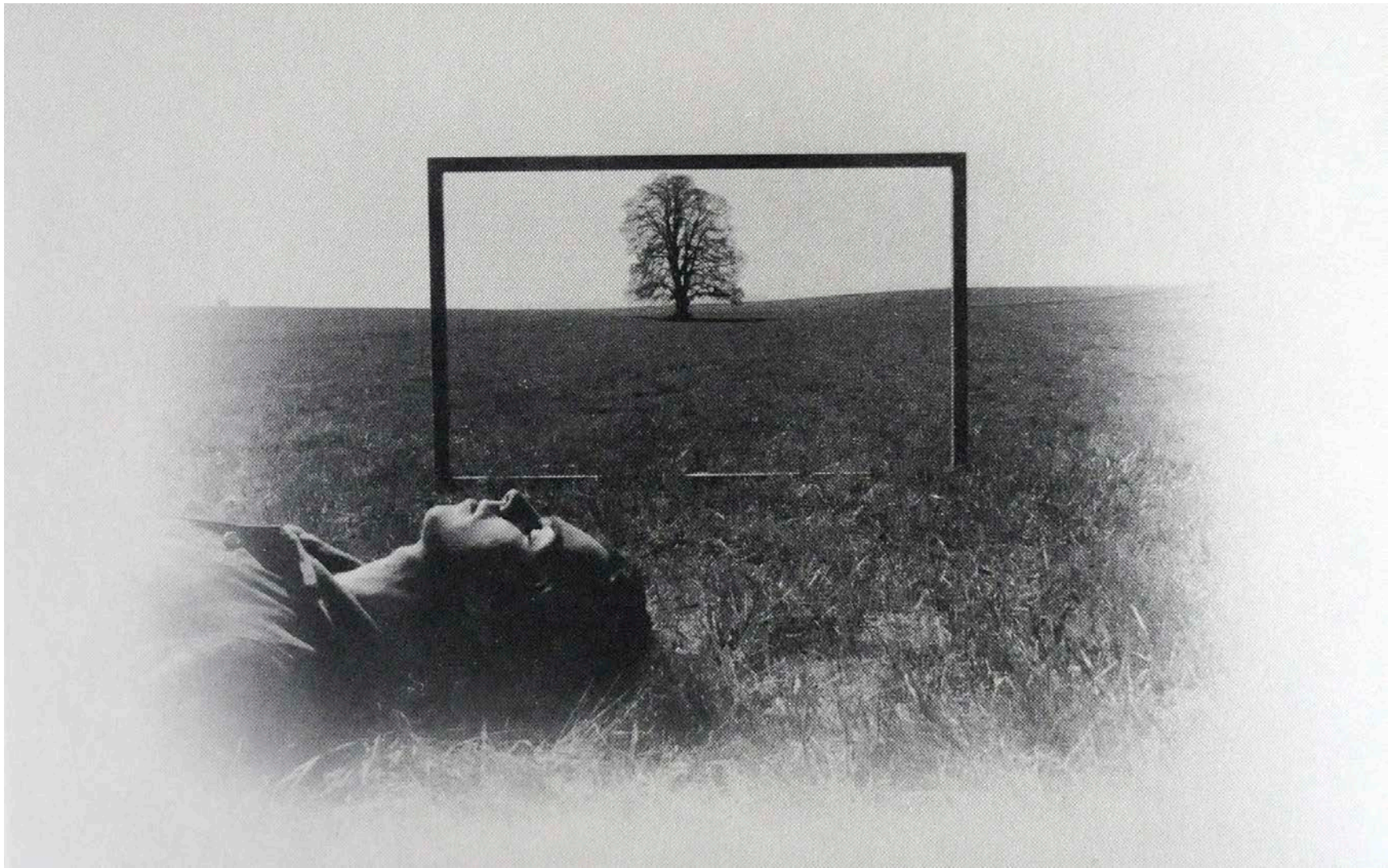




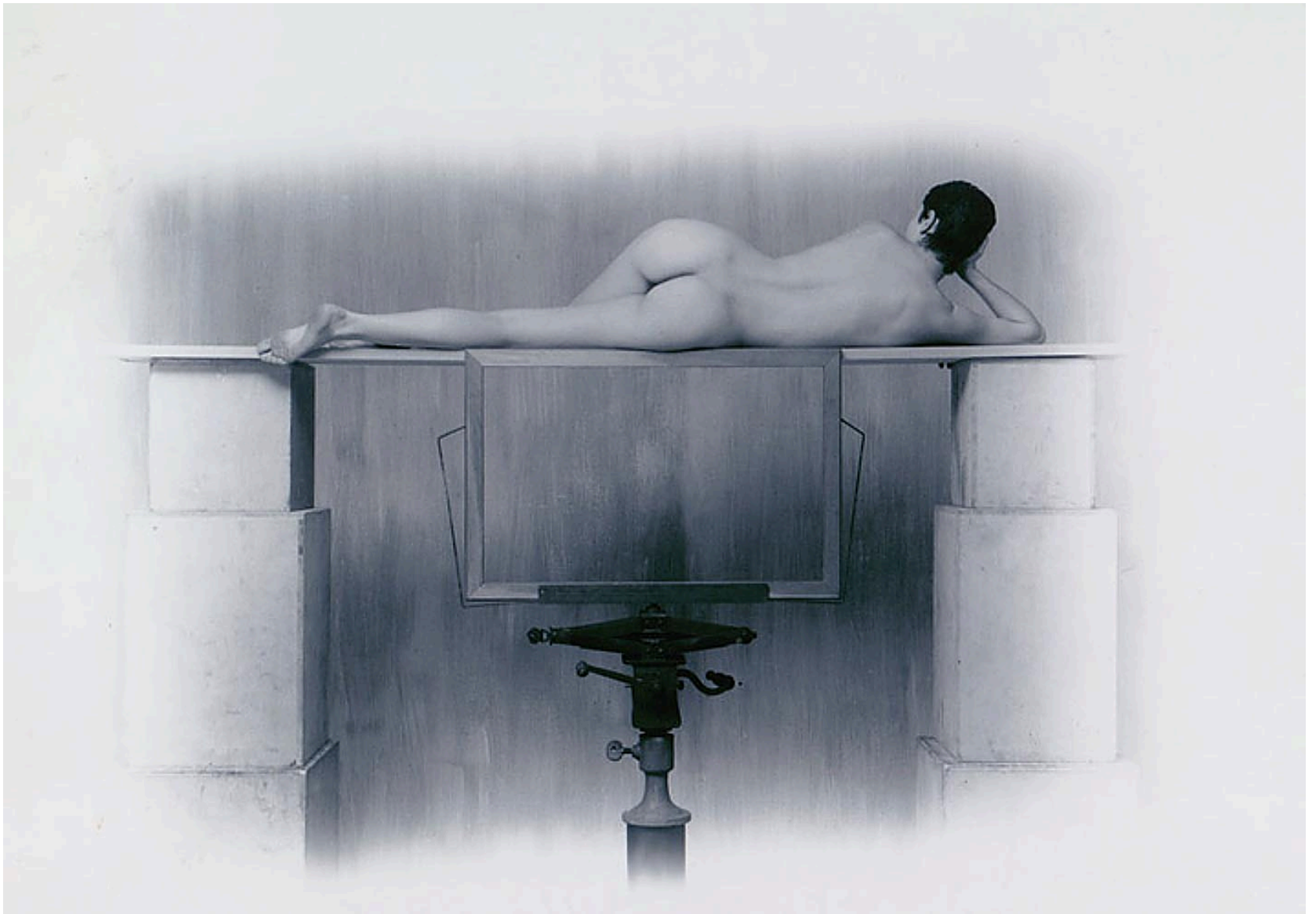








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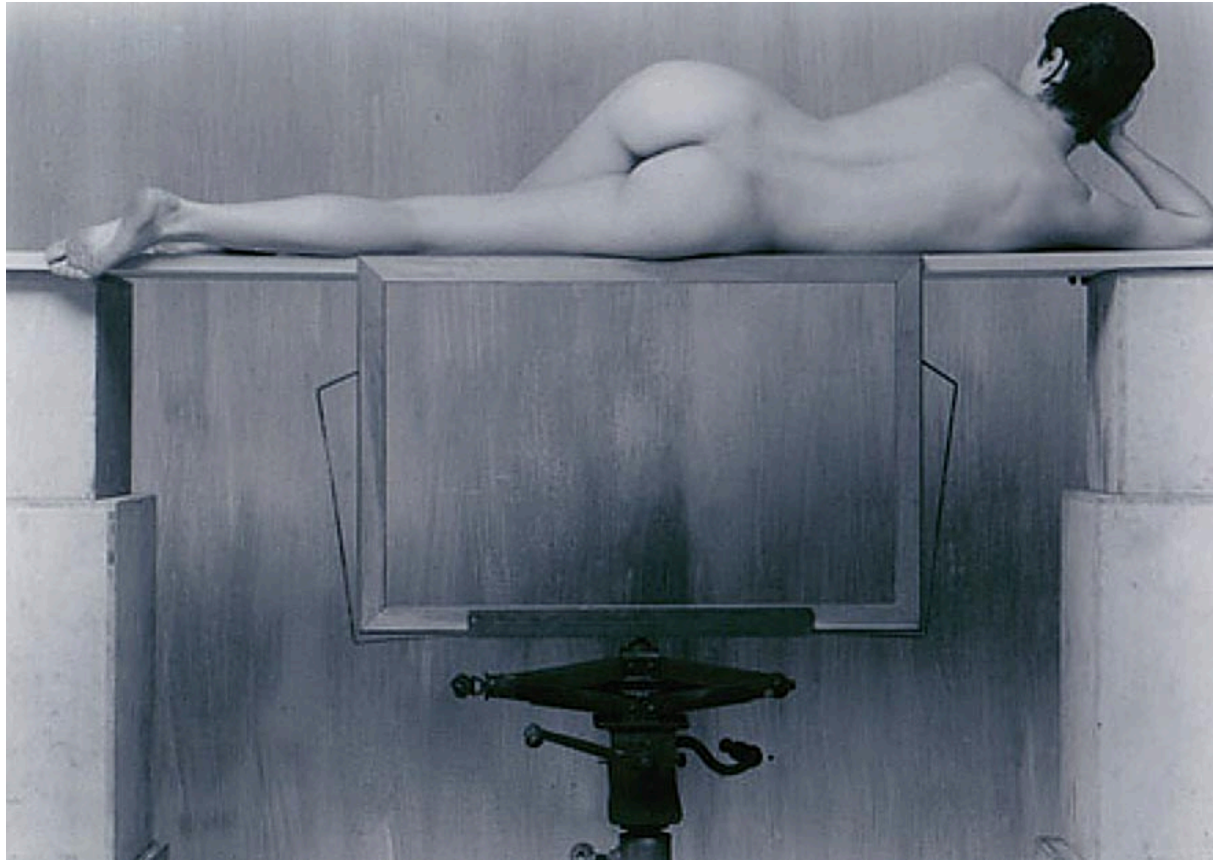


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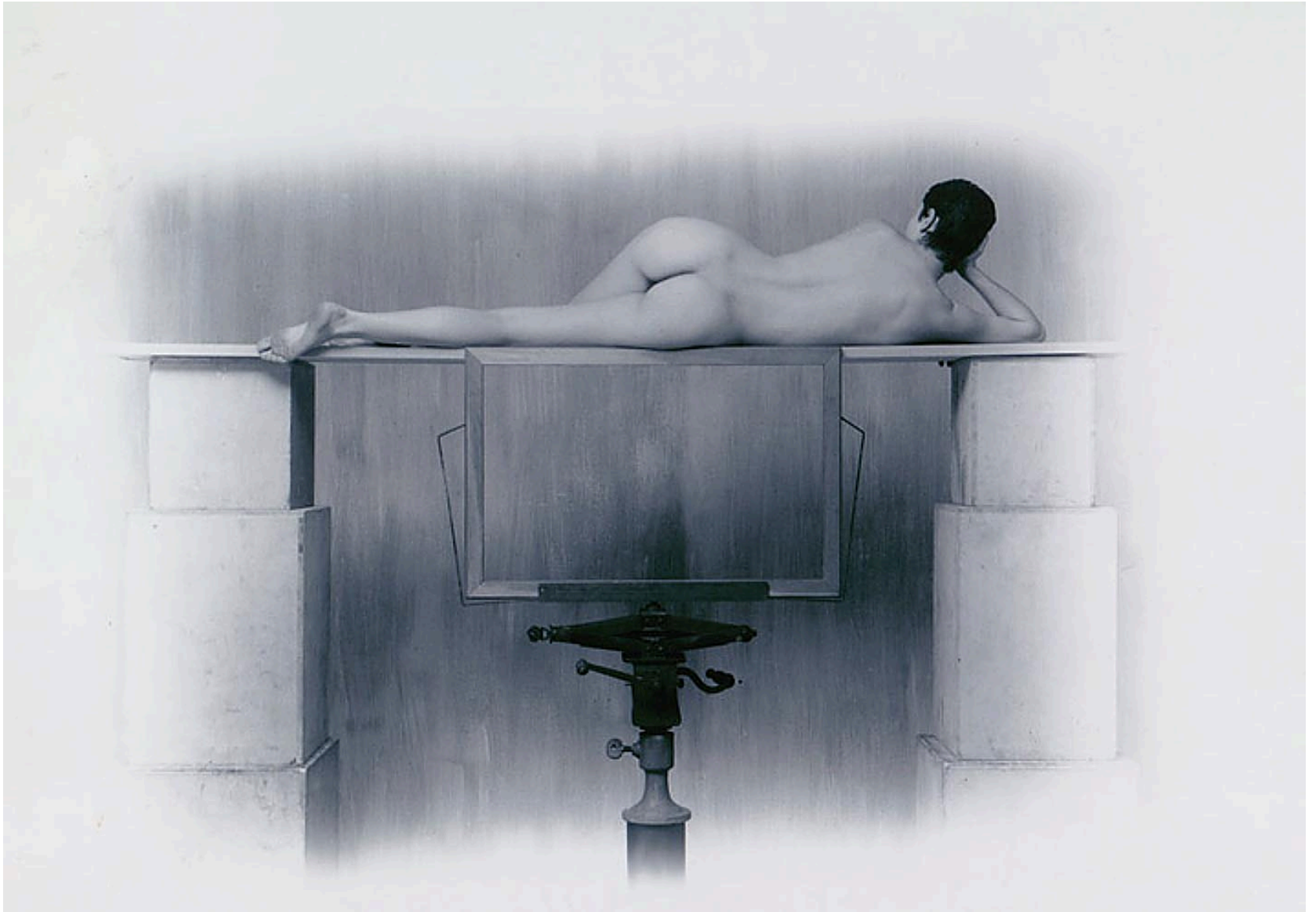


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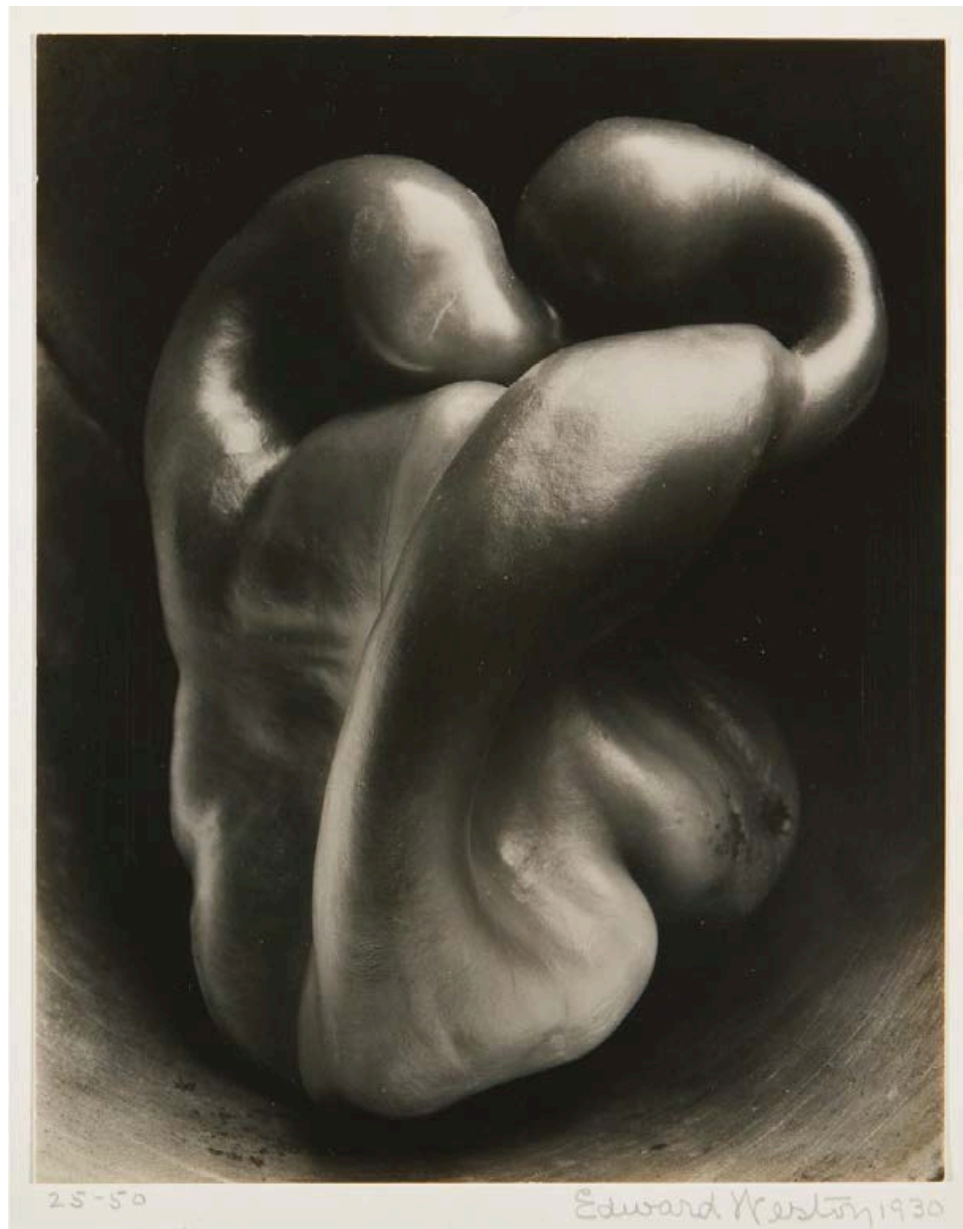
# **Context of Time**





**Alfred Eisenstaedt (1898-1995)**  
*V-J Day in Times Square, August 14, 1945*

**Can we read the same image  
differently?**



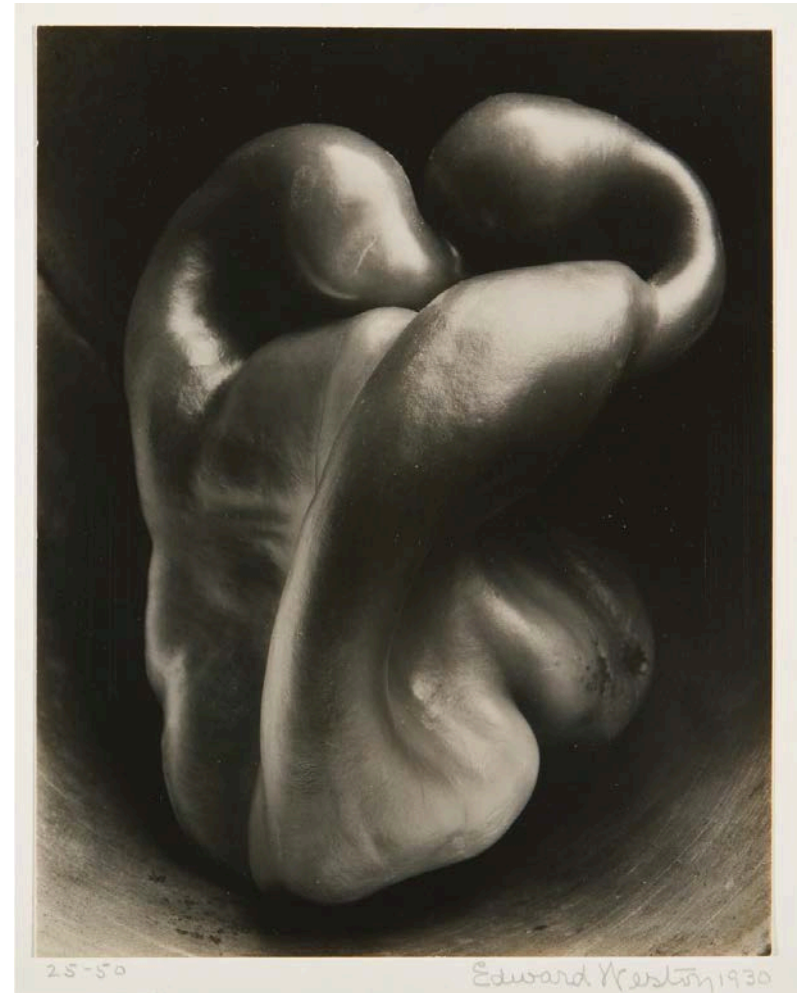
**Edward Weston (1886-1958), Pepper (No. 30), 1930**



“It is a classic, completely satisfying, – a pepper – but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter. It has no psychological attributes, no human emotions are aroused: this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind.”

“[I]t is disgust and weariness over having my work labeled and pigeonholed by those who bring to it their own obviously abnormal, frustrated condition: the sexually unemployed belching gaseous irrelevancies from an undigested Freudian ferment.”

- Edward Weston





**Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946)**  
*Equivalent, 1929*



**Mitch Dobrowner**  
*Rainshafts, 2017*

# **Bad Examples of Blog Writing**



# Shoji Ueda



Shōji Ueda(1913–2000) was a photographer of Tottori, Japan. He combined surrealist composition with realistic perception. He was passionate about painting, he uses photography to capture his poetic and surrealist images.

The first photo was his self-portrait, in the desert, you couldn't really see what's behind him. It made his body and the woman in the reflection stand out. And the women wear and how his hair has a different grey scale makes the photo special and unique.

In the second picture, sky, sand, and grass give it compositional beauty. The Japanese women wear traditional cloth with an umbrella, gives the photo a sense of mystery.

In the third picture, I believe he used a telephoto lens to make people bigger than the surroundings. Also, their choice of clothes gives them different grey, makes them stand out in harmony with the sky.

# Philip-Lorca diCorcia

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, an American photographer. Known for his iconic quality of staged composition that often includes a baroque theatricality. With the careful planning, he takes everyday scenes beyond the realm of banality, trying to inform his picture's spectators with awareness of the psychology and emotion in real-life situations.



## Philip-Lorca diCorcia - Heads

In this project of his, he went to New York City's Times Square to capture candid photos of strangers. He captures them with a flashlight from 20 feet away, in case for them to notice him. In this unique approach, his photographs are looking empathetic without actually meeting the people.



## Philip-Lorca diCorcia - Hustlers

During the late 1980s and early 90s, when devastation and despair start spreading during the AIDS pandemic. He conforms to the staged narrative, where it's clear that things are being staged, and there's a narrative to it. This project was in response to specifically the First Amendment rights of homosexuals.

# **Good Examples of Blog Writing**



## EDWARD HONAKER

—  
Out of all the photographers in the self-portrait lecture, Edward Honaker's work captured my attention immediately and intrigued me the most. I find this a bit strange due to the fact that most of his photographs are in black and white. I personally would think that color photography such as that from Thomas Simpfendorfer or even nude photography such as that from Elanor Carucci would demand a greater sense of my attention. However, Honaker's work still stands out to me more and I and I believe this is because of its symbolism and visual effects.

With regards to the look of Honaker's work, there appears to be an emphasis on visual effects. For instance there are photos where faces are blurred, covered, scratched off, or even wiped away almost like a painting. These effects naturally capture the audience's attention and I believe it is these effects which elevate Honaker's work. For instance, there is a photo of who I believe is Honaker himself sitting on a chair facing the camera with his head blurred, almost as if Honaker had been nodding side to side at a fast pace. I find this image visually appealing and I believe that the blurriness of Honaker's head adds a significant meaning, for reasons I will discuss shortly. If the head had not been blurred, I would have probably found this image to be very boring and not spend much time looking at it. There is a similar photograph of Honaker looking at a mirror, once again with his face blurred in motion. This image would also come off as very stale to me if the blurriness was not there. In addition to these visual effects, I believe that the way in which Honaker's work presents itself is very eerie. His work feels moody, dark, and looks almost as if it belongs in a psychological thriller type of film. The removal of color forces the audience to detach from their usual emotions of happiness and the use of shadows, balloons, family photos with a face scratched out are all commonly utilized within horror films or thrillers.

These effects, while visually intriguing, are also symbolic. To me, they represent a form of madness or mental struggle. While doing some research, I learned that Honaker himself struggles with depression and anxiety and that his photos are a visual representation of his experience. When I learned this, all of Honaker's work made much more sense to me. Usually colors are associated with feelings like yellow for happiness or green for envy. They are vibrant and really stand out to the audience. Honaker's use of black and white photography symbolizes his depressed state and possibly his lack of feeling throughout his life. The photo where Honaker's head is broken down and rearranged into little fragments represents the state of his mind being all over the place, and possibly how he feels how his thoughts are not all in one piece. I would also like to point out how these facial effects conceal Honaker's face quite well. Perhaps this is to show how his depression and anxiety make him feel concealed from the rest of the world. I believe this makes sense because people facing depression can feel distanced from society.



Photo Credit: Edward Honaker

## Sally Mann



Sally Mann's portraits of her family reflect both the ordinariness and ephemeral qualities of childhood and the family life. The combination of the ordinary American childhood as seen through the lens of a mother and staged portraiture captures perfectly the wonder and work of family life. Black and white photography reduces not only detail or business in the photo that might detract from the subjects themselves, but also lends to the reduction of her children's identities into the identities of American children more generally. Mann is also successful at Cartier-Bresson's "the decisive moment" - she captures light on pointed toes, water rushing with the current, children somehow human and almost fairy-like (sallymann.com).

My research on Mann also led me to the controversy surrounding her work, which *The New York Times* referred to as "the disturbing work of Sally Mann". The nudity of her children, often present at Mann's gallery openings, came under fire as the line between art and ethics was discussed. Even classic childhood scenes of distress that Mann photographed are criticized. Bug bites, wet beds, intimate moments of childhood and the slow crawl to adult life that Mann documented. For me, I find Mann's work is art without controversy, or perhaps for the sake of it. The nudity, the intimacy, the averageness of American childhood all tell an ethereal and ordinary coming-of-age story. We all wet the bed, all scratch at swollen mosquito bites, all run free and naked until nakedness becomes a thing of shame and privacy. What Mann does is freeze these moments, document almost historically the quick passage of time. I think photography, like any creative discipline such as writing, demands that the hard, intimate, vulnerable things must be documented as well as the smiling portraits and beach sunsets.



Sources:  
sallymann.com

<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/27/magazine/the-disturbing-photography-of-sally-mann.html>

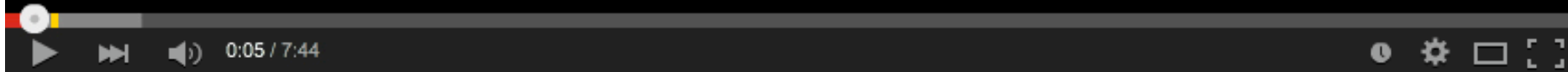
# How to make a difference?

Think differently, be bold, go to places you haven't gone, be innovative, experiment, express yourself in your own visual language, know the history of photography,

**There is always a different way to photograph the familiar subject matter.**



4'33"



William Marx performs John Cage's 4'33" (1952)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTEFKFiXSx4>

# **10 Things that require no photographic talent**

**being on time**

**work ethic**

**effort**

**body language**

**energy**

**attitude**

**passion**

**being respectful**

**follow deadlines**

**come to each class prepared**

# Strategies for Essay Writing

**“A common structural flaw in college essays is the "walk-through" (also labeled "summary" or "description"). Walk-through essays follow the structure of their sources rather than establishing their own. Such essays generally have a descriptive thesis rather than an argumentative one.”**

**Source:**

**<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure>**