

Between 1946—the year of Moholy's death—and 1951, when Harry Callahan hired Aaron Siskind, the assumptions and principles governing photographic production at the I.D. were already being inflected and altered as much by the American cultural climate as by the rather different goals and ideas of the American staff hired by Moholy. Arthur Siegel, who ran the photography department between Moholy's death and 1949, was in certain respects the transitional figure, having one foot in the Moholy camp and the other in a subjectivized, privatized approach to the medium. Published statements by Siegel are such a jumble of the two approaches that it is difficult to distill what he actually meant. Here, for example, is Siegel on his first tenure at the I.D.:

My job, develop a four-year course of study for photographers. (With the help and hindrance of many students and teachers, I tried to weave the threads of European experimental and painting-oriented photography into the American straight technique of object transformation.) This attitude became a web of problems, history, and technique that, together with the whole environment of the school, provided an atmosphere for the gradually unfolding enrichment of the creative photographer. . . . Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind carry on the rich teaching tradition that I inherited from Moholy-Nagy, Kepes, and others. . . . For if the fifties of photography had lyrical songs, part of the notes originated at the Institute of Design.<sup>29</sup>

Although it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when the nominally formalist framework of the I.D. came to incorporate that very subjectivity which had been previously excoriated,

Kenneth Josephson, *Season's Greetings, 1963* (Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York)



Siegel's "personal" work as well as his statements suggest that this shift in emphasis was well in place by the end of the 1940s. It is worth mentioning too that in Siegel's work one finds technical experimentation with the medium coupled with a rather ghastly self-expressive intent, illustrated by projects such as the series of color photographs made in 1951 collectively entitled *In Search of Myself* and undertaken, as John Grimes indicates, at the suggestion of Siegel's psychoanalyst.

Harry Callahan's arrival at the I.D. in 1946 (hired by Moholy himself, shortly before his death) could only have confirmed this direction. A self-taught photographer for whom photography was, according to John Szarkowski, "a semi-religious calling"<sup>30</sup> and whose exposure to Ansel Adams and his work in 1941 was both revelation and epiphany ("Ansel is what freed me"),<sup>31</sup> Callahan was as far removed from the machine-age ethic of Bauhaus photography as anybody possibly could be. As early as 1941, with photographs such as the calligraphic study of reeds in water (*Detroit, 1941*), Callahan was single-mindedly developing a body of work that would probably have been little different had he never set foot in Chicago. Characterized by a consistent and intensely personal iconography (the fact and body of his wife and model Eleanor) and great elegance and purity of design and composition, Callahan's photography had more in common with the work of Minor White, or even Stieglitz, than it did with Moholy's. Although one could argue that certain kinds of work Callahan produced after coming to Chicago—the collages, multiple exposures, series, and superimpositions—were the result of his exposure to Moholy's ideas and the I.D. environment, some of this experimentation had in fact preceded his arrival. In any case, few would dispute that Callahan's influence on the future orientation of the I.D. photography program was immense. Beyond any consideration of the direct influence of his photographs was the fact that he came to exemplify the committed art photographer; equally aloof from marketplace or mass media, content to teach and serve his muse. "The interior shape of private experience"<sup>32</sup> coupled with a rigorous concern for formal values effectively constituted Callahan's approach to photography, and this, more than any of Moholy's theoretical formulations, constituted the mainstream of American art photography through the 1960s.

That a subjectivized notion of camera seeing should have come to prevail at the I.D. by the 1940s is not surprising. Reflecting on the political and cultural climate of America in the ten years following World War II, it seems inevitable that the last remaining tenet of radical formalism to have survived the ocean crossing—and I refer here to the belief that the camera was a mechanical (no quotes), objective, impersonal, and rational device fully in keeping with the imperatives of technological society—should be finally engulfed by the dominant ethos of art photography. Surely one of the significant factors shaping all noncommercial photography by the end of the decade was that certain kinds of documentary practice had become politically suspect. The influential and politically left New York Photo League was included in the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations by 1947, and many documentary photographers felt that their very subject matter made them politically vulnerable.

Discussing this period in her essay "Photography in the Fifties," Helen Gee gives a particularly suggestive example in the case of Sid Grossman, the director of the Photo League's school and an acknowledged radical:

Remaining virtually in hiding, afraid of the "knock on the door" he complained of no longer feeling free to work on the streets. He escaped as often as he could, seeking the solitude of Cape Cod. His work between 1948 and the time of his death in 1955 . . . shows a clean break, a complete change in subject matter. From the lively images of rambunctious teenagers on Coney Island beaches he moved to contemplative scenes of sea and sand in Provincetown, a change which appears to be more psychological than geographic. While an extreme example of a shift from a documentary approach to a reflective, interior response to the world, it is symbolic of a change in sensibility that affected American artists, either consciously or unconsciously, during the decade of the fifties.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting in this light to return to the Szarkowski essay on Callahan, which subtly suggests that Callahan's stature as an artist was somehow reinforced by his refusal of the social documentary mode: "Activist photography in 1941 seemed new, important, and adventurous, and there was a market for it. Nevertheless, Callahan was not interested. For him, the problem was located at the point where the potentials of photography and his own private experience intersected. . . . His attitude toward this question has not changed."<sup>34</sup>

But well before the machinery of HUAC, McCarthyism, and the Cold War had been put in place, American art culture was shifting away from agitprop production and the Popular Front program of solidarity with the masses toward the postwar embrace of an international modernism whose legatees and avant-garde elite were the abstract expressionist painters of the New York School.<sup>35</sup> For many American art photographers who had in various way accommodated themselves and/or modified their work to accord with the concerns of the Depression years,<sup>36</sup> the later depoliticizing of American culture truly constituted a return to normalcy. The battle to legitimate photography as art had been consistently waged in terms of the camera's ability to express the subjectivity and unique personal vision of the photographer, and with the postwar valorization of individualism, detachment, and originality, art photographers returned again to their historic agenda.

It is against this background that we need to survey what, *faute de mieux*, we might consider the Callahan-Siskind "high formalist" period at the I.D., which may be said to have started in 1951 when Callahan hired Siskind after becoming head of the photography department in 1949. In an article on Chicago photography, Andy Grundberg points out that the two men "overthrew or redirected much of Moholy's emphasis,"<sup>37</sup> although I am inclined to think that the process had begun under Siegel, or in any case before Siskind's arrival. Grundberg further points out that

As enrollment increased and a graduate degree program was added, the New Bauhaus curriculum was de-emphasized. The preliminary course, which mimicked Moholy's original progression in the medium—from photograms to paper negatives, multiple exposures, out-of-focus images, etc.—was retained but lost some importance. Callahan and Siskind both resisted emphasizing experimental techniques (Callahan: "I didn't care anything about solarization and negative prints . . ."; Siskind: "I had no interest at all in the Bauhaus philosophy. I found all that experimentalism stuff a little uncongenial to me").<sup>38</sup>

The surprise is that the tradition of technical experimentation, including the mixing of media, remained as strong as it did in the post-Moholy I.D. But inasmuch as Callahan and Siskind were for the ten-year period between 1951 and 1961 the dominant photographic influences in the school—both through their teaching and the prestige of their work—it is evident that whatever vestiges remained of the earlier concept of formalism were entirely eclipsed by the subjectivization of vision championed and practiced by both

men. It might be noted, too, that art photography of the early 1950s is exemplified by Minor White, Frederick Sommer (who spent a year at I.D. while Callahan was abroad on a grant), and Ansel Adams, and that *Aperture*, with White as its editor, was conceived in 1952.

In retrospect, Aaron Siskind seems so perfectly to represent the cultural and photographic adjustment of the period that one is tempted to say that had he not been born he might well be invented. It is not only in the fact of Siskind's shift from the social documentary work of his Photo League days to the virtual abstractions of 1944 that one sees the magnitude of the larger social transformation (Siskind, after all, continued to teach documentary photography at the I.D. for years), but in his assimilation of Clement Greenberg's doxology of modernism—the *ne plus ultra* of Anglo-American formalism—as the theory and ground of his work. "First and emphatically," wrote Siskind in his "Credo" of 1956, "I accept the flat picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture."<sup>39</sup> And two years later: "As the language or vocabulary of photography has been extended, the emphasis on meaning has shifted—shifted from what the world looks like to what we feel about the world and what we want the world to mean."<sup>40</sup> This interiorized, *purified* notion of art making is, of course, closely linked to notions current among the New York School artists with whom Siskind was allied both by friendship and dealer (he exhibited from 1947 to 1957 at the Charles Egan Gallery). In the same way that among abstract painters action was redirected from the political field to the field of the canvas, Siskind's arena became circumscribed. "The only other thing that I got which reassured me from the abstract expressionists," said Siskind in a 1973 interview,

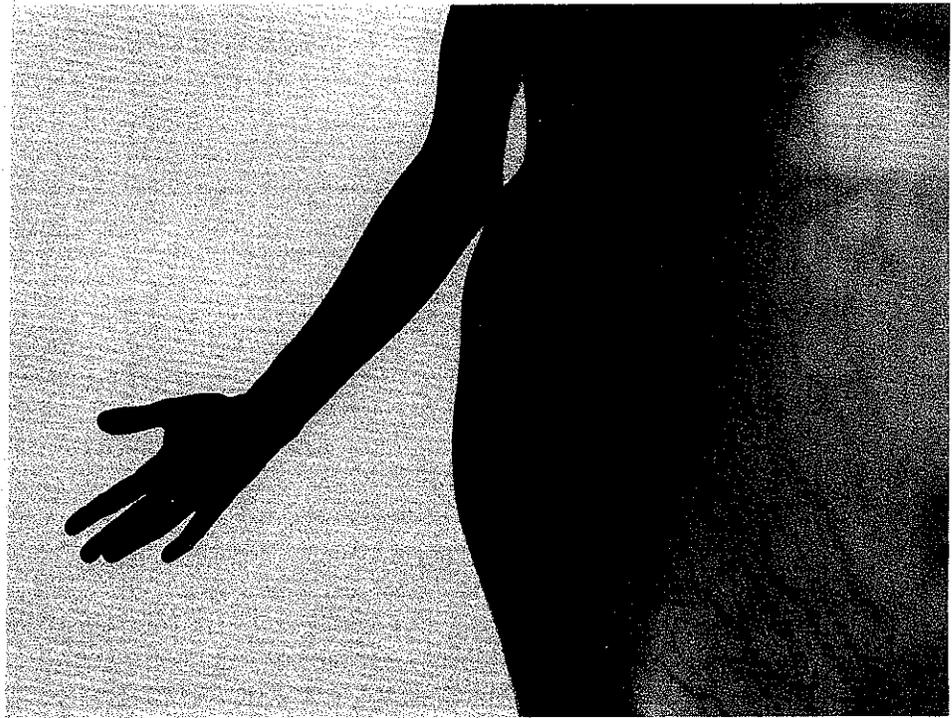
is the absolute belief that this canvas is the complete total area of struggle, this is the arena, this is where the fight is taking place, the battle. Everybody believes that, but you have to really believe it and work that way. And that's why I work on a flat plane, because then you don't get references immediately to nature—the outside world—it's like drawing.<sup>41</sup>

What is striking about Siskind's enterprise is not simply that he produced photographs that look like miniature monochrome reproductions of Klines or Motherwells—if one believes a photograph to be like a drawing, why not?—but that the heroicizing of self-expression is so absolute as to border on the parodic. That more than an enthusiastic conversion to Greenbergian formalism was involved in Siskind's rejection of the documentary mode (a mode which in no way precludes formalist preoccupations, *vide* Walker Evans and Siskind himself) is suggested by Siskind's photographs of *writing*, and political writing at that.

I've done a lot of them [torn political posters]. You may have seen some, they're big political slogans in huge letters, put on walls, and then someone comes along and paints them out and they make these marvelous forms. . . . That goes back to 1955, but since then I've found many more and the interest has gotten more complex, in that I began to realize to some extent that they are political. I wasn't interested in the politics. . . . I was interested in the shapes and the suggestability of the shapes.<sup>42</sup>

It is tempting to see in the very extremity of this refusal of political meaning in the world a double displacement: first, in the effacement of the specifically political text, and second, in the conflation of abstracted form with transcendent meaning.

That the formalism espoused by Callahan or Siskind derives from aesthetics rather than criticism is obvious, and that it relates more to the mainstream currents in American art photography should be equally so. Somewhere between these two notions of for-



Barbara Blondeau, Untitled,  
1971 (Permission of the Visual  
Studies Workshop)

malism lies Bauhaus photography: responsive to certain aspects of revolutionary thought, but functioning within a developed, capitalist society on the verge of fascist consolidation.

Most of what is now meant by "Chicago School" or specifically, "I.D. photography," is the work of photographers who emerged during the 1960s (exceptions would include Art Sinsabaugh, who graduated in the 1940s; Richard Nickel, who graduated in 1957; and Ray Metzker, class of 1959). Neither Siskind nor Callahan seemed to have exercised direct influence on their students' production, at least in the sense of their students' work resembling their own. Rather, the influence would appear to center around the assertion—provided as much by example as exhortation—that art photography, at its highest level, represented the expression of a privileged subjectivity, and the use of the formal and material properties of the medium to express that subjectivity. Given that radical formalism had been launched with a blanket repudiation of such notions, there is finally very little that remains to link Russian photography with the productions of the I.D. The pedagogic formalism which was developed and refined throughout the 1950s and 1960s provided I.D. photographers with certain kinds of building blocks, frameworks, structures—or, at the most trivial level, *schticks*—which, in a general sort of way, do constitute a recognizable look. The emphasis on "problem solving," the concept of series, interior framing devices, and other self-reflexive strategies, emphasis on the design element in light and shadow and positive and negative space, dark printing, certain types of subject matter, technical experimentation, are all identifiable aspects of I.D. formalism. This type of work, and the precepts that inform it, have in turn been widely disseminated, largely because most art photographers end up teaching new generations of art

photographers. With the quantum leap in photographic education that occurred in the mid to late 1960s (the number of colleges teaching photography expanded from 228 in 1964 to 440 in 1967), as well as the growth of a photography marketplace, I.D. photography was further validated.

There is, of course, no fair way to generalize about the range of work made by as many (and disparate) photographers as Thomas Barrow, Linda Connor, Barbara Blondeau, William Larson, Joseph Jachna, Ray Metzker, Kenneth Josephson, Barbara Crane, Art Sinsbaugh, Joseph Sterling, Charles Swedlund, Charles Traub, Jerry Gordon, and John Wood, to name only the ones I am familiar with. I would however, venture to say that at its best, as in Josephson's *History of Photography* series, it is intelligent, witty, and interesting, and at its worst—or average, for that matter—it reveals only the predictable results of a thoroughly academicized, pedagogical notion of formalism.

And although I am compelled to admit that in comparison to what passes for formalist art photography nowadays the I.D. photographers cited above seem blazing stars in the firmament, this can only be considered as damning with faint praise. The basic issue is whether I.D. formalism, or any other, for that matter, has not become a *cul-de-sac*. The I.D. tradition of experimentation and serial work notwithstanding, what one sees over and over again is a recapitulation of various devices and strategies which exist as guarantors of sophistication and mastery, but which rarely exceed the level of academic, albeit accomplished, exercises. Inasmuch as so many of these photographers are clearly serious, intelligent, and committed to their art, I wonder at what point they may begin to question whether the concerns of art photography might extend beyond the creative or the self-reflexive? As the tumbrels for the photography boom begin to be heard in the land, as the markets that have supported post-1960s art photography begin to collapse, the body of art photography produced in the past twenty years will be subject to ever more rigorous criticism. The formalism which sustained the best work of a Callahan or a Siskind has run its course and become useless either as pedigree or infrastructure. Walter Benjamin's prescient warning on the results of the fetishizing of the creative seems as applicable to present-day art photography as it was to the photography of Renger-Patzsch and his milieu, which had, at very least, the gloss of newness.

## N O T E S

- 1 *The New Vision: Forty Years of Photography at the Institute of Design*, (Millertown, NY: Aperture, 1988), p. 10. I would like to acknowledge the great help, both bibliographic and conceptual, given me by Christopher Phillips. I would also like to thank Charles Traub for furnishing additional information on the I.D.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 3 Alexander Rodchenko, "Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot" (1928), cited in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), p. 167.
- 4 "Contemporary Art and the Flight of its Public," in Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 5.
- 5 The comparison is often drawn between the critical method of the Russian formalists and the contemporary work of the American New Critics. Addressing this correspondence, Frederic Jameson has written: "While both the American and Russian critical movements are contemporaneous with a great modernistic literature, although both arise in part in an attempt to do theoretical justice to that literature, the Formalists found themselves to be contemporaries of Mayakowsky and Khlebnikov, revolutionaries both in art and politics, whereas the most influential literary contemporaries of the American New Critics were called T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. This is to say that the familiar split between avant-garde art and left-wing politics was not a universal but merely a local, Anglo-American phenomenon." *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 44.
- 6 Alexander Rodchenko, "From the Easel to the Machine," cited in *Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*, ed. David Elliott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. 8.
- 7 Osip Brik, "From Pictures to Textiles," in Bowlt, p. 245.
- 8 Andrei B. Nakov, "Le Retour au Matériau de la Vie," in *Rodchenko* (Paris: Arc 2, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977), n.p., my translation.
- 9 Cited in Bowlt, p. 152.
- 10 Alexander Lavrentiev, "Alexander Rodchenko," in Elliott, p. 26.
- 11 Discussing the advertising work produced by the artistic partnership of Mayakowsky and Rodchenko, Szymon Bojko has indicated, in effect, why this advertising practice may not be compared with the advertising industry of Weimar Germany, or the U.S.: "The need for visual advertising appeared as a result of the coexistence on the national scene of the nationalised and private sectors. The real sense of NEP advertising was not so much commercial, since there was still a scarcity of goods, but for propaganda purposes. The aim was to stress the dominating role of the nationalised commerce and services. In this way Mayakowsky understood the advertising and he wrote propaganda poems and slogans for it. . . . All Moscow was dominated by products of the partnership who signed themselves as 'advertising constructors.'" Szymon Bojko, "Productivist Life," in Elliott, p. 81.
- 12 The influence of Dziga Vertov on Rodchenko was immense, as indeed it was on most of the radical Russian artists. Rodchenko worked with Vertov on several projects, including designing the titles for *The Man with a Movie Camera* and posters for Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*.
- 13 Both quotes are from Bowlt, p. 167.
- 14 Cited in *Rodchenko*.
- 15 Cited in John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 76.

- 16 Cited in Herbert Molderings, "Urbanism and Technological Utopianism: Thoughts on the Photography of the Neue Sachlichkeit and the Bauhaus," in *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933*, ed. David Mellor (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), p. 89.
- 17 Ibid., p. 92.
- 18 Ibid., p. 93.
- 19 Carl George Heise, preface to *Die Welt ist Schön*, in *ibid.*, p. 9.
- 20 Ibid., p. 10.
- 21 Ibid., p. 14.
- 22 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in *ibid.*, p. 72.
- 23 Cited in Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 313.
- 24 Karel Teige, cited in *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, ed. Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952), p. 91.
- 25 László Moholy-Nagy, "Photography is the Manipulation of Light," reprinted in Andreas Haus, *Moholy-Nagy: Photographs and Photograms* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 47.
- 26 Cited in *The New Vision*, pp. 16-17.
- 27 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1969), p. 28, originally published as *Malerai, Fotografie, Film*, Vol. 8, *Bauhausbuch*. For a suggestive and provocative discussion of the implications of the prevalent view of the camera as supplement to optical vision, see Rosalind Krauss, "Jump Over the Bauhaus," *October* 15 (Winter 1980).
- 28 Between Moholy's departure from the Bauhaus in 1928 and his appointment as director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago, it seems probable that his politics, ambitions, and art practice were all variously transformed. In Amsterdam, where he initially emigrated in 1934, he worked primarily as an advertising photographer and a design consultant. Supported by Sir Herbert Read, he moved to London the following year, where he designed window displays for Simpson's of Piccadilly and worked as a graphic designer for British Royal Airlines and London Transport. He also designed the (never used) light decoration for Alexander Korda's film *The Shape of Things to Come* and produced three photographically illustrated books.
- 29 Arthur Siegel, "Photography Is," *Aperture* 9:2 (1961), n.p. This special issue, "Five Photography Students from the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology," contained portfolios by Ken Josephson, Joseph Sterling, Charles Swedlund, Ray K. Metzker, and Joseph Jachna.
- 30 *Harry Callahan*, edited with an introduction by John Szarkowski (Millerton, NY: Aperture in association with the Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 12.
- 31 Ibid., p. 11.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Helen Gee, *Photography of the Fifties: An American Perspective* (Tucson: The Center for Creative Photography, 1980), p. 5.
- 34 Szarkowski, p. 9.
- 35 For a detailed discussion of the de-Marxification of the American intelligentsia, and the rapprochement of the abstract expressionist program with postwar liberalism, see Serge Guilbaut's "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," *October* 15 (Winter 1980).
- 36 I am thinking here, for example, of Walker Evans's two-year association with the FSA, Berenice Abbott's WPA-funded documentation of *Changing New York*, and Paul Strand's involvement with Frontier Films.
- 37 Andy Grundberg, "Photography, Chicago, Moholy, and After," *Art in America* 64:5 (September-October 1976), p. 34.
- 38 Ibid., p. 35.
- 39 Aaron Siskind, "Credo," in *Photographers on Photography*, ed. Nathan Lyons (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 98.
- 40 Aaron Siskind, from "Photography as an Art Form," an unpublished lecture delivered at the Art Institute of Chicago (Nov. 7, 1958), printed in Lyons, p. 96.
- 41 Aaron Siskind, "Thoughts and Reflections," interview in *Afterimage* 1:6 (March 1973), p. 2.
- 42 Ibid.