

# Equivalence: The Perennial Trend

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When we speak of trends, we concern ourselves with changes, with shifts in style from here to there and back again. Trends are peripheral, yet we can lose ourselves in too blind a concern for them. Central to the changes is something else. If we have to give a name to this centrality, and I guess we do, one name is "Spirit." Every fashion, every trend, every style may function as a gateway to the central significance of the aesthetic experience if the individual persists. That is, though we follow trends or get on bandwagons we can always get off and head towards the eternal significance, Spirit. At best styles and trends and fashions are but clothes for the *raison d'être* of any art. At the worst, fashions, styles and trends function as traps for the unwary. I will treat here of a tradition, a concept and a discipline, namely the concept or theory called "Equivalence," by which any style, fashion or trend may be worked through to something beyond the conformism of competition.

Probably the most mature idea ever presented to picture-making photography was the concept of Equivalence which Alfred Stieglitz named early in the 1920's and practiced the rest of his life. The idea has been continued by a few others, notably at the Institute of Design in Chicago under Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan, and at the former California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco under the efforts of the present author. As a consequence the theory is in practice now by an ever increasing number of devoted and serious photographers, both amateurs and professionals. The concept and discipline of Equivalence in practice is simply the backbone and core of photography as a medium of expression-creation.

Equivalence is a pregnant discipline. Hence the photography that grows out of its practice is bound to develop and change with the photographers and writers on photographic criticism who become mature enough to understand the nature of the theory or approach. The Equivalent is one of those ideas that in practice grows by the efforts and accomplishments of the people who explore it.

To outline this theory (we hardly have space to discuss it), we will refer to "levels" of Equivalence. The term covers too much ground for a linear definition. At one level, the graphic level, the word "Equivalence" pertains to the photograph itself, the visible foundations of any potential visual experience with the photograph itself. Oddly enough, this does not mean that a photograph which functions as an Equivalent has a certain appearance, or style, or trend, or fashion. Equivalence is a function, an experience, not a thing. Any photograph, regardless of source, might function as an Equivalent to someone, sometime, someplace. If the individual viewer realizes that for him what he sees in a picture corresponds to something within himself—that is, the photograph mirrors something in himself—then his experience is some degree of Equivalence. (At least such is a small part of our present definition.)

While we are reluctant to disappoint the reader by not giving some rules or signposts by which one can spot an Equivalent twenty feet away, we would rather be true to the facts of the situation than distort them. So at this graphic level of Equivalence no specifications will be listed.

At the next level the word "Equivalence" relates to what goes on in the viewer's mind as he looks at a photograph that arouses in him a special sense of correspondence to something that he knows about himself. At a third level the word "Equivalence" refers to the inner experience a person has

while he is remembering his mental image after the photograph in question is not in sight. The remembered image also pertains to Equivalence only when a certain feeling of correspondence is present. We remember images that we want to remember. The reason why we want to remember an image varies: because we simply "love it," or dislike it so intensely that it becomes compulsive, or because it has made us realize something about ourselves, or has brought about some slight change in us. Perhaps the reader can recall some image, after the seeing of which, he has never been quite the same.

Let us return for a moment to the graphic level of the photographic equivalent. While we cannot describe its appearance, we can define its function. When any photograph functions for a given person as an Equivalent we can say that at that moment and for that person the photograph acts as a symbol or plays the role of a metaphor for something that is beyond the subject photographed. We can say this in another way; when a photograph functions as an Equivalent, the photograph is at once a record of something in front of the camera and simultaneously a spontaneous symbol. (A "spontaneous symbol" is one which develops automatically to fill the need of the moment. A photograph of the bark of a tree, for example, may suddenly touch off a corresponding feeling of roughness of character within an individual.)

When a photographer presents us with what to him is an Equivalent, he is telling us in effect, "I had a feeling about something and here is my metaphor of that feeling." The significant difference here is that what he had a feeling about was not for the subject he photographed, but for something else. He may show us a picture of a cloud, the forms of which expressively correspond to his feelings about a certain person. As he saw the clouds he was somehow reminded of the person, and probably he hopes that we will catch, in the expressive quality of the cloud forms, the same feeling that he experienced. If we do and our feelings are similar to his, he has aroused in us what was to him a known feeling. This is not exactly an easy distinction to make so maybe we can repeat. When the photographer shows us what he considers to be an Equivalent, he is showing us an expression of a feeling, but this feeling is not the feeling he had for the object that he photographed. What really happened is that he recognized an object or series of forms that, when photographed, would yield an image with specific suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state or place within himself. With constantly metamorphizing material such as water, or clouds or ice, or light on cellophane and similar materials, the infinity of forms and shapes, reflections and colors suggest all sorts and manners of emotions and tactile encounters and intellectual speculations that are supported by and formed by the material but which maintain an independent identity from which the photographer can choose what he wishes to express.

The power of the equivalent, so far as the expressive-creative photographer is concerned, lies in the fact that he can convey and evoke feelings about things and situations and events which for some reason or other are not or can not be photographed. The secret, the catch and the power lies in being able to use the forms and shapes of objects in front of the camera for their expressive- evocative qualities. Or to say this in another way, in practice Equivalency is the ability to use the visual world as the plastic material for the photographer's expressive purposes. He may wish to employ the recording power of the medium, it is strong in photography, and document. Or he may wish to emphasize its transforming power, which is equally strong, and cause the subject to stand for something else too. If he uses Equivalency consciously and knowingly, aware of what he is doing, and accepts the responsibility for his images, he has as much freedom of expression as any of the arts.

To be concrete, and leave off theory for a moment, we can return to the photograph of a cloud mentioned above. If we question the photographer, he may tell us that it stands for a certain

quality that he finds in a specific woman, namely her femininity. The photograph exhibits softness, delicacy, roundness, fluffiness and so corresponds to at least one feeling or emotion that he has about her. If we ask why he does not photograph the woman herself directly, he may answer that she is hardly photogenic, or that he wishes to establish a certain aesthetic distance between his direct feeling and his outward manifestation of it via the photograph. And this is pleasant—as we all know, too intimate a photograph of a person frequently gets in the way of the viewer's enjoyment.

This photograph of the cloud at one level is simply a record, but at another level it may function to arouse certain planned sensations and emotions. The factual side properly belongs to the photograph; the arousable implications are possible only when someone is looking at it sympathetically. So another aspect of Equivalency is this: Equivalency, while it depends entirely on the photograph itself for the source of stimulation functions in the mind of a viewer. Equivalency functions on the assumption that the following equation is factual:

### **Photograph + Person Looking Mental Image**

As we can see from the equation, Equivalence is a two-way reaction. Also we can see that only in the mental image held is there any possibility of a metaphorical function occurring.

The mechanisms by which a photograph functions as an Equivalent in a viewer's psyche are the familiar ones which the psychologists call "projection" and "empathy." In the art world the corresponding phenomenon is referred to as "expressive forms and shapes." In the world of photography the vast majority of viewers remain so subject-identification bound that they stay ignorant of the "expressive" qualities of shapes and forms or are unable to overcome their fear of letting themselves go and responding to "expressive" shapes or colors, that is, the design side of the pictorial experience. Yet fortunately, or unfortunately, as the case may be, the contemporary viewer of photographs nearly always responds subconsciously to the design embedded in photographs. This he can hardly help, as the world of advertising exploits constantly and expertly. The reader no doubt has heard of "hidden persuaders." If advertisers can use the subliminal effect of design in photography to help sell a product, a knowledgeable photographer can use the same aspect of design for more enlightened aesthetic purposes.

At a deeper level of Equivalence, the term refers to the specific effect of a photograph intended to function as an Equivalent. So far in this article it would seem that any awareness of mirroring on the part of the viewer looking at a photograph is related to Equivalence. Now we can revamp the definition somewhat to indicate that the feeling of Equivalence is specific. In literature this-specific feeling associated with Equivalence is called "poetic," using this word in a very broad and universal sense. Not having an exact equivalent for the word "poetic" in photography we will suggest the word "vision," meaning not only sight, but insight. The effect that seems to be associated with Equivalence may be worded thus: When both subject matter and manner of rendering are transcended, by whatever means, that which seems to be matter becomes what seems to be spirit.

A third level of Equivalence was mentioned earlier. This level revolves around the "remembered image." What a man remembers of vision, is always peculiarly his own because various distortions occur and change his recall image after the original stimulation has gone. These alterations from the original can only come from the individual himself. If a viewer happens to study in his mind a remembered image, who knows what degree or trajectory of Equivalence he might reach, or how far he might walk into his remembered image? The moment when a

photograph transforms into a mirror that can be walked into, either when one is looking at it, or remembering it, must always remain secret because the experience is entirely within the individual. It is personal, his own private experience, ineffable, and untranslatable. People who report on this experience tell of literal transformations before their eyes, for example a picture that they know to be of peeled paint turns into something else.

To select this moment for which to make photographs hardly seems a likely area for productive camerawork, yet secret as this moment is, a few photographers are working today who deliberately try to start from their own known feeling states to make photographs which will arouse or reach similar feeling states in others. They consciously make photographs to function as Equivalents. We can add the names of a few—Frederick Sommer in Arizona, Paul Caponigro in Massachusetts, Walter Chappell in New York, Gerald Robinson in Oregon, Arnold Gassan in Colorado; there are others.

To work in such a manner, the photographers must be able to get their work before those persons in the world who are sensitized intellectually, emotionally, and kinesthetically—not a numerous audience to be sure, even if widespread. Universality, that quality always thought to be desirable in photographs and pictures, is not denied to such photographers. It is their efforts that matter, to communicate-evoke with individuals who are in tune with the central core of universality common to both man and spirit.

### **Equivalence, Mirror of the Psyche**

The perennial trend, as old as man in art, seems to have appeared in photography at the beginning of this century. At first it was rather vague in the work and writings of the Photo-Secession group around Stieglitz and Edward Steichen in New York; then it was named, as was said, by Stieglitz in the early twenties. The perennial trend is still not generally understood by photographers or their critics.

There seems to be growing frequency on the part of contemporary thinkers about photography to point out that people see themselves in photographs in spite of themselves. Nathan Lyons, Assistant Director of Eastman House, asks the members of his private classes whether they see what they believe, or believe what they see. And most of us see what we wish to see in a photograph, or anything else—not what is actually present. Cameras are far more impartial than their owners and employers. In other words projection and empathy, natural attributes in man, lead us to see something of ourselves almost automatically in anything that we look at long enough to be aware of it. So we can say that the photograph invariably functions as a mirror of at least some part of the viewer. From extensive researches in audience responses to photographs done at the Rochester Institute of Technology, it is evident that many persons looking at a photograph see something of themselves first, and the photographer behind the camera second, if at all. To the innocent, well meaning young photographer, audience response to his photographs is a disheartening experience. They see what they wish to see, and not what he thinks that he is showing them.

Some degree of mirroring happens with any photograph, but it is especially strong with photographs rendered in a stylized or non-literal way. Mirroring is also strong in photographs in which the presence of design is equal to or supersedes the sense of the presence of the subject in front of the camera. This is the usual appearance of the "pictorial" photograph which includes design and its expressive effect as well as the recording of an aesthetic object. When the subject

matter is rendered in such a way that it is obscure, ambiguous, or impossible to identify, the response to the image takes on a completely different aspect. Since most of us have no experience of similar images except what we see in abstract or non-objective painting, we will tend to react to such photographs as if they were paintings and look for the same qualities or value relationships and all the rest of the attributes of design long familiar to us from the world of painting and sculpture. When we cannot identify the subject, we forget that the image before us may be a document of some part of the world that we have never seen. Sometimes art and nature meet in such photographs. We call them "abstractions" frequently because they remind us of similar paintings. Actually they are "extractions" or "isolations" from the world of appearances, often literal. This puts a different bearing on the ambiguous or unidentifiable subject in a photograph. And we are faced with a different encounter with the world of appearances than when we confront the painted "abstraction." Nevertheless, our usual tendency, if we make the attempt to engage, rather than reject, the ambiguous rendering of a subject in a photograph, is to invent a subject for it. What we invent is out of the stuff and substance of ourselves. When we invent a subject we turn the photograph into a mirror of some part of ourselves.

Editors such as Ralph Hattersley of Infinity Magazine, or myself of Aperture, who point out that people see themselves in photographs in spite of their protests to the contrary, are long familiar with the letters and articles of persons who insist that they do not want to solve picture puzzles. We wonder if such persons have the emotional-intellectual equipment to solve anything. Or the letters of those who insist that they are upright, honest men or women and so do not want to, or have no need, to indulge in self-searching. "Morbid" is the word most frequently applied to a knowing study of a photograph for what it might reveal of the true nature of the viewer. It would seem that any soul searching, or attempt to discover what Plato meant by "Know Thyself" is considered sickness of some sort by many contemporary Americans. In spite of protests, our own psychology finds a way to see what it wants to see in the world of appearances. This is a difficult and sore point; consequently I and many of my students have observed people's responses to photographs, and attempted to evaluate and investigate the nature of things behind the responses of many kinds of people to many types of photographs. And we observe that all too often the persons who cry "Sick, Sick, Sick" have no imagination. Or, for reasons obscure to them, they deliberately blind themselves to visual experiences that might disturb their basic insecurity. Consequently the full range of photographic possibilities of communication-evocation is a closed world to them.

Sometimes the complaint against ambiguous photographs is stated, "Art must never be a glorified Rorschach test!" Suggestibility is part of the foundations of human nature. Most of our lives depend on suggestibility, the arts especially. The documentarian in photography may communicate considerable information with his camera; the pictorialist conscious of design and its power of suggestion depends heavily on that quality in us that makes the Rorschach blot useful in therapy. The theory of Equivalence is a way for the photographer to deal with human suggestibility in a conscious and responsible way. It seems to me that to think of painting or photography as some degree of glorified Rorschach blots is not detrimental to either medium because suggestibility is the very gate to the perennial trend in art. We must observe, of course, that a gate is not quite the same as a garden.

Some contemporary photographers, such as those already named, willingly acknowledge the fact that photographs mirror some state of feeling within the viewer. They include themselves here as viewers of their own photographs and viewers of the subjects they select. They accept the truth that photographs act as a catalyst, and consequently are a step in process, not an end product. They can remember that the mental image in a viewer's mind is more important than the photograph itself.

That the photograph is a function instead of a thing is a most interesting development in the idea of the Equivalent; if indeed this is a development and not a belated understanding of what Stieglitz meant by the word. It is interesting because it reflects a certain potential change in the Freudian, Jungian and Adlerian effect on the popular ideas about psychology. Probably many a lay person still thinks psychology is dirty, has associated the dirty sides of himself with that word. True enough the inner workings of man are both dirty and clean—as are his outer relations to other men. Art traditionally claims a concern with man's pure impulses and clean motives, yet many a contemporary psychologist thinks that all this is pure hokum. So do some photographers. And in protest and in truth, in soul searching and awareness of our self-destroying age, many people in contemporary art, notably Frederick Sommer in contemporary photography, present images which are intended in such a particular way that if the viewer engages the images at all, then the viewer will see something of himself. If what he sees is unpleasant, that there may be some truth in that some part of himself is unpleasant—if dirty, morbid and so on. If he is struck with terror, perhaps he has met something worthy of his fear. If he finds something magnificent, it is because something beautiful in him has been magnified.

Four photographs are presented here by the author. Of them it may be said that what you get from them is yours. The author presents them also as showing something of himself. In other words, these photographs originate in a known feeling state. They are not self-expressive, or self-searching; they are self-found. Communication is of no importance, evocation of little significance, competition nonexistent. They are shown as an event out of which Equivalence might occur. The possibility of the reader's being confronted with something of himself is their only reason for being reproduced. They will function as mirrors of the viewer, whether he admits it or not. It will not be pointed out which of the images knows happiness, the one that knows anger, or the one that knows sadness because viewers of photographs need the opportunity to learn faith in their own feelings.

With the theory of Equivalence, photographers everywhere are given a way of learning to use the camera in relation to the mind, heart, viscera and spirit of human beings. The perennial trend has barely been started in photography.