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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1952, just as an upstart little magazine called *Aperture* was making its first appearance, the photographer Minor White completed and shopped around the manuscript for an instructional book titled *Cameras Are for Seeing*. Like many of the books White envisioned over the course of his career, it remained unpublished—there were no takers—but, just as typically, its content overlaps with much of his other published and unpublished writing. The book sought to explain photography’s “inherent characteristics,” its relationship to art and to other branches of photographic practice, and its connections to broader notions of analysis and synthesis, creativity and process. The manuscript was loaded down with a highly verbalized framework of terms and dichotomies, but White promised that these could be internalized with repetition and practice. “After a long and painful period of conscious learning,” he wrote, “the whole routine of camera and concepts becomes automatic. . . . Then the man is free to see, to think and feel with a camera wide awake, unblinking, at his eye.”¹ The manuscript was one of White’s many unfinished or unresolved attempts to explain how an image-making technology could guide an individual’s creative practice and personal growth and shape their seeing.

If cameras are for seeing, why do we need photographs? Or, put a little more bluntly: Why should *my* personal growth matter to *you*? White had fewer answers on that score. That might have been fine; maybe it wasn’t a burning question in the early 1950s. Photography was a widely practiced and ever-growing hobby and pastime (supported and propelled by a manufacturing industry and a media/publishing ecosystem). Familiar notions of craft and art were more than sufficient to account for the moments of amateur activity where one aimed for something more ambitious than snapshots for the family album. Even a limited model of relatively private self-expression could find a place or play a role in society. “Maybe we can re-open some discussion on . . . the artist and society in general,” wrote a friend of White’s in 1946, after they had both survived their military service. “Art in itself is a great reward to the artist. The mere act of creating something personal and sincere is an end in itself. Whether the works are sold or ever desired by others is of less importance. . . . It sure beats the Army way of trying to satisfy somebody who is trying to satisfy somebody else, ad nauseam.”² The sentiment strikes a crisp contrast with both military hierarchy and its civilian counterpart, the famed “organization man” of midcentury sociological analysis.

But organizations were the order of the day. In parallel with fellow photographers Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan, among others, White was working to carve out a new role and status for art photography in the postwar decades. All three were working to build a field, and their efforts were centered on—and central to—photography’s migration into institutions of higher education in the United States. White, Siskind, and Callahan were icons among the first

generation of college-level photography teachers, and they did much to establish the role of photographer-teacher as a lifeline for those seeking to define themselves as artists in the face of commercial and professional pressures and alternatives.

The process began in smaller schools of art and design, and throughout their own teaching careers White, Siskind, and Callahan found employment in institutions that called themselves “schools” and “institutes” rather than colleges or universities. But within a generation, the models of photographic education they developed—on the fly in the GI Bill years of the 1940s, with further revision and codification in the 1950s—had touched nearly every corner of US higher education, frequently carried there by the three photographers’ own students. White, Siskind, and Callahan found plenty of critical success, and their photographs helped fill the burgeoning field of museum photography collections in the later decades of their lives. But the consequences of their careers in photography were as much organizational as aesthetic, leading both directly and indirectly to the creation of academic programs, publishing enterprises, and professional societies, and to filling those organizations and institutions with their own network of contacts.

In those institutional contexts, personal ends in themselves rarely stood on their own without supplemental justification. Students, colleagues, and administrators all had to be satisfied, ad nauseam. Reframed not as a hobby, trade, or vocation but as an academic degree, photography trailed all manner of pesky questions behind itself. What do a photographer’s experiences, looking through a camera, really have to do with the flat, static, marked surfaces—the photographs—that follow? What do those photographs offer to their eventual viewers, and how do they, or how should they, expand or focus or limit a viewer’s visual experience? What do those basic issues of the medium have to do with the goals and outcomes of a college education? The decades following World War II in the United States were overflowing with suggestions for how an individual might experience their world or capture their experiences of the world through photography; but it may have been less clear what one person’s seeing might mean to others. One answer, the one that began to crystallize around White, Siskind, and Callahan, was that it could define both a curriculum and a potential career path.

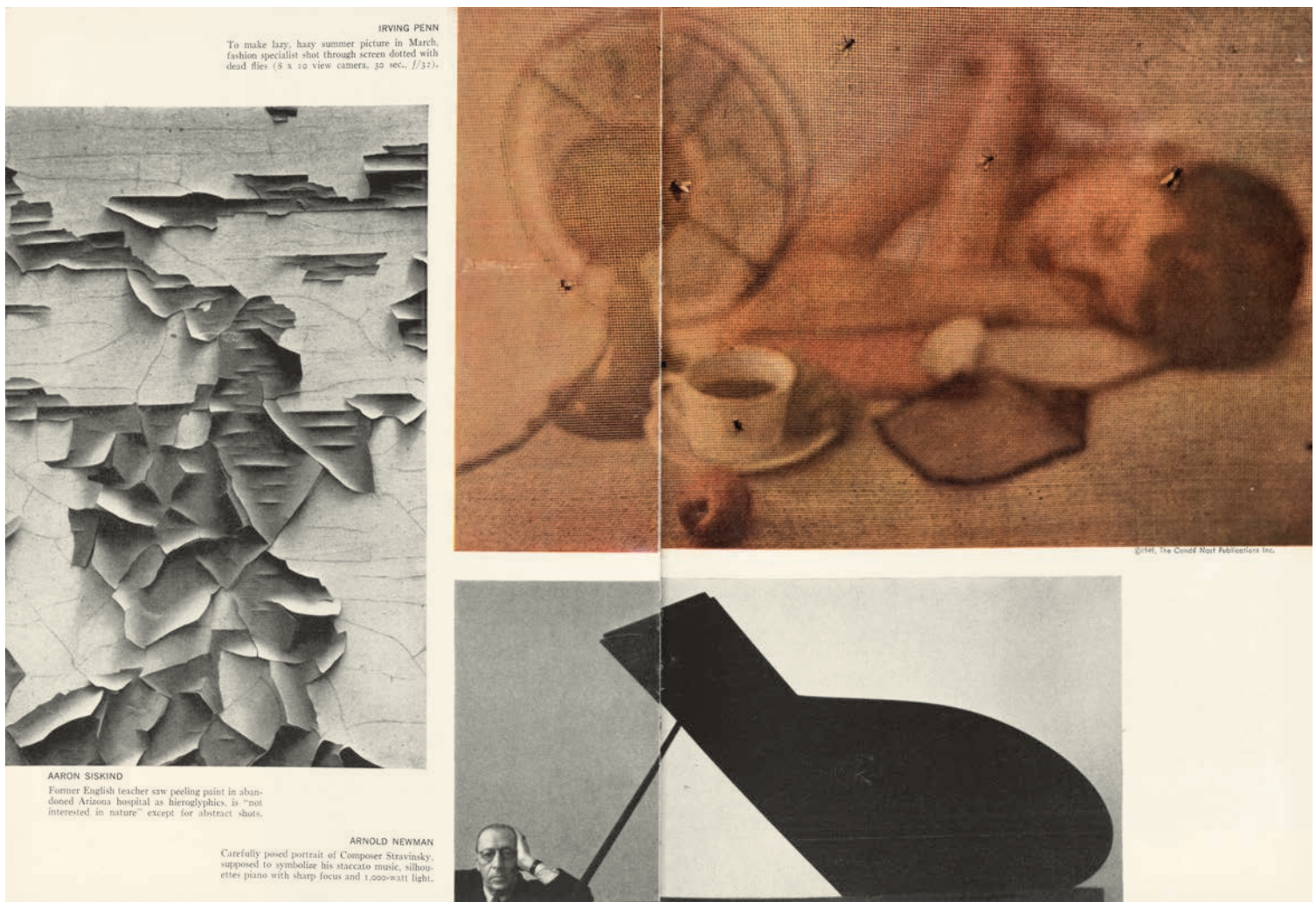
lessons in photography

This is a book about why and how institutions of higher education became places to learn photography. It is also a book about a growing embrace of photography as a vehicle for learning and personal growth. Learning photography—but also learning *through* photography. Those are overlapping concerns, certainly, but not identical ones; this is a two-sided story. The narratives that follow consider the double meaning of “lessons in photography”—the phrase



1 / Cover of *Time*, November 2, 1953

2 / Spread from “Two Billion Clicks: Half a Century of U.S. Photography,” *Time*, November 2, 1953. Photographs by Aaron Siskind (left), Irving Penn (top right), and Arnold Newman (bottom right)



appears in the title of another of White's manuscripts — and show how those meanings sometimes aligned and sometimes conflicted. The *how-to* framing of the chapters aims to capture both the semester-to-semester details of how White, Siskind, and Callahan introduced a rapidly growing population of eager beginners to the building blocks of their field (cameras, darkroom techniques, and print study) and the evolving subtexts and stakes of learning those things.

It all happened against the background of an overwhelming volume of amateur usage and a limited vision of professional alternatives. "Two Billion Clicks" was how *Time* magazine [1, 2], in 1953, estimated the likely output from that year alone of "the most typical art of the 20th century, and perhaps the only national folk art yet produced by the U.S." Against *Time's* estimate of \$300 million spent on equipment and supplies that year, it worked out to a mere fifteen cents per picture — assuming, of course, they were all winners. More than that, *Time* gladly noted that "the majority of good professional U.S. photographers work for the printed page. . . . The printed page is perhaps where photography is truly at home. It seems too restless for museum walls."³ Artists, teachers, and program-builders like White, Siskind, and Callahan faced an uphill climb on both counts: They had to prove the viability of a different

model of professionalism, and they had to keep museum walls in sight while coming to terms with the printed page.

From the 1940s into the 1970s, against that huge and yet still-growing volume of amateur and mass-media practice, photography became an academic discipline: a specialized field of knowledge that more or less made itself at home within the disciplinary structure of the university. It most commonly, though not exclusively, found its place in proximity to studio art; its somewhat newer technical basis could pull photography in the directions of design or engineering as well. But photography was also promoted, and sought out, as a disciplining activity in the much more general sense — as the kind of structured activity through which we encounter, define, or refine ourselves. In that role, it was potentially more interchangeable with other sources of self-structuring and self-cultivation (like, say, the reading of poetry, but maybe also yoga or meditation). The teaching and learning of photography opened onto both technical skills and “transferrable” skills, as we call them today, with the balance between them perpetually under review — which makes it sound like a microcosm of perennial issues in higher education itself.

The development of an academic field around the practice of art photography and the idea of a photographer’s “personal vision” was hardly a predetermined outcome, and it relied on at least three historical factors. The first was its alignment with an era of rapid expansion in US higher education, fueled by the GI Bill, sustained by the Cold War–era National Defense Education Act, and amplified by population growth. It was a time when the tools for seeing and experiencing the world, and for expressing and sharing one’s vision and experience, seemed like they could be offered up to any and every willing person; when the institutional and instructional infrastructure for imparting those values and tools seemed scalable without limit; and when voices across the system of higher education actively demanded a “general” education for “whole” selves instead of a more narrowly delimited vocational path. The seeds were planted earlier — some photographers and photography historians had set their sights on greater rigor and professionalization by the 1930s — but the growth medium in which they took root was the rising demand for college degrees.

From our vantage point today, the decades following World War II now look like an obvious bubble, an anomalous moment for American colleges and universities, bracketed by the GI Bill in the 1940s and the arrival of the baby boomers at college in the 1960s and 1970s. By the early 1970s, the growth of the total system had already slowed, and the job market for college photography instructors had reached its saturation point. There were vastly more students in photography courses and programs than could ever find employment as professors of photography. Why bother teaching, in those circumstances, and why bother learning? From the 1940s into the 1970s, a generation or more of teachers and students of photography increasingly grappled with

those questions—and with the institutional surroundings in which the questions were posed. They were never answered conclusively.

the indecisive network

The second and third factors involve a pair of historical coincidences: namely, that those bubble years of the US university also overlapped with the heydays—and swan songs—of both abstract painting and the picture press in the United States. Abstraction and mass media had significant impacts on the unfolding institutionalization of photographic education; each was a source of affinities and antipathies as so-called creative photography worked to locate and define itself through a process of triangulation. Here, *Aperture* magazine enters the story as a crucial complement and counterpart to schools, programs, and degrees.

Cameras are for seeing, but they also yield photographs. Sometimes photographs resemble abstract art in other mediums, as the work of White, Siskind, and Callahan often did. In such cases, a photograph might frustrate one's expectation of seeing a recognizable subject through another's eyes; such an experience can be difficult to account for. The photographs and photographic styles that established White, Siskind, and Callahan as leading "creative" photographers were at once hailed and criticized for their apparent similarities to midcentury abstract painting, with its typical emphasis on inner feeling, emotional experience, and self-expression. It is a strange circumstance that three photographers known, in part, for close-ups of peeling paint and dripping tar, for graphic reductions of tone to line, for all-over textures and unrecognizable subjects—for their traffic in strategies of abstraction—were so centrally involved in figuring out what it meant to offer, and to pursue, an institutional education in photography.

Photographs without a clear or immediate referent aligned nicely with "foundations" models of art instruction, a recent import to the United States from the German Bauhaus. This approach to art and design training was not about the reproduction of exemplary models, nor even primarily about depiction or representation as such. Instead, the foundations approach prioritized hands-on knowledge of basic tools and concepts, and then worked toward the possibility of novel applications or novel syntheses of those basic building blocks. It was a form of visual education that took abstraction for granted, both as a starting point and as a possible destination. But photographs in the neighborhood of abstraction also aligned nicely with important values in the humanities. This was particularly true of the poetic celebration of uncertainty and ambiguity, qualities that literary criticism often sought to dwell upon or dwell within, rather than to explain away. Indeed, in the 1940s and 1950s, wherever "creative" photography sought to explain its relationship to either painting or mass-media

photography, one finds recourse to analogies with poetry. The analogies helped explain how art photography conceived of itself in opposition to a photojournalistic mass-media culture of instantaneous messages and instrumentalized communication.

Indeed, *Aperture*, as a preeminent showcase for creative photography—among however small an audience—was crafted both in opposition to *and* in emulation of the dominant presence of photojournalism in the postwar decades. White was the founding editor of *Aperture*, which first appeared in 1952, and Siskind and Callahan were among the most important exemplars of the vision for photography he propounded in its pages. Both in print and in the evidence of White's archive, it is clear that he saw them as his most important fellow travelers, as proof of concept for the kind of art making he sought to practice and teach. But to sell that idea of photography, he perceived, might require the printed page as well as the classroom. To counter the dominant model of photojournalism, one might just have to master its native medium of word and image, and demonstrate how that hybrid medium could be deployed to other ends.

Testing that alternative in the early, uncertain first decades of *Aperture*, White created the node that would allow a scattered but growing group of photographers and photography teachers to see their pictures and their classrooms as part of a common cause. Whereas photojournalism defined itself in terms of its *impact*, creative photography would be characterized by *ambiguity* and *experience*. Just like photojournalism, however, the cultivation of an audience—finding it, gathering it, shaping its expectations—was an essential part of the work at hand. For White, Siskind, and Callahan, the success of their approach to photography would depend upon the creation of that audience, the members of which often looked, subscribed, and enrolled because of the pictures they aspired to make themselves. Exhibitions, publications, and classrooms all had essential network-building roles to play; context building ensured the success of a decontextualized photographic style. That process of diffusion and culture building laid, however well or poorly, some of the foundations of the field today.

The growing network of postwar photography education may be called “indecisive” in two senses. First, the values it championed, like abstraction and ambiguity, lay in opposition to the “decisive network” of postwar photojournalism.⁴ And second, as it all happened, neither the short-term best practices nor the long-term objectives of *professing* photography were particularly clear. Nobody had been trained for this; they were inventing the training as they went along. At times, it has to be said, the professionalization of photography could be a decidedly unprofessional undertaking, ad hoc and improvisational to the point of comedy.

MFA vs. NYC vs. MIT

In the wake of the literary scholar Mark McGurl's 2009 study *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, the phrase "MFA vs. NYC" came to serve as shorthand for the historical formation of "two cultures" in contemporary creative writing—one rooted in university writing programs like the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the other in the publishing networks of New York City—that are distinct yet necessarily interdependent.⁵ Related patterns serve to illuminate aspects of postwar photography as well, though one telling difference is that literature and writing were already relatively at home in US universities before the GI Bill and the postwar years. As photographers adapted themselves to the context of higher education, charting career paths that stood in opposition to photojournalism, they nevertheless remained aware of and pressured by that commercial world just beyond the ivory tower.

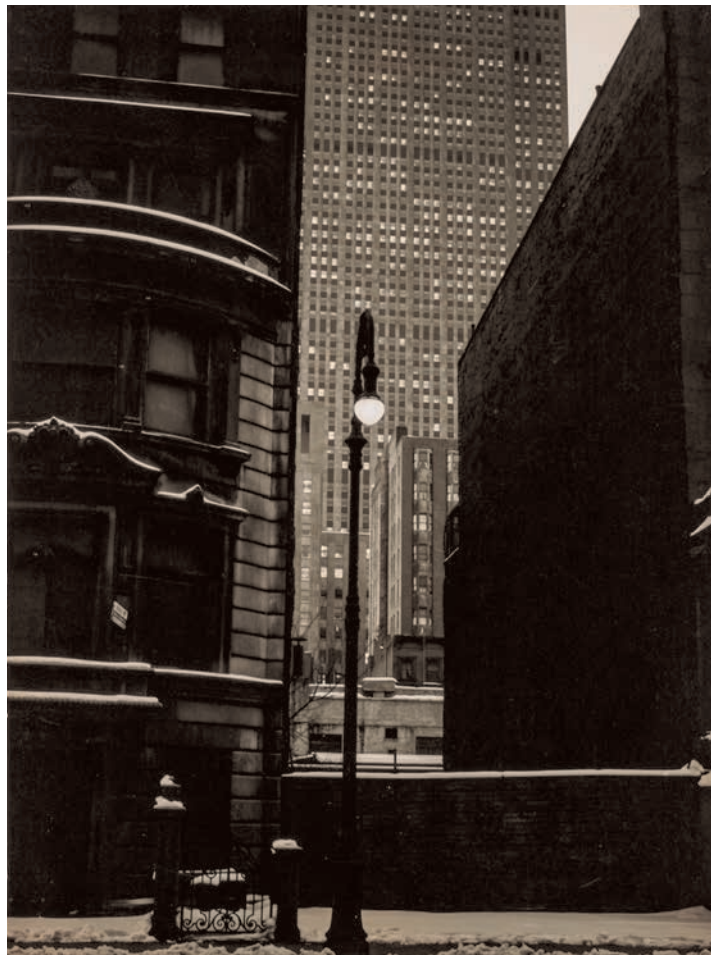
"Photographer, stay home!" This was the photography critic Jacob Deschin's exhortation, in the early 1960s, to those readers of the magazine *Popular Photography* thinking of trying their luck in New York City. There, in "the country's huge center of photographic markets," he felt the commercial field was already overcrowded.⁶ In the competing magazine *Modern Photography*, the writer and photographer Patricia Caulfield would recommend *Aperture* to "small town" photographers as a replacement for the artistic context and discourse of larger cities.⁷ Deschin's and Caulfield's advice echoed the evolving geography of creative photography in the postwar decades, dispersed across a more regionalized network of formal institutions (and, later, informal workshops) that linked Chicago and San Francisco to Rochester, then Bloomington, Portland, Providence, Denver, Cleveland, Boston, and elsewhere. Siskind and Callahan taught together at the Institute of Design (ID) in Chicago, and then again at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence. White began at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) in San Francisco, taught at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) during the crucial first decade of *Aperture*, and finished his career at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The institutional embedding of photography as a creative practice took place across a scattered collection of relatively decentralized locations and in contrast (and dialogue) with the mass-media practice of photojournalism and its centralization in New York City.

White, Siskind, and Callahan all had formative early experiences in New York, though they came to shape programs and networks of creative practice away from the city. Siskind was a native New Yorker, molded by the intellectual currents of the city and his involvement in the leftist, documentary-oriented Photo League during the 1930s. White and Callahan, both Midwesterners, each traveled to New York in 1945 to make photographs and make connections. There, they made pilgrimages to meet the photographer Alfred Stieglitz [3, 4, 5], as had their role models, the photographers Edward Weston and Ansel Adams,



**3 / Alfred Stieglitz,
Equivalent—1927,
1927**

**4 / Minor White,
*West 53rd Street and
RCA Building, New
York City, 1946***





**5 / Harry Callahan,
New York, 1945**

before them, and they met other luminaries in the field such as Berenice Abbott, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, and Edward Steichen. As they departed the city to begin an era of program building, White, Siskind, and Callahan remained keenly aware of New York's holy trinity of *Life*, Magnum, and the Museum of Modern Art—epitomizing the popular press, photojournalism, and museum collections and exhibitions of photography—but also of their own distance from those nodes.

The popular photographic press, which was as rooted in the New York publishing world as any other segment of the market, provided a kind of connective tissue that bridged the gap between the mass amateur market and the narrower slice of aspiring photographers found in college programs. But magazines such as *American Photography*, *Modern Photography*, and *Popular Photography* were just as likely to declare themselves a superior source of knowledge compared to art schools and to *Aperture* alike. Considering the number of new photo magazines available on the newsstand each month, to say nothing of the many instructional books that crowded White's various manuscripts out of the market, could you be a student just by being a reader? What did RIT really have to offer that couldn't be found in the pages of *Popular Photography*?⁸

Within the loose analogy to creative writing suggested here, White, Siskind, and Callahan stand together on one side of a divide in photographic practice, working to redefine art photography against the backdrop of mass media. Within that framing, “Chicago and Rochester” could serve as a rough equivalent for “Iowa,” shorthand for the simultaneous development of a way of doing things and a culture of teaching students to do things that way. But Chicago and Rochester were not the last stops or the end of the story, and White, Siskind, and Callahan had never been perfectly aligned in their art making, their methods and motivations for teaching, or their goals and visions for photography. As Chicago and Rochester became Providence and Boston during the 1960s, long-standing differences came to the fore. Callahan spearheaded one of the quintessential MFA programs in photography at RISD, and graduated some of the most prominent photographers—and photographer-teachers—of the next generation. White, by contrast, recalibrated his teaching at MIT almost entirely to the viewer's share in the experience of photographs, often ignoring, and sometimes actively resisting, any concern for careers in photography or for the nature or limits of art. White's MIT years lifted him to guru status in the 1970s; as critical tides began to turn, the image of those years also turned him into a punchline and a pariah over the course of the 1980s. However much White's and Callahan's visions diverged from each other, though, neither truly aligned with an emerging postmodernism or the critical elevation of “artists using photography” in contemporary art discourse. Abstraction helped photography get into college but delayed and deflected its path into contemporary art.

snapshots

This book draws on objects and events that range from the 1930s into the 1970s, but many of its key moments can be sketched out along a short series of five-year checkpoints just after World War II.

The year is 1946: The GI Bill has begun delivering an influx of students to the nation's colleges and other institutions. The growing enrollments lead the still-young ID in Chicago to launch an expanded, four-year program in photography. Its founder, the Bauhaus émigré László Moholy-Nagy, makes two important hires: first Arthur Siegel, one of the school's own graduates, to spearhead the new program; and then, on Siegel's recommendation, the Detroit photographer Harry Callahan, a relatively unknown amateur. Moholy-Nagy, already quite sick from leukemia, would not survive the year. Among the returning GIs elsewhere is Minor White, who enrolls in courses at Columbia University with the legendary art historian Meyer Schapiro while also connecting at MoMA — it was a small world back then — with Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, both groundbreaking scholars and curators of photography. White is thus embroiled in a major moment in the history of his field when leadership of MoMA's photography department passes to Edward Steichen, a media-minded fashion photographer (among his many possible descriptions). White departs MoMA in solidarity with the Newhalls and joins Ansel Adams in founding a new photography program at CSFA. Aaron Siskind, meanwhile, is a veteran teacher in the New York public schools, now several years into a body of unusual photographs that put him at odds with his documentary-minded former colleagues in the leftist Photo League and bring him into the orbit of Abstract Expressionist painters.

Chapter one, "How to Hold a Camera," begins with the practical matter of choosing one's tools. The various cameras on the market at this time afforded different bodily relationships to a photographer's subject matter and to the image-in-progress the photographer sought to record. A curious beginner could treat those differences as active variables and, in doing so, rapidly find themselves in the vicinity of main currents in modern art. The choice of tools (and magazines and books) could also orient a learner among varying attitudes toward skill and craft. The era was marked by open questions and competing opinions about how much training was necessary — or desirable — for beginning photographers. Debates about photographic education thus paralleled larger conversations about the balance between knowledge and know-how in higher education, and about what distinguished true education from "mere training."

The year is 1951: After showing his work at Egan Gallery in New York City, Siskind leaves his high school teaching career and his hometown and joins Callahan at the ID, which has become part of the Illinois Institute of Technology. Before settling in Chicago, Siskind teaches a summer session, with

Callahan and Siegel alongside him, at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. That fall, White joins with Adams, the Newhalls, the photographer Dorothea Lange, and others in Aspen, Colorado, for a wide-ranging conference on photography that ultimately leads to the founding of *Aperture*, with White as its editor; the first issue will appear in 1952. In addition to Lange and Nancy Newhall, *Aperture's* founders include the photographers Barbara Morgan and Dody Warren, with Imogen Cunningham and Lisette Model claiming firm places within the magazine's vision of photography. But through the rest of the 1950s, both *Aperture* and the growing field of college programs around it were almost exclusively dominated by men. The Newhalls are now in Rochester, where Beaumont has become curator at George Eastman House; White will follow them in 1953 when, for a murky collection of reasons, he loses his position at CFSA.

Chapter two, "How to Print a Picture," traces *Aperture's* convergence, during its early years, with a growing concern for the photograph as an independent visual experience, or what Siskind called "an altogether new object." The new print publication was finding its niche and aligning itself with "picture-minded" photographers. Just as the practice of "creative" photography did, *Aperture* worked to define itself by opposition or negation — most directly in relation to photojournalism and more generally in relation to the competing models of folk/amateur and commercial/professional photography. These efforts fueled a further attempt to recuperate the turn-of-the-century notion of pictorialism and redefine it for the magazine era, when a successful picture might need to travel between ink on paper and silver prints.

The year is 1956: White, Siskind, and Callahan appear together in an issue of *Aperture* focused on college programs and the current state of photographic instruction in higher education. The issue grows, in part, out of a summer conference on photography and teaching organized by Henry Holmes Smith at Indiana University. The pages of *Aperture* and the field in general are still roiled by the impact of MoMA's *The Family of Man* photography exhibition, a spectacular, humanist celebration of families worldwide that debuted in 1955. White joins Newhall at Eastman House, then departs in favor of a greater focus on teaching at RIT (where he meets undergraduate students Peter C. Bunnell and Carl Chiarenza, both to play important roles in writing the histories of the era). White bids farewell to his first of many subsequent private students-in-residence, John Upton, and begins his first private workshop. Callahan's career suddenly accelerates, with his inclusion in the Venice Biennale and several other exhibitions and the receipt of a Graham Foundation grant that will send him abroad in 1957.

Chapter three, "How to Read a Photograph," turns to problems of photographic interpretation, with particular emphasis on the iconic late-1950s volumes of *Aperture*. This was the moment of White, Siskind, and Callahan's greatest

convergence, when the latter two were a cornerstone of White's editorial agenda, and when *Aperture* was shaping national conversations about photographic education. As an idea of photography-as-poetry was put into practice — as interpretive methods were tested in classrooms and in print — the magazine quickly entangled itself with psychology, philosophy, and esoteric practices. White's growing mysticism, which would separate him from Siskind and Callahan in the 1960s, emerged from a focus on the foundations of photographic reading and interpretation.

The year is 1961: Siskind's and Callahan's graduate students at the ID appear in *Aperture* just as Callahan departs Chicago to found a new program at RISD; it will be ten years before he convinces Siskind to join him there. White has begun cultivating a far-flung network of stand-alone photography workshops, teaching and learning opportunities that ventured even further into his personal philosophy and esoteric interests than his ongoing university instruction. A few years later, those extramural teaching methods will converge with White's classroom teaching when he is recruited, following unsuccessful overtures to both Callahan and Siskind, to initiate photography courses at MIT.

Chapter four, "How to Find Your Audience," examines a decade of dissemination and reputation building, from Siskind's first artist's book, in 1959, to White's only artist's book, in 1969. It looks at the reception of major photography exhibitions and of a range of publications, from poetry journals in which photographs appeared to full-scale artist's books, all of which fueled the growth of photography programs in turn. But it also highlights the clear divergence from Siskind and Callahan in White's teaching and art making alike, as he arrived at unusual perspectives on color photography, on slide projection as a kind of performance medium, and on his real-time, in-person relationship with live audiences.

Chapter five, "How to Expand Your Horizons," gathers White, Siskind, and Callahan back together and sets them in relief against broader changes in their field. In their later teaching years, they all traveled more widely in search of new experiences and new pictures. By the mid-1970s, when all three retired from teaching, they were also puzzling over dramatic shifts in visual culture and youth culture. And they were grappling with the emergence of competing approaches to photography: the snapshot aesthetic, conceptual art, and the rise of "artists using photography."

• • •

As already suggested, *Photography as a Way of Life* explores a specific point of view on these decades and developments, one that privileges *Aperture* magazine and the depth of the Minor White Archive at the Princeton University Art

Museum. It engages Siskind's and Callahan's careers on their own terms, but also acknowledges how White's editorial direction of *Aperture* often framed or pressured — for better or worse — the ways in which their photographs were published and discussed. The three photographers were never employed together; more personally, Siskind and Callahan were never among White's closest friends or colleagues, and vice versa. Still, as one retraces White's published and unpublished commentaries on the state of the field, his course outlines and lecture notes and comments to students, it is clear that Siskind's and Callahan's examples and achievements were constantly in his field of view. At moments they offered something to react against, but more often something to stand beside. In the 1940s, while teaching at CSFA, White justified his focus on psychological interpretation as an antidote to "Bauhaus creative methods."⁹ More typical, though, is his insistence to RIT students around 1959 and 1960 that there were only two programs in the country — his and Siskind and Callahan's — where one could truly explore photography as an expressive medium.

Siskind and Callahan left important archives of their own, now held at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and the material stored there, alongside material found in repositories like the Museum of Modern Art and George Eastman House, has informed this project at every step. But writing was a vastly more important aspect of White's career, and he left a different kind of paper trail. That archival record includes a chorus of hundreds of correspondents who, for reasons of space, will await future projects to be called upon. One notable voice among them is the photographer, critic, and rival textbook author David Vestal, who lovingly but unrelentingly needled White about his philosophy, editorial agenda, and vision for the field. Vestal is a welcome reminder that the Minor White Archive sometimes can be a repository of skepticism and doubt, including but not limited to White's own. "From all evidence, institutions and education are the most formally organized anti-learning corporations we have among us," Vestal protested, as *Aperture* ramped up its coverage of photographic education. "The way for teachers to use institutions is the way actors use jobs as dishwashers: to make an emergency buck and to observe the 'types.' I do think anything else is a joke."¹⁰

1.

1. HOW TO HOLD A CAMERA

on the move, in the streets

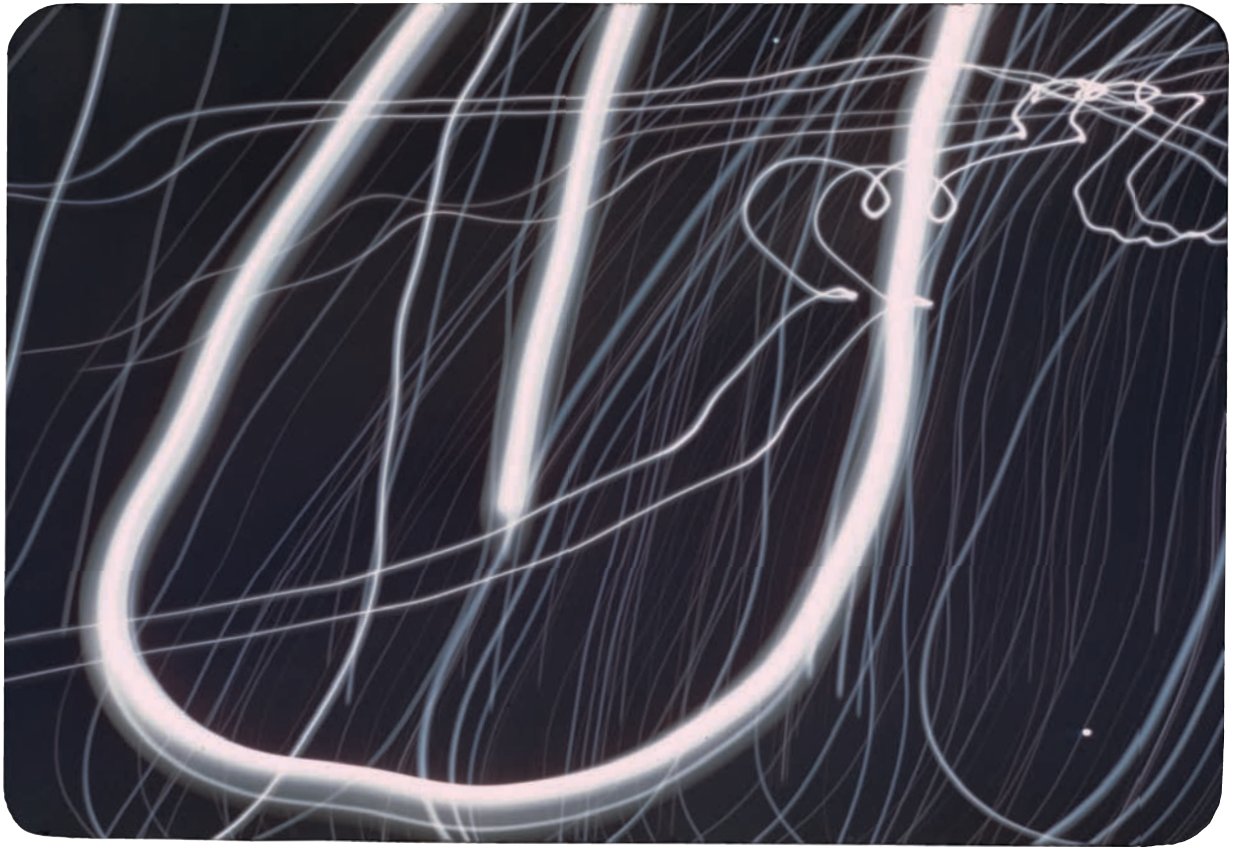
White lines on black, black lines on white. Auspicious beginnings. White on black: Picture skittering, irregular twists and loops, luminous, soft at their edges, sometimes broadening into transparency—and imagine the fine motor activity of fingers and wrists redirecting the lens of a 35mm camera with an open shutter, each gesture enlarged or scaled up, as with a pantograph, to rapidly sweep across the height and width of a picture, but also multiplied, as if drawing with multiple pens in hand [6]. Black on white: Picture thin, crisply defined vectors across a stark white background—and imagine a vintage twin-lens camera in hand, its lenses at a right angle to its viewfinder, along with the gross motor activity of the whole body, seeking foot and eye and hand positions that will turn overhead wires into a perfectly aligned pattern on the camera's ground glass [7]. Fluctuating depth, perceptual ambiguity, both gestural and hard-edge approaches to abstract design. Amazing what beginners can do in photography.

To call Harry Callahan a “beginner” in 1943 or any later year probably overstates the case a bit. He'd learned too much already from sources that seem, today, improbably accessible relative to their fame. Directly from Ansel Adams; indirectly, by way of Callahan's friend and future colleague Arthur Siegel, from László Moholy-Nagy. He had dedicated too much time to the shared pursuit of a passion for photography with other dedicated and highly skilled amateurs.¹ Even as a camera club member, Callahan already imagined himself pursuing a more advanced and refined vision of photography than the average hobbyist. *Amateur*, then, would be the better term. And if we want to say that he traded it in for “professional” status in 1946, when he began teaching at Moholy-Nagy's Institute of Design (ID) in Chicago, it would have to be the paycheck alone, and not any kind of credential, that marks the distinction.

Where would the credential have come from, anyway? Photography was many things—a vocation, a hobby, a media ecosystem, a means of selling and informing—but hardly an academic course of study. Rarely even a school subject, for that matter. You could learn from magazines and guidebooks, most of them funded directly or indirectly by the manufacturers whose products you'd be taught to use. You could join a camera club. You could apprentice with a working photographer. If geography was in your favor, you could have participated in the waning years of the Photo League in New York City.² But in 1946, to be *trained* for anything resembling the teaching of studio photography as an academic subject, in an art-school or design-school setting, you'd have had to attend Callahan's own program at the ID—or else the new photography program at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) in San Francisco, founded by Ansel Adams but rapidly handed off to Minor White, another highly skilled and implausibly well-connected beginner.

**6 / Harry Callahan,
Camera Movement,
ca. 1943–46**

**7 / Harry Callahan,
Telephone Wires,
ca. 1945**



Instead of lines, a jumble of shapes and edges. In a gridded, outdoor city plaza, temporary partitions hold an array of framed paintings. It's 1949, but the art on view may be modern only in a chronological sense; most of the paintings are still lifes, floral arrangements, and landscapes. The setting is an art fair that White was exploring with fellow photographers Nata Piaskowski and Lisette Model [8]. Piaskowski, a student of White's at CSFA, leans back and tucks her chin while cradling a handheld camera aimed at the partition before her. Next to her, Model raises her 35mm camera and, with a slight cock of the hips, appears to capture White in the act of photographing them. If Model actually



8 / Minor White,
San Francisco,
September 30, 1949

9 / Minor White,
San Francisco, April
1951

photographed White in return, her picture never saw the light of day, but White captured himself in the same basic mode a couple of years later. On the streets of San Francisco in 1951, he grabbed a quick self-portrait in a window reflection, camera in hand; another photographer, likely one of White's students, shares the frame [9]. Model was visiting California in the fall of 1949 and had been engaged as a visiting instructor at CSFA; Piaskowski recalled Model's brief tenure as her first introduction to small-format cameras.³ Model's teaching was important to CSFA's students, and her work had an impact on students and instructors alike. In her wake, White immersed himself in making, teaching, and theorizing small-format photography—in exploring the kinds of cameras that Model used for searing portraits, and Callahan for swirling abstractions. These were crucible years for White, years when he was absorbed

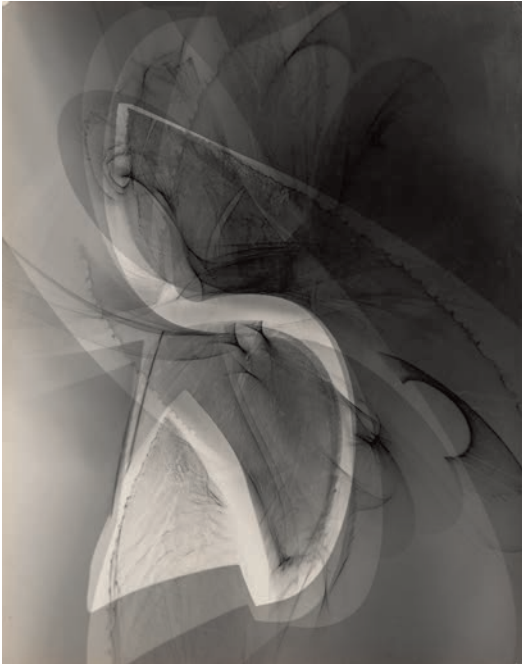
in the lives and ideas of Adams, Beaumont Newhall, and Nancy Newhall; was putting his stamp on the CSFA curriculum; and was expanding his aims as a photographer and writer. By 1952 that matrix of concerns would shape the emergence of the new magazine *Aperture*.⁴

The 1940s saw Callahan and White beginning to lead their respective photography programs while also exploring the possibilities of small, mobile cameras. Photographers had plenty of cameras to choose from in those days; school-minded photographers had a narrower choice of programs before them. Both choices were bound up with bigger questions about what beginning photographers needed to know and where and how they should acquire that knowledge. Those concerns, in turn, were enmeshed with midcentury debates about higher education itself, about the difference between true education and “mere training.” Handheld cameras weren’t the whole story, but they shaped teaching, writing, and picture making in significant ways; they could lead, at varying moments, toward the abstractions of midcentury modern art, toward questions about the creative work of photographers, and toward the dominant presence of photojournalism and mass media. All those interests and pressures affected the new crop of photography programs, but they also shaped *Aperture’s* entry into the field. As a field and a discipline, photography was coming into sharper focus. It was time to pick up a camera and get started.

makers and materials

The new program at CSFA, the expanding program at the ID, and the relatively more established Photo League all had their own ideas about where and how a beginning photographer should begin. They all prized the feeling of discovery but offered different points of departure. The ID emphasized discovery of the medium’s potentials, via firsthand experiments with its tools and materials. Students there began with the photogram, or cameraless image made directly on photographic paper, which introduced them to the principles of light sensitivity and tonal gradation and the idea that photography might be more than a reproductive medium. CSFA emphasized discovery of one’s self, though couched within a highly prescriptive vision of technique and craftsmanship. Its curriculum emphasized larger, tripod-mounted view cameras, which took individual sheets of film, encouraged careful framing, and allowed for precise control over exposure. The League sent students out to discover subject matter first and foremost, trusting that they would arrive at technique and a clearer sense of themselves somewhere along the way. Handheld cameras loaded with roll film, known at the time as miniature cameras, were one of the essential tools in this trial-and-error approach. Choosing different starting points, those organizations also made different assumptions about where and how self-expression would factor into a student’s beginnings. The photogram, the view camera, and the miniature camera offer easy emblems of the three

approaches, if ultimately reductive ones. There was far more to each program, including a growing interest in smaller cameras in all corners. More than that, the relationship between the three programs was a topic of active debate. Hiring decisions, exhibitions, and publications all signaled an increasingly national conversation, whose key participants were triangulating among these competing approaches to makers and materials.⁵



10 / Arthur Siegel,
Photogram, 1947

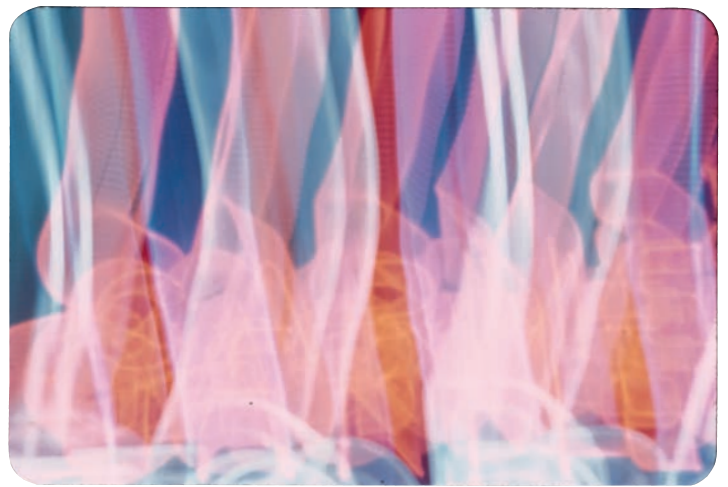
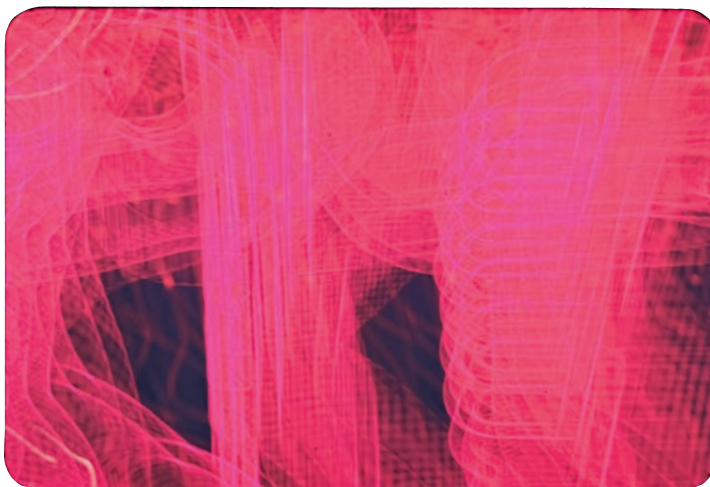
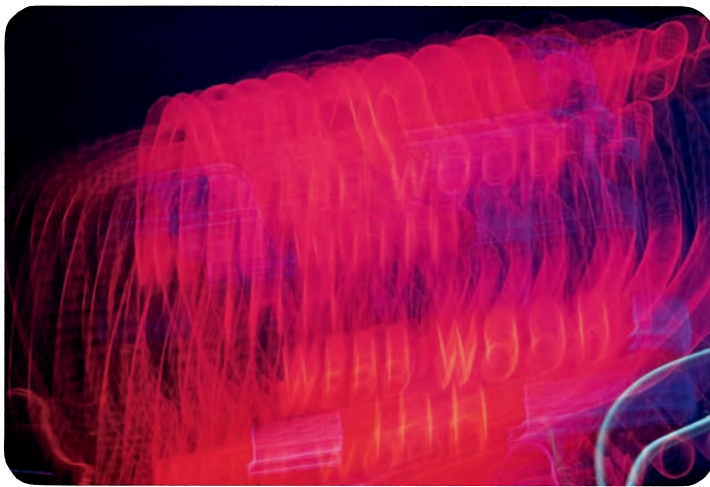
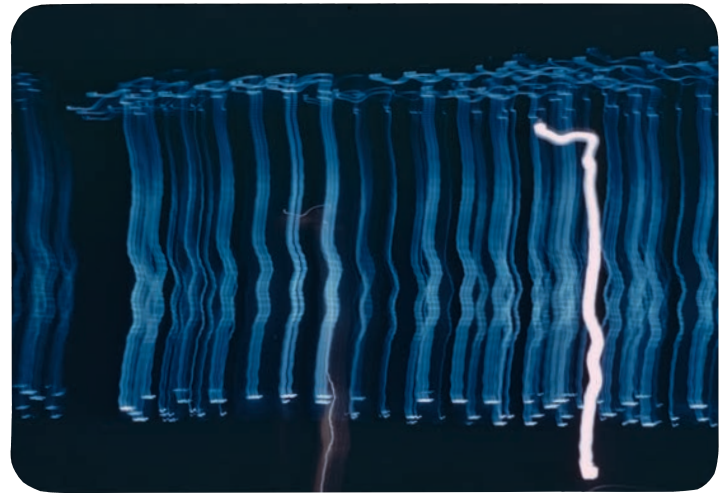
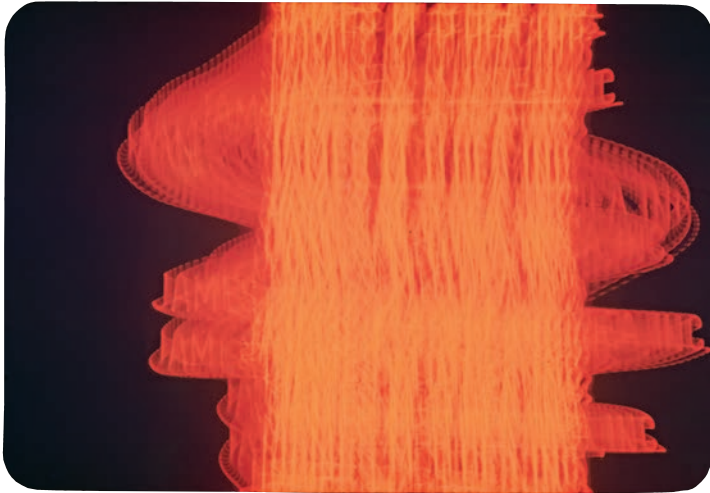
The ID introduced photography through a hands-on, exploratory curriculum, and Callahan's own work exemplified those principles in many ways. It is one of the mainstays of Callahan's story that he began teaching in a student condition, still learning and exploring himself. Arriving in Chicago, he often stated, "I didn't even believe in education. I don't think you can teach anybody to be creative."⁶ But the ID had an existing foundations curriculum, still more or less on the Bauhaus model, and it gave Callahan a rapid introduction to a generative notion — that a teacher's job might be to pose questions and structure inquiries rather than to arrive at work in possession of the answers.⁷ "I loved the Foundation Course because it was the most wonderful way of not actually influencing anybody, just showing what photography as a medium is," Callahan would later reminisce. "You asked those questions 'What is photography?' 'What is technology?' Around those questions you formed problems. . . . I just fit into this framework perfectly. I kept inventing problems for the students. . . . I learned how to teach right there."⁸ Like his colleague Siegel [10] and fellow educator Henry Holmes Smith, both students during the school's earliest years, Callahan absorbed and then embodied the perennial lesson of ID photography instruction: Questions about the basic elements of the medium could always provide starting points for new ideas.⁹

For Callahan, those starting points included the different cameras he used and the different ways those cameras related to his eye and body. When Callahan held a camera, he sometimes experimented with motion, rotation, and reorientation. The earliest experiments preceded his hiring and his move to Chicago; in Detroit, he had already absorbed aspects of the ID ethos from Siegel (who returned to their mutual hometown between his student years and faculty years at the ID). During the early 1940s, for example, Callahan had experimented with multiple exposures that captured a single scene or subject, whether trees or the bustle of Detroit streets, from several slightly different angles [11]. His series *Camera Movements* extended the idea from frozen moments to continuous motion; with his 35mm camera in hand and the lights of the city before him, Callahan would tilt, pan, and roll in various combinations, sweeping and swirling and yielding an astonishing variety of abstract compositions [12]. From the mid-1940s into the 1950s, he kept returning to body-camera relationships as a generative source of new ideas, as one variable that was open to experimentation and could be combined with others, like the choice of single, multiple, or extended exposure.¹⁰ Rich examples emerged from his twin-lens Rolleiflex, a square-format camera with its lens at a right angle to its viewfinder [13].



11 / Harry Callahan,
Detroit, 1943

12 / Harry Callahan,
Camera Movements,
ca. 1943-46



C H A P T E R F I V E

Five Shooting Levels

Life with the Rollei begins at waist level. Hand the camera to any novice and waist level is where it goes almost instinctively. It's logical, for with a Rollei primarily you look down, into the hood.

As the photographer becomes more familiar with it he goes to other levels. At one time and another, he may shoot from any of these five, acquainting himself with them probably in this order:

1. Waist level (Fig. 30)
2. Eye level (Fig. 31)
3. Knee level (Fig. 29)
4. Ground level (Fig. 28)
5. Overhead (Fig. 32)

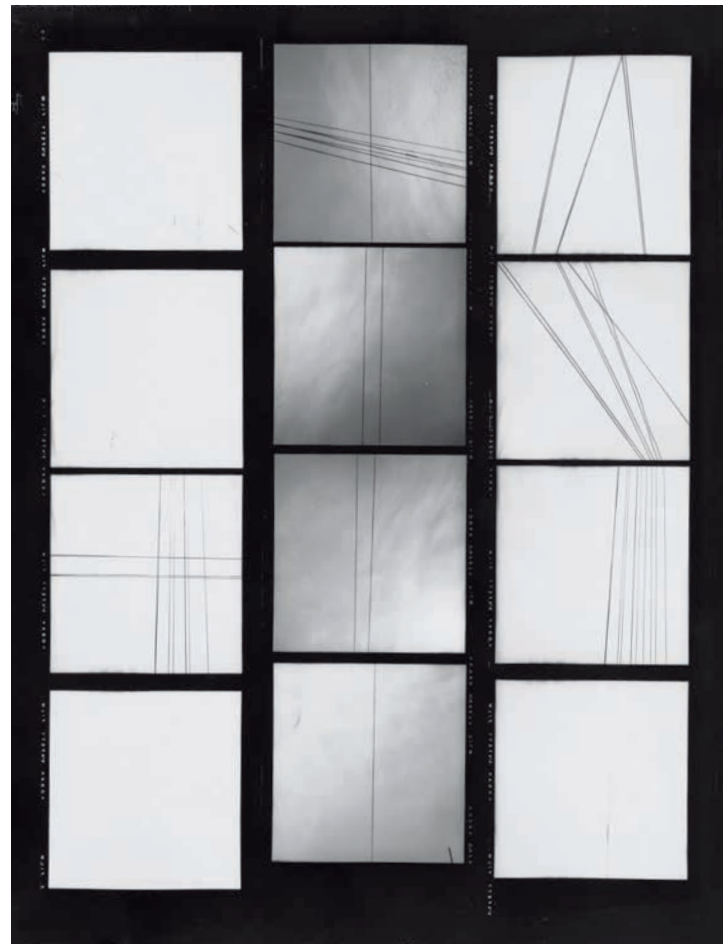
The basic recommended holding form is to wear the camera suspended from the neck either in the Rollei's eveready case or, if used out of the case, as some photographers prefer, by the camera's special neck strap. The latter is attached by threading it through the eyelet on each side of the camera, then slipping the hole at the end of the strap around the button just below the eyelet. Bear down on the strap for camera steadiness.

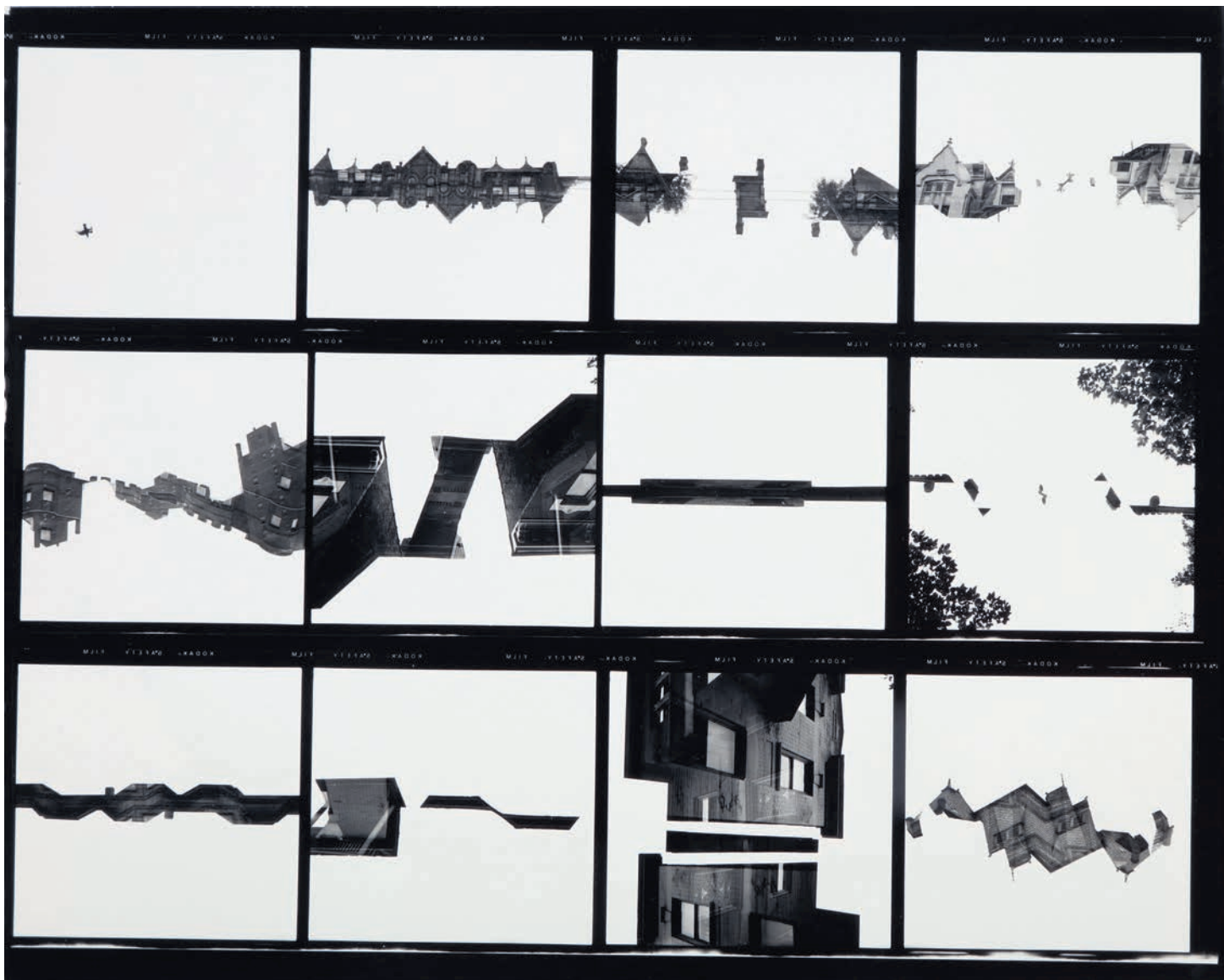
Cradle the camera in the right hand and balance it with the left. The right-hand index finger works the body release, the thumb the shutter-speed setting knob. The index finger and thumb of the left hand turn the focusing knob; the left thumb is also used to set the lens aperture. Reverse this procedure with the Rolleicord, where the focusing knob is on the right; the left-hand index finger operates the set-and-release lever under the taking lens.



13 / Page from Jacob Deschin, *Rollei Photography* (1952)

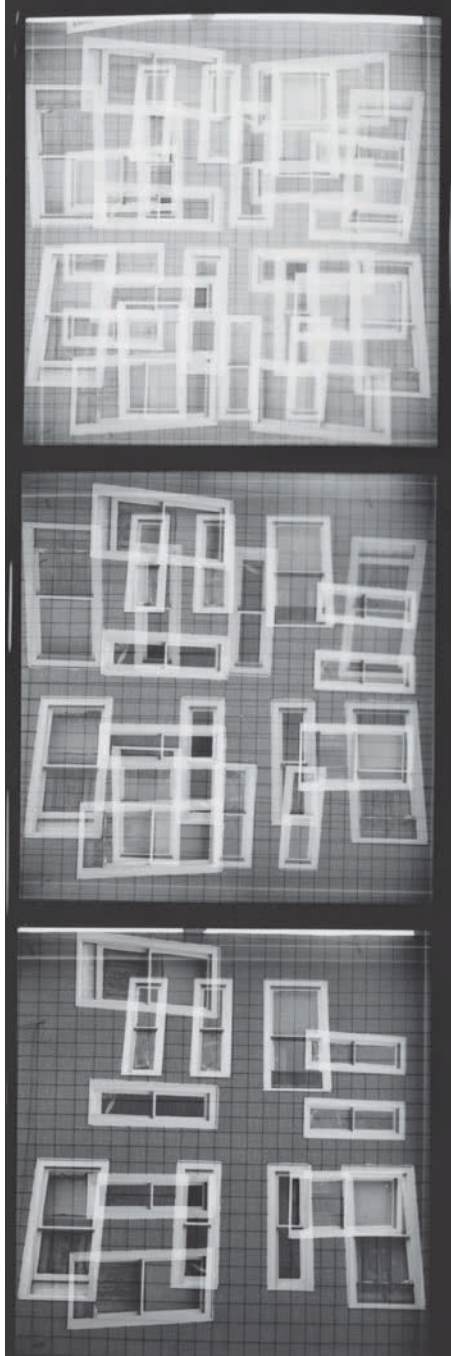
14 / Harry Callahan, contact sheet, *Telephone Wires*, 1940s-1950s





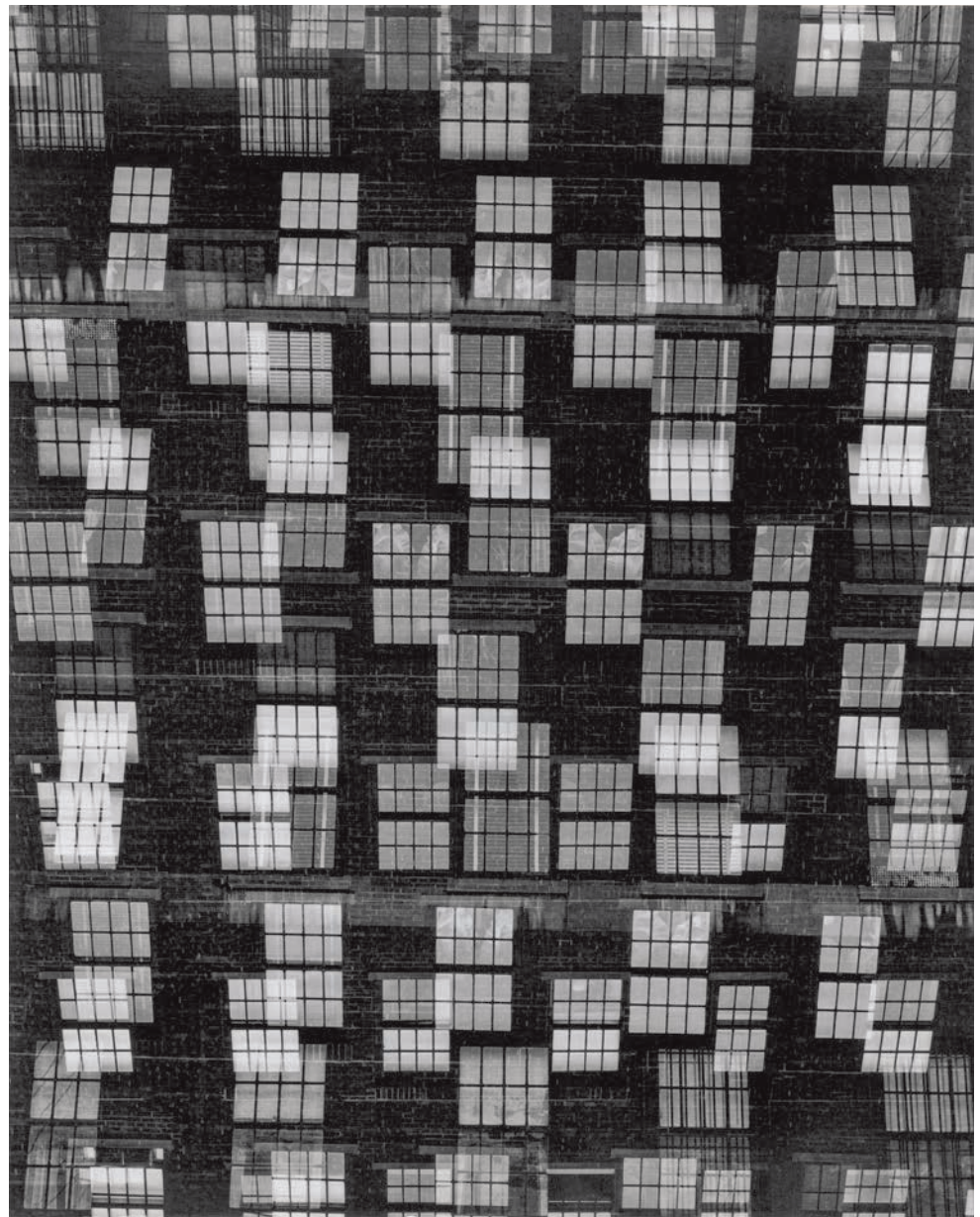
15 / Harry Callahan,
Proof Sheet, Chicago,
1953

Many of Callahan's *Telephone Wires* [14], begun as early as 1945, pursue a disorienting abstraction through single exposures, relying on viewpoint and contrast alone. But he combined the upward views of his *Telephone Wires* with rotation and multiple exposure in another series, made around 1953, depicting the rooflines of buildings. Callahan would frame an architectural fragment against the blank field of the sky, then capture a second view of the same fragment with an approximately 180-degree rotation of the camera [15]. In some instances, the camera went from right side up to upside down, and in others from a position on its right side to a position on its left side—though Callahan would have to hold the lens in a constant position all the while. One imagines that passers-by might have watched a strange little ballet in which Callahan shifted his hands or his body around a fixed but invisible point. Because of Callahan's canny choice of subject, the resulting photographs mix an abstracting flatness—anchored by the masking effect of the bright sky—with a persistent sense of disorientation. Cameras could be an avenue for discovery, and Callahan's discoveries sometimes staked his claim to midcentury abstraction.



16 / Harry Callahan,
contact sheet,
*Window, Multiple
Exposures*
(detail), 1949

17 / Harry Callahan,
Chicago, ca. 1948



There was also cross-fertilization within his work, as ideas generated in one series or one camera format revealed possibilities in another. Callahan had combined multiple exposure and rotation in photographs of windows a few years earlier. A set of three multiple exposures from 1949, for example, shows accumulating impressions of white-trimmed windows on a clapboard wall: first two, then three, then finally four exposures in a single frame, with a 90-degree rotation between exposures in each case [16]. In the double exposure, from which Callahan made finished prints, the parallel clapboard lines give rise to a grid whose regularity throws into relief the irregular pattern of overlapping windows. A similar principle animates one of his widely reproduced architectural multiples, *Chicago*, a triple exposure from around 1948 of apartment-building windows illuminated from within [17]. Two of the three exposures are identically framed upward views, separated only by a 180-degree rotation. Working here with his view camera, Callahan

needed only to rotate the film holder to produce the effect, where rotational symmetry of the combined exposures competes with the perspectival recession encoded in each. After that, however, Callahan tilted his camera a few degrees higher (the former top edge of the frame descending about one-third the frame's height) and added a third, unmatched exposure. This third exposure introduces a new set of angles to the geometry of the picture plane, hiding the underlying symmetry of the first two exposures and, as a result, setting in motion the undulating shallow depth of the final image. Compare such an effect to Callahan's subsequent "8 × 10 snapshots" [18], which, through the contrast between their precision and their blunt framing, seem to comment ironically on the gap between the photo industry's promise to capture life-as-it-happens and the staid, centered, and conventional posing of so many family photographs.¹¹ Callahan didn't always work with handheld cameras, but his thinking about mobility could inflect even his work with a view camera, pointing up its stillness at one moment and its experimental possibilities the next.

18 / Harry Callahan,
Eleanor, Chicago,
1949



(continued...)

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