

A new kind of history?

The challenges of contemporary histories of photography

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'I want a new kind of history'

Since the late 1970s, when the history of photography became an academic subject, and with increasing interest in photography in the art market, there have been frequent calls by various scholars for a 'new kind of history' of photography. These calls were part of what Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson described in a special photography issue of *October* (Summer 1978,) as a renewed scholarly 'discovery' of the medium, characterized by the 'sense of an epiphany, delayed and redoubled in its power.' This rediscovery carried the message that photography and its practices have to be redeemed 'from the cultural limbo to which for a century and a half it had been consigned.'¹

The calls for a new history of photography suggested that the time has come to substitute Beaumont Newhall's hegemonic modernist classic *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* with new text/s.² Newhall was a librarian and later the first director of photography of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His work is considered as 'the English-language text that has shaped thinking on the subject more permanently than any other.'³ Based on the catalog of his MoMA exhibition *Photography 1839-1937*- 'usually cited as a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as full-fledged museum art'⁴- this book was the predominant photo-history for more than 50 years. It shifted the historiographic focus from the chemical-physical aspect of the medium to its visual aspect. Similarly, the geographic center of the historiography of photography shifted from Europe to the United States.⁵

¹ Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, *October*, vol. 5, Photography (Summer 1978) 3.

² Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*. 1939. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982.

³ Douglas R. Nickel, 'History of Photography: the State of Research', *The Art Bulletin*, 83: 3, Sept. 2001, 550. The book was first titled *Photography: A Short Critical History*.

⁴ Christopher Phillips, 'The Judgment Seat of Photography', *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992, 17.

⁵ For a detailed survey of the history of photography before Newhall see Anne McCauley, 'Writing Photography's History before Newhall', *History of Photography*, vol. 21: 2, Summer 1997, 87-101, or Martin Gasser, 'Histories of Photography 1839-1939', *History of Photography*, vol. 16, Spring 1992, 50-60.

Newhall's history has been vigorously criticized in recent decades. It is denounced as based on a formalist methodology that 'forced him to mostly comment on style rather than content,' and as focusing 'on genre and the tracing of influences.'⁶ The critics also argue that his canonization of the *masters of photography*, detached photographic practice from social, political and cultural historical contexts.⁷ In the later editions (1949, 1964, 1982), Newhall made significant changes and revisions to his text, though his formalist attitude and selective and authoritarian approach concerning 'masterpieces,' 'photographic artists' and photographic genres remained. Nonetheless, as noted by Marie Warner Marien, 'Newhall's aversion to losing the uniqueness of photography in the world of art is a constant underlying value in the text.'⁸ His emphasis on photographic means, procedures and techniques is characteristic of that concern.

A relatively early event that marked this need for a new history of photography was the series of lectures 'Toward the New History of Photography' organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979. In his lecture for the series, Carl Chiarenza opened with the assumption that 'there will be new histories of photography...' that 'will be critical of past histories...' Contrary to Newhall's approach, Chiarenza's critical vision regarding the future history of photography was that it 'must be part of the history of all picturemaking,' i.e. part of a general visual culture.⁹

Another early landmark in the formulation of the need for a new history of photography appears in Andy Grundberg's 'Two Camps Battle over the Nature of the Medium' (1983.) In this article for the *New York Times* he defined two distinct 'camps', i.e. two contemporary photographic concepts:

The lines are drawn between those who think of photography as a relatively new and largely virgin branch of art history, and those who rebel at the very notion of photography being "estheticized." The former welcome the medium's elevation to the realm of the museum, the marketplace and traditional art-historical scholarship, while the latter argue that photography's "museumization" ... robs it of its real importance- that is, its social meanings.¹⁰

Towards the end of the twentieth-century, the calls for a new history of photography and the debate regarding its character intensified. The 1997 summer issue of *History of Photography*, for instance, was titled 'Why Historiography?' and included articles by young and promising scholars such as Mary Warner Marien, Christine

⁶ Julian Rodriguez, 'History Man', *British Journal of Photography*, vol. 141, Jan. 1994, 12; Stevie Bezencenet, 'What is a History of Photography?', *Creative Camera*, vol. 208, April 1982, 485.

⁷ Nickel, 'History of Photography', 553; Bezencenet, 'What is a History of Photography?', 485.

⁸ Mary Warner Marien, 'What Shall We Tell the Children? Photography and its Text (Books)', *Afterimage* vol. 13, April 1986, 5.

⁹ Chiarenza's article was published in the summer issue of *Afterimage* in the same year: Carl Chiarenza, 'Notes Toward an Integrated History of Picturemaking', *Afterimage*, Summer 1979, 35, 41.

¹⁰ Andy Grundberg, 'Two Camps Battle over the Nature of the Medium', *The New-York Times*, August 14, 1983, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1983/08/14/arts/photography-view-two-camps-battle-over-the-nature-of-the-medium.html>>

Mehring, and Malcolm Daniel. Its guest editor, Anne McCauley, described the purpose of the issue as a review and reconsideration of the history of photography at the end of the twentieth-century. She suggested the need to move from descriptive writing and 'largely unexplored assumptions' to an integrated history, focused on 'photography's shifting social roles.'¹¹

Another project reexamining the theory and historiography of photography is *Photography: Crisis of History*, an anthology of short essays published in 2003, written by an international group of photo-historians, curators, critics and photographers. These authors were asked by scholar and photographer Joan Fontcuberta to 'offer their reflections on the state of the historiographic question in photography.' Their texts, according to Fontcuberta 'represent different ways of revisiting history, and put forward ideas that will undoubtedly prove very useful in bringing new light to historical studies with a bearing on photography... help[ing] to place us in a position from which to overcome with greater surety that crisis of history in which we find ourselves.'¹² The authors in the anthology, among them Ian Jeffrey, Carmelo Vega, Boris Kossoy and Marie Loup Sougez, referred in various ways to questions such as: 'What are the problems that emerge from his [Newhall's] approach?' (i.e. canonizing certain photographers and photographs and emphasizing 'the history of technique'); 'What are the principal filters- cultural, ideological and political- that have determined the dominant historiographic model?'; 'Can photography still be studied as an autonomous discipline...?'; 'Is a social history of photography compatible with an aesthetic history, a history of uses with a history of forms?' and 'How are we to produce a 'politically correct' history of photography?'¹³

What seems to be an effective summing-up of the need for a new history of photography appeared in Geoffrey Batchen's Proem in the May/June 2002 issue of *Afterimage*, comprised of wishes expressed in the recurrent assertion 'I want a new history [of photography].' Batchen demands, for instance, a history that 'looks at photography, not just at art photographs,' 'breaks free from an evolutionary narrative,' 'traces the journey of an image, as well as its origin,' 'acknowledges that photographs have multiple manifestations and are objects as well as images,' and 'sees beyond Europe and the United States, and is interested in more than the creative efforts of a few white men.'¹⁴

Shortly before the publication of Batchen's proem, Douglas Nickel made an assesment of photo-history's 'state of research' in the pages of the *Art Bulletin*. Like Grundberg in the early 1980s but with a wider perspective, he concluded that the field is caught between two opposing forces: one that construed photography as high art, with the accompanying aura of prestige, originality and uniqueness; the other arguing for 'photography's social determination' and interdisciplinary character.

¹¹ McCauley, 'Writing Photography's History', 86.

¹² Joan Fontcuberta, ed, *Photography. Crisis of History*, Barcelona: Actar, 2003, 14, 17. The book was published in Barcelona and was translated into English by Graham Thomson.

¹³ Fontcuberta, *Photography. Crisis of History*, 14-16.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Batchen, 'Proem', *Aftreimage*, vol. 29, 6, May/June 2002, 3.

While the first force is essentially related to the rising power of photography collecting market in the 1970s and intensified during the 1980s and 1990s, and the incorporation of photographs in museum collections at around the same period, the second is the incorporation of photography as an academic field in Art History departments and later in departments such as social and cultural history, anthropology, literature and philosophy. This process was described by Nickel as 'fraught with contradictions' due to the 'dual challenges' of critical theory and the crisis in the field of Art History itself.¹⁵

In this context, Nickel describes how a prominent group of commentators of the 1980s-1990s, who made the history of photography the focus of their research, had revived the ideas of critics such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, from different theoretical perspectives, among them marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis. Some of them, he argues, had taken a radical political approach to the history of photography, promoting it 'to assume a central position in the larger project of postmodern criticism.'¹⁶ He concludes his article commenting that

The intellectual self-consciousness with which photography's social agency can now be contemplated is the beneficial and necessary end product of two decades of soul-searching on its behalf, but how (or whether) the remains of this process get reassembled into something vital will be determined largely by the institutional forces that presently control photographic history's fate.¹⁷

New histories, new challenges

In response to these calls for a new history of photography, at least six comprehensive academic photo-histories have been published in the United States and Europe between 1984 and 2002. Such volumes serve as essential textbooks for art-history students, and as a general introduction for the interested public. They therefore play a central role in the construction of historical-photographic knowledge. Three of most popular of these histories, according to sales estimates and new editions, are: *A World History of Photography* by Naomi Rosenblum (1984; 4th edition: 2008), *Seizing the Light* by Robert Hirsch (1999; 2nd edition: 2008), and *Photography: A Cultural History*, by Mary Warner Marien (2002; 3rd edition: 2010).¹⁸

¹⁵ Nickel, 'History of Photography', 554-555.

¹⁶ Nickel, 'History of Photography', 554. Among these writers he mentions Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula, Sally Stein, Victor Burgin, Christopher Phillips and John Tagg. While their work was largely in reaction to the medium's 'apotheosis as a museum object,' Nickel defines it as a 'negative, iconoclastic critique' by authors who 'neglected to counter its negative critique adequately with any positive program of study or foundational theory of their own, or even attempt to define for the field coherent limits and scope.' (Nickel, 'History of Photography', 555.)

¹⁷ Nickel, 'History of Photography', 556.

¹⁸ Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1984; Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*, New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1999 (second edition's title has been changed to *Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography*); Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 2002. All three books

Are these texts really a new kind of history? Almost ten years after Nickel's article, and almost nine years after the publication of the most recent and innovative of these books- Marie Warner Marien's *Photography: A Cultural History*- seems to be an appropriate time to investigate how they comply with the demand for a new history of photography, how they compare with Newhall's history, and how and to what extent they fill the lacunae left by his prototype.¹⁹

The present article focuses on two sections of these books: the first engages with the Photo-Secession art-photography movement. The second focuses on the Farm Security Administration's documentary photographic project. The Photo-Secession was an American movement of photographers interested in promoting the status of photography as fine art. It was established in New York and was active between 1880 and 1920. The photographic project of the Farm Security Administration (the FSA), was part of the New Deal program for reviving American agriculture throughout the country during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Each of these subjects, according to Newhall, signifies a high point in photographic history.

These sections were selected for two reasons: first because the subjects are familiar to anyone with general knowledge of the history of photography, which makes their analysis both accessible and comprehensible; and second as they represent the problems of photography's manifold character, raising the old but still relevant questions regarding the differences and similarities between documentary practices and art. The discussion of the texts and images representing these two 'poles' in histories of photography testifies to some of the challenges and complexities involved with revising or creating an alternative to Newhall's history.

The sections in the three books will be discussed in relation to Newhall's work, according to the following criteria: the extent and complexity of their historical and photo-historical contexts; the narrative sequence and the approach to canonical photographers; the approach to canonical photographic images; the expansion of the canon and political corrections.²⁰

appear in Amazon and Barnes and Nobles websites as the bestselling comprehensive academic history of photography books (keywords: "history of photography"; sort by: best selling.) In Amazon they appear after Newhall's fifth edition (1982; latest print: 2010), while in Barnes and Noble Newhall's book is the least popular among the four. The order of popularity is, in Amazon: Hirsch's, Rosenblum's, Warner's; In Barnes and Noble: Rosenblum's, Hirsch's, Warner's. Non-English-language history of photography books such as *A History of Photography* (Jean Claude Lemagny and Andre Rouille, New York: Cambridge University Press) and *A New History of Photography* (Michele Frizot, Koln: Konemann) have been published in only one edition in English, in 1987 and 1998 respectively.

¹⁹ Warner herself was one of those who pointed to a need for a new history of photography, in two articles from 1986 and 1995: Mary Warner Marien, 'What Shall We Tell the Children? Photography and its Text (Books)' (see footnote 9) and 'Photography is Another Kind of Bird', *Afterimage*, vol. 23, Sep./Oct. 1995, 11.

²⁰ Newhall's 1982 edition (latest reprint: 2010) is the latest and most up-to-date. Its publication date is the closest to the new histories' publication dates, and therefore it was chosen to be compared with them.

Historical and photo-historical contexts

The Rosenblum, Hirsch and Warner's new histories reveal their authors' approach to the importance of historical and photo-historical contexts. While all the new authors discuss photographic issues in a broader historical context, in Rosenblum's and Hirsch's books, this context is demarcated by their chapters, which are usually defined stylistically. One of the problems resulting from such categorization is the inconsistencies in the ways by which photographic issues and approaches are discussed. Documentary photographs, for instance, are presented in their books in a much wider historical context than artistic photographs taken at around the same period. The latter seem to have a discrete history of art photography that does not integrate cultural, social, or political historical events, but rather focuses on internal stylistic influences.

Like Newhall's, Naomi Rosenblum's and Robert Hirsch's sections on the photo-secession are therefore set in the context of efforts in the USA and in Europe to establish photography as fine art under the heading 'Pictorialism'. The sequence of events– the rejection of mid nineteenth-century artificial painting-like photographs, the efforts to distinguish art photography from amateur photography, the advent of naturalist photography, of camera clubs and of photography salons, and the rise of the photo-secession as a cohered group of pictorial photographers clearly adheres to Newhall's evolutionary narrative pattern.

Warner, on the other hand, totally deconstructs Newhall's model by eschewing the stylistic categories and examining varying photographic approaches and practices which operate in parallel within a specific cultural historical framework. In this way, she challenges the traditional contexts in which pictorialist photography and the photo-secession are discussed. Though she too refers to the aforementioned sequence of issues and events, she does not emphasize this trend in photography simply as a counter-reaction to painterly photographs or the proliferating amateur photography of the period within the seemingly hermetic world of art photography. Instead, she describes the rise of the pictorialist movement and the increasing significance of photography in everyday modern life in a chapter on 'Photography in the Modern Age.' This chapter includes, for example, sections on social reform photography, science and photography, and war and photography.

While the photo-secession is portrayed by Hirsch and by Rosenblum in a way similar to Newhall's– a unique school of art photography within the broader pictorialist movement, headed by Alfred Stieglitz– Warner again rows against the current and insists that Stieglitz's role 'was not unprecedented.'²¹ While all authors create the impression that the photo-secession's journal *Camera Work*, and its exhibition space– gallery '291' (located at 291 Fifth Avenue, New York) were exclusively American phenomena, she describes the photo-secession in the context of influential

²¹ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 183.

European exhibitions (among them those organized by Stieglitz's mentor H. W. Vogel) and photographic magazines.

Just as the photo-secession is discussed at length in chapters on art and pictorial photography, references to the FSA photographic project are prominent in reviews of documentary photography in the first half of the twentieth-century in Newhall's text and in the new histories. Newhall opens with a definition of the term 'documentary' and continues with examples of documentary photographers and photographs, beginning in the early years of the twentieth-century, to create an allegedly evolutionary sequence of documentary photography as a genre, almost isolated from a historical context. This is how he describes the FSA photographic project in this sequence, after Lewis Hine, and before Margaret Bourke-White: 'At the same time that filmmakers began to talk about 'documentary,' here and there photographers were using their cameras in a similar way. In 1935 the United States government turned to these photographers for help in fighting the Depression....'²²

There is a marked difference in the new authors' approaches in comparison to Newhall's. Rosenblum, Hirsch and Warner set the FSA photographic project in the context of a more diverse social documentary initiatives and individual photographers. They focus on social documentary and discuss it in relation to various issues such as social change, the social sciences, and ethnographic photography.²³ Unlike Newhall, they also supply a wider social and cultural context to the establishment of the FSA photographic agency and its operation, against the backdrop of the Depression and the New Deal, including the wide distribution and circulation of its images- mainly promoted by the head of the project, Roy Emerson Stryker- as well as viewers' responses to the images. All three authors, for instance, conduct an important discussion regarding the public's ambivalent acceptance of FSA photographs: was this 'real' evidence or 'red propaganda'?

Although providing a broader background to the FSA photographic project, Rosenblum and Hirsch follow Newhall's example, locating it in a chapter on documentary photography (albeit within a section on social documentary). Warner, on the other hand, includes the FSA project in a chapter titled 'New Vision'. Rosenblum employed this term- borrowed from Bertolt Brecht who referred to the period as 'a great lesson for a new vision of the world'- to describe the interaction between modernism and photography in the years between the two World Wars.²⁴ By setting documentary photography in the context of photographic avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, Warner in fact demarcates this branch of photography as no less modernist than

²² Newhall, *History of Photography*, 238.

²³ Rosenblum, Hirsch and Warner mention photographers and groups of photographers in the US, in Northern and Eastern Europe, among them Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Berenice Abbott, the 'New York photo league', Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, Helmar Lerski, August Sander, and Roman Vishniac. Rosenblum also gives some instances of Japanese documentary photographers such as Kuwabara Kineo and Horino Masao. Hirsch gives some instances of biased photographic documentations of Native Americans. Warner also presents photojournalism from 1939-1945 war in this chapter, while the other authors present such images in a chapter on photojournalism.

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, in Frizot, *A New History of Photography*, 457.

the experimental and/or straight photography of the period. This approach, perhaps inspired by the historian Michael Denning in his *Cultural Front*, challenges the traditional split between modernist 'art photography' and documentary photography in the period under discussion.²⁵

Nevertheless, while Warner discusses some important formalist aspects of RA/FSA photographs, it is not at the expense of the project's significant social and cultural role, which she emphasizes more than any of the other authors. She is the only one, for example, who suggests that the RA (Resettlement Administration- which later merged with the FSA), 'was regularly questioned by conservatives who felt that direct, planned government intervention into the economy and the daily lives of citizens was un-American or, worse, crypto-socialist.'²⁶ This is very significant, in light of the perception by late twentieth-century photo-historians of the FSA photographs as mere propaganda for the US government.²⁷ Warner is also the only author who provides examples of the uses of RA/FSA photographs in popular newspapers and in documentary photo-books. By expanding the visual knowledge of those famous images, she encourages their examination within the contexts in which they were originally produced and circulated during the 1930s and early 1940s. The other authors, like Newhall, present the images as individual examples that do not suggest their numerous cultural manifestations.

Narrative sequence and the canonization of photographers

Newhall's history was attacked as 'developing from one *Master* to another,' as 'the key site of analysis becomes the qualities of the individual photograph,' rather than the social and cultural contexts in which it was produced and reproduced.²⁸ This approach resembles that of the second best-known museological history of photography after Newhall's, i.e. John Szarkowsky's *Photography until Now* (1989.) Like Newhall's, this book is based on an exhibition at MoMA and represents the 'camp' which sees (and constructs) photography as the 'auristic' artefact described by Grundberg and Nickel, in which concepts such as 'pure vision,' 'intelligent eye' and 'significant form' are privileged.²⁹

An examination of narrative sequences in the new histories discussed here evokes Newhall's prototype in various ways. The story of the photo-secession in Hirsch's book is virtually Alfred Stieglitz's story, opening with the group's establishment by the latter and followed by a citation of his statement concerning its goals, and listing the names of other founders and members. In further sections- 'The

²⁵ Denning defines 'documentary aesthetic' a 'central modernist innovation.' (Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, New York: Verso Press, 1996, 118.)

²⁶ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History* 281.

²⁷ For an extended critical discussion of this issue: Jack F. Hurley, 'The Farm Security Administration File: In and Out of Context', *History of Photography* 17.3, Autumn 1993, 244-252.

²⁸ Bezencenet, 'What is a History of Photography?', 485.

²⁹ James R. Hugunin, 'A Critical Contest' (a revision on an essay originally published in *Views*, Fall 1990 / Winter 1991.) <<http://www.uturn.org/Essays/CRITCONpdf.pdf>>

Decadent Movement and Tonalism,' 'Woman Pictorialists,' and 'The Pictorial Epoch / The Stieglitz Group,' Hirsch describes prominent photographers in the Photo Secession one by one, with strong emphasis on their affiliation to Stieglitz.

It seems that Hirsch was also influenced by Rosenblum in his sections on pictorialism and the secession group, in particular in his emphasis on women pictorialists, whom Newhall virtually ignores. Nevertheless, her text is much more balanced in regard to background information and detail, and she also corrects Newhall's injustices, including his blurring of Edward Steichen's role in the photo-secession:

The formidable role played by Stieglitz ... has received ample attention, but the active participation of Steichen, who found and installed the exhibition space, designed the cover and publicity for *Camera Work*, and initiated contacts with the French graphic artists whose works eventually formed an important part of Secession exhibits and publications, is less known.³⁰

Warner opens her section on the photo-secession in a sophisticated way that suggests the complexity and contradictions inherent to the term 'pictorialism.' She cites the prominent photography critic Sadakichi Hartmann's comments on a pictorialist exhibition at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1904, published in *American Amateur*. Hartmann had unfavorably reviewed some of the works in this exhibition, organized, among others, by Stieglitz, as 'overstep[ping] all legitimate boundaries and deliberately mix up photography with the technical devices of painting and the graphic arts,' and calling on the movement's photographers to present reality in a straightforward manner.³¹

The term 'straight photography' was later adopted by Newhall to define his favorite 'photographic genre'- primarily represented by Stieglitz's mature works. His chapter on 'Straight Photography' follows the one on 'Pictorial Photography.' However, the distinction between the pictorial and the straight branches of the photo-secession made by Hartmann seven years later in *Camera Work* is not mentioned by Warner, a fact that weakens her critique of the movement.³²

Unlike her narrative of Stieglitz and the photo-secession, part of Warner's section on the FSA photographic project surprisingly retains the pattern of Newhall's narrative sequence, and her account of the FSA photographers is very similar to his. Her writing on Walker Evans, for instance, seems to be a dissonant synthesis of the contextual approach and Newhall's canonical mold. Newhall wrote, for example: 'Walker Evans was one of the first photographers to be hired' and Warner almost

³⁰ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 325.

³¹ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History* 181.

³² This distinction in which Hartmann described the painterly branch of the movement as demises, served Newhall's interest. It is actually cited by the latter, who also saw the first branch as opposed to the nature of photography. However, as noted by Alison Bertrand, some photographs noted by Newhall as 'straight' were actually 'pictorially' manipulated. (Alison Bertrand, 'Beaumont Newhall's "Photography 1839-1937"- Making History', *History of Photography*, vol. 21: 2, Summer 1997, 143.)

literally rewrote his words: 'Among Stryker's first hired was Walker Evans.'³³ Subsequently, again like Newhall, Warner discusses Dorothea Lange, relatively at length.³⁴

The canonization of these two photographers, especially of Evans, is criticized by contemporary photo-historians of the FSA, who argue that such an approach detaches their works from the specific political context in which they were created and presents them as the works of outstanding individual artists. '... We run the risk of developing a 'star system' approach to these images' comments Jack F. Hurley; 'We stand back, view the beautiful print on the gallery wall and say, 'isn't it wonderful? It's an Evans' (or Lange, or Lee, or whatever.)'³⁵ The canonization of some FSA photographers also obscures the contributions of others, among them Marion Post-Wolcott, Jack Delano and Carl Mydans, to name a few.

Rosenblum's profile on FSA photographers appearing at the end of the chapter on documentary photography, separately from the section on the FSA photographic project, is the only one truthful to history in this regard: It begins with a description of the work of Arthur Rothstein, the first photographer hired by Stryker. Stryker met Rothstein when they were students at Columbia University in the early 1930s and called him to join the new and still amorphous project.³⁶

Concluding the section on the FSA photographic project, Warner, again like Newhall, mentions other photographers hired by the FSA during the later years of the administration and after its merger with the Office of War Information (OWI.) However, in an obvious effort to provide a politically-correct alternative to his pattern, she focuses on two figures: Gordon Parks, the only black photographer in the FSA/OWI, and Esther Bubley, one of the few women photographers in the FSA/OWI. She also provides details about the later careers of prominent FSA photographers, which again seems to correct Newhall, who was criticized for designing his history according to categories in which such an option would be untenable.

Canonical images

Just as he canonized certain photographers as 'masters', Newhall also considered their works masterpieces. Both Rosenblum and Hirsch, but the latter in particular, revert to Newhall's model in this regard. Their references to Steiglitz's *The Steerage* (1907,) and Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936) are examples of this.

³³ Beaumont Newhall, *History of Photography*, 238; Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 282.

³⁴ After Lange, Newhall discusses Ben Shahn, while Warner discusses Arthur Rothstein.

³⁵ Hurley, 'The Farm Security Administration File', 244. Beverly W. Brannan and Carl Fleischhauer also comment that since FSA photographs were 'rediscovered' in the 1960s and 1970s, 'the books in which [they] appeared usually identified them only by the name of the artist and a brief title... one image to a page, each one framed in white ...' They conclude that 'both the passage of time and this style of publication have isolated the photographs, obscuring the circumstances of their creation.' (Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, eds, *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 7.)

³⁶ Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972, 27-28.



Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907, Photogravure, 15.9x21.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Gift of Georgia O'Keeffe, [LC-USZCN4-243].

Newhall mentions *The Steerage*, a photograph of travelers and re-emigrants from the US to Europe on the first and lower-class decks of the ship *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, as what Stieglitz considered to be his finest work. In his history it is the focal representative of straight photography (appearing on the first double page spread of the chapter 'Straight Photography',) reflecting Stieglitz's preference for 'stick[ing] closely to the basic properties of camera, lens and emulsion' at a time when he 'began to champion the most progressive painting and sculpture, as well as photography.'³⁷ Newhall emphasizes the formal aspect of the image, citing Stieglitz's description of what motivated him to take it:

A round straw hat, the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white drawbridge with its railings made of circular chains; white suspenders crossing the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape.... I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life.³⁸

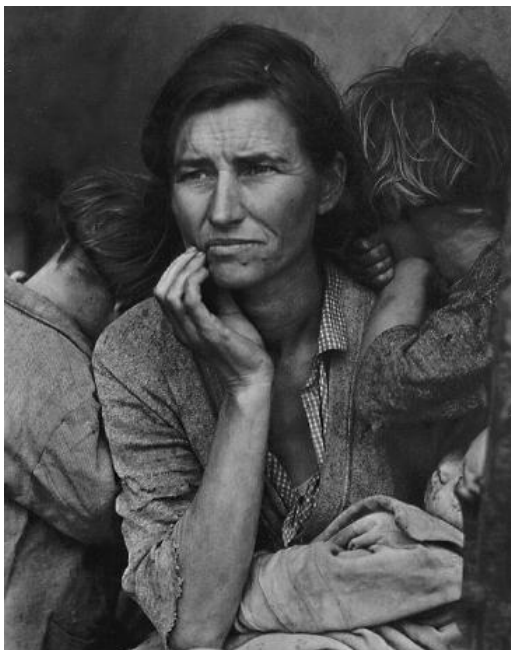
Rosenblum and Hirsch offer no alternatives to Newhall's formalist reading of *The Steerage*; rather, they reinforce it by emphasizing its affinity with art movements of the period, especially with cubism. Hirsch actually goes even further than Newhall. While Newhall comments that Stieglitz was flattered by Pablo Picasso's excitement about the picture, and Rosenblum quotes Picasso's statement that he and Stieglitz worked 'in the same avant-garde spirit,' he discusses the image, under the heading 'Cubism', as representative of a 'transformation' in Stieglitz's 'aesthetic thinking' under the influence of analytic cubism. Apart from the fact that cubism is a term that fundamentally belongs to the realm of painting (Stieglitz himself, according to Warner, 'praised Picasso's "antiphotographic" work, meaning that it had renounced the simple vanishing-point perspective imposed by the camera,') Hirsch decontextualizes Newhall and Stieglitz's resistance to the assimilation of photography into the realm of painting and its vocabulary, and their efforts for the recognition of photography as a discrete

³⁷ Newhall, *History of Photography*, 167-168.

³⁸ Stieglitz, in Newhall, *History of Photography*, 168.

medium. His ignorance of the social content in Stieglitz's photograph is also surprising.³⁹

Thus Rosenblum and Hirsch maintain the canonical status of the image but fail to discuss contemporary critical references to it. Warner also describes Stieglitz's scene of *The Steerage* but, unlike them, she subsequently echoes Allan Sekula's Marxist-oriented critique in his 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' (1975): 'He was looking over the first-class deck to the steerage below, recognizing there not the disheartened immigrants returning to Europe, but a combination of abstract forms....'⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Warner's up-to-date and significant reference to Sekula's seminal article is problematic. She mixes history and critique in a way that will most likely confuse the novice reader who is seeking an introduction to the history of photography. By supporting Sekula and presenting opinion as fact, she virtually constructs the readers' perception of the photograph without letting them make their own conclusions, and without even mentioning Sekula's name.⁴¹



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother* (Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California. 1936, 1 negative: nitrate; 4 x 5 in., Library of Congress, [LC-USF34-009058-C]).

Migrant Mother is the best-known photograph of the FSA project and perhaps of American documentary photography as a whole, an enduring symbol of the Depression.⁴² Newhall's description of this image of a mother and children of a poor, migrant agricultural workers' family, taken by Dorothea Lange in Nipomo, California, appears on the first page of his chapter on documentary photography: 'Lange could make a deserted farmhouse, abandoned in acres of machine-plowed land, an eloquent definition of the phrase 'tractored-out,' which was on the lips of hundreds of dispossessed farmers. Her photograph of a migrant mother surrounded by her children, huddled in a tent, became the most widely reproduced of all the FSA pictures....'⁴³

Similarly, Hirsch writes that Lange's FSA photographs 'epitomized the human cost of the Depression' and that *Migrant Mother* was considered by many as 'the

³⁹ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 405; Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 215; Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 189. In fact, the only photographic experiments that can be entitled 'cubist' are Alvin Langdon Coburn's experimental 'Vortographs'- which are fundamentally different from Stieglitz's work.

⁴⁰ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 185.

⁴¹ Sekula is mentioned by Warner in another context, in a section on contemporary theory of photography titled 'Thinking photography' in the final chapter of the book (p. 423.)

⁴² This prevailing title of the photograph was actually coined by Newhall in his history. The original title given to it by Lange was *Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California. 1936* (Library of Congress, LC-USF34-009058-C.)

⁴³ Newhall, *History of Photography*, 244.

quintessential FSA image.⁴⁴ Rosenblum also notes the reputation of the photograph; as in Newhall's history, it is given a full page in her book as a signifier of the FSA photographic project. Warner, on the other hand, comments that: 'Though powerful, *Migrant Mother* is not typical of Lange's work.'⁴⁵ She is also the only author who presents the image as it frequently appeared in the popular press, thereby shedding light on the circulation of FSA images, and on how urban Americans were exposed to them in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The choice of this version of the image also suggests different possible interpretations of FSA photographs in different texts and contexts.⁴⁶

However, Warner's short summary next to the image, again combining cultural history and critical theory, is confusing. The first part, in which the image is described as recalling 'religious images of the Madonna and Child,' seems to echo art and photography historian John Pultz's feminist reading of the image as drawing on 'Renaissance depictions of the Virgin and Child and the secularized versions of these that began to appear in the mid nineteenth century...' This is part of Pultz's analysis of the image as centering 'on the female body ... that is socially constructed through the gaze, and has the quality "to be looked at."' ⁴⁷

Such a presentation of the photograph, characteristic of feminist discourse of photography, is again confusing for the reader who expects an introductory textbook that provides a cultural historical framework of photographs. Not only does it shift the focus from the social and cultural historical context in which it was taken, it actually contradicts the media-constructed version of the image chosen by Warner herself, which called on the middle-class public to 'look in her eyes,' not as a representation of objectified female body, but as a representative of the most deprived class in American society.⁴⁸ A discussion of contemporary readings of the photograph is certainly worthy, but they should be explained as late interpretations, and in a way that acknowledges the image's numerous and varied readings.

Warner's subsequent statement that the image 'also expresses Depression era values' is vague. If these values are implied by the continuation of her above cited sentence: 'the children on either side turn away, symbolically ashamed of their wretchedness' (which also resonate Pultz's writing: 'the two older children turn their heads away from the photographer (out of shame or shyness?)...'),⁴⁹ then such reading also seems decontextualized. The idea of the poor as ashamed or responsible of their

⁴⁴ Newhall, *History of Photography*, 244; Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 286. However, the latter, who also comments that this image overshadowed Lange's other important works, offers no single visual or verbal example of these important works, unlike the other new authors.

⁴⁵ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 285.

⁴⁶ The instance given by Warner is a clipping from *Midweek pictorial* 17 Oct 1936: 23. Library of Congress LC-USZ62-117092. <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96518456/>>

⁴⁷ John Pultz, in Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2000, 44.

⁴⁸ In fact, the FSA image that is perhaps the second most renowned parent-and-children image is Rothstein's photograph of a father and his children fleeing a dust storm. *Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936* (LC-USF34- 004052.)

<<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998018983/PP/>>

⁴⁹ Pultz, in Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 44.

situation was characteristic of the late nineteenth-century Social Darwinism but was actually weakened during the Depression. Besides the diluted faith in capitalism due to the economic crisis during that period, the images of the Depression poor played a significant cultural role, constructed by the mass media as the 'deserving poor,' representing a tentative national situation that will apparently be overcome soon. Hence, the symbolic figures of the rural poor were connected with the agrarian myth and the ethos of the white pioneers who built America and survived hardship to eventually become successful and prosperous.⁵⁰

The second part of Warner's discussion of the image determines that 'the mother's careworn face, her tattered clothes, and the dirty baby near her breast indicate extreme distress, deserving of compassion. Yet her expression hints at a determination to persevere through hard times.'⁵¹ The combination of these oppositions- distress and persevere, or 'tragedy and resistance,' according to photography critic John Roberts 'in essence was what the magazine editors were waiting for,'⁵² namely, a message that aimed to pacify American middle class audience. This combination was also pronounced by Stryker retrospectively, as he described it in 1973 as '*the picture of the Farm Security Administration ... She has all the suffering of mankind in her but all the perseverance too. A restraint and a strange courage.*'⁵³ However, Stryker's aim was of course different from that of the popular magazine's editors: he was trying to promote public support for the RA/FSA rehabilitation programmes through images that would arouse both respect and empathy.

For a third time then, and again with no reference to her resources, Warner confuses the reader with an apparent factual characteristics of the image ('the mother's ... face ... indicate extreme distress ... Yet her expression hints at a determination to persevere') instead of discussing its construction (by the mass media versus the FSA, for instance) as such.

Extending the canon and political corrections

As shown earlier, Rosenblum's and Hirsch's approaches to canonical photographs certainly seem like variations on Newhall's book, even though they, and Warner, significantly extended his range. Their extensions also include images of and by representatives of social groups that were under-represented or disregarded by Newhall, among them women, African Americans and Native Americans.

Newhall's list of photographers in his chapters 'Pictorial Photography' and 'Documentary Photography' is almost completely present in the new books, though the authors have expanded this list considerably, both in number and variety. Rosenblum's most notable contribution, for instance, has been to extend the photographic canon

⁵⁰ For further reading on poor agricultural workers as representing 'citizens of the kind who built America' see Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995, 187.

⁵¹ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History*, 284.

⁵² John Roberts, in Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 43.

⁵³ Roy Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In this Proud Land*, Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973, 73.

beyond the United States and Central and Western Europe. In the chapters under discussion, she adds examples of pictorial and documentary photographers in countries such as Spain, Finland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Poland, Russia and Japan.

Rosenblum also discusses the important role played by women in the pictorialist movement. This amendment was followed by both Hirsch and Warner. Apart from Gertrude Kasebier- the only pictorialist woman photographer discussed by Newhall- Rosenblum, Hirsch and Warner also present works by Alice Boughton, Anne W. Brigman, Eva Watson-Schutze, Sara C. Sears, Jane Reece and others. They also refer to more women documentarists than Newhall did, including those who worked for New-Deal agencies operating parallel to the FSA, such as Marjory Collins and Martha McMillan.⁵⁴

Commenting that 'women, who were more active in all aspects of photography in the United States, were especially prominent in pictorialism,'⁵⁵ Rosenblum's discussion of women pictorialists is a part of the section 'Pictorialism in the United States.' This corrects the imbalance of women photographers in Newhall's history, while Hirsch's and Warner's presentation of the women photographers in a discrete section actually removes it from its historical and local contexts, referring to their work as if it were a 'school' existing separately from pictorialism.

Similarly, political correctness is also apparent concerning the work of black photographers. Warner, as aforementioned, discusses the black FSA photographer Gordon Parks and all three writers discuss works by James van der Zee, who was also neglected in Newhall's book. The new histories also correct a radical lacuna in images of American blacks in Newhall's book (the only African-American image in the last edition of Newhall is that of Paul Robeson by Edward Steichen, taken in 1933.) Rosenblum includes images of blacks by Ben Shahn (for the FSA) and by her husband, the Photo League photographer Walter Rosenblum. Warner presents the most detailed story of Photo League's documentation of poor blacks' life in Harlem (and of harassment by the FBI as suspected of subversive communist activity.) She also dedicates a number of paragraphs to discussion of black representations in photography in the 1930s, with images by Margaret Bourke-White, Eudora Welty, Carl Mydans, Aaron Siskind and Van der Zee.

Hirsch's most original political addenda are four examples of Native American images in his chapter on documentary photography: 'The Snake Priest, Hopi' by Adam Vroman (1901), 'Bear Bull- Blackfoot' by Edward Curtis (1926) (both these photographers are also discussed by Newhall,) 'Class in American History' by Frances Benjamin Johnston (1899), and 'Horace Poolaw, Aerial Photographer, and Gus Palmer, Gunner, MacDill Air Base' by the Native American photographer Horace Poolaw (1944).

It should be noted that despite the significance of the political corrections in the new histories, they rarely involve critical discussions. Warner, for example, refers to

⁵⁴ Of the three authors, Rosenblum presents the most examples of women photographers. In 1994 she published *A History of Women Photographers* (Abbeville Press).

⁵⁵ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 320.

historian Deborah Willis' observation that Van der Zee's photographs of middle class blacks 'often suggest that the postwar mass movement of blacks from the south to take factory jobs in the northern cities was a success'- but she does not make it clear that this suggestion was highly deceptive.⁵⁶ Neither does her description of Gordon Parks' work for the FSA include the racist reception he received from members of the administration's photographic laboratory. He arrived there under a Julius Rosenwald fellowship, without which he would probably never have been accepted to work for the FSA.⁵⁷

One of the few critical discussions of 'correcting images' is done by Hirsch. While Newhall comments, for instance, that 'to Curtis the Indian, as a nation, was the 'vanishing race,' whose ancient manners, customs, and traditions should be recorded before they disappeared, and this often led him to pose his subjects....,' Hirsch suggests that his work was retrospectively 'criticized for its racist attitudes.' He also refers to the unconsciously patronizing stance in Benjamin-Johnston's photograph of 'Class in American History,' in which 'viewers observe the stereotypical Native American warrior as a specimen of the old (bad) picturesque wild west.'⁵⁸

A significant though in some cases problematic outcome of the extensions of Newhall's canon is the discussion of the works of certain photographers under different categories, some of which virtually undermine his dictated boundaries between 'pictorialism', 'straight photography' and 'documentation.' Frances Benjamin Johnston, for instance, who was ignored by Newhall, was a prominent nineteenth-century photographer who turned from pictorialism to photojournalism. Her works appear in chapters on documentary photography in both Rosenblum's and Hirsch's book, while in Warner's they appear in 'Photography in the Modern Era' just before those of pictorialist photographers. The text concerning her career concludes the section on women pictorialists.

Other examples are evident in the classifications of works by two significant figures in Newhall's canon: French photographer Eugene Atget, who created an extensive photographic document of Paris; and Curtis, who was previously mentioned, is famous in his romanticized exoticist gaze on Native Americans. Both were active at the turn of the twentieth-century and during its first decades. Atget's works appear in Newhall as representative of straight photography. In Rosenblum they appear in the 'New Technology' chapter, in a section on 'Instantaneous Photographs of Everyday Life;' in Hirsch's chapter 'The New Culture of Light'; and in Warner among documentary works in the 'New Vision' chapter referred to previously.

Curtis' works are discussed in Newhall's 'The Conquest of Action,' which more or less parallels Rosenblum's 'New Technology' chapter (in which Atget's works are discussed.) In the latter, Curtis' works are discussed in the chapter on early documentation- 'Documentation: Objects and Events, 1839-1890.' In Hirsch's book,

⁵⁶ Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History* 297.

⁵⁷ Nicolas Natanson cites photographer Esther Bubley's description of the hostility Parks had suffered from members of the technical team of the FSA photography laboratory. (Nicolas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992, 62.)

⁵⁸ Newhall, *History of Photography*, 136; Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 274-275.

Curtis is also referred to as a documentarian, in a section titled 'Ethnological Approaches' of the chapter 'Social Documents,' while in Warner's they appear in the chapter on 'Photography in the Modern Age' in the section on 'Anthropological Pictorialism.'

Conclusion and a remark concerning Newhall

The challenges concerning contemporary histories of photography are answered to varying degrees and in different ways by the new histories written by Rosenblum, Hirsch and Warner. Compared with Newhall's *History of Photography from 1839 to the Present*, the authors of the new books provide broader cultural and social historical contexts and discuss broader aspects of the medium. They are less canonical, less West-oriented, and include images of and by minorities and discriminated-against social groups.

However, none of these authors have re-shuffled the cards. Substantially, their work derives from Newhall's model, and Hirsch's seems to be the most obvious example of this. His history, like Rosenblum's and Warner's, expands Newhall's model and canon, provides a wider historical background and incorporates some original ideas and innovations. For the most part, however, it seems like an updated Newhall.

Rosenblum's and Warner's histories are much more contextual. They both emphasize the background and content of photographs rather than the careers of the photographers, and they both extend the scope of photographic history to non-western areas. Warner's approach is much more radical. She makes the most extensive revisions to Newhall's narrative, including sophisticated (even if sometimes problematic) references to issues of contemporary critical theories of photography.

A fundamental difficulty encountered by all authors of the new histories is that of formulating a cohesive methodology to account for different approaches and different aspects of photography. The example of 'art' versus 'documentary' (i.e. documentary not initially intended as art) discussed in this article is evidence of this. In Rosenblum's and in Hirsch's books, the social and cultural context in which the FSA photographic project is discussed is disproportionate to that of the photo-secession. Furthermore, while Warner sets both topics within a wide cultural-historical framework, her history still bears Newhall's imprint, particularly regarding the inconsistent canonization of some photographers. Discussions of the works of 'documentary' photographers in sections on art photography, and on 'artistic' photography in chapters on documentary photography are symptoms of this difficulty. However, it is not only the limitations of Newhall's model that have given rise to these structural and methodological problems. They are also largely inherent to any historiography or theory of photography, as Barthes suggested in *Camera Lucida*:

From the first step, that of classification (we must surely classify, verify by samples, if we want to constitute a corpus), photography evades us. The various distributions we impose upon it are in fact either empirical (Professionals / Amateurs), or rhetorical (Landscapes / Objects / Portraits /

Nudes), or else aesthetic (realism / pictorialism), in any case external to the object, without relation to its essence ... We might say that photography is unclassifiable.⁵⁹

It is worth noting, however, that while all the new authors indirectly react to Newhall's classic, their explicit references to it and to him are surprisingly minimal. Rosenblum and Hirsch at least refer to his book as 'the best-known general history that has appeared in the twentieth-century' and as the text that 'defined the modernist approach' to photography. Conversely, Warner uses Newhall's name in two marginal contexts only.⁶⁰ This is disturbing because all three histories– though innovative in many ways and responsive to most of the criteria summed up by Batchen– are largely founded on Newhall's seminal work.

Post-conclusion: photography as art in the new histories

Batchen ends his proem with the question 'What kind of history do you want?' The fact that classifying photographic approaches, practices and practitioners, products and expressions is such a complex undertaking, enables recognizing the agenda behind the new histories' attempts to answer Batchen's question. A common denominator among the three texts is evident: All the authors' discussions of photography in the nineteenth-century and the first half of the twentieth-century present a relatively balanced picture of different trends in photography, but the chapters concerning the 1950s and 1960s, and, more radically, the 1970s to the present, are essentially focused on art photography (i.e. photographs for the museum or gallery wall– to use Michael Fried's definition) by photographers whose intention is primarily artistic. In Rosenblum's book almost 85% and in Hirsch's almost 100% of the post-1970 images can be classified as art. Warner's final chapter- 'Convergences: 1975-Present'- comprises more than 90% art.⁶¹

Has photographic expression since the 1970s been essentially artistic? The answer is a categorical 'No'. There are many photographic expressions in contemporary culture that are not art. Photojournalism, advertisement and fashion photography, digital news

⁵⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 5.

⁶⁰ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 9; Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 344; Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History* 298-9; 391. Warner's case is maybe the most surprising since already in 1986 she published a comprehensive article on Newhall's history ('What Shall We Tell the Children?'- previously mentioned.)

⁶¹ These images appear in Rosenblum's chapters 11 and 12: 'Photography since 1950: The straight image' and 'Photography since 1950: Manipulations and color', in Hirsch's chapters 16, 17 and 18: 'New frontiers: Expanding boundaries', 'Changing realities' and 'Thinking about photography', and in Warner's chapters 6 and 7: 'Through the lens of culture (1945-1975)' and 'Convergences (1975-present.)' In Newhall's 1982 edition there are four images dated 1970 and later. They are all art. The other images in the final chapter, titled 'New Directions,' are also art photographs.

photographs (sometimes by executors or victims of an event,) and the proliferation of amateur photography on the web are some examples.⁶²

Newhall's history was attacked as an 'art history of photography.'⁶³ Examination of Rosenblum's and Hirsch's books indicates that even though they offer a wider historical context than Newhall, they had a singular problem in removing their classifications from his traditional categorization. Moreover, although Warner's approach appears to be the most self-aware and compound alternative to this approach, when it comes to contemporary photography she also seem to be rather ambivalent regarding the 'divorce' from Newhall's prototype and from 'categories previously constituted by art and its history,' to cite Rosalind Krauss.⁶⁴ This is not an illegitimate tendency, but it is an undeclared one, that makes these books' structures and methodologies incoherent and misleading.

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⁶² It is worthy to mention in this regard Carl Chiarenza's words from 1979 on Aaron Scharf's book *Art and Photography* (1968): 'as Scharf approached the last chapter of his book photography seemed to emerge slowly as art rather than as the something other that it was at the beginning of the book' (Carl Chiarenza, 'Notes Towards an Integrated History of Picturemaking', *Afterimage*, Summer 1979, 37.)

⁶³ For example, Martin Gasser, 'Histories of Photography 1839-1939,' *History of Photography*, vol. 16, Spring 1992, 57.

⁶⁴ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces', *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1986, 150.