

Foreword

<CT>Photographer on Photography

<CS>The Photographic Enquiries of Kenneth Josephson

<CA>Gerry Badger

<EP>In the end, however, what makes Josephson's photographs continue to involve the viewer is his own particular and passionate obsession with picturemaking. He is the quintessential picturemaker, a photographer's photographer, moving compulsively from one picture series to another, working intuitively with the faith in art that knows pictures come from pictures, that ideas come from within the work itself.

<ES>Carl Chiarenza

<TXT>Any photographer works in the context of their time and cannot help but be affected by it. So before we look at the work of Kenneth Josephson, it seems pertinent to review the general context of 1960s and 1970s American photography. It is perhaps an exaggeration to claim that Josephson has been underrated by the American photographic establishment, but nevertheless there is an issue with the kind of approach he and others adopted toward the medium in

those heady days when photography was fighting for its place at the arts table--an issue concerning its reception in certain quarters.

As a result, this is something of a rehabilitation, a revisionist look at the legacy of an important photographic artist, rather in the manner of the recent reappraisal of the oeuvre of Wynn Bullock, another comparatively neglected figure, or Robert Heinecken, recently the subject of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹ There will be others also worthy of such fresh scrutiny--Jerry Uelsmann or Thomas Barrow, for instance. Indeed, a whole raft of figures may warrant this kind of attention: those who were perceived to be exploring the medium in a self-reflexive way, at a time when the most powerful institution in American photography, MoMA, was privileging photography "in the documentary mode."

John Szarkowski, then head of the Department of Photography at MoMA and widely regarded, not always with approbation, as the "czar" of American photography in the 1960s and 1970s, was interested primarily in the straight photographic aesthetic. He was considerably less enamored of those working in mixed-media techniques and those exploring the medium through the medium, rather than those exploring the world through the medium. At one point,

Szarkowski's philosophical position was balanced by the presence in the photography department of Peter Bunnell, but Bunnell's initiatives, such as his groundbreaking exhibitions Photography as Printmaking (1968) and Photography into Sculpture (1970),² were not repeated in quite the same way once he left the Modern to teach at Princeton, essentially leaving the field clear for Szarkowski and his deeply intelligent, perfectly valid, but largely purist view of photography.

Furthermore, as Andy Grundberg has noted, the kind of photography espoused at MoMA during Szarkowski's influential tenure remained "a distant cousin to the contemporary artworld of painting, sculpture, and Conceptualism."³

But here another issue arose. Photographic artists like Kenneth Josephson and many others, who were anything but traditional but who were regarded as traditional photographers, were squeezed on both sides, as it were, by the purism of Szarkowski on the one hand and by postmodern theory and a whole host of "artists utilizing photography" on the other. Just when photographers could think about hanging their work in the burgeoning number of photographic galleries that sprang up in the 1970s, and just as they could perhaps think about selling their prints as works of

art, the whole notion of art photographic practice came under fire in postmodernist critical discourse, most devastatingly in Susan Sontag's 1976 book On Photography.⁴

To be sure, all "empty modernist formalism" was subject to "critique" by the postmodernists, but photography came in for particular opprobrium. And although Sontag rightly raised concerns about the wider influence of photography within society because of misapprehensions caused by its presumed veracity, it is also clear that she regarded the medium in the same way many have regarded it, from its inception onward. Reading Sontag, it seems very apparent she did not regard photography as a "proper" art.

The irony of this--and the postmodernists regarded themselves as especially good at irony--was that, not only was the movement generating much empty formalism of its own, but much of it seemed to be photographic, and camera-generated, in nature. But, of course, all of this was produced by "artists" rather than mere "photographers." In the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, it was certainly an act of willful defiance, if not career suicide, to call yourself a photographer rather than an artist--a far cry from the days when Edward Weston was quite content to veto the word "artist" in favor of being known simply as a photographer.

Such was the milieu in which many photographic artists like Kenneth Josephson had to work and try to make a living. It did not make any difference to his work--strong artists do what they have to do--but it certainly made a difference in terms of the plaudits of the critics and the material rewards of the art world. If this all sounds negative, that is because it was for many photographers at that time, especially those who spent the 1960s and 1970s pushing at the boundaries from within rather than from outside the medium.

However, with that in mind, let us come to the work and the considerable legacy of Kenneth Josephson. And we will begin by returning briefly to John Szarkowski. In 1964, Szarkowski curated a major didactic exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art devoted to his notion of the photographic aesthetic. The Photographer's Eye explored the vocabulary of the medium, defining some of the salient means of expression at the disposal of the photographer, such as light, framing, detail, timing, and so on. These basic elements, or "building blocks," coalesce in a particular way within the camera and make the photograph what it is--a plausible simulacrum of the world.

Included in the exhibition and subsequent publication⁵ was one of Ken Josephson's most striking images, a

photograph of his shadow looming over his firstborn son, Matthew. The picture is an interplay between black and white, between substantiality and illusion, with the shadow making a "figure" that is as substantial as the baby, and the interplay between the two figures conjures up a number of potential interpretations, not all of them benign.

Here, in this image and in others from the mid-1960s, is the first level at which Josephson's imagery works, and indeed at which any serious photographer's imagery works. This is the deployment of the medium's basic building blocks: how a "decisive" moment or a trick of the light makes a mundane photograph into an image, how the camera renders textures with astonishing precision. Sometimes, it might seem that such qualities are so obvious that we fail to give them the credit they deserve. But, for photographers such as Kenneth Josephson, they not only form a palette of visual effects, they, given due care and attention, demonstrate the medium's genius. As Roland Barthes remarked, these effects are "scandalous," serving to make photography "a magic, not an art."⁶

At root, it is the power of the camera to capture "actuality" that gives the medium this talismanic aspect. Of course, as the American photographer John Gossage has succinctly put it, "it's all fiction."⁷ At worst--and

thankfully this is a scenario that occurs less often than we might think--it is a downright lie. At best--and this is the aspect grasped eagerly by creative photographers--it is an illusion.

So we come to the second level of meaning in Josephson's imagery, how the photograph's illusory and fictional nature works. Josephson also ponders the question of our almost irrational belief in the illusion, and crucially, the broad and far-reaching consequences of that belief. He has investigated the "truth" behind the photographic fiction at many different levels, exploring in a thoroughly creative and complex, yet accessible, way the perhaps narrow but infinitely deep gap between actuality and image.

It would seem that Josephson's primary impulse is formal, and this is an issue we will consider. Yet this is not a question of form without content, but rather of cause and effect. At the root of his work is the basic desire of the photographer to make pictures, to walk around with the camera, to construct and set up images, even to make family snapshots--and to make photographs that satisfy this desire in a fundamental way, to record a face or a place, and then, at a higher level, to delight in how the camera

records the textures of the world and revel in the actuality/image gap.

It is worth considering briefly this compelling need to take photographs. Writing about his friend Garry Winogrand, a contemporary of Josephson's in their early careers, Leo Rubenfein surmised that Winogrand's work perhaps represented an "imaginative reclaiming" of a world from which he was estranged.⁸ Estranged or not, this reclaiming, or simply claiming, of the world seems fundamental to the photographic act and is clearly a vital feature of Josephson's work. He illustrates in a myriad of ways.

But what, for instance, does the silhouetted image of a car made by unmelted snow have to do with claiming the world? Or spots of light hitting Chicago pedestrians like laser beams? The answers can range from indulging in the sheer pleasure of looking to creating complex metaphors for the human condition.

These images may contain meanings that are primarily private, and personal to their maker. However, although Kenneth Josephson exemplifies the turn inward toward a self-reflective vision that marks post-World War II photography--he was taking "selfies," though very complex

selfies, decades before the iPhone generation--he was also enough of an artist to look outward.

The "claiming" impulse was also central to photography's role in the colonial enterprises of the nineteenth century, and Josephson deals with this aspect of the medium, both philosophical and practical, in his History of Photography and Archaeology series, where he frequently includes instruments of measurement in the images. They remind us that photography was regarded, just after its invention, as "half art, half science." It became a vital constituent of the knowledge-gathering industry, an important adjunct to the building of empires, from the opening up of the American West to the colonization of vast swaths of the globe by the two countries in which photography was invented, Great Britain and France. The invention of photography and the rise of scientific materialism are closely intertwined. And Josephson roams across these different uses of the medium, from the private to the public and from the benign to the dubious, employing many different rhetorical strategies-- from the serious to the playful, the simple to the complex, the immediate to the subtle.

This brings us to a final, and crucial, question. Is Kenneth Josephson primarily a photographic theorist or a

picture maker? That is, does he make pictures to illustrate philosophical theories about how images work, or does he take photographs as a means of self-expression, photographs that explore his feelings and also lay bare the workings of the photographic act? Does he, to put it another way, photograph with his intellect or with his intuition? Of course, like any serious photographer, he does both, but to my mind--and his own words would tend to bear this out--he is primarily an image maker, creating expressively satisfying images rather than illustrating an aesthetic or philosophical treatise.

For me, the pictures come before the philosophy, and I believe--or I would fervently hope--that Josephson would never compromise an image's quality to confirm a theory. Kenneth Josephson's photographs have life because, first and foremost, they are great pictures. That is why they are not only satisfying but have resonated in our consciousness for so long. They are the opposite of so much dry and often predictable conceptualism.

To make this case, I mention Josephson's much-remarked-upon humor. Humor in art is an often misunderstood quality, frequently damned with faint praise, as if to say that, if it is humorous, it cannot quite be serious. It is all too easy with photographers of Josephson's ilk to see

only the visual humor and the formal games, and to miss the connection with the world (as Martha Rosler did in the case of Lee Friedlander, another contemporary of Josephson's).⁹ But Beethoven and Bob Dylan are the most humorous of musicians, while Picasso and Robert Rauschenberg hardly lack a sense of comedy--and who would dare contest their serious credentials?

Josephson's humor, subtle and sardonic, is an essential feature of his work. A photograph showing four horseshoes "floating" in front of a wall exemplifies his whole approach. It is an interesting picture, with the two painted numbers and the horseshoes making for a kind of realist abstract expressionism, while a measuring rod added by Josephson in the corner plays with the frame edges and completes the image visually yet also qualifies it for inclusion in one of his "scientific" series, in this case his History of Photography. This inclusion gives us the vital clue: the picture refers to Eadweard Muybridge and his pioneering motion studies of the 1870s and 1880s, which proved that a horse's four hooves are never simultaneously off the ground when it is galloping, as had generally been believed. But no, says Josephson, I can prove otherwise, and indeed, Muybridge's studies have been found to be not quite what they seem.¹⁰ This is pure Josephson, a photograph

of considerable elegance, gentle wit, and absolute seriousness.

Kenneth Josephson's work has lasted, and continues to resonate so powerfully precisely because he has privileged the act of picture making over that of philosophizing. His life and work demonstrate a love for photography despite its foibles and problems, and not the active dislike so many using the medium seem to feel for it. He has produced one of the foremost bodies of work that explores how photographic images operate and their ultimate purpose. He was a "postmodernist" before postmodernism was concocted--but, to our great benefit, one who has led with his heart as much as his head.

<A>Notes

<NT> The epigraph is from Carl Chiarenza, "The Seriousness of Wit," in Kenneth Josephson, ed. Lynne Warren (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983), 7.

1. Wynn Bullock: Revelations, curated by Brett Abbott, was shown at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, from June 14, 2014, to January 18, 2015. Robert Heinecken: Object Matter, curated by Eva Respini, was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from March 15 to September 7, 2014. See

Brett Abbott, Wynn Bullock: Revelations (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), and Jennifer Jae Guttierrez and Eva Respini, Robert Heinecken: Object Matter (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

2. Peter Bunnell's exhibition, Photography as Printmaking, was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from March 19 to May 26, 1968. Photography into Sculpture was shown from April to July 5, 1970.

3. Andy Grunberg, "Kenneth Josephson: The Photograph and the Möbius Strip," in Kenneth Josephson: A Retrospective, ed. Sylvia Wolf (The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 2000), 13.

4. Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

5. The Photographer's Eye, an exhibition of two hundred photographs curated by John Szarkowski, was shown at the Museum of Art, New York, from May 27 to August 1964. See John Szarkowski, The Photographer's Eye (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

6. Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 88.

7. John Gossage, telephone conversation with Gerry Badger, August 10, 2010.

8. Leo Rubenfein, introduction to Garry Winogrand, catalogue accompanying an exhibition at Grossmont College Gallery, El Cajon, California, March 15 to April 2, 1975.

9. See Martha Rosler, "Lee Friedlander's Guarded Strategies," Artforum, April 1975.

10. For example, see Marta Braun, "The Expanded Present: Photographing Movement," in Ann Thomas, Beauty of Another Order: Photography in Science (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Braun demonstrates that even the "scientific" photographs of Muybridge were manipulated to a degree in order to obtain the desired result.