

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

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STATEMENTS BY PHOTOGRAPHERS IN DIOGENES III

MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO

Frequently a passionate discussion takes place between artists of different occupations as to which art is more profound, more significant, or more complete. The result of these discussions is that each person is convinced that his art is the best. Aside from this positive result, those involved discover two fundamental concepts: one is that each medium, aside from its academic dimensions, has its own dimension, whose limits are adjusted to that part of the complexity of human living and its relationship with nature which can be expressed, so that different arts do not exclude each other, but complement each other. The other result is understanding the submission to the medium and to the environment, in such a way that the artist becomes the sensitivity and the brain of the tools he handles, and the interpreter of the imperative dictates of the human group to which he pertains. This interpretation gives rise to a conflict which is: the choice of what should be heard, in order to be executed in the work of art. And in this choice is to be found the importance, the value of the work; not in the medium used.

What is said and how it is said produce the style; the lack of style is the not having something to say, or not knowing how to say it. What happens often is not having something to say. Therefore, academicism, virtuosity, and purism are produced, which tend only to surprise and deceive.

Technical qualities are not manufacturers' formulas, but individual resolutions of the problems of expression. Furthermore, limitations of the medium and personal limitations can constitute expressive forces.

Manuel Alvarez Bravo

Statement by La Sociedad de Arte Moderno in presenting a retrospective exhibition of the work of Manuel Alvarez Bravo in Mexico, 1945.

"The photography of Manuel Alvarez Bravo is neither a spontaneous phenomenon nor an exotic one in the Mexican environment; it is, on the contrary, the culmination of all the antecedents of work in this field, so well known and absorbed by him, of all the forces and advances which have marked the history of photography in Mexico. Manuel Alvarez Bravo is a photographer of the purest Mexican nature; this is reflected in his subject matter, his light, his composition and his lofty poetic and dramatic feeling."

WALKER EVANS

Valid photography, like humor, seems to be too serious a matter to talk about seriously. If, in a note, it can't be defined weightily, what it is not can be stated with the utmost finality. It is not the image of Secretary Dulles descending from a plane. It is not cute cats, nor touchdowns, nor nudes; motherhood; arrangements of manufacturers products. Under no circumstances is it anything ever anywhere near a beach.

In short it is not a lie, a cliché - somebody else's idea.

It is prime vision combined with quality of feeling, no less.

Walker Evans

From an essay by Lincoln Kirstein in Walker Evans - American Photographs

"...after looking at these pictures with all their clear, hideous and beautiful detail, their open insanity and pitiful grandeur, compare this vision of a continent as it is, not as it might be or as it was, with any other coherent vision that we have had.... Only newspapers, the writers of popular music, the technicians of advertising and radio have in their blind energy accidentally, fortuitously, evoked for future historians such a powerful monument to our moment....

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It is no chance that...Walker Evans should have worked with James Agee, the author of Permit Me Voyage, whose verse, springing at once from Catholic liturgy, moving pictures, music and spoken language, is our purest diction since Eliot. Walker Evans' eye is a poet's eye. It finds corroboration in the poet's voice....

The most characteristic single feature of Evans' work is its purity, or even its puritanism. It is 'straight' photography not only in technique but in the rigorous directness of its way of looking....

This is neither a baroque nor a decorative, but a purely protestant attitude: meagre, stripped, cold, and, on occasion, humorous....The view is clinical. Evans is a visual doctor, diagnostician rather than specialist. But he is also the family physician, quiet and dispassionate, before whom even very old or very sick people are no longer ashamed to reveal themselves....

...The pictures of men and portraits of houses have only that 'expression' which the experience of their society and times has imposed on them. The faces, even those tired, vicious or content, are past reflecting accidental emotions. They are isolated and essentialized...he so details the effect of circumstances on familiar specimens that the single face, the single house, the single street, strikes with the strength of overwhelming numbers, the terrible cumulative force of thousands of faces, houses and streets."

AUGUST SANDER

From a letter by Thomas Mann:

"I have perused with interest and pleasure the "Antlitz der Zeit" and warmly felicitate you on its publication. This collection of photographs which are both precise and unpretentious is a true find for the devotees of physiognomics and offers an excellent opportunity for the study of vocational and social imprints on the human countenance."

Wilhelm Hausenstein in den Münchner Neuesten Nachrichten

"In these photographs images of the time are recorded factually, consciously and firmly. Here photography has understood, differentiated and performed its role; it has earnestly verified essences of our time, has created documents sine ira et studio, documents which only photography can create. A photographic typology, sociology and physiognomic which is, to be sure, an essential and particular task for the lens. Not only is the possible accomplished here but also the extraordinary."

PAUL STRAND

Wherever the painter, writer or photographer may be working, he has, I think, a great responsibility of truthfulness. But if the place and the material chosen is a country which is not his own, that responsibility is heavier. For here he is relatively a stranger. He must come to know, to see and understand what he sees, with a good deal of humility and respect. Otherwise what he does cannot be much more than an impertinence. In the past, European artists have come to America and have tried to express the quality of life there before they really knew what it was all about. One may learn from such mistakes.

In my work in both France and Italy, much looking - much simple being there, preceded any photography. To know a land somewhat, its special character, the qualities which make its individuality, the temperament and life of its people, is a process of gradual absorption, of sympathetic perception....

It is my hope to find what is explicit and implicit in the France of now, in the Italy of now - that essential character which is compounded of both past and present.

Paul Strand
U.S. Camera Annual, 1955

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From a statement by Leo Hurwitz

"...Laymen say: What reality! How three-dimensional! Photographers say: What texture! What a scale of values! What print quality! This is a first reaction and the least significant one. All this virtuosity is at the service of what Strand has to express, the felt idea behind the photograph. No picture of Strand's is brilliant for brilliance's sake. To him the object is all important. His photograph is his best effort to render the emotional significance of the object. His approach is one of utmost simplicity. In this sense his photographs are impersonal, selfless. Yet they are characterized by a strong emotion.

He has sought in his photographs to express his most vigorous feelings about his world. His passion has sharpened his vision to the degree where he is satisfied with no less than the most dramatic manifestation of events. It has driven him to the most superb mastery of techniques, so that his medium places no impediment to his expression. And as a result he has opened a new world to photography, and through it rendered revelations into human experience. He has written an autobiography of himself in terms of things he has seen. He has given us photographs that are more than the look and surface of things, photographs that live and grow, that will take on new beauty and meaning for people as long as his prints...are seen."

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION BY EDWARD STEICHEN

This is the Museum's third exhibition under the title Diogenes with a Camera. Of the twenty-nine exhibitions I have organized here since becoming the director of the Department of Photography in 1947, there have been fourteen group exhibitions similar to this one. Each of these group exhibitions was made up of small one man shows by four to six photographers. They have often deliberately contrasted work of the widest possible variations of form, style, content and technique and have included the meticulous rendering of minute detail, the swift interception of an exact instant, and complex abstractions.

In the present group there are certain similarities of approach, but the evident differences, based on each photographer's sensitivity, intellectual and emotional orientations, again emphasize the scope and range of photography as a creative medium. I believe the validity and relative value of the photographer's concept is further emphasized by the juxtapositions. These are four highly individual and concrete evaluations of the medium of photography in relation to the photographer, his simplicity or extravagance, and his relationship to himself, his time, and his environment.