





## POSED to UNPOSED: *encounters with the camera*

Throughout the history of photography, posed subjects have comprised an essential category of human imagery. Posing occurs for many reasons: to commemorate a personal milestone, clarify a group affiliation, advertise a product, or dramatize a narrative. It is a means of controlling an image through specific choices related to props, setting, body language, facial expression, and arrangement of subjects. As such, it is based on an agreement, however tacit, between two or more parties.

In the early years of the medium, posing was a necessary function of having one's picture taken. The daguerreotype process, widely in use by the 1840s, required a large box camera that contained a copper plate covered with silver iodide, which reacted chemically upon exposure to light. After developing, the result was a unique, laterally reversed image on the polished metal, giving rise to the expression "mirror with a memory." Unfortunately, the success of the daguerreotype depended on sitters remaining absolutely still for periods of several minutes; often their heads were held in place by metal brackets. Photographers and subjects worked collaboratively to find positions that would be most flattering under these difficult circumstances, sometimes referring to guides and handbooks for advice.

Though the daguerreotype process was gradually replaced in the 1850s by glass negatives yielding paper positives, the

technical improvement did not render picture making any easier. The wet-plate system, which was in use through the 1870s, involved a great deal of preparation and follow-through: a photographer had to photosensitize the plate and expose and develop it on-site. This laborious procedure was undertaken with heavy and awkward equipment, which greatly stifled the quest for spontaneity. If people were to be described with any degree of detail and accuracy, photographs had to be posed.

The first posed pictures were portraits of families and individuals. Having photographs made was a means to permanently memorialize loved ones, as evidenced in a picture from the 1850s by American George N. Barnard of four children seated against a satin backdrop (p. 148). Though it is difficult to imagine from a modern-day perspective, the idea that one's countenance could be forever recorded on a reflective surface was both a comfort and a revelation. For the first time, people could see exact transcriptions of the faces of friends and relatives in image form. Daguerreotypes were viewed as precious not only in their jewel-like appearance but as objects of deep personal significance.

OPPOSITE, TOP: Irving Penn. *The Ballet Theater, New York*. 1947. Gelatin silver print, 13¾ x 19¾" (34.9 x 49.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Condé Nast Publications

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Garry Winogrand. *World's Fair, New York City*. 1964. Gelatin silver print, 8" x 12" (21.9 x 32.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of N. Carol Lipis

The integration of photography into the rituals of family life has inspired many forms of posing, be it for a spur-of-the-moment snapshot at a graduation or a formal wedding portrait. In 1930 Martín Chambi was hired to document the marriage of Don Julio Gadea. Chambi was known throughout the elite of Cuzco for his sensitive approach to portraiture, which is illustrated by his photograph of the Gadea wedding party. Chambi posed his subjects within a domestic environment to create the effect of a procession that has been temporarily halted. Bride and groom emerge from the darkness to stand in a strong and enveloping light, as friends and family wait inside the threshold of an entryway in the background. Among the most striking features of this composition is its somber mood; virtually no one smiles. The mysterious ambience, accentuated by contrasts of light and shadow, is unlike modern-day conventions of wedding portraiture, which idealize moments of utmost happiness and familial harmony.

The commemoration of social or professional affiliations is the function of many posed photographs. James Van Der Zee, a popular studio photographer in Harlem, opened his doors in 1917 to a clientele of predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class New York residents. Inspired by fashion, film, and magazines, Van Der Zee realized the power of the pose to create an image of status and economic privilege. For *Unity Athletic*



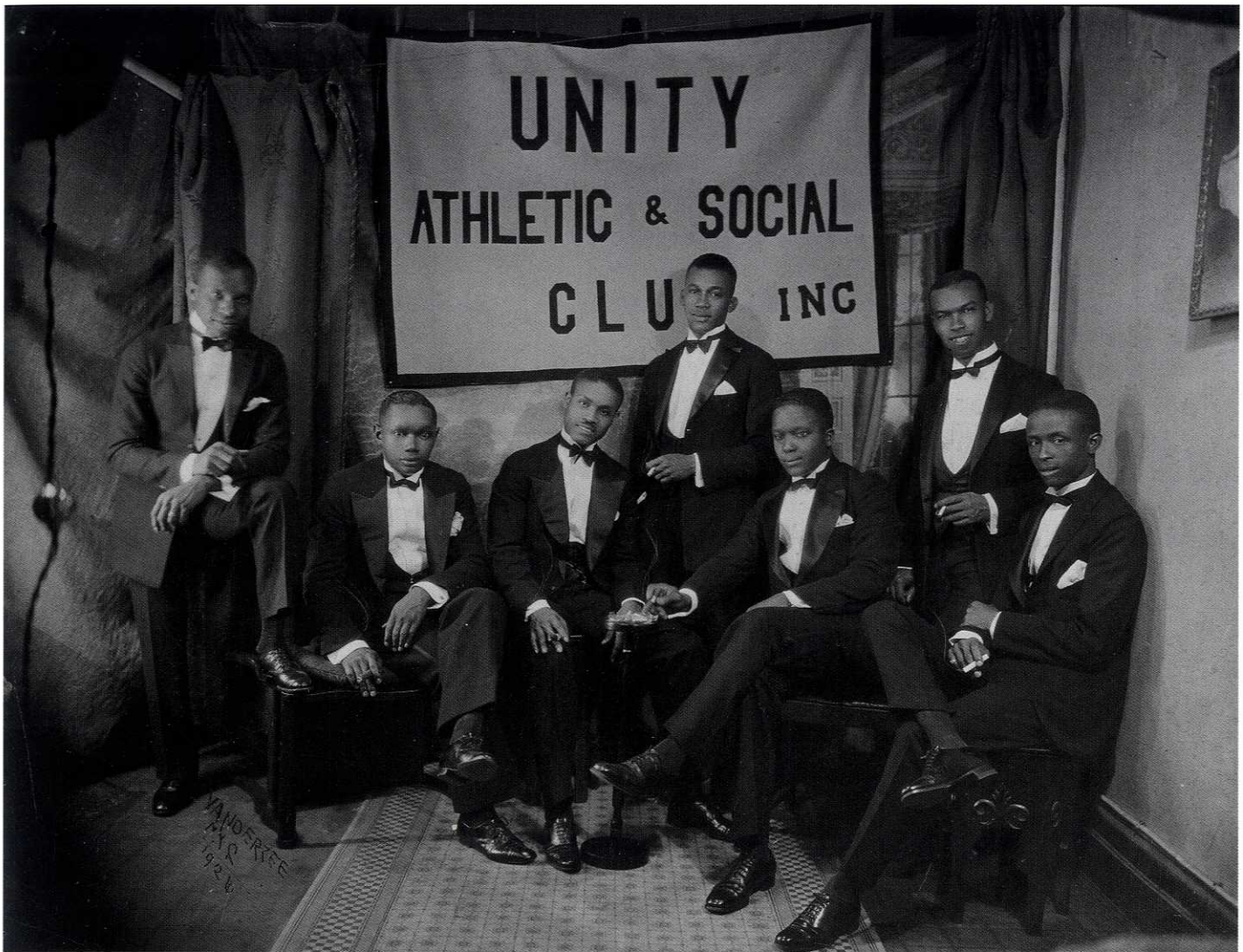
ABOVE: George N. Barnard. Untitled. 1850s. Hand-tinted daguerreotype, 4¼ x 5½" (10.8 x 14 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Armand P. Bartos

BELOW: Martín Chambi. *Gadea Wedding*. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 9⅞ x 12⅞" (24 x 32.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Vera Louise Fraser Estate

OPPOSITE: James Van Der Zee. *Unity Athletic and Social Club, Inc.* 1926. Gelatin silver print, 7¾ x 9⅞" (19.7 x 25.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr. Fund





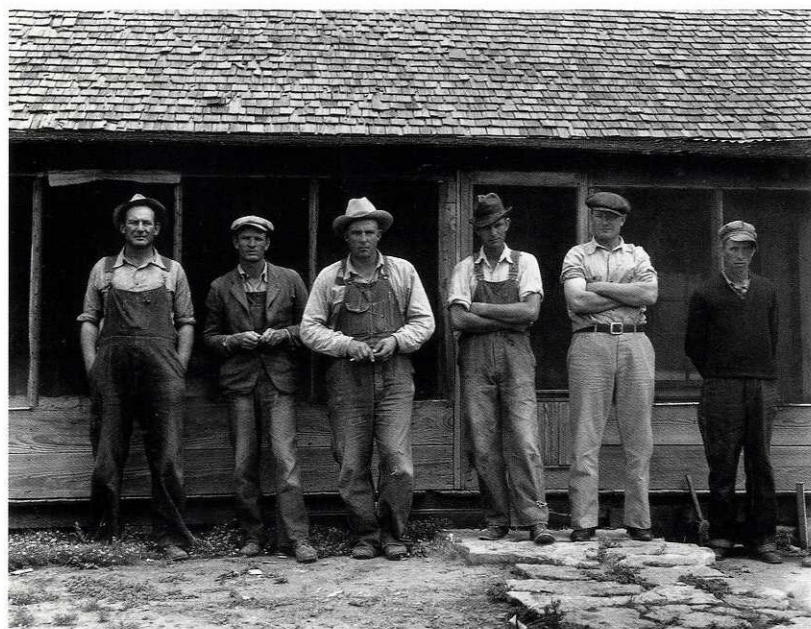


and Social Club, Inc., of 1926, every detail was carefully plotted to support the sought-after effect: the choice of apparel, the configuration of the subjects, and their individual postures and gestures. The men, in matching black tuxedos, were arranged to convey an attitude of relaxed elegance, with legs crossed and cigars or cigarettes casually balanced in their fingers. A studio lamp, visible along the left edge of the picture, casts a dramatic light on the sitters, adding to the artifice of glamour affected in this image.

Photographers who document social conditions have also manipulated poses, even when this compromises the supposed "truthfulness" of an image. Dorothea Lange worked for the Farm Security Administration, a division of the United States Department of Agriculture, which undertook an extensive campaign to photograph the hardships of rural life in Depression-era

America. Focusing on the plight of migrant laborers, Lange created images that would broaden awareness and stimulate aid to rural workers. In two photographs from 1937 of the same group of unemployed tenant farmers (p. 150), Lange experimented with the potential of different poses to illustrate the strength of hardworking men yet also suggest their misfortune. In one photograph, the figures stand against the backdrop of a rustic house, confronting the camera with their collective gaze. In a second composition, the crouching figures look in slightly different directions, each seemingly lost in his own thoughts. Taken a full thirty minutes after the first picture, this photograph raises provocative questions: did the subjects adjust their stance on their own, or was the rearrangement something Lange contrived in order to create another, perhaps more psychologically compelling, portrait? A comparison of the two works also





reveals that Lange cropped the second image to eliminate a figure. She might have felt that paring down the composition would intensify its effect. Yet when Lange reprinted the image in the 1960s, she restored the farmer to his original place among the group.

Working decades earlier, both Peter Henry Emerson and Frances Benjamin Johnston employed rigorous methods to pose their subjects in narrative photographs that illustrate the lives and labors of specific regional and ethnic groups. Emerson, a physician by training, documented the rural populations of England's East Anglia in consciously artistic compositions derived from the styles of nineteenth-century Realist painters such as Jean-François Millet. Emerson's photographs depict men and women working the land—tilling soil, picking berries, and reaping the harvest. Though based on the actuality of the subjects' daily existence, his images draw upon themes of heroism and dignity through the use of symbolic poses. For example, *The Barley Harvest, Suffolk* (p. 152), published in 1888, represents human fatigue and stoic determination through carefully chosen gestures. A seated man is about to quench his thirst, while another sharpens his scythe for further toil. Like Emerson, Johnston was interested in "active" poses that would suggest her subjects' virtuous qualities. Johnston, who photographed America's coal miners as well as its aristocrats, embarked upon a commissioned project for The Hampton Institute, a school dedicated to the proper education and vocational training of African and Native Americans. In 168 pictures made in 1899 and 1900 (p. 153), well-dressed, well-mannered students are arranged in tableaulike configurations to represent a balanced life of study, work, and relaxation.

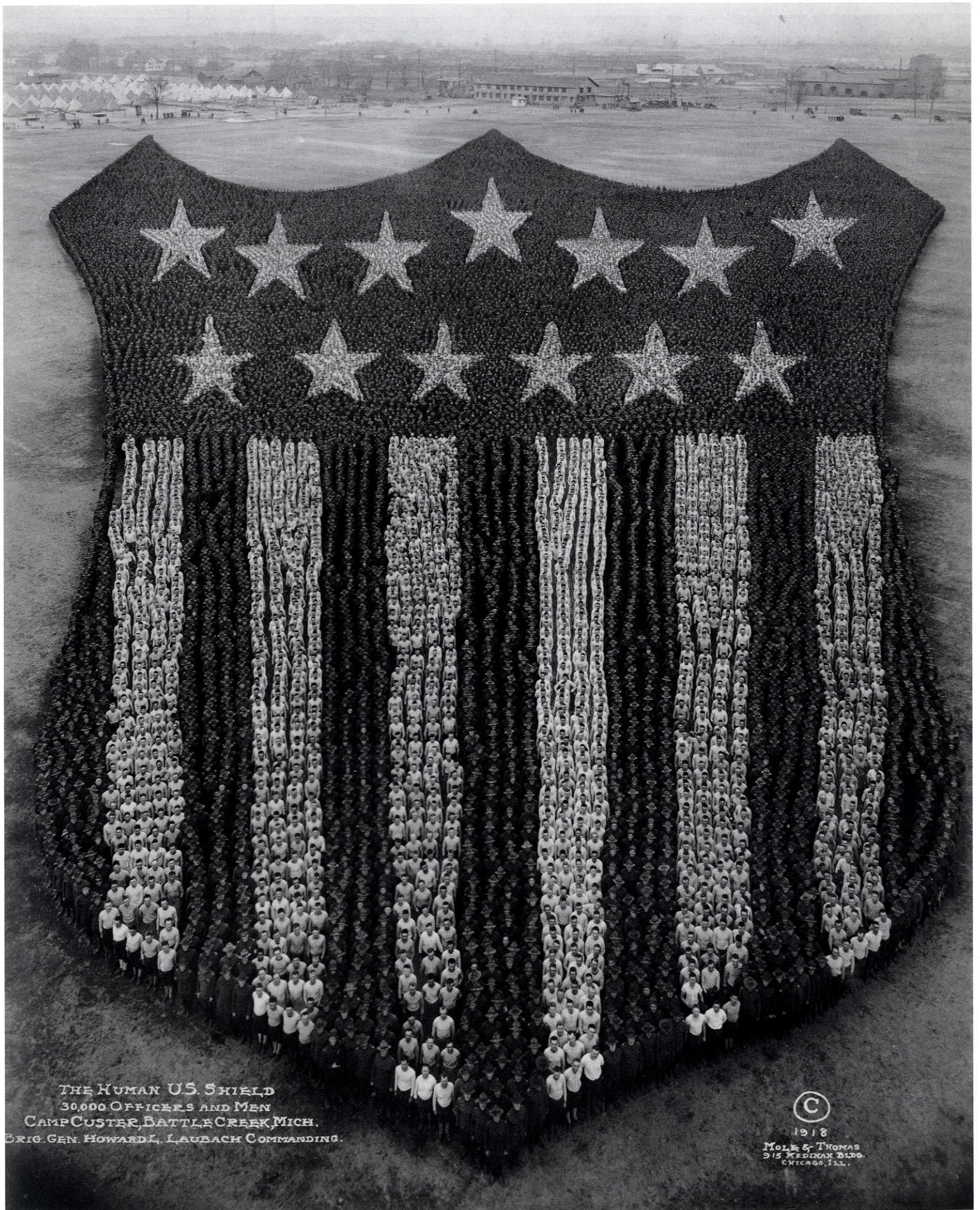
Photographs that demonstrate a more casual encounter between subject and visual recorder began to appear in the late nineteenth century. In 1888 George Eastman of Rochester, New York, marketed a camera that was small, hand-held, and easy to use, permitting pictures to be taken under a wide variety of conditions. With its rapid-advance mechanism, the 35mm Leica, which became available to the public in 1925,

ABOVE: Dorothea Lange. *Six Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardeman County, Texas*. 1937. Gelatin silver print, 12 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (32.7 x 39.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

BELOW: Dorothea Lange. *A Half-Hour Later, Hardeman County, Texas*. 1937. Gelatin silver print, 10 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (25.9 x 34.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

OPPOSITE: Arthur Mole and John D. Thomas. *The Human U.S. Shield: 30,000 Officers and Men. Camp Custer, Battle Creek, Michigan*. 1918. Gelatin silver print, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (32.4 x 26.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Ronald A. Kurtz





THE HUMAN U.S. SHIELD  
30,000 OFFICERS AND MEN  
CAMP CUSTER, BATTLE CREEK, MICH.  
BRIG. GEN. HOWARD L. LAUBACH COMMANDING.

©  
1918  
MOLLY & THOMAS  
915 KEDDAX BLDG.  
CHICAGO, ILL.





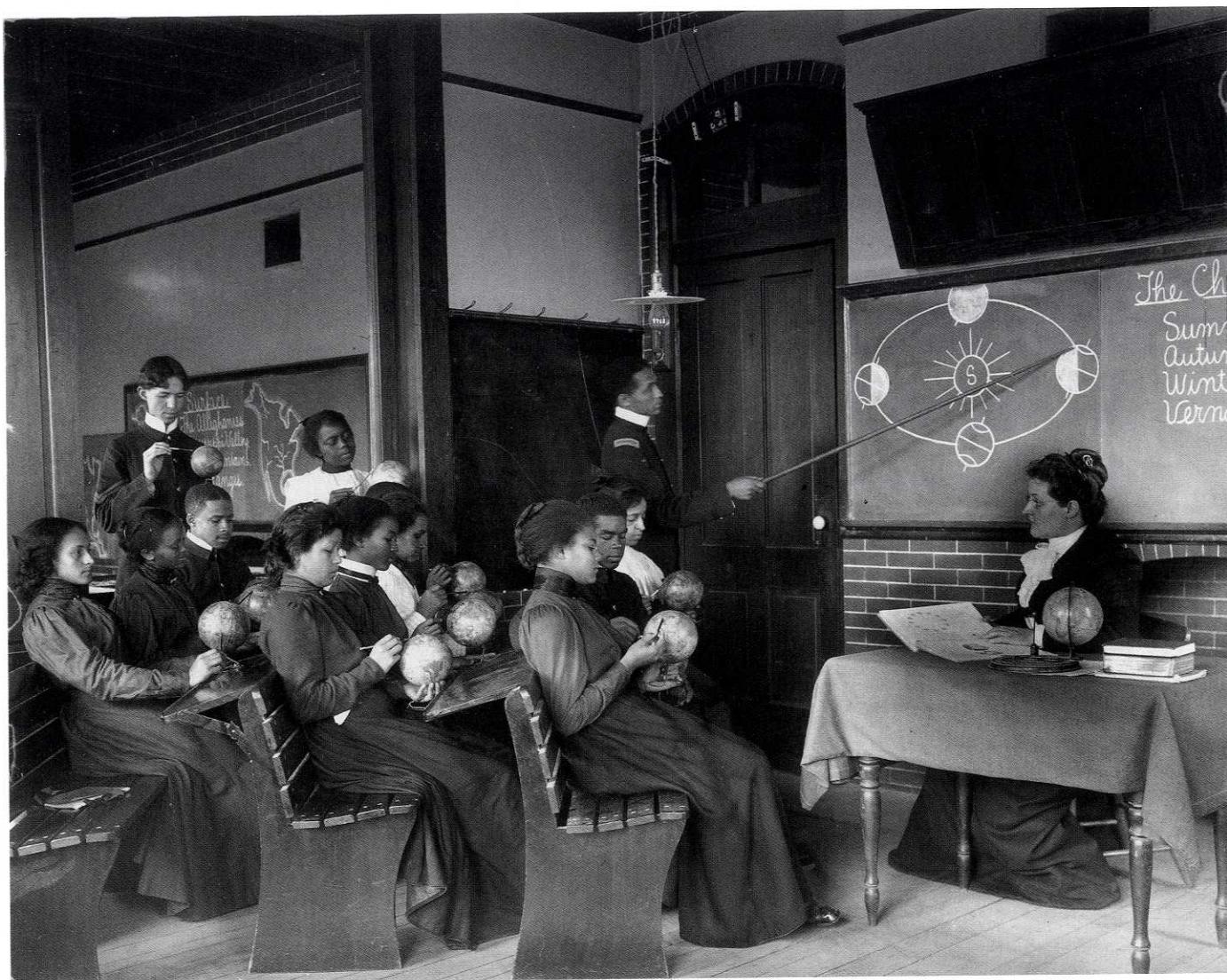
improved the efficiency of the hand-held camera and allowed photographers to shoot successive frames very quickly. It was also extremely compact, which engendered greater freedom in the picture-taking process. Photographers began to approach their subjects from an unlimited range of positions, using their mobility to capture the flow of everyday life.

As a consequence of these technological changes, which enabled subjects and photographers to respond instantaneously to one another, a new form of posing emerged. To "strike a pose" a subject freezes in a theatrical attitude directed at the camera. In a photograph by Helen Levitt from around 1940 (p. 154), for example, two boys make exaggerated gestures that evoke the dramatic poses of great actors or orators. Although people respond in many ways to being photographed, subjects who act or mug for the camera adopt outward personae that reveal little of themselves to scrutiny.

At the same time, by striking poses they may manifest sides of their personalities that are not readily apparent in the course of everyday life. Thus for one person a pose might serve as a protective strategy or smoke screen, and for another disclose personality traits that are normally concealed.

In *Alicante, Spain* of 1933 (p. 154) by Henri Cartier-Bresson, three people respond to the photographer's assertive presence by configuring themselves into a bizarrely twisting arrangement that is both graceful and disturbing. As they turn to look into the lens of his 35mm camera, they lean into one another, hands and bodies forming a circular flow of contact. To the left, a woman raises a blunt knife to her companion's neck in a pseudo-menacing gesture. Like other photographs by Cartier-Bresson, this one is full of ambiguities: who are these subjects, and what are they attempting to convey by their actions? Inspired by Surrealism's attention to uncanny occurrences





and odd juxtapositions. Cartier-Bresson extrapolated fragments of the visual world through cropping, framing, and foreshortening to create enigmatic compositions stripped of all spatial and narrative context.

The features of hand-held cameras have had radical implications for the creation of unposed photographs, which record the subtle and unexpected effects of life in motion. With lighter and smaller equipment, photographers can document human activity surreptitiously, acting like spies and voyeurs. During the 1890s, for example, Arnold Genthe wandered the streets of San Francisco's Chinatown with a small Zeiss camera hidden beneath his jacket, a strategy that allowed him to observe a wide range of unmediated everyday phenomena from the position of inconspicuous bystander (p. 157).

The work of Jacques-Henri Lartigue embodies the qualities of immediacy and chance that characterize unposed

OPPOSITE: Peter Henry Emerson. *The Barley Harvest, Suffolk*, from *Pictures of East Anglian Life*. 1888. Photogravure, 9 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (23.8 x 24.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

ABOVE: Frances Benjamin Johnston. *Geography. Studying the Seasons*. 1899–1900. From *The Hampton Album*. Platinum print, 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (19.1 x 24.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lincoln Kirstein





ABOVE: Henri Cartier-Bresson. *Alicante, Spain*. 1933. Gelatin silver print,  $10\frac{1}{4} \times 15\frac{3}{16}$ " (26 x 38.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer

BELOW: Helen Levitt. *New York*. c. 1940. Gelatin silver print,  $8\frac{15}{16} \times 13\frac{1}{4}$ " (22.7 x 33.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer

OPPOSITE, TOP: Joel Meyerowitz. *Paris*. 1967. Gelatin silver print,  $9\frac{1}{16} \times 13\frac{1}{2}$ " (23 x 34.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Weegee (Arthur Fellig). *Untitled*. 1942. Gelatin silver print,  $10\frac{5}{16} \times 13\frac{3}{16}$ " (26.2 x 33.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Family of Man Fund









photographs. When he began to photograph as a young boy, it was because he wanted to document the action of his life: bicycle races, jumping contests, speeding cars. Drawn to movement of any variety, Lartigue was always ready to record its many permutations with his Block-Notes camera. Taken in 1908 when he was a teenager, a picture showing an afternoon stroll becomes a record of flux in *The Beach at Villerville*. In the foreground, a man absentmindedly clasps his hands as a woman turns to view a boat on the horizon. Further back, three men in black recede as they exit the frame of the image. This picture captures a sense of passing, not only of people but of time. It is as if everything is about to shift: bodies, gestures, light. A fragment of life, this picture could never be reenacted.

The work of Americans Tod Papageorge and Garry Winogrand is the product of an intense observation of the world and an acute ability to respond instantaneously to its

unpredictable, humorous, and tragic manifestations. In the 1978 *Alice in Wonderland* (p. 159) by Papageorge, the sight of a figure (whose gender is unclear) perched on a bronze sculpture that commemorates a storybook heroine is evidence of the odd and momentary occurrences of life in the city. The strange scale of the people in relation to the sculpture, the mingling of animate and inanimate body parts, and the playful surrounding activity mimic the peculiar events of Lewis Carroll's tea party. In the foreground, a little boy kneels amid

ABOVE: Jacques-Henri Lartigue. *The Beach at Villerville*. 1908. Gelatin silver print, 10½ x 13¾" (26.7 x 35 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

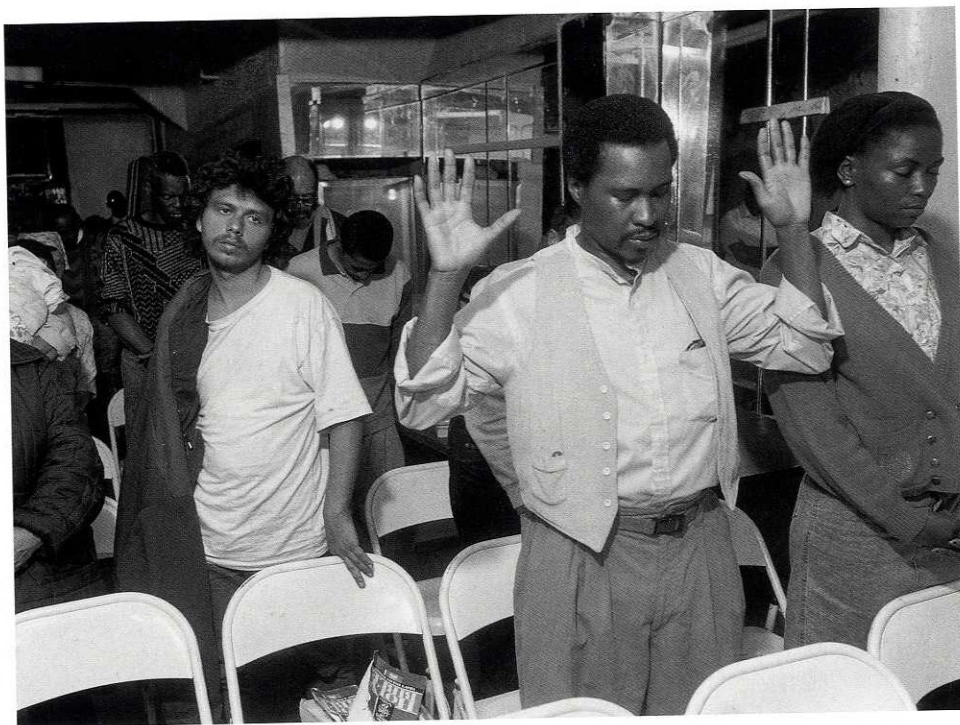
OPPOSITE, TOP: Manuel Alvarez Bravo. *Conversation near the Statue*. 1933. Gelatin silver print, 7 x 8¾" (17.8 x 22.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Clark Winter Fund

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Arnold Genthe. *Street of Gamblers* (Chinatown, San Francisco). 1896 or later. Gelatin silver print, 9¾ x 11½" (24.8 x 30.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Albert M. Bender









a display of mysteriously placed objects—including a hat, tin pot, and rubber mask—lost in his own imaginary tale. Winogrand viewed public space as a kind of theater comprising many small dramas. In *World's Fair, New York City* of 1964 (p. 146), a park bench becomes a stage where secrets are shared, conversations sparked, and curious looks advanced. In addition to the physical description the work provides—the pattern of legs, the leans and whispers—it also alludes to broader human relationships and suggests the coexistence of two parallel worlds: the specific and intimate reality of the women clustered on the park bench and the anonymous presence of the crowds visible in the distance.

Overtly posed compositions contrast sharply with the complex and subtle language of the body when caught unawares. In posed works, gesture, facial expression, and comportment are encoded to relay specific meanings and messages. However, when subjects are pictured outside the controlled environment of a studio or a set-up environment,

ABOVE: Thomas Roma. *Untitled*, from the series *Come Sunday*. 1991–94. Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (23.5 x 32.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Christie Calder Salomon Fund

BELOW: Henry Wessel. *Untitled*. 1977. Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (25.1 x 38 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Joseph G. Mayer Fund

OPPOSITE: Tod Papageorge. *Alice in Wonderland*. 1978. Gelatin silver print, 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (47.3 x 31.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Robert L. Smith







their body language is often determined by the unforeseen conditions of the moment. The subjects' reactions to these conditions may be immediately recognizable; in an image from the 1991–94 series *Come Sunday* (p. 158) by Thomas Roma, for example, a parishioner stands with his eyes closed and his arms raised, a posture that quickly registers as a sign of surrender and devotion to God. However, body language is not always so easily read. The 35mm camera can stop movement at any juncture, be it climactic or incomplete. Cartier-Bresson often photographed transitional scenes in which gesture was linked to unfolding and often indeterminate action. Though body language is no less important in influencing the interpretation of his pictures, its effect can be to further a sense of ambiguity.

The photographs of Chris Killip and Sheron Rupp communicate the uninhibited attitudes of people intensely absorbed in their activities. In Killip's 1988 photograph (p. 161) of slam dancers at a club in Newcastle, England, chaotic movement consumes a couple of skinheads and provides the basis for a powerful figural composition defined by the bold lines of human anatomy. Likewise, the configuration of bodies in Rupp's work is determined by the subjects' concentrated activity. While on vacation at a campsite in Bayside, Ontario, in 1995, Rupp was captivated by the striking physical likenesses within a family and asked to photograph them. In exchange for their compliance, she took several Polaroids of the group. The photograph illustrated here (p. 161) revolves around the act of looking: as the adults assemble to study the Polaroid pictures of themselves, a boy admires his truck and a little girl assiduously puts false nails on her fingertips. Though the entire group is fully aware of Rupp, only one of them, a boy in the foreground, acknowledges her presence by staring directly into the lens of the camera. As such, he provides a point of contact and entrance for the viewer.

In recent years, the associations of unposed (quick, fleeting, surreptitious) and posed (controlled, preconceived, agreed upon) have merged in photographs that have the casualness of snapshots but were in fact carefully planned. Pictures of friends and family by Tina Barney (p. 163) seem to stem from of-the-moment encounters, as if Barney had happened upon her subjects and photographed them with a simple click

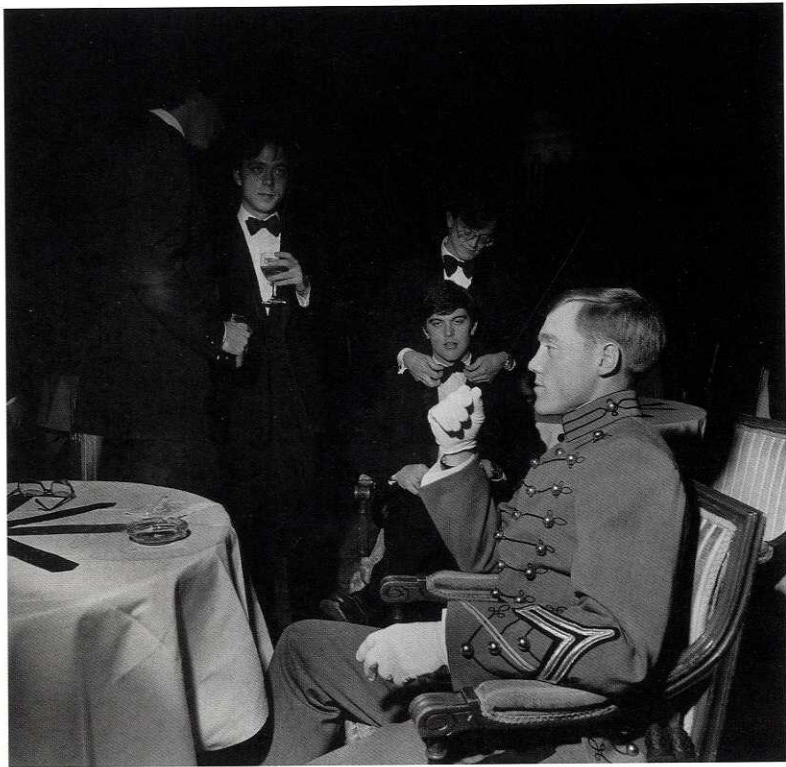
OPPOSITE, TOP: Sheron Rupp. *Untitled (Bayside, Ontario, Canada)*. 1995. Chromogenic color print, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 32" (65.7 x 81.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. E. T. Harmax Foundation Fund

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Chris Killip. *Untitled*. 1988. Gelatin silver print, 15 x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (38.1 x 47 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Family of Man Fund









of the shutter. Her process, however, involves a large view camera and sophisticated lighting equipment, the use of which requires considerable labor and forethought. To create her pictures, Barney begins by taking note of her surroundings—what people are doing, how their bodies are interacting, and the quality of light, form, and color. When she has identified a scene, she positions her camera and then often directs her subjects to hold still, repeat an action, or move in a certain way. Barney's strategy of observation and intervention is one that many photographers employ to varying degrees. Rupp's bathers, for example, would not have gathered as they did if the artist had not provided the incentive to do so. Thus, distinguishing between posed and unposed in photographs is complicated by the subtle effects of staging that are incorporated into seemingly impromptu compositions.

The different methods a photographer can employ—posing one's subjects versus responding instantaneously to a rapid influx of visual stimuli—appear to result from antithetical strategies of artistic control. Highly posed photographs—such as works by Van Der Zee—reveal a deliberate contrivance in the way subjects hold particular postures and in the careful arrangement of the overall environment. Unposed photographs, by contrast, are comparatively spontaneous, derived from the chance occurrences of life. Under these circumstances, a picture is composed by manipulating specific photographic devices: isolating subjects from a particular perspective, stopping action at a precise moment, or distorting and exaggerating details through selective focus. But as Barney has shown, the strategies that differentiate posed from unposed very often overlap, eliciting further consideration of both categories. At what point does a photographer's intervention transform a "natural occurrence" into a posed scene? When does observation give way to manipulation? How much posing underlies even the most casual-looking pictures? Sometimes a photograph provides enough visual evidence to suggest answers to these questions, but often the subtle human interactions that underlie an image's construction are known only to the scene's participants.

LEFT: Larry Fink. *Hungarian Debutante Ball, New York City*. 1978. Gelatin silver print, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 15 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (37.5 x 38.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired with matching funds from the Frank Strick Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts

OPPOSITE: Tina Barney. *Sunday New York Times*. 1982. Chromogenic color print (Ektacolor), 47 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 60 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (120.7 x 154.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Anonymous gift



