

Photography & Text

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Introduction

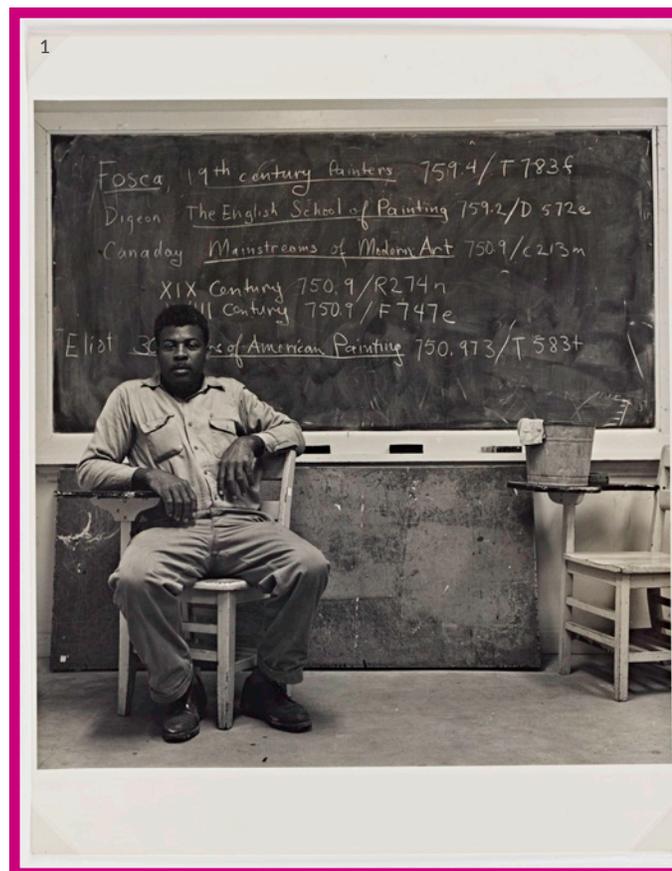


These photographs typify various relationships of photo and text. In some instances, the text and photo are side by side, and in others, they are together within the borders of the image. Of the latter, some feature “found text”—words and phrases that already existed in the environment—while others include text that was added to the photograph.

Roland Barthes’s seminal writings on semiotics and photography point to how titles, captions, and accompanying or included texts can clarify, elaborate, or change the message of a photograph. Because of their indexicality, Barthes notes that, to all appearances, a photograph is “a message without a code”—that is, a neutral image exclusively constituted by a denoted message. However, photographs are subject to connotation, too, in that a photograph is “worked on”—planned, composed, cropped, described, and explained. Accompanying text never literally duplicates the image, subjecting the photograph to new nuances. Because the photograph appears to be a “message without a code,” the *ideological* aspects of the photograph and its accompanying text are potentially *naturalized*. Reading this group of photographs according to these ideas, we find poignant and witty interactions of text and image, many of which comment on issues of class and gender.

1. This photograph is an ideal case study of how text and image interact in layered and complex ways to create meaning. The viewer's eye first takes in the figure of an African American man at the left side of the photograph. He is seated casually in front of a chalkboard and he gazes directly out at the viewer. On the chalkboard is a list of assigned readings on nineteenth-century painting, suggesting that this man may be the Art History professor. As the viewer's eye moves to the right, however, it encounters a bucket and rag sitting on an adjacent desktop. Returning to the figure, the viewer now notices his scuffed shoes and shabby coveralls. The title confirms that this is not the professor, this is a *Portrait of a Custodian as an Art Historian*.

Whereas Jerry Uelsmann's better known surrealist composite photographs combine multiple negatives to suggest new and implausible dreamscapes, this early straightforward photograph's juxtaposition of figure and text suggests a commentary on issues of race and class in the early days of the civil rights era. The issues this photograph speaks to not only remain clear and relevant today, but take on additional potency in the context of today's continued systemic inequality and racialized violence, demonstrating how a viewer's immediate cultural moment can inform their reading of a photograph.



2. In the early twentieth century, improved processes for printing photographs revolutionized magazines. Picture magazines like *Life* and *TIME* featured extended essays substantially illustrated with photographs. W. Eugene Smith, one of the most influential photojournalists in the development of the photo-essay form, took this photograph for a photo-essay published in *Life* magazine in 1951 called "Nurse Midwife." The photo-essay, which Smith considered one of his best, consisted of six spreads and thirty pictures documenting the work of Maude Callen, a nurse and midwife, who lived and worked in rural South Carolina. Smith spent six weeks shadowing Callen on her rounds as she performed all the duties of a doctor, nurse, and midwife in makeshift clinics. As compelling as this single image is—in which we intuit Callen's dedication from our limited view of her back and one strong arm—Smith was notorious for creating his own page layouts, carefully crafting the narrative through the sequence and layout of image and text.

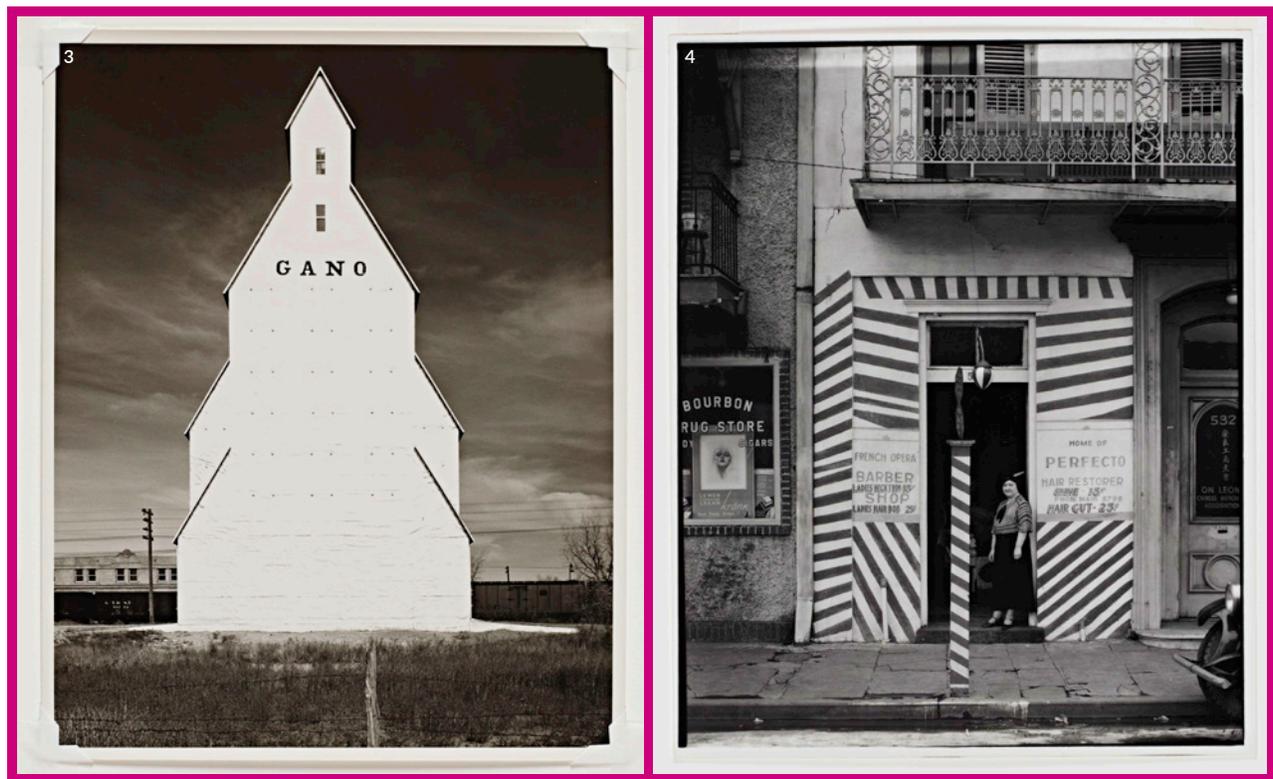


1. Jerry N. Uelsmann, U.S.A., b. 1934. *Portrait of a Custodian as an Art Historian*, 1963. Gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, 1986.416

2. W. Eugene Smith, U.S.A., 1918–1978. *Maude Feeding Pregnant Woman*, c. 1951. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Kevin Eugene Smith, 1988.136.2

- 3. Wright Morris made a name for himself as both a writer and a photographer. During the mid-1930s, Morris began thinking about how to combine his fiction and photography in a way that was unlike what the picture magazines of the day, like *Life*, were doing. In Morris's "photo-texts," the photographs do not illustrate the text nor does the text describe the photographs. Instead, the juxtaposition enhances and expands the interpretation of each component. **Gano Grain Elevator, Western Kansas** was included in Morris's first photo-text, *The Inhabitants* (1946), across from the following text:

Donaldson's hitch bar would have to go. So would the split elm and the horse trough full of marbles, the old chain swing. Mr. Cole said the horses would soon go too. Cement paving would wear their hooves to the bone, he said. Willie said, for what did horses have shoes? Mr. Cole spit and said some day the paving would go right out of town. It would go to the east first, and then it would go to the west. He said when Willie had kids he'd bet their kids would ride it for miles. And when their kids had kids they'd ride it clear to Omaha. Willie rolled up his sleeve and felt in the horse trough for marbles. What makes you think, Willie said, that I'm goin' in for kids?

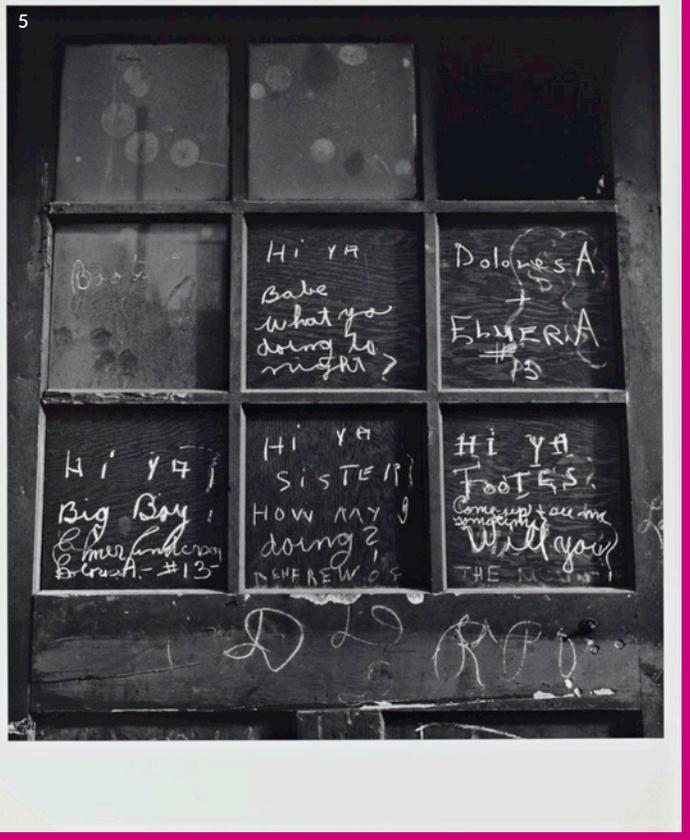


- 4. Walker Evans was a significant early-twentieth-century documentary photographer. This photograph appeared in *American Photographs*, the publication accompanying Evans's groundbreaking 1938 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published in 1941 with text by James Agee, established Evans, furthermore, as a pioneer of the photobook form, expanding the photo-essay form in length and literary sensibility.

Beyond his contributions to the photobook form, however, Evans's documentation of signage, such as that in *Sidewalk and Shopfront*, revealed what the photographer considered to be a uniquely American vernacular. A concept most often used in reference to architecture or language, Evans's American vernacular is specifically characterized by a combination of text and image. The uneven stripes of the barbershop post and doorway and the hand-painted lists of services and prices in *Sidewalk and Shopfront* exemplify the interaction between architecture, graphics, and text in the largely commercial found text that Evans pictured.

3. Wright Morris, U.S.A., 1910–1998. *Gano Grain Elevator, Western Kansas*, 1940. Gelatin silver print. 10 x 8 in. (sheet) 25.4 x 20.3 cm (sheet). The Capital Group Foundation Photography Collection at Stanford University, 2019.46.12

4. Walker Evans, U.S.A., 1903–1975. *Sidewalk and Shopfront, New Orleans*, 1935. Gelatin silver print. 9-1/2 x 7-3/4 in. (image) 24.5 x 19.5 cm. (image). Francis Alward Eames Fund, 1975.188



5. John Gutmann, a successful German painter, emigrated to the United States after he was barred from teaching and exhibiting in Germany because he was Jewish. Although he wasn't trained as a photographer, Gutmann was familiar with German magazines of the 1930s, which featured photographic human-interest stories, and he took up photography as a way to make a living in his new country. Before sailing for California, he purchased a Rolleiflex camera and got a contract with Presse-Foto, a German photo agency for magazines. Gutmann was successful as a photojournalist, and his images capture the unique character of the places and people of his new home, which, as an emigre, he was particularly sensitive to. Like Walker Evans's *Sidewalk and Shopfront*, Gutmann's *Datebook* documents found text in the city. In this case, however, the text is not commercial, but appears instead to be a spontaneous and partly anonymous exchange of personal ads that reveals how graffiti and architecture form another integral part of an urban American vernacular.

6. Whether the proliferation of signs in the city was acceptable or not was hotly contested during the first two decades of the twentieth century. New York City groups concerned with cultivating and maintaining the city's beauty and livability argued that billboards and the electric signs of Times Square were unsafe and unaesthetic. Although these early efforts led to some restrictions in the form of zoning laws, neon signs dominated Times Square and many city spaces by the mid-twentieth century. World War II had stimulated economic growth, enabling the creation of a large middle class and an accompanying boom of consumption.

In Frank Paulin's *Times Square (Canadian Club)*, layers of glowing signs, ranging from advertisements for cars, whiskey, and beer to the marquees of several theaters, document this boom in commerce and its accompanying signage. The bright lights of the neon illuminate the dark sky and the rush of oncoming car headlights and throngs of pedestrians on the sidewalks animate this nighttime cityscape.



5. John Gutmann, Germany, 1905–1998. *Datebook, San Francisco*, 1939. Gelatin silver print. 14 x 11 in. (sheet) 35.6 x 27.9 cm (sheet). The Capital Group Foundation Photography Collection at Stanford University, 2019.44.52
 6. Frank Paulin, U.S.A., b. 1926. *Times Square (Canadian Club)*, 1956. Gelatin silver print. 8-7/8 x 13-3/8 in. (image); 11 x 14 in. (sheet) 22.5 x 34 cm. (image); 28 x 35.5 cm. (sheet). Gift of Bruce and Silke Silverstein, 2010.7

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- 7. Robert Heinecken produced an expansive and highly influential body of photographic work that consistently interrogated the roles and strategies of popular media in contemporary life. Heinecken rarely created original photographs with a camera, but rather appropriated, reproduced, and altered found photographs from magazines and other pop culture sources in the darkroom and through other interventions. *Recto/Verso* is an excellent example of the artist's cameraless working methods and critical commentary on advertising imagery, consumerism, and beauty culture.

Heinecken's *Recto/Verso* photograms are created by contact printing double-sided magazine pages, which reproduces the imagery from the front and back of the page together, intertwined in evocative ways, on the photographic paper. The *Recto/Verso* prints are made from fashion magazines and the content is, subsequently, focused on desire and the female body. The silver dye bleach printing process that Heinecken used replicates the glossy color and texture of fashion magazines and produces crisp text, allowing the viewer to explore the planned and unplanned potent juxtapositions of text, image, and color in ads and magazine editorials.

8



IT WAS CLEAR, I WAS NOT MANET'S TYPE
 PICASSO--WHO HAD A WAY WITH WOMEN--
 ONLY USED ME & DUCHAMP NEVER
 EVEN CONSIDERED ME

- 8. Carrie Mae Weems's interest in photography started in the late 1970s after she received a camera as a gift. She first used photography as a means of personal documentation, turning her camera on her extended families. Then, increasingly, it became a form of political and aesthetic expression, with storytelling as a means to understand history figuring prominently in her work.

Not Manet's Type is a highly personal and political series that questions the foundations of modern art. The images, and the text that Weems has added to the mat, address the status that history has allotted to female artists and subjects of color. The title refers to revered male artists of European descent, like Édouard Manet (1832–1888), and by extension his famous painting *Olympia* (1863), in which a black female servant is nearly invisible in the background as she tends to the white prostitute who is her mistress. Each of Weems's images in this series is a carefully constructed self-portrait and the text is notably written in the first person. Weems allows the viewer to peer voyeuristically into her bedroom, not unlike the setting for *Olympia*, as she considers her place in art history as subject, muse, and creator: "It was clear, I was not Manet's type. Picasso—who had a way with women—only used me & Duchamp never even considered me ..."

7. Robert Heinecken, U.S.A., 1931–2006. *Untitled #4*, 1988. Color Cibachrome photograph. 14 x 11 in. (sheet) 35.6 x 27.9 cm (sheet). Gift of Victor Landweber, 2019.183.4.1

8. Carrie Mae Weems, U.S.A., b. 1953. *It was clear, I was not Manet's type Picasso—who had a way with women—only used me & Duchamp never even considered me*, 1997. Gelatin silver print with text on mat. 25 x 21 x 1-1/2 in. (frame) 63.5 x 53.3 x 3.8 cm (frame). Museum purchase made possible by a gift from Pamela and David Hornik, 2014.108.2

■ 9. Having failed his draft physical and avoided fighting in the Vietnam War, Bill Burke decided to travel to Southeast Asia on his own, photographing and documenting his journeys. Burke published his photographs from Thailand, Cambodia, and other former French colonies in two photobooks, *I Want To Take Picture* in 1987—in which this photograph appears—and *Mine Fields* in 1995. Like many young men of his generation, Burke was exposed to a great deal of war imagery in movies, television, and magazines, but his own images, which include photographs of Khmer Rouge fighters, tend toward sensitive portraits rather than images of violence. *I Want To Take Picture* and *Mine Fields*, moreover, combine photographs, contact sheets, ephemera, and personal reflections. Burke often wrote autobiographical snippets directly on the photographs, as seen in *Khmer Rouge DK75 and Crew*, where Burke details how the negative was scratched when his backpack broke on the road back to Thailand from Cambodia. The mundane nature of this recollection highlights its personal nature.

■ 10. Jim Goldberg's *The Poor and Privileged of San Francisco*, published as a photobook titled *Rich and Poor* (1985), is the artist's seminal project in the realm of storytelling through text and image. For this series, created between 1977 and 1985, the photographer invited his subjects to review their portraits and write their own reflections on the page. As the series title states, Goldberg's portraits feature both the rich and the poor of San Francisco, taken in their elegant and lavish homes and welfare hotel rooms, respectively. Questions of representation and power are inherent in portrait photography, but Goldberg's invitation to the individuals to interpret their own images, in their words, allows them to exert control over the narrative. While the images show most overtly the material differences between the homes of the rich and poor, the sitters' words give the clearest sense of the personal and psychological effects of wealth and poverty. In *Larry Benko*, a shirtless man stands in a dingy hotel room, with one arm protectively around a little boy standing on the sagging bed. Larry Benko, the subject of the photograph, writes underneath, "I love David. But he is to (sic) fragile for a rough father like me," highlighting the intersection of class, gender expectations, and parenthood.



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I LOVE DAVID. BUT HE IS TO
FRAGILE FOR A ROUGH FATHER LIKE
ME

Larry Benko

9. Bill Burke, U.S.A., b. 1943. *Khmer Rouge DK75 and Crew, Nong Pru*, April 15, 1984. Gelatin silver print. 17 x 23 in. (image) 43.6 x 59.6 cm. (image). Palmer Gross Ducommun Fund, 1990.21

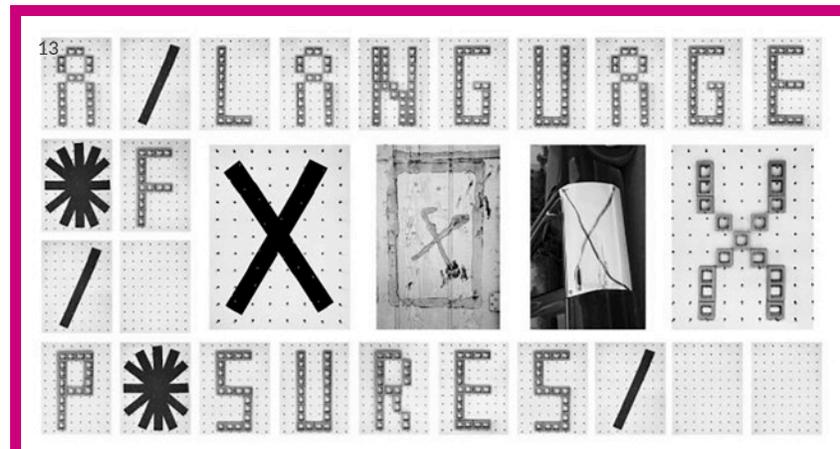
10. Jim Goldberg, U.S.A., b. 1953. *Larry Benko*, 1979. Toned gelatin silver print. Gift of William R. and Louise Fielder, 1991.252.23



11./12. Jess T. Dugan’s work explores issues of identity, gender, sexuality, and community through photographic portraiture. For this series, *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults*, Dugan and social worker Vanessa Fabbre traveled throughout the United States photographing and interviewing older transgender people, who, they note, are overwhelmingly absent from cultural imagery. The photographs and interviews reveal their subjects to be complicated individuals, whose experiences uncover complex intersections of gender, age, race, sexuality, and class. Preston is relaxed in his portrait, leaning against a wall, gazing out at the viewer. In his interview, he recalls the difference it made when he learned the word transgender. In contrast to Larry Benko’s comments on Jim Goldberg’s portrait of him, Preston’s interview recounts his father’s unselfconscious display of vulnerability and acceptance when Preston came out as transgender, presenting a different model of masculinity.



13. For all of Barthes’s musings on the complex construction of meaning in photographs, language itself is not a transparent and neutral medium of communication either. Shannon Ebner’s (*A.L.N.G.U.E.*F.X.P.S.R.*) tackles this fact, turning language into an object and an image for examination. The artwork, from the larger project *The Electric Comma Series*, explores language’s psychological weight by making the letters physical. In a one-car garage in Los Angeles, Ebner arranged cinder blocks on wall-mounted pegs to create each letter of the alphabet. The solidity and weight of the cinder blocks serves as a foil for the immaterial and fleeting nature of spoken, and even written, language. Imagining the artist’s process hefting the cinder blocks into place and photographing them, flattening the three-dimensional block into a two-dimensional letter, the viewer further confronts the inherently constructed and mediated nature of language. Ebner’s work can be understood through Barthes’s semiotics, as well as within the historical context of photo- and language-based Conceptual art that emerged in the 1960s, which embodied and interrogated philosopher Marshall McLuhan’s notorious argument that “the medium is the message.”



11. Jess T. Dugan, U.S.A., b. 1986. *Preston, 52, East Haven, CT*, 2016, 2018. Color archival pigment print. 18 x 13-1/2 in. (image); 20 x 16 in. (sheet) 45.7 x 34.3 cm (image); 50.8 x 40.6 cm (sheet). Fenton Family Fund, 2019.51.8.1
 12. Jess T. Dugan and Vanessa Fabbre. *Preston, 52, East Haven, CT*, 2016, 2018. Printed text. 20 x 16 in. (sheet) 50.8 x 40.6 cm (sheet). Fenton Family Fund, 2019.51.8.2
 13. Shannon Ebner, U.S.A., b. 1971. (*A.L.N.G.U.E.*F.X.P.S.R.*), 2011. 28 Chromogenic prints. 144 x 240 in. (overall) (unframed) 365.8 x 609.6 cm (overall) (unframed). Palmer Gross Ducommun Fund, 2017.1.1-28

