SUBJECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHY
AND THE EXISTENTIALIST ETHIC

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Those commonplace and merely beautiful pictures, which thrive mainly thanks to the charm of some actual object, are thrust into the background in favor of experiments and fresh solutions. Adventures into the realm of optics are still for the most part unpopular. But only that photography which enlists the help of the experimental will be able to lay bare all the technical formation of the visual experience in our times.

—Otto Steinert

Art would perhaps be authentic only when it had totally rid itself of the idea of authenticity . . .

—Theodor Adorno

SUBJECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

Ever since the beginning, the camera has pointed to myself," confessed Minor White, espousing a self-reflexive attitude that also characterized *Subjektive Fotografie*, the postwar European photography movement founded by Dr. Otto Steinert.[1] Steinert defined Subjective Photography as "humanized and individualized photography," which was meant "to capture from the individual object a picture compounding to its nature."[2] A contemporary West German curator, Ute Eskildsen, explains the subjective thrust of this renewal of Modernism: "The viewing of reality changed after the war to a self-oriented need for expression."[3] The movement's exhibitions spanned the years 1951 through 1958, serving not only the aesthetic but also the economic and ideological needs of postwar West Germany.[4] It was theory of a camerawork that may be explicated by examining its theoretical kinship with the Continental philosophies of Phenomenology and, particularly, Existentialism. The latter is in large part a development of the former in its Sartrean version, as James Edie observes: "Sartre is the person who more than any other has 'domesticated' the German Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and created what is now called the 'second school of Phenomenology'. . ."[5]

Theoretically, Subjective Photography could draw from Phenomenology's positing of the mutual implication of subject and object, from the phenomenological method that involves intending, intuiting, reflecting upon, and describing pheno-

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[1] Minor White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations* (New York: Aperture, 1969): 4.

[2] As quoted by Allan Porter in "Subjective Photography 4," *Camera* (July 1975): 5.

[3] Ute Eskildsen, " '*Subjektive fotografie*': a program of non-functionalized photography in post-war Germany," *Subjektive Fotografie: Images of the '50s* (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 1984): 10.

[4] It is not a mere coincidence that photographic equipment and supply companies encouraged this renaissance in European photography by supporting exhibitions, and that domestic and foreign sales of photographic items soared. As the secretary of the Association of the German Photographic Industry stated: "For our future, exportation is vital. Photographic articles are highly precious goods in terms of the balance of trade. Let's hope that the 'Photokina' 1951 can contribute" (Bruno Uhl, "Photokina 1951 internationale Leistungsschua," *Photo—Technik—Wirtschaft* 4 [1952]: 117).

[5] James M. Edie, "Sartre as Phenomenologist and as Existential Psychoanalyst," *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Edward N. Lee and Maurice Mandelbaum, eds. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967): 140-141.

mena. And *existentialized* Phenomenology (*à la* Sartre), like *Subjektive Fotografie*, stressed how one subjectively intends and constitutes one's "life-world." Both espouse making a transition from a natural, nonreflexive perception of things to an intensified, self-reflexive grasp of key aspects. Albeit without the transcendental ego, Sartre subjectifies this intentional grasping of things, putting an emphasis on subjective knowledge, knowledge constituted by feelings and desires, as well as thought, played out in specific "situations." Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Steinert stresses the constituting power of the gaze, and the importance of authenticity: a creative, personal individuality opposed to inauthenticity, "bad faith" or *mauvaise foi* in Sartre's terminology. Commenting on the existentialist aspect of modern photography in the 1950s, the editor of the periodical *Magnum*, Dr. Karl Pawek, observes in the 1959 *German Photographic Annual*: "Every modern photograph is . . . based on the momentary existence of an object which does not always exist in that form. . . . How did 'photography' come by this Existentialism which at the same time reveals the essence and the very substance of the subject? It is characteristic of the modern camera that it has discovered the third and fourth dimension for the two dimensional picture."[6] Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Steinert's *Subjektive Fotographie* all converge on the ethic that one is "to make no use whatever of the testimony of others in confronting the givenness of experience."[7]

Subjective Photography—even as it set itself apart from its predecessor, the New Vision's objectivist photography of the 1920s—extended that earlier movement's modernist goals of greater aesthetic autonomy and expressiveness for the medium.[8] German art historian Franz Roh wrote enthusiastically about both.

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[6] Karl Pawek, "Do We Have a New Photographic Style Today?" *The German Photographic Annual: 1959*, Dr. Wolf Strache, ed. (New York: American Book Publishing, 1959): 19.

[7] Maurice Natanson, *Edmund Husserl, Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 60.

[8] New Vision photography included two paths: 1) synthesis—photomontage, superimposition of several photographs, lens-less photography; and, 2) analysis—penetrating to the overlooked objects and events right next to us; utterly simple things are made significant. See Hans Windisch's 1929 essay, "Seeing," reproduced in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, Christopher Phillips, ed. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989): 177.

SUBJECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

Prescient of both Otto Steinert's and Minor White's later theorizing, László Moholy-Nagy, in *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), viewed the 1920s' new objectivity as necessary to the founding of a new subjectivity: "In the photographic camera we have the most reliable aid to the beginning of objective vision. Everyone will be compelled to see that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms before he can arrive at any subjective position."[9] Subjective Photography, building upon the former objective emphasis characteristic of New Vision photography, took the latter as its appointed task. Manfred Schmalriede, contributing his observations to the catalogue *Subjektive Fotographie: Images of the 50's* (1984), explains this difference between pre- and postwar German photography: "The claim for objectivity that the photography of the New Objectivity tried to realize in the objective presentation of the objective world was not to be found with the postwar photographers. Their interest was their own existence and the human element, which thus entailed a subjective-existential view, understanding subjectivity as a creative source."[10] Of course, what is described here by Schmalriede can be understood from a philosophical position as the existentializing of Phenomenology by Sartre when, in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937), he attacked Husserl's concept of the transcendental ego, that which permitted Husserl to claim scientific objectivity for his method.

Nevertheless, many of the formal ploys that characterize Subjective Photography are rooted in early Modernism: Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer, and Man Ray were major influences on the postwar generation eager to pass over the propagandistic employments their medium had been put to during the Third Reich. This was a generation eager to reassert the existential importance of unfettered individuality as a reaction against the jackboot of fascist conformity. L. Fritz Gruber, organizer of many Photokina exhibitions, writing in the 1956 *German Photographic Annual*, defines what the postwar generation wanted to put behind them:

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[9] László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1973): 28.

[10] Manfred Schmalriede, " '*Subjektive fotografie'* and its relation to the twenties," *Subjektive Fotografie*, 27.

> For years photography had been the slave and worshiper of evil; the face of the man with the Chaplin moustache called Hitler, yes-men at attention, uniforms, military bands, flags, the terrifying frozen-faced adoration, arms raised, hands outstretched. Photography had been the state-sponsored German *Romantik*, the innumerable shots of the german soldier, with the grim, controlled features of an actor, fighting his way victoriously through to defeat. Photography, it seemed, had been a lie.[11]

In other words, photographers acted in "bad faith" in promulgating a political agenda, rather than exploring the dimension of their individual encounters with what phenomenologists term "the life-world," what Sartre calls "the situation."

In the same 1959 annual, Kurt S. Safranski discusses the effect of the war years on personal expression in photography. Characteristically, he understates the Nazi's manipulation of the media and their repression of dissent; he defines creative photographic vision as a phenomenological "suspension," or "bracketing," of the natural attitude of human vision, a "reduction" (in Husserlian terms) that turns experience into "pure phenomena," into "adequate form." And, like the existentialists, he stresses the importance of the total personality in creative expression:

> It is true that the years 1933 - 1945 brought so many problems and made the task of merely remaining alive so difficult that the time and means, the energy and the will were entirely lacking when it came to seeking something new in photography. . . . A development thus inhibited can do no more than follow, more or less slavishly and in abject imitation, the lines of policy laid down. In other words, a neutralized press automatically engenders neutralized photographers. Photography of course is really nothing more nor less than 'vision held in suspension.' And vision, in turn, is dependent on the whole personality of the person seeing—on his actions, his desires, his intentions and his expectations. If this personality is under the stress of outside influences, the vision will inevitably reflect this stress—i.e., the photographer will record it in his work. Added to this is the

[11] L. Fritz Gruber, "The Coming Generation," *The German Photographic Annual: 1956* (New York: American Book Publishing, 1956): 18.

> fact that all those who were in a position to offer conscientious resistance to this political streamlining saw their livelihood threatened or were expelled from the country.[12]

Minor White, whose theoretical agenda also developed during the 1950s, expresses a similar interest in holding the world in phenomenological "suspension." During one of his workshops, he suggested that when looking, "withhold judgement as a way to greater seeing."[13] This is akin to Phenomenology's methodological aim —through eidetic and phenomenological reduction—to remove presuppositions that might prevent the turning of experience into "pure mental phenomena."[14] Put simply, reduction refers to a shift in attention from factuality and particularity (as seen in applied and documentary photography) to essential and universal qualities grasped by intuition (as observed in subjectively-oriented photography).

What White's guru-like didactics were to American photography in the 1950s, so were Steinert's rational theories and curatorial proclivities to postwar Europe. Both White and Steinert believed in transcending the literal aspects of photographic reportage, a "natural attitude" in photography underwritten by the medium's *optico-chemical chain of causality.* However, by creatively interpreting, or even transcending, the subject matter (the "motif," as Steiner termed it; the "thing itself" as White called it) *through uniquely photographic means,* each theorist hoped to rescue photography from the banalities of the mass media, the literalness of the Sunday snapshooter, and superficial readings of the layperson. This constituted a perfect

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[12] Kurt S. Safranski, "The Possibilities of Photo-reporting," ibid., 14-15.

[13] White cited by Arnold Gassan, *Report: Minor White Workshops and a Dialogue Failed* (Sun Prairie, WI: Baumgartner Publications, 1983): 47.

[14] The door, to which suspension ("bracketing") is key, opens into an entire realm of subjectivity which Descartes barely touched upon. It is to the description and analysis of the structure and constitution of that realm that Phenomenology is devoted. It employs two fundamental distinctions in method, in meaning-conferring activity: *eidetic* and *phenomenological* reduction; the former denotes the turn from mere contingency to essence, the latter describes the movement from mere belief to transcendental subjectivity; using both reductions one becomes increasingly aware of the co-constitution of objects wherein the world is reduced to the status of an intentional correlate of that meaning-conferring activity.

Greenbergian, modernist construction of what photographic expression—if it is to be aesthetically significant—must avoid.

For White, the photographic "equivalent," or symbol, was the key means for shifting the viewer's attention from literal record (denotation) to poetic suggestion (connotation). To this end, White harnessed Alfred Stieglitz's theory of photographic symbolism to Eastern mysticism's philosophy for overcoming the subject/object dichotomy. The result was his four "canons of camerawork":

> 1) to be still with oneself;
> 2) not to impose your composition on the object, but let it generate its own;
> 3) the photograph becomes a mirror of the observer;
> 4) when the photograph is a mirror of the man, and the man is a mirror of the world, spirit might enter.[15]

As a specific instance, White mentions—in a discussion that recalls Moholy-Nagy's words previously cited—that when Edward Weston was most concerned with the objective thing-in-itself, something seemed to happen, and his photographs became in a very curious way more subjective.

For Steinert—a German physician, not an Eastern guru—such a complete identification of self and world, mind and matter—philosophers call it *monism*—must have seemed merely fanciful and wholly out of line with Phenomenology which attempts to walk a fine line between monism and dualism. Scientifically trained, with a predilection toward empirical method, Steinert's sympathies were more attuned to (as Husserl claimed his method initiated) a "science of essences." And just as Husserl outlined the ways experience might be reduced from mere contingency to its essential aspects, Steinert enumerated the creative elements unique to photography, aspects inherent in the medium, which the photographer could use to abstract/extract key responses to the life-world. Like the five inherently photographic aspects listed later by John Szarkowski in his catalogue essay for *The Photographer's Eye* (1966)—the thing itself, the frame, vantage point, detail, and time—Steinert's elements were to provide the objective technical means for the creative personality to unite in creative

[15] Gassan, 28, 75.

symbiosis with the mechanical aspects of picture taking within the new situation of postwar European experience. Following an existential bent, personal perspective —the free creation of consciousness by itself within the facticity of its situation and its own body and in the face of its death—was to be imposed on the obdurate facticity of objective reality through creative use of the following:

1) choice of subject, and its isolation from nature;
2) view in photographic perspective via lens choice, point of view;
3) view in photo-optical reproduction, the selective emphasis on pictorial elements through isolation, close-up, and tonal rendition;
4) transposition into photographic tones and hues via high contrast, tone line breakdown, solarization, and negative print;
5) isolation of the natural course of time by exposure, either very short or prolonged.[16]

Karl Pawek, in his aforementioned 1959 article, links these creative elements to man's existential situation:

> . . . Modern photography can avail itself of a number of new categories of beauty which correspond to the psychology of modern man. How the photographer arranges objects in a room, the angle from which he photographs them, what he selects for presentation to us, his completely different choice of lighting, what he permits himself in the way of inaccuracy, blurred effects, insinuation and overemphasis, the new functions of space or pattern, the rhythm of the formal composition—all these factors are deeply rooted in the situation, in the world of experience, in the innumerable invisible backgrounds of our modern life.[17]

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[16] Otto Steinert, "On the Creative Possibilities of Photography" (1955), *Subjektive Fotografie*, 154-155.

[17] Pawek, "Do We Have . . . ," 25.

Ironically, these supposedly creative elements were, by the late 1950s, being employed merely as a set of conventions which signified *subjectiveness* in a practice that had become merely academic. In a conversation between Otto Steinert and Otto Toussaint (published in the March 1959 issue of *Camera),* Toussaint maintained: "The whole world is engaged in the subjective, and 'structuritis' has virtually broken out."[18] This reference to "structuritis" refers to the commercial and amateur photographers' scavenging of the movement's less idiosyncratic formal strategies, such as the characteristic diagonal tilt imparted to verticals and horizontals, and high contrast and negative prints. A formulaic pictorialism of modernist pretensions resulted; the 1956 *German Photographic Annual* contains not a few examples sporting titles like: "Precocious Spring," "Winter Fur," "Cabin Cronies," "Dope Perspective," and instances of commercial exploitation of the style in fashion and product illustration. Such blatant pictorialism merited a firm rebuff by Pawek: "The photos taken 'according to modern principles' are for us no more than caricatures. They are based on a misunderstanding. They are in contradiction to the true nature of modern photography. They are the outer shells without inner substance."[19] Toussaint also made note of this aesthetic "inauthenticity": "If the phenomenon of 'subjective photography' had arisen spontaneously in 1951, its subsequent development made subjectivity a conscious process, and the formal means were completely exhausted."[20]

In Sartrean terms, such scavenging involved the photographer in "bad faith": passive obedience to the vision of others, setting up a certain way of composing the world as valuable in itself.[21] To the extent that a photographer borrowed photographic

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[18] As quoted by Heinrich Freytag in "Subjective Photography," *Camera* (July 1975): 17.

[19] Pawek, "Do We Have . . . ," 17. This ossification of a one-time formal vitality is analogous to Sartre's ethical contrast between "freedom" (as value) and "obligation" (as an alienating reversal of value).

[20] As quoted by Freytag, *Subjektive Fotographie*, 18.

[21] Sartre held an obsessional fear of being turned into a thing and thereby lose freedom. This threat occurs on two levels: 1) bodily existence—in which we exercise our consciousness as a nature in the midst of nature; and 2) social existence—wherein we attempt to identify our consciousness with our social roles and thus reduce ourselves to the thinglike and determined reality of our particular ego situation (see James M. Edie, "Sartre as Phenomenologist and as Existential Psychoanalyst,"

conventions, he or she was under the hold of the Other. And the Other—Sartre makes this explicit in *Being and Nothingness* (1943)—is the enemy, "the original scandal of our existence." Thus, in a Sartrean critique of late-*Subjektive Fotographie*, the photographer, instead of photographing merely to ape modern principles, must think of each photographic situation afresh in terms of his or her own subjectivity, trying to push beyond limits and seeing unimpeded by the sight of others. It is the individual photographer who confers values and makes the rules—a *nihilating* activity in relation to the *de trop*, the sticky mass of facticity, which consciousness (creative activity) must become unstuck from in order to assert its independence of being.[22] This condemns the individual to perpetual originality as he or she explores the dialectical relation Sartre posits between Being (objects) and Consciousness (the subject). This existentialist "ethic," of course, has now been challenged by the anti-modernist valorization of pastiche and appropriation associated with Post-modernism.

II

Subjective Photography—although not so called at first—emerged initially as a coherent body of Purist, formalist-oriented imagery in 1949 at a photofair held in Neustadt an der Haardt, Germany, a sector under French military supervision, temporary foreign overseers who encouraged the display. During this fair an informal group of photographers calling themselves "*fotoform*" hung their work in a special exhibit. Represented were photographs by Peter Keetman, Wolfgang Reisewitz, Steinert, and the students of these photographers.

By 1950 this informal grouping had increased in numbers and influence, having yet another showing of their work at the Photokina exhibition in Cologne, Germany that same year. On July 12, 1951, an international exhibition of this "new vision in photography"—as the press referred to it, bringing back memories of the 1920s photographic movement—took place in Saarbrücken, opening concurrently

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Phenomenology and Existentialism, 144).

[22] Ibid., 145.

with Cologne's Photokina. Later that year, the exhibition was moved to Cologne.[23] Steinert, the show's main organizer, labeled the entries *Subjektive Fotographie* to oppose the work to *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* and to set it against the "natural attitude" of all applied and most documentary photography. For the occasion, Franz Roh lectured on "Mechanism and Expression, Possibilities and Limits of Photography," a modified version of an essay originally written in 1929 to explicate the New Vision photography.

The photographers exhibiting in this 1951 show included: Keetman, Reisewitz, Steinert, Toni Schneiders, Helga Schmidt, Fred Gravenhorst, and Ludwig Windstoßer. Steinert lauded these participating photographers for their "full palette of expressive values," presenting these values as the general prerequisite for creative photography.[24] In an essay published in 1952, Steinert further explicated Subjective Photography, saying that it "means humanized, individualized photography and implies the handling of a camera in order to win from the single object the *views expressive of its character* [my emphasis]."[25]

These photographers utilized the abstracting qualities engendered by high-contrast printing, solarization, photograms, the worm's- and bird's-eye view (culled from their 1920s predecessors) to "make strange the familiar." Similarly, Sartre opens his short story "Erostratus" (1948) by situating the protagonist in the bird's-eye position. Writing in the first person, Sartre has his character subjectively intend the scene outside, seven floors below his apartment window, imparting an existentialist tenor of *angst* and *nausée* to the man's belittling, downward observation:

> You really have to see men from above. I put out the light and went to the window; they never suspected for a moment you could watch

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[23] The second *Subjektive Fotographie* exhibition was held in Lucerne, Switzerland in 1952; the opening of the third and last exhibition took place in the fall of 1958 at the Cologne photofair. Before this, the first exhibition had traveled to the United States, where Beaumont Newhall installed it at the George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

[24] Otto Steinert, "Preface," to the 1951 catalogue *Subjektive Fotographie* (Saarbrücken, 1951): 5-7.

[25] Quoted by Schmalriede in *Subjektive Fotographie*, 22.

> them from up there. They're careful of their fronts, sometimes of their backs, but their whole effect is calculated for spectators of about five feet eight, Who ever thought about the shape of a derby hat seen from the seventh floor? They neglect protecting their heads and shoulders with bright colors and garish clothes, they don't know how to fight this great enemy of Humanity, the downward perspective. I leaned on the window sill and began to laugh; where was this wonderful upright stance they're so proud of; they were crushed against the sidewalk and two long legs jumped out from under their shoulders.[26]

This fascination with the unfamiliar viewpoint can be traced back to the Russian Formalist thinker Viktor Shklovsky, who believed that literature (and by extension, art) was a set of techniques for upsetting routine conceptions/perceptions of the world; Tony Bennett explains:

> . . . the Formalists aimed to undermine the cogency of the concern with mimesis in literary theory by arguing that literature was not and could not be a *reflection* of reality but only a particular, semiotically organized *signification* of it. Far from reflecting reality, the Formalists argued, literary texts tend to 'make it strange,' to dislocate our habitual perceptions of the real world so as to make it the object of a renewed attentiveness.[27]

These Shklovskian themes are faithfully echoed in the writings of Russian Productivist photographer Volkov-Lannit:

> . . . the history of the appearance of outstanding works of art is mainly a history of break-throughs in perspective and habitual composition schemes . . . that is, a *history of the disruption of the automatism of*

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[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Erostratus," *Intimacy and Other Stories* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corp., 1968): 41.

[27] Tony Bennett in *Formalism and Marxism* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979): 20.

> *visual perception* . . . the manifestation of visual impressions is achieved through the use of 'new viewpoints' . . . [my emphasis] [28]

The unusual vantage points taken in the work of these pre-World War II photographers exemplified Pawek's later comment that "under the eye of the 'subjective photographer' the world was changed into a repository of views," a phenomenologically inspired backward glance written in 1962. In Subjective Photography, as in Phenomenology and Existentialism, *all consciousness is consciousness-of-something*; the world is given as an infinite set of possible framings, a repository of views, corresponding to the subjective intentionality of the photographer. In a perceptive commentary on Phenomenology, Maurice Natanson discusses this key point, which has its application in the aesthetic of Subjective Photography:

> Reality presents itself in aspects, profiles . . . that reveal the unity of the object or event in gradual ways. Thus, when we speak of experience as 'presenting itself' what we mean is that some facet of the totality of the occasion 'shows' itself and, in turn, reveals a further segment of the whole.[29]

In a less philosophically rigorous manner, Pawek's 1959 commentary on modern photography brought up the same issue: ". . . its principal aim [an exhibition of Subjective Photography] is revealing reality, conveying a message, transmitting knowledge . . . in the realm of life and reality." [30]

What Phenomenology sees as the status quo—what is to be transcended in phenomenological reduction—is "natural perception" and its conditions. Analogously, what Subjective Photography wishes to transcend is the "status quo" of the mechanically-formed image. Both of these "natural conditions" are existential

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[28] Volkov-Lannit, quoted by Victor Burgin in "Photography, Phantasy, Function," *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982): 180.

[29] Natanson, 37.

[30] Pawek, "Do We Have . . . ," 18.

coordinates that "anchor," respectively, the perceiving, and the photographing, subject in the world. Thus, keeping to the analogy, both phenomenological reduction and Subjective Photography release the subject from the limitation of such anchoring. Natural perception and mechanical reportage are transcended, substituting subjective knowledge and a secondary level of intending the world. This release from the everyday attitude of seeing is carried over to the viewer as well. For example, in one photograph we may be looking down from a high perch, yet in another looking straight up. The camera can bring us closer to things, or take us away from them; it may revolve around them in a sequence of views—all the while we, as viewers, haven't had to move beyond our immediate position.

Thus photography draws close the perceived and the perceiver, the world and photography's audience. The world becomes its own image (whereas in painting, the image becomes a world). Pawek also noted this:

> The old camera was not inside the space of the world it recorded, it was always positioned outside that world, somewhere in the infinite. The modern camera has its place right among the subjects it photographs . . . The new spatial unity between subject and lens has given those who see the pictures a new and intimate relationship with the subjects of the photographs . . . There is no variation in levels between the modern camera and our world.[31]

Similarly, Phenomenology and Existentialism posit an objective world as known only as mediated through a subject; conversely, the subject only comes to know itself through the context of the life-world or situation. Consciousness is a correlation: mind and world are mutually implicated; they are neither collapsed into each other, as White would have it, at the moment of mystical union, nor wholly autonomous as in Cartesian dualism. Objects are relative to consciousness and consciousness is characterized by what Phenomenology calls "intentionality": consciousness is always *consciousness-of* something. This interpenetration of external world and internal self provided the epistemological basis for Subjective Photography's aesthetic, for the understanding of how the photographer, confronted with the brute facticity of the

[31] Ibid. 19.

world (Sartre's "Being-in-itself") can produce the "stuff of art," the mark of conscious being (Sartre's "Being-for-itself"), out of such recalcitrant matter. According to Steinert, the photographer transforms the motif ("Being-in-itself") by creatively intending the world through photographic means, through formal reductions that place out-of-frame the everyday presentations of reality, defamiliarizing that world and reconstituting it at a deeper level of personal perception that is realized in new types of formal ordering.

Leading toward this perfection of subjective photographic vision, Steinert posited a hierarchical ladder, four steps or stages of photographic intentionality, which progress from the natural attitude (objectivity, no transformation of the motif) to greater degrees of subjectivity (the formal transformation of the motif):

1) *reproductive photographic image*—mechanically applied photography, such as surveillance or spot news coverage;

2) *representative photographic image*—personal interpretation of the subject occurs, yet it is still subordinate to what the photographed object is and/or to what an outside client may dictate, such as in documentary photography or "creative" advertising and fashion photographs;

3) *representative photographic creation*—the subject is no longer photographed for what it is *per se*, but is subordinated to personal transformative vision via photographic means, hence, will be defamiliarized in relationship to the visual result found in categories one and two;

4) *absolute photographic creation*—the subject is abstracted, defamiliarized to such an extent that it remains only as a formal armature of the construction of the image's geometry.[32]

Only the latter two categories constitute Subjective Photography in Steinert's mind. (White and Szarkowski both posited schemata similar to Steinert's, but theirs were horizontal continua stretched between the poles of objective record and personal

[32] Steinert, *Subjektive Fotographie*, 154-155.

symbolism, rather than the crude pigeonholes into which Steinert hoped to fit all the diverse types of photographic production.)

These stages of Steinert's may be viewed in Phenomenology's purview as progressing from the natural attitude toward higher levels of phenomenological reduction. Steinert's first two categories fit Phenomenology's notion of the natural attitude, the primordial acceptance of the world as simply being there. Isn't this what documentary and advertising photography both want the viewer to assume? Steinert's final two categories constitute a kind of photographic suspension of this natural attitude to better reflect on the subjective construction of the image as a special mode imaging: art photography.

As Steinert's categories indicate, representation and expression are put into reciprocal relation: as one increases, the other diminishes. Given this formulation, Subjective Photography becomes an art of increasingly expressive design, supplanting the simple representationalism of applied and documentary photography. This is hardly a novel idea. Art historian Richard Shiff points out that this opposition between expression and representation constituted the central theme of formalist theoretician Roger Fry's "Essay in Aesthetics" (1910); therein Fry equates expression with discovering the originality of truly personal experience. Shiff, in his book *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (1984), writes:

> Fry allies the term [expression] with the concept of emotion—one experiences and comes to know emotion only through its expression. Thus Fry can speak of the special emotion of the artist . . . that is conveyed through the formal design of the work. The content of aesthetic emotion often contrasts sharply with the content . . . of representation; the one is known with immediacy, the other is mediated.[33]

Thus, Subjective Photography is to give the viewer a more immediate, emotional response to the visual world as that world is co-constituted by the photographer's vision.

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[33] Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984): 157.

Even earlier, in 1867, the Frenchman Hippolyte Taine wrote in "Concerning the Ideal in Art" that the goal of art was to render "real objects" ideal: "Things pass from real to ideal when the artist reproduces them in modifying them according to his idea."[34] Taine's statement is ambiguous since it "does not specify whether the expressed character of the represented subject is a product of the artist's own particular experience or somehow the essence of that object itself."[35] It was Phenomenology's philosophical task to correlate these two aspects under the guise of phenomenological intentionality and reduction. Nevertheless, Husserl tended to privilege the objective character of phenomenological intuition, trying to promote his method as leading to scientific knowledge. Sartre's *existentializing* of Husserl's Phenomenology stressed the subjective dimension already present in Husserl, but which had been de-emphasized until Phenomenology became re-examined in the late thirties. According to Sartre's argument contra Husserl—developed in "The Transcendence of the Ego" (1936 - 37) and which leads toward his mature existentialist thought in *Being and Nothingness* (1943)—there is no type of consciousness such as the "transcendental ego" that "stands behind objects," supposedly guaranteeing objective knowledge of those intended objects, for the ego must, then, make contact with some reality different from itself.[36] Sartre posits no reduction to a neutral viewpoint that overcomes the natural viewpoint; consciousness becomes a pure intentionality in itself: a "revealing intuition" of things, the being of which is everywhere," [37] consciousness is "simply a spontaneity, a sheer activity transcending toward objects."[38] Existentialism focuses upon human existence in its "situation-in-

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[34] As quoted in Shiff, 39.

[35] Ibid.

[36] For an in-depth discussion of the objective/subjective dimension of the correlation of consciousness to its intentional object see Aron Gurwitsch's "Husserl's Theory of the Intentionality of Consciousness in Historical Perspective," *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, 53-56.

[37] See in translator's introduction in Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971): 24-25.

[38] Ibid., 21.

the-world," the perfect subject matter for the discrete, agile user of the handcamera. This rewriting of Husserl by Sartre corresponds with the change in theoretical tone from the valorization of the *objective* camera-eye in the New Vision photography during the 1920s when Husserlian thought was very influential, to the championing of the subjective, purely intending, eye of the photographer in 1950s Subjective Photography when Sartrean Existentialism was on the ascendancy.

III

Propelled into the critical limelight by the favorable remarks of art historians Franz Roh and J. A. Schmoll, Subjective Photography was generally acclaimed by the press, one commentator referring to the movement's imagery as "an atom bomb in the dung heap of German photography."[39] Schmoll says European man has "become aware of himself as a subjective observer. From his own standpoint, focusing and fixing with his eye the things around him."[40] Schmoll then goes to point to the similarity between the new theories of atomic physics—to the mutual interaction of mind and matter (not incompatible with Husserlian speculation on the relationship between subject and object) as espoused by Werner Heisenberg—in claiming Subjective Photography's contemporaneity of vision. In the essay "Objective and Subjective Photography," Schmoll cites Heisenberg: “In our time we regard as belonging to the sphere of reality, not only what we can see and touch, but also what we think about it. These two notions cannot be separated as sharply as logical thinking will have it.”[41] Schmoll rejects the New Objectivity's fascination with the objective camera eye: "The old conception of the mechanical objectivity of the photographic process is shown to be an illusion . . . ," commenting further that, "realism is unaware that it belongs to the general phenomenon of subjectivism, that is to say, that the views made by the individual person of real objects are governed

[39] A remark by critic Robert d'Hooghe in the *Frankfurter Allegmeine Zeitung* (1950), quoted in Heinrich Freytag, "Sixty Years: Otto Steinert," *Camera* (July 1975): 27.

[40] J. A. Schmoll (b. Eisenwerth) in an excerpt from "Objective and Subjective Photography" (1952), *Subjektive Fotographie*, 150.

[41] Heisenberg quoted ibid., 151.

by the subjective process of choice, by stylistic conceptions of a particular period. . . ." [42] Schmoll's dénouement weds Subjective Photography to the then prevailing sense of the *le sentiment de l'absurde* in human existence:

> . . . Finally a word must be said about the readiness of modern man to perceive what is absurd in reality. Here too photography actively serves his desire for knowledge by proffering symbols of his imaginative world. Hence the photographing of the farcical, the absurd, the unreal and of the visionary, of what is painfully ironical and of all those *situations* lying on the border between the real and the unreal [my emphasis].[43]

The mutual implication of consciousness ("Being-for-itself") and world ("Being-in-itself") that Schmoll espouses is assumed by Sartre when he notes that any description of the world must be a description of the world as seen by somebody. This means existence becomes suffused with drama, for the dramatist frames the world as seen by someone. (Little wonder that both Sartre's and Camus' most potent philosophical vehicles were the novels, short stories, and plays.) Again, Pawek has something to say apropos this existential drama:

> Now that we know that in this world not only objects but inner relations too can be made visible if only we can learn to see them, we also look at static objects through different eyes. For it is questionable whether anything in the world with which we human beings come into contact is immune from the drama of existence.[44]

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 153. This sentiment, of course, was examined earlier in detail by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): "The absurd arises from this confrontation between man's appeal and the irrational silence of the world."

[44] Pawek, "We Do Have . . . ," 29. Pawek may be indebted to Camus here for this emphasis on the drama of existence for, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus sees the *absurdity* of existence as a drama we all play parts it: "The irrational, human nostalgia and the absurd which arises from their confrontation, those are the three personages of the drama . . .")

This is in line with the tenets of both Phenomenology and Existentialism. As subjectivity means relationship with the world, so objectivity means relationship to consciousness. Aron Gurwitsch points this out:

> . . . what is meant by objective must not be conceived as severed from the life of consciousness. Moreover, the ascent to higher levels of objectivity, far from requiring the progressive elimination or, at least, disregard of mental activities and operations, on the contrary, involves them in increasing complexity; it involves syntheses of consciousness of ever-widening scope.[45]

But, I stress, this is a *relationship* of terms, not a momentary mystical conflation of consciousness and world, such as desired by White, who claimed that when "man is a mirror of the world, spirit might enter."[46] According to Existentialism, consciousness is the gap or "nothingness" between conscious being and the world. For Sartre, consciousness involves the capacity to go beyond the real. According to him, reality is characterized by the "viscosity" of being, whereby being in its "massivity" tends to "invade" the subject and so enslave him; the power to escape or "nihilate" this viscosity is *liberty*. Mary Warnock in *Existentialist Ethics* (1967) elaborates:

> There is necessarily, in a conscious being, an area of free play, as it were, between himself and the world. the emptiness within him has to be filled, and is filled by whatever he plans to do, or to think, or to be. Consciousness, Sartre says, knowingly places itself at a distance from its objects, and the gap between itself and its object is identical with the power to confirm or deny what it chooses. Freedom and consciousness thus turns out to be the very same thing. They are both identified with the power to consider things either as they are or as they are not, to imagine situations which are different from the actual situations obtaining in the world.[47]

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[45] Gurwitsch, "Husserl's Theory . . . ," *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, 55-56.

[46] Minor White cited by Gassan, 75.

[47] Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 21.

Both this existentialist ethic and Subjective Photography's aesthetic are born of the this gap between these two mutually implicated aspects of being. It is this gap between subject and object that permits the subject to intend the world any way he or she may choose. That intending may be a moral or a formal decision, a "decisive moment" revealing the existential situation of a subject in significant form. This "decisive moment," observes Henri Cartier-Bresson, "embodies an interrelationship of eye, body, and mind that intuitively recognizes the moment in time when formal and psychological elements within the visual field take on enriched meanings."[48] William Nevious, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation titled "A Phenomenological Explication of the Photographer's 'Decisive Moment'," expanded on that definition:

> The photographer 'sees things' based on the idea that the object brought-into-consciousness has various relationships with the lived environment. He or she is continually responding to the objects brought-into-consciousness, thinking about the reciprocal elements of the natural world of events.[49]

It was precisely this "bringing-into-consciousness" of a certain relationship with the life-world and the thinking about the reciprocal elements of the natural world of events that Sartre described abstractly in *The Idiot of the Family* (1972) as the "idiosyncratic interiorization of the exterior in and by the experience of the author," and concretized through the eyes of that downward peeping protagonist in "Erostratus."[50]

IV

Five years after the first *Subjektive Fotographie* exhibition, when its practice and theories have spread wide, L. Fritz Gruber's essay in *The German Photographic*

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[48] Cartier-Bresson cited by Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984): 483.

[49] William A. Nevious, "A Phenomenological Explication of the Photographer's 'Decisive Moment'," (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1986): 2.

[50] Sartre, *L'idiot de la famille*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972): 33.

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Annual: 1956 mentions the relationship between modern photography and modern existence, commenting upon the ability of modern photography to grasp "essentials":

> Among our young women photographers there are those who have captured all the characteristics of the metropolis, of the international atmosphere, of fashion, of Existentialism; others have succeeded in presenting to us new and unsentimental sides of nature. Among the men some seek our men and women instead of idyllic meadows, and show them to us: in cool matter-of-fact portraits full of controlled sympathy; others go to the snow-capped peaks to capture not the poetic aspects but the ultimate essentials. We find the characteristics of our modern philosophy, of our modern style, reflected here uncompromisingly.[51]

The modern philosophy Gruber refers to is, of course, Phenomenological-Existentialism; the modern style, Subjective Photography. For the phenomenologist, such "essences" are unities of meaning, aspects or qualities of objects as presented to consciousness and as consciousness intends them. Creatively intended, subjectively encompassed, objects may be translated into "adequate" or "significant" form. Phenomenology "constitutes a determined attempt to enrich the world of our experience by bringing out hitherto neglected aspects of this [our] experience."[52] This is what Steinert called upon photographers to accomplish, using their awareness of the world harnessed to the uniquely photographic means at their disposal. When successful, there was to be a correspondence between these essences and their photographic manifestations. Here we have in a nutshell two aspects of modernist aesthetics: 1) the artist filters the world through a temperament, expressing their mutual implication, by 2) using means inherent to the medium employed.

Existentialism, drawing upon Nietzsche as well as Husserl, stresses the total independence and isolation of the person. According to it, truth exists for you and it exists for me, but each of us must grasp it for ourselves. This is what "inwardness"

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[51] Gruber, 20.

[52] Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982): 717.

amounts to and, translated into the economic sphere, such individuality underwrites the ventures of the capitalist entrepreneur. Within the existential perspective, what a person believes is less important than the manner in which it is believed. Translate this epistemology into aesthetics—into photography, specifically—and it becomes: *what* a person photographs is less important than the *manner* in which it is photographed. Not surprisingly, Steinert writes in "On the Creative Possibilities of Photography": ". . . it is not the motif [what is photographed] which brings about the pictorial effect produced, but the creative faculty of the photographer shaping the subject into a picture."[53] Here is yet a third modernist tenet: *how* usurps *what*.

Linked to this autonomous individual and to the emphasis on formal issues is the modernist hope that photography itself become a uniquely expressive medium, an autonomous signifier, such as painting became with Abstract-Expressionism. Like the Abstract-Expressionist brushstroke, the formal conventions of Subjective Photography signified the reconstitution of freedom and individuality of expression after a devastating war during which people on both sides suffered restrictions to their personal agency. This freedom, according to Sartre, is based on the negating power of consciousness, which can be seen as analogous to the limiting, negating power of the edges of the photographic frame. Freedom, in both Steinert's and Minor White's aesthetic means the possibility of seeing things other than as they are. "This magical mode of apprehension," writes Warnock in *Existentialist Ethics*, "is emotion." Sartre says, explains Warnock, " 'Emotion is a transformation of the world'."[54] Choices must be made by each person for themselves. "So they must be described as what each individual plans as he looks out at the world from his own personal angle. He cannot be told by anyone else what is to be valued highly and what is not, nor therefore, what is to be done and what is not."[55] One can see how ideologically useful this philosophy might become in an era just leaving behind the repressive horrors of the Third Reich, an era of renascent capitalism now facing the

[53] Steinert, *Subjektive Fotographie*, 154-155.

[54] Warnock, 25.

[55] Warnock, 54.

ideological and military threat of Communist East Germany at the advent of the Cold War.

However, except for this implicit ideological usefulness, Subjective Photography skirted direct confrontation with political issues in favor of an apolitical formalism linked to the existentialist ethic of developing one's own personal "life-project."[56] It focused attention on the marvels of the "disembodied eye" as it freely roamed the world, constituting it as one vast spectacle for visual consumption; and, like Existentialism, Subjective Photography undermined the distinction between thinking and feeling, between epistemology and ethics. Here each individual, wielding a camera, makes their own choice concerning what constitutes truth—purely personal and subjective—for oneself. As Gruber summed up in his introduction to the cultural section of Photokina 1951 (using a term associated with spiritual inwardness and having the proper existential ring to it), this mode of photography was a usage of the medium in which everybody could express his or her "confession."[57]

This concern with constituting the world as a myriad of personal views even carried over into Subjective Photography's exhibition designs wherein the gallery-goer was offered a series of choices of gaze: straight ahead, to the side, up or down. Prints were often hung at other than a 90-degree angle to the floor and might be "bled" to the edges of their mounts rather than overmatted. Like Subjective Photography itself, this mode of presentation harkens back to the 1920s, to El Lissitzky's Productivist-inspired exhibition designs, to Herbert Bayer's theories of the active exhibition spectator, and to the innovative magazine layouts of the early German picture magazines. Ironically, this mode of exhibition design, which originated in

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[56] Later, when *Subjektive Fotographie* is in decline, Sartre's *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) moves existentialist thought from its purely subjective emphasis into the socio-political arena, hoping his theories can "interiorize" Marxism, "by displaying," observes Warnock, "in their concrete and actually experienced forms, the various elements in the Marxist account of the world. It could describe, from the inside, the Group, the Revolution, the Labor of man, the actual *praxis*, or action, in which men intervene in the world of things. . . . that is on *what it is like* for the individual to be in the world he is in, how he will feel in choosing to support the Revolution, how this decision will come to him, as an individual" (Warnock, 52).

[57] Quoted by Eskildsen, *Subjektive Fotographie*, 10.

radical leftist politics, was used by the Nazis for propagandistic purposes. This modernist exhibition style reached its zenith in Paul Rudolph's gargantuan display for Edward Steichen's 1955 reactionary salute to both the "natural attitude" of documentary photography and Eisenhower's declaration of "Peaceful Coexistence" with the U.S.S.R.: "The Family of Man" installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This fragmentation of the whole—of everyday visual reality as well as inside the exhibition space—into an inventory of subjective perspectives paralleled Existentialism's fracturing of a shared social life into a hodgepodge of individual views and life-projects, with its two nagging problems: the disparity between personal experience and the social totality and how to provide an ethic beyond that of the self. Concerning first problems, Fredric Jameson notes, the mode of production coincident with Modernism—monopoly capitalism exhibited a growing contradiction between appearance and essence, i.e., between lived experience of an individual and the structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience.[58] Jameson describes the result of this disparity: "There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic [in Sartrean terms], then it cannot be true. That if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience. It is evident that this new situation poses tremendous and crippling problems for a work of art."[59] What Subjective Photography set out to do, then, was to figure what was inaccessible to individual consciousness, but since it couldn't do this directly it, necessarily, turned to distorted and symbolic figurations that it hoped might reconcile the aforementioned contradiction between the experience of the agent and social structure *per se*. Jameson argues that modernism's "monadic relativism" (Subjective Photography's ploy) was the (not very successful) result.[60]

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[58] Fredric Jameson, "Conclusion," *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992): 410-411.

[59] Ibid., 411.

[60] Ibid., 412.

As for the second problem, that of founding an ethic beyond the self, Suzi Gablik addresses this issue. In *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984), she observes that "the over-arching principle of modernism has been autonomy. Its touchstone is individual freedom, not social authority," and that such "modernism has moved us too far in the direction of radical subjectivity and a destructive relativism."[61] She goes on to ask whether "we can find some way of balancing the desire for individual freedom with the needs of society—and whether, at this point, we are able to shake ourselves free of the modernist notions of uninhibited individualism and endless innovation, which have become sterile monotony."[62] In *Existentialist Ethics*, Warnock makes an analogous observation *vis-à-vis* Existentialism's inability to harbor a firm social ethic:

> We are *not* [contra Sartre] in fact free to choose absolutely anything. To accept, for example, the categories under which we normally describe the world is *not* a free voluntary decision. We learn these categories as we learn to talk, and to see the world otherwise would be in many cases impossible. It seems to me that there are further features of our life which are not a matter of choice. . . . the extreme subjectivism and the extreme libertarianism of the existentialists seem . . . unacceptable. . . . without *some* element of objectivity, without *any* criterion for preferring one scheme of values to another, except the criterion of what looks most attractive to oneself, there cannot in fact be any morality at all . . .[63]

Subjective Photography's touting of Nietzschean perspectivalism—resulting in a relativization and fragmentation of experience as lived in a monadlike container (the bourgeois ego) that often led to that modern illness, *anomie*—[64] and its

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[61] Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984): 24, 127.

[62] Ibid., 32.

[63] Warnock, 55.

[64] See Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984) reprinted in *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 15-16, where Jameson writes: "The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego—what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the

valorization of endless innovation may be said to mirror the economic aspects of modern society, to reflect the industrialized nations' rationalized and fragmented mode of assembly-line production, and their corresponding inability to perceive limits to those productive capabilities. (No wonder German capitalism—touting the supremacy of the individual as entrepreneur and consumer, attempting to surpass prewar levels of production—smilingly supported this renaissance in German photography.)[65] Under such production, every whole task becomes increasingly fractured into a plethora of individual "perspectives," while production continues to the point that industrial byproducts threaten our very existence. But, more recently, Daniel Bell observes in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1979) that we "are grouping for a new vocabulary whose key word seems to be limits: a limit to the spoilation of the environment, a limit to arms, a limit to the tampering with biological nature.[66] Gablik moves Bell's argument onto the plane of cultural production: ". . . the real question . . . is will we also set a limit to the exploration of cultural experiences. Can we set a limit to hubris? . . . Hubris means forgetting where the real source of power lies, and imagining . . . it is in oneself . . . If the great modern enterprise has been freedom, the modern hubris is, finally, the refusal to accept any limits."[67] Such self-confidence marked the beginnings of subjective photography, but today self-denial and self-questioning mark our postmodernist aesthetic. We deny originality its romantic pretensions and question the application of the term "genius" to authorship. Our life as subjects in a multidimensional array of discontinuous

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sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings— which it may be better and more accurate, following J.-F. Lyotard, to call 'intensities'—are now free-flowing and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria. . ."

[65] See note #4.

[66] Daniel Bell, quoted by Gablik, 33.

[67] Ibid., 32-33.

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"realities" (late-capitalism) means we experience the so-called "death of the subject," a fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion which can no longer provide a "point of view" upon things. Moreover, pastiche and appropriation, once frowned upon as aesthetic "bad faith," are now the norm. Instead of the unique viewpoint, the "decisive moment," our sensibility now sanctions re-photography and the explosion of popular culture into what was once high culture. An exploration of the tenets of Subjective Photography permits us to see more clearly the aesthetic and *ethical* gap between Otto Steinert's subjectivized images and Sherrie Levine's scavenged (re-photographed) photographs, reminding us of the gap between Modernism *then* and Postmodernism *now*.[68]

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[68] See James Hugunin, "A Separate Reality: Subjective Photography," *The Center Quarterly* 6 (Winter 1984): 7.