An Eye for Vulgarity:
How MoMA Saw Color Through Wild Bill's Lens

by
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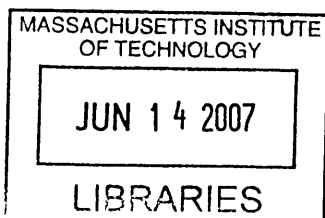AT THE
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the 1976 Museum of Modern Art exhibition of color photographs by William Eggleston—the second one-man show of color photography in the museum's history— with particular attention to the exhibition monograph, *William Eggleston's Guide*. From hundreds of slides, MoMA Director of Photography John Szarkowski dominated the process of selecting the 75 images for the exhibition and 48 to be carefully packaged in the *Guide*, a faux family photo album/road trip guidebook. It is my contention that, despite their verbal emphasis on the Modernist and universal (rather than Southern) nature of the images, the photographs can be read as being replete with the mythology of the Old South— its decay, vulgarity, and even horror. Through this act of manipulation, the images in the *Guide* appealed in a voyeuristic way to an elite Northern art world audience, ever eager to reinforce its own intellectual, economic, and ethical superiority over other parts of the country. Due to its presumed "vulgarity" and absence of aesthetic mystique at the time, color photography required for its inaugural moment at the museum a sharp distancing from the documentary tradition and advertising—the complete erasure of social context afforded by a Modernist aesthetic. The two-faced posture maintained by the curator and photographer combined a canny understanding of the cultural power of the images with an overtly Modernist disavowal of it.

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The Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski has been criticized for his unequivocal declaration that William Eggleston was one of the first photographers to make successful color pictures. The time was 1976, after the end of the Vietnam War and the climax of the Civil Rights Movement, when Szarkowski announced that Eggleston's photographs were a bright exception in a sea of mostly "puerile" work.[1] Within the insular world of artistic photography, dominated by black-and-white images of urban streets, Americana, and landscape masterpieces by the likes of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, an unknown, Tennessee-born and Mississippi-raised white man was declared to be the first to see "both the blue and the sky."[2] A critical firestorm erupted after Szarkowski packaged Eggleston and seventy-five of his dye transfer prints into an exhibition at MoMA that year. The museum had launched a comprehensive public relations campaign for the show, with press materials dispatched to eleven newspapers, fifteen magazines, one radio station, and the critic Clement Greenberg.[3] Forty-eight of the exhibition's prints were published in *William Eggleston's Guide,* the museum's first ever monograph of color photography. Funding for the book and the exhibition was furnished by $10,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts and a $15,000 grant from the corporate world: the photo supply company Vivitar.

All the hype made Hilton Kramer, chief art critic for *The New York Times,* instantly suspicious. Publishing a book to accompany the first solo exhibition of an unknown artist

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[1] John Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 1976, 4.
[2] Ibid, 9.
[3] List of press notified of exhibition, Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archive.

was unusual, he wrote in his review, and must have been designed to bolster the aura of significance around the photographs. Banal and boring, the photographs were unworthy of such attention in his view: "Mr. Eggleston…likes trucks, cars, tricycles, unremarkable suburban houses and dreary landscapes too, and he especially likes his family and his friends, who may, for all I know, be wonderful people, but who appear in these pictures as dismal figures inhabiting a commonplace world of little visual interest."[4] Fellow *Times* critic Gene Thornton concurred with his colleague, concluding in December, 1976, that Eggleston's was the "most hated show of the year," and that the photographs strongly resembled "the color slides made by the man next door."[5]

Such bitter contempt from critics—and not just from the conservatives—stood in stark contrast to the passionate adulation given by some and to the star-struck admiration expressed by Szarkowski. The polemic that ensued both drew on and contributed to the constructed identity of Eggleston the Maverick from the rebel South, a stylized persona emptied of the specter of racial division and contemporary controversies over desegregation. Yet the photographs themselves are slyly evocative of horror, kitsch, and the grotesque, components of the Southern Gothic as it is portrayed in literature and film. Thus, in order to be effective, this show had to be displaced spatially from South to North—it would have been a failure in Memphis, Eggleston's hometown. Eggleston's artistic persona was contingent upon his complicity with an ahistorical position that feigned a paradoxical color

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[4] Hilton Kramer, "Art: Focus on Photo Shows," *New York Times*, (May 28, 1976).

[5] Gene Thornton, "Photography Found a Home in Art Galleries," by Gene Thornton, *New York Times*, (December 26, 1976). Of the critical response, Eggleston remarked in an April 17, 2007 phone conversation, "John's show at MoMA was quoted as the most hated show of the year…that didn't mean anything to me. I just saw a few things in the papers that critics had written…It didn't make sense to me, I didn't take seriously, I just kept doing what I was doing."

"blindness" or neutrality toward social strife. Such a position characterized the white population of the New South in the 1970s as it confronted desegregation, integration, and bussing, while coming into greater wealth as a region. As the Reverend Paul Leonard of Charlotte, North Carolina commented in 1970, "With all Southern pleasantries removed…the present and past political and business leadership is dedicated to the goal of a racially and economically segregated city."[6] Charlotte's position in the early 70s, appearing socially progressive at face and emblematic of the pragmatic, moderate ethos of the New South and the rest of the nation, flourished by allowing affluent whites to "maintain a liberal façade…because of their physical and social distance from the problems of race and poverty."[7]

It is my contention that such a façade was coded in the Modernist aesthetic Szarkowski saw in Eggleston. It afforded Eggleston the luxury of claiming that a picture of his white uncle standing with his black servant on his grandparents' old cotton plantation was a purely formal statement.[8] It let him point the camera up at the red ceiling in the house of his friend—a dentist who, legend has it, would so anger his neighbors by his romantic

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[6] Paul Leonard, "A Working Paper: Charlotte, an Equalization of Power through Unified Action," April 22, 1970, folder 19, box 3, JLC/UNCC.

[7] Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 131.

[8] In an April 14, 2007 phone conversation, Eggleston said that Sumner, Mississippi was a "tiny town of the Mississippi delta." It was also the site of the 1955 trial for the men who murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till after he made what was perceived to be a disrespectful comment to a white woman. The men were acquitted for the murder by an all-white jury. Uncle Adyn, the man featured in the photograph, was on the jury, according to Eggleston. "The white man is my uncle the black man is the man who raised me as a servant. They were together so long, which is why they had the same stance, they way they stood. They are both dead now." Szarkowski and Eggleston agreed that the photograph "was an important image to be included in the *Guide*." Eggleston said that the picture was not chosen for a social reason for the simple fact that people would not know that the image had been taken in that town. I reminded him that the picture was labeled with its place location, "Sumner, Mississippi." He said, "True." And later: "I didn't keep up with the trial at all, I was too young to get the import of it. I do now."

liaisons with black patients that they murdered him— and make a Modernist photograph, ostensibly about the color red.[9] My goal will be to examine how the false romance of the Old South was combined with constructed white racial "innocence" of the New South to allow both Eggleston and Szarkowski to frame the photographs in the *Guide* not as social documents but as stylized glimpses of ephemera. These glimpses also evoked, quite purposefully, Southern Gothic and the inimitable trace of past violence alongside nostalgia for a decaying Southern aristocracy. Such themes have been embraced by writers such as William Faulkner and Eudora Welty (who wrote the introduction to Eggleston's 1989 book, *The Democratic Forest*).[10] In what follows, I will also examine how Szarkowski's curatorial predilections and the heightening role of corporate sponsorship in the art world contributed to making Eggleston's show and the publication of the *Guide* the moment that elevated color photography to an art form in the public eye. Vivitar, Inc. ensured adequate funding to print the costly, richly toned prints, at a time when the Museum was cash-starved.[11] Ultimately, the form and subject of Eggleston's snapshot-like color images (printed in deluxe 8 x 10 formats) and their presentation in the *Guide* (resembling both a family photo album and a

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[9] Information about these photographs taken from an interview with Winston Eggleston, February 15-16, 2007.

[10] In Southern literature, a tradition called Southern Gothic combines elements of the grotesque and the bizarre with mimesis. An example of a writer that contributed to this tradition is William Faulkner. In the contemporary period, Southern Gothic has been further enriched by Eudora Welty, Flannery O'connor, and Carson McCullers. The genre has been characterized as a "lurid or macabre writing style native to the American South. Since the middle of the 20th century, Southern writers have interpreted and illuminated the history and culture of the region through the conventions of the Gothic narrative (or Gothic novel), which at its best provides insight into the horrors institutionalized in societies and social conventions." The New York Public Library Literature Companion [abbreviated NYPL], ed. Anne Skillion (N.Y.: Free Press, 2001).

[11] Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1973-74, Museum of Modern Art. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives. One of Eggleston's photographs featured in the exhibition, *(untitled) Memphis*, was used as the cover image for the annual report that year.

guide for a road trip) could be appropriated by a company seeking to displace Kodak as the maker of pocket cameras.[12]

Who's afraid of Magenta, Yellow, and Cyan?

Eggleston brought MoMA around height carousels of slides made around 1970 from which Szarkowski chose seventy-five for the exhibition and, of those, forty-eight for publication in the *Guide* (Fig. 1).
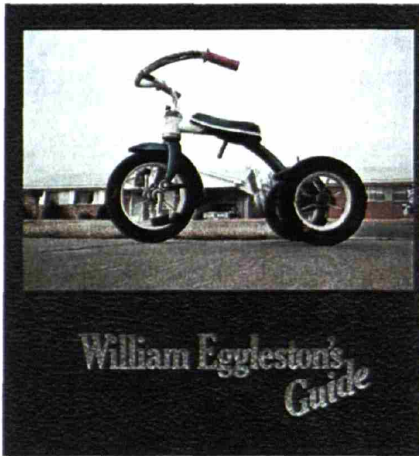

Fig. 1, *William Eggleston's Guide*, MoMA, 1976, distributed by MIT Press

Despite their ostensive similarity to the amateur snapshot, noted disparagingly by Thornton and Kramer, the pictures were not made with the Kodak Instamatic or Polaroid one might have taken on a family vacation, but rather with a Leica. That small camera carried with it a mystique, for it signaled a commitment to photography as art, and had been

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[12] In an April 14, 2007 phone conversation, Eggleston told me that he thought John Szarkowski based the design for the *Guide* on a road guide produced by Michelin tires. "I left that up to him," he said. The use of the word "guide" in the title connotes a lineage of popular travelogues such as the Michelin and AAA guides, as well as the Federal Works Agency Work Projects Administration American Guide Series, a 48-volume (the same number of images comprised *William Eggleston's Guide*) series of state guides to America. The American Guide Series books were printed by individual states and contained detailed histories of each state with descriptions of every city and town.

used by the most highly regarded black and white photographers Robert Frank, Walker Evans, Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and Eggleston's role-model, Henri Cartier-Bresson. The fact that the *Guide* was the result of work done with a high-art Leica is significant, for during the time leading up to Eggleston's exhibition, color photography had been denigrated as emphatically not art. It was badmouthed by photographers such as Evans (enshrined for his photographs of the Great Depression), who wrote in the late 1969 book of essays edited by Louis Kronenberger, *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, "There are four simple words for the matter, which must be whispered: color photography is vulgar."[13] By this logic, Evans concluded that color film was an ideal medium for the rendering of subjects that were likewise vulgar:

> When the *point* of a picture subject is precisely its vulgarity or its color-accident through man's hands not God's, then only can color film be used validly….Almost always, color can be used well only by a photographer who is an artist of perfect taste—Marie Cosindas for example—and of immense technical mastery; for color has to be controlled and altered from start to finish by selection of film, by lens filters, and in developing and printing."[14]

Frank, who had been lauded for his searing 1959 documentary series, *The Americans*, was known to have concluded simply that "black and white are the colors of photography." As with Evans, Frank's opinion was not to be taken lightly; in Szarkowski's esteemed view, the Swiss photographer's *The Americans* series was one of the works that established the

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[13] Walker Evans, "Photography," in *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, ed. Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 208.
[14] ibid

main thrust of photography in the fifties, along with the1952 founding of the photography journal *Aperture* by Minor White.[15]

Color film had been on the market since the 1930s—as early as 1948, articles in *The New York Times* covered amateur exhibitions featuring multiple-toned color prints while new developers were offered that aimed to improve detail in color prints, through the Kodak Dye Transfer process. It is therefore telling that color photography did not come of age as an art form until the late 1960s.[16] MoMA's very first exhibition of color photographs was in 1962, featuring work by Ernest Haas.[17] While Haas's work, according to Szarkowski, was "handsome and even inventive," it fell short of Eggleston's later accomplishment because it was "dedicated to a basically familiar idea of beauty, one very indebted to painterly traditions."[18] MoMA's next attempt at mastering the art of photographic color was a 1966 exhibition of the still life portfolio of Marie Cosindas. Invitations were mailed to thousands of Polaroid stockholders in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York on thick card stock with a glossy Cosindas Polaroid of flowers in a vase pasted on the front.[19]

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[15] John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1975), 18. The envelope carrying a February, 2007 letter to me from Szarkowski sported a Minor White stamp.

[16] Joseph Deschin, "Prints in Colors," *New York Times*, (February 29, 1948), 1, Eauclaire, 9.

[17] This exhibition was mounted shortly after Szarkowski arrived at the museum, but had been proposed and conceived during the tenure of his predecessor, Edward Steichen.

[18] February 22, 2007 letter from John Szarkowski to me.

[19] April 11, 1966 letter from Mary Glenn Yeary, Staff Assistant of the Polaroid Corporation to John Szarkowski, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art archives. Enclosed in the letter was a proposed announcement of the exhibition, which states that it will be sent, along with two tickets, to approximately 14,000 Polaroid stockholders in the Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey areas: "From previous experience, Mr. Calderwood predicts that about 3,000 will make use of the invitations."

According to a MoMA press release, the exhibition was the museum's first to be devoted entirely to prints made by the Polaroid Land Process.[20] The 4 x 5 prints "specially matted and mounted on color papers chosen by Miss Cosindas" were described as having "exotic color and startling detail." To Szarkowski, the photographs—"as real and as unlikely as butterflies"— inhabited, as for him artistic photographs must, a timeless realm. Indeed, the images possessed an "otherworldliness" that referred to a "place and time not quite identifiable—a place with the morning-fresh textures and the opalescent light of a private Arcady, and to a time suspended, as in a child's long holiday."[21] Ten years later, in the introductory essay to *William Eggleston's Guide,* Szarkowski cited Cosindas's work alongside Irving Penn's as the few "conspicuous successes of color photography." Yet neither Cosindas nor Penn had resolved the issue of color within the tradition of so-called "straight," uncontrived photography. Their achievement had thus been less than Eggleston's, having amounted only to "masterly studio constructions, designed to suit the preferences of the camera" and dependent on a "high degree of prior control over the material photographed."[22]

Critical and media response to the Haas and Cosindas exhibitions, and to Helen Levitt's 1974 show of color slides as part of MoMA's "Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art," was meager in comparison to the coverage of Eggleston's show two years later. In a short blurb about Levitt's forty color slides of New York street life taken after 1971, *The Village Voice* took note of the color issue only by observing with disinterest: "Purists may feel that great documentary photos still

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[20] The original Polaroid Land Process was invented by Edwin H. Land in 1947 and is a one-step method that allows the photographer to inspect a finished print in the presence of the subject, thus eliminating the need to transfer the print from negative to positive film.
[21] April 13, 1966 press release courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art archives.
[22] *William Eggleston's Guide,* 9.

come only in black and white." *Park East*'s brief mention of the slide exhibition, which was "shown in continuous projection describing New York street life," makes no mention whatsoever about color.[23] Color film was, at the time, inseparably associated with magazines such as *Life* and *Vogue*, with television, Super 8 home movie cameras, and Technicolor movies. Color film was not the medium of the fine artist—it was better suited the director of raunchy, sex-and-violence-crazed double features shown at the local movie theater. How could the same medium exuberantly producing trash cinema be called upon to make something worthy of MoMA's walls? Never before had such an inherently uncouth medium been smuggled into the rarefied world of high art. There was no mistaking it: color film was a wildcard for the art world.

Despite the less than honorable reputation of color, Eggleston's wife Rosa remembers being awestruck when she saw his first slides beam out of their home projector, a quintessential "amateur" moment after the road trip, a travelogue (or, alternatively, how one might vet images for a fashion shoot before printing them for publication). "It was so saturated and so intense," she said. "It was astounding to see color like that."[24] Around that time, Eggleston's hobby was to watch thousands of rows of amateur snapshots being developed at the local photography lab. He remarked in a 1993 interview for *History of Photography*:

> On a typical evening, maybe we might see twelve pictures on a ribbon a few inches wide, a continuous roll of paper. Maybe at one minute we might see twelve or fifteen pictures that two people made on their first trip after having

[23] *Park East*, October 17, 1974.
[24] Stated during my interview with Rosa Eggleston, February 17, 2007.

been married, and they forgot to have them developed. And years later they

sent them over and here I was looking at them....it was one of the most

exciting and unforgettable experiences as a whole—and educational for me.[25]

Asked in a recent phone conversation how viewing amateur photographs in a lab could

influence the making of artistic photography, Eggleston spoke with emotion, placing the

amateur photographs he had viewed somewhere in an idyllic past, which, coupled with their

small size and grainy look, heightened their exquisiteness to him:

> I had a close friend who worked there, not an artist, he managed a certain
>
> color lab, produced endless amounts of people's snapshots, loved to see
>
> them come off the machine. He gave me a great many ideas. But this
>
> fellow was not an artist at all. He just managed this lab…they would
>
> develop a lot of rolls that people had taken many years back, on a
>
> honeymoon and were so beautiful, almost kind of grainy, but the prints
>
> were beautiful— little tiny, small prints. I would enjoy spending time with
>
> him, I still love him. I would drop in and watch what was coming out.[26]

But Eggleston showed neither slides nor strips of commercially developed snapshots

when it came time to produce the MoMA exhibition.[27] Eggleston's use of the dye transfer

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[25] Mark Haworth-Booth, "William Eggleston: An Interview," *History of Photography*, (Spring, 1993), 51.

[26] April 14, 2007 phone conversation with Eggleston.

[27] Asked how the editing process for the 1976 show was executed, Szarkowski responded in a letter dated February 22, 2007, "I would have thought that we began with seven or eight carousel trays; seven would mean 560 slides. We went through them many times, which was not a duty but a pleasure because of their beauty, and little by little we would with mutual

process, increasing the preciousness of the photographs as artistic objects, differentiated

them from the typical snapshot they sometimes closely resembled. The expense and time

taken by the process limited the number of photographs reproduced. So tedious was the

process that Kodak stopped making the materials used for dye transfer in the early 1990s.[28]

Dye transfer, Kodak's proprietary process, renders the richest tones in color photography

and was the most expensive printing process Eggleston could have chosen at the time. Each

print cost him several hundred dollars and the multiple-step process took (and still takes) a

minimum of three days per print. The printing press uses four separate printing plates, one

each for the three primary colors (magenta, yellow, and cyan) and one for black. Each plate

is engraved with a halftone image for one of the colors, which is coated with a thin layer of

oil-based ink. The four plates then transfer their ink onto the surface of a sheet of blank

paper to make the color pictures. The final picture is not created chemically on the paper,

but rather assembled on the paper's surface from four separate screened color images. Such

challenges meant that, while Eggleston had been a proficient black and white printer, he

stopped printing himself after he began shooting in color. Only a dedicated specialist could

do the job. The expense, level of skill, and rarity of the dye transfer process rendered

Eggleston's images unattainable for the average person with a Polaroid camera. Thus, despite

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regret eliminate this one, and then that one, until after many sessions we got it down to one
tray, which I showed many times to various Museum committees. When the project finally
got on the schedule, I think that I edited the last tray down to about fifty plates for the book,
and sequenced them. I showed the sequence to Eggleston, and he said fine. I think he liked
it then and came to like it even more as time went by, although it was of course a serious
abridgement of his vision, which—although constantly shifting—would have required
hundreds of pictures, and probably a theater with an organ. I never asked him whether he
was happy with the principle of the sequencing, but I believe that he was."
[28] Interview with Winston Eggleston, February 15-16, 2007. Eggleston's printer in
Washington State bought a large amount of the chemicals, dye, paper, and film and froze it
before the products were discontinued, and he has enough supply to make prints for the
next four years only.

their apparent similarity to the snapshot (and the critical reaction such a similarity fueled), they were "art" indeed.[29]

Dye transfer was a process largely used in fashion photography, and Eggleston's first printer in New York, Don Gottlinger, had worked primarily for the fashion industry.[30] Fashion, however, is only rarely and anxiously art, no matter how many models stood in front of Jackson Pollock's 1950 *Autumn Rhythm*.[31] So while the battle to make photography an art form "had been fought and won" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by black and white photographers, most serious photographers in the late 1960s and early '70s still believed that the formal problems of color—the exaggeration of hue and the difficulty of organizing color combinations—coupled with its ties to advertising and the commercially-developed casual snapshot rendered it coarse and difficult to work with.[32]

Making a Name, the Southern Way

Just as Eggleston's complex, labor-intensive process yielded a result that could be linked to amateur snapshots, so his identity could be seen to straddle Modernist pretension and Southern kitsch. The identity of photographers was then, and continues now to be, a charged issue in the United States. Some even suggested that the art form itself belonged to Jewish image-makers. In 2002, the former *Artforum* editor and critic Max Kozloff published a

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[29] The dye transfer process evokes the *techne* component of art—the cunning, skill, or labor that cannot be attained by a regular person. Plato viewed techne and systematic or scientific knowledge as being closely related. Aristotle asserted that techne was the systematic use of knowledge for intelligent human action.

[30] Interview with Winston Eggleston, February 15-16, 2007.

[31] T.J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, 1990. It must be noted that during his 29-year tenure at MoMA, Szarkowski organized several exhibitions of fashion photography, for example Irving Penn in 1975 and 1984, and Richard Avedon in 1974, 1978, and 1991.

[32] Eauclaire, 9.

compilation of images titled *New York: Capital of Photography*, and organized an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. The book and exhibition, focusing on street photographers working in the city, noted the number of practitioners of Jewish backgrounds and argued for a distinct aesthetic along these lines. "The great majority of the photographers concerned were or are Jews," he wrote. "In truth we are dealing largely with a picture archive of an American city visualized by Jews, to which a few distinguished Gentiles have contributed."[33] Kozloff is not alone in making such claims. During the 1970s, Garry Winogrand often quipped, partly tongue in cheek, that to be a great photographer, one first had to be Jewish because they were nervy, ironic, disruptive of artistic norms, and proud outsiders.[34] He concluded that Eugene Atget must have been Jewish because his photographs of French life on the tattered fringes seemed so Jewish in spirit (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. *(from left)* Garry Winogrand and William Eggleston, 1971, photograph by Todd Papageorge

[33] Richard B. Woodward, "Behind a Century of Photos, Was there a Jewish Eye?" *New York Times*, (July 7, 2002), A1.
[34] Woodward, A1.

The fact that a majority of the most legendary photographers have been Jewish gives one pause to consider Winogrand's extravagant claim.[35] Others have made much of the distinction between a Jewish and a non-Jewish sensibility in photography. Photographer William Klein was quoted in *The New Yorker* in 2001 speculating about an opposition between the "goyish photography" of the landscape school of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, and the funky urbanism and "Jewish photography" displayed in the work of Arbus and Weegee. No matter how misguided or sarcastic, such comments from photographers like Winogrand and critics like Kozloff—who wrote disparagingly of Eggleston's 1976 show—must have made Eggleston (a slow-talking gentleman from the South) appear even more exotic to his audience in New York. In this world, Eggleston was, at best, hard to place. Whitney Museum of American Art curator Marcia Tucker commented at a seminar of Southern artists (that included Eggleston) in October 1976, that she would be leaving the Whitney because "the management is too parochial, too much into the New York thing."[36] The parochial "New York thing" that dominated not just photography but art in general was being challenged in the 70s, however, as the Sunbelt states accrued more political and economic power.[37]

Eggleston has traveled and worked throughout the world—in Kenya, Germany, China, Japan, and Egypt—but his reputation still seems to rest on his well-known photographs depicting mundane Americana (Fig. 3).

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[35] The list of Jewish photographers includes Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Man Ray, El Lissitzsky, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Andre Kertesz, Brassai, Erich Saloman, Robert Capa, Lisette Model, Helen Levitt, Weegee, Richard Avedon, Arnold Newman, Robert Frank, Elliot Erwitt, Winogrand, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Annie Leibovitz, Joel Meyerowitz, Cindy Sherman, Irving Penn, and Nan Goldin.

[36] B. Drummond Ayres, "Cultural Activities in the South Grow With Its Economy," *New York Times*, (November 1, 1976), 24
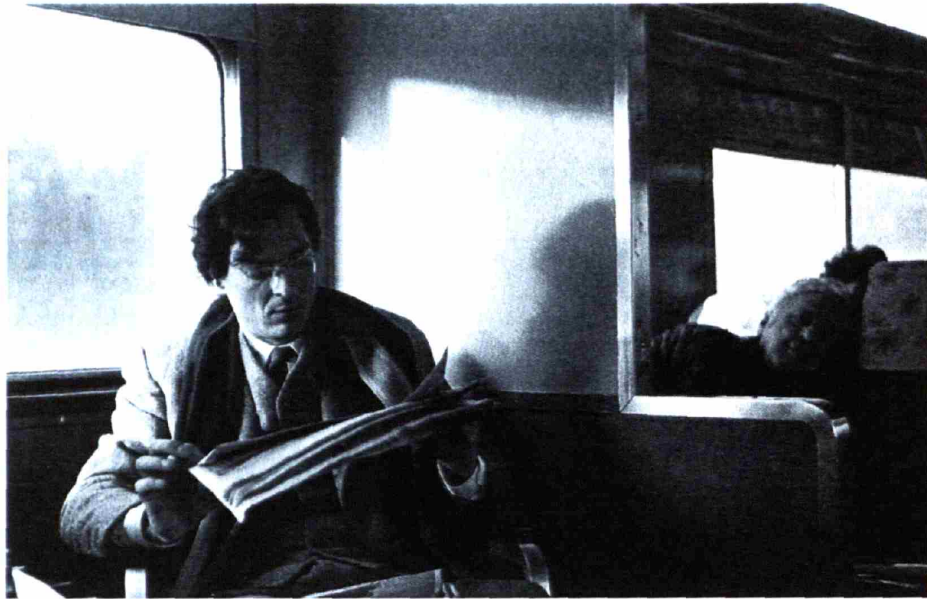
[37] Ibid.

Fig. 3, William Eggleston, from *William Eggleston's Guide*, 1976

Born July 27, 1939, in Memphis, Tennessee, and raised on his grandparents' plantation in Mississippi, the photographer once stated dryly that the centripetal composition of all of his pictures was based on the Confederate flag.[38] Eggleston's *Untitled* 1973 photograph literally shows a battered, Confederate flag license plate ensnared among sickly vegetation, caught in dead center by an eerie glow (Fig. 4).
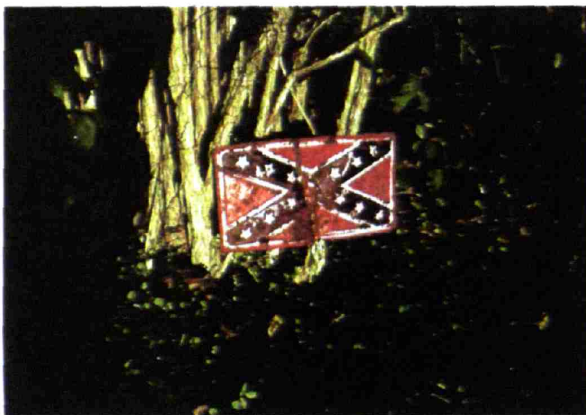

Fig. 4, *Untitled*, William Eggleston, 1973

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[38] Stanley Booth, "William Eggleston," *Salon* (Sept. 7, 1999), p. 1.

Re-appropriated as pure form, this death of the Confederate flag is divested of its brutal legacy, but its lingering symbolism gives a whiff of the rebel South. Accordingly, the forty-eight color photographs selected for the *Guide* index the insular and vernacular in Mississippi, Memphis, Louisiana, and Alabama. Many of the images in the *Guide* suggest temporal displacement, almost supernatural moments of limbo suspended in the aftermath of horror or the restless anticipation of an uncertain future. Cemeteries and post-funeral scenes funerals occupy several. One image shows an old truck parked in a driveway behind a fence full of blooming purple flowers, contrasted with dying brown grass covering the ground beneath them. Another depicts the lifeless trappings of a decaying Southern aristocracy: a portrait of a young child in a carved, gold-embossed frame hangs on the wall above a delicate china tea set atop a gleaming silver tray. On the left side of the frame, an open cabinet of Wedgwood china bowls and plates sits in darkness (Fig. 5).[39]

Fig. 5, *Tallahatchie County, Mississippi*, from *William Eggleston's Guide*

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[39] Wedgwood Blue is also the name of one of Eggleston's limited edition Artist Books. It was published by Caldecott Chubb in 1979. There are twenty editions.

To the right of this scene, an open door leads through a sitting room in orangey light to a space that might be a kitchen, bathed in the daylight streaming through a glass paneled door, revealing wisps of cloud in a pale blue sky. The daylight cuts through the mausoleum-like environment of the darker room, creating an orange line along its doorframe that violently circumscribes the precious and decadent objects in its shadowy corner. Such attention to temporal displacement and nostalgia often produces an unsettlingly romantic effect, one which surely helped him to land commissions photographing quintessential Southern locations: Plains, Georgia, on the eve of Jimmy Carter's election in 1976; Graceland in 1983; and images for a 1990 book with text by Willie Morris, *Faulkner's Mississippi*. Eggleston himself has alluded to a kinship between himself and Faulkner, a fellow Oxford, Mississippi native, at least when it comes to drinking: "I'll wake up some days and think, I'm gonna' get drunk today. It's not just I think I'll have a cocktail before dinner. Faulkner took drink in much the same way." Eggleston's drawl and locution is itself an upper class Southernism, self-consciously placing him within the aristocratic social class he lays claim to (Fig. 6).[40]

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[40] Hugo Williams, "A Clicking Machine in the South, the Vulgar Photography of William Eggleston." *Times Literary Supplement*, (March, 1992), 16. The Southern poor, a group to which Eggleston most definitely does not belong, have faced stereotyping for much of U.S. history. This stereotyping has contributed to popular conceptions about Southerners of all classes. As Stuart Kidd has pointed out, citing Wayne J. Flynt [*Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980)], "The most pervasive stereotypes of the Southern poor conjoined material and moral deprivation. 'Po' Buckra' was lazy, sly, idiotic, ignorant, uncouth and immoral, adverse characteristics that were frequently compounded by his depiction as grotesque in physique, as well as being given drunkenness and bouts of random violence. Even when southern literature treated the poor white sympathetically, as a stock character of the local color writing of the late nineteenth century, the result was often to perpetuate the fictional life of a "pathetic regional type," since the poor white became a sentimentalized version of Uncle Remus."

Fig. 6, *Faulkner's Mississippi*, text by Willie Morris, photographs by William Eggleston

This purposeful identification with Faulkner underscores the fact that, despite his constant protests against the label of "Southern" artist, Eggleston seems to have willingly assumed a public persona built in part from Southern stereotypes. This stylized gentleman, put into the New South, abetted silence about the region's more uncomfortable social aspects—the issue of Civil Rights, for example—coupled with the cultivated visual stereotypes that afforded aesthetic cachet: kitsch, road tripping, Elvis and Faulkner, dandyism, boozing, and even the Confederate flag. More broadly conceived, Eggleston taps into a potent reserve of tropic American visions from popular culture, seen in films like the 1969 *Easy Rider*, the 1963 photo book *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* by Ed Ruscha (one of Eggleston's favorite artists), and rock n' roll bands like Lynard Skynyrd (Eggleston, for instance, liked to refer to his wild youth as his "rock n' roll days").

There had been a profound shift in such tropes the time since Walker Evans was commissioned to photograph the Great Depression for the U.S. Farm Security

Administration in the '30s. Evans was one of the so-called 'FSA photographers,' who made a

substantial contribution to establishing the South's impoverished image during the 1930s,

and chronicled the many changes happening in the region.[41] Historian Leslie Baier is not

alone in observing that Evans's 1936 photographs of Alabama sharecroppers in James

Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* confront the viewer with unrelenting intensity and cast

a harsh light on rural poverty.[42] Since the FSA constituency comprised poor,

disenfranchised, and politically marginal farmers, it was vital to the future of their federal aid

that the FSA cultivate a public and congressional mood of sympathy for their plight,

according to British historian Stuart Stanley Kidd. This required the tempering of the

distinctly American notion of "rugged individualism" that shunned public assistance

programs on moral and aesthetic grounds, and the reassurance of the economy-minded that

the cost of aid was justified, writes Kidd. The resonant effect of Evans's tenant farmers,

clapboard houses, and roadside farm stands sprang from a political imperative that was

separated by a deep chasm from artists of the sixties and seventies like Eggleston who re-

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[41] Stuart Stanley Kidd, *Farm Security Administration Photography, The Rural South, and the Dynamics of Image-making 1935-1943*, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2004) Chapter One, "Introduction: The South Faces the Shutter." The FSA photographers were organized within the Historical Section of the Information Divisions of the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and under the direction of Roy Emerson Stryker. Over an eight-year period, Stryker's photographers took 164,000 black-and-white negatives of which 77,000 prints are catalogued in the main or classified file at the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. The Historical Section's photographic record was not exclusive to the South but was national in scope, according to Kidd, and it is unlikely that more than 21 percent of the its output relates to the South. Stryker's team photographed this region more extensively, however, than any of the section's other teams.

[42] Leslie Baier, "Visions of Fascination and Despair: The Relationship Between Walker Evans and Robert Frank," *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), 55-63.

appropriated some of the same imagery.[43] The full-color picture, *Near Extinct Wannalaw Plantation, Mississippi*, in *William Eggleston's Guide*, (Fig. 7) for example, is separated from Evans's similar, black-and-white, 1936 picture, *Untitled, Cabin, Hale County, Alabama* featured in the book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Fig. 8). Intervening years had witnessed the perfection of color television, the post-World War II economic boom, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and administrations, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Fig. 7, *Near Extinct Wannalaw Plantation, Mississippi*, from *William Eggleston's Guide*

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[43] In an April 14, 2007 phone conversation, Eggleston said: Walker Evans "was not an influence. He was quite a master, but we are nothing alike I think, speaking photographically and otherwise….I knew him, not that well, but I did."
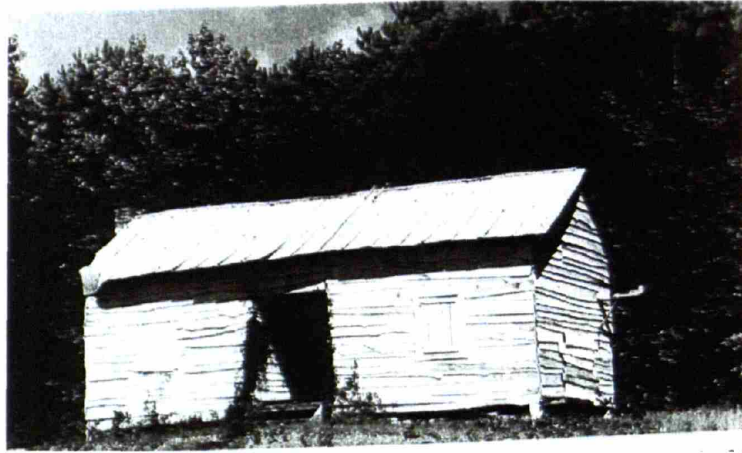
Fig. 8, *Untitled, Cabin, Hale County, Alabama,* Walker Evans, 1936 from *Let Us Now Praise Famous*

By the 1960s and 1970s, any deep-seated Depression-era interest in social reform stoked by

the FSA project had been displaced by a preoccupation with enjoying the nation's

affluence.[44] Enriched by savings from the war period and smitten by an array of new

appliances and cars, many Americans had, during the 50s, been oblivious to the needs of the

impoverished in both urban and rural areas.[45] By 1960, rising wages and a partnership

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[44] 'The Golden Age of Television' refers to the period from about 1949 to 1960 when television became a popular mass medium and many common programming formats were developed (*www.wikipedia.org*). In 1927, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) gave a public demonstration of new television technology, and by 1928, the General Electric Company had begun regular television broadcasts. The years following 1929 saw the first "television boom," with thousands of viewers buying or constructing primitive television sets to watch primitive programs. However, it was not until the early 1950s that television technology had progressed so far, and television become so widely established that the time was right to solve in earnest the problem or creating television images in natural colors. After World War II, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) began demonstrating its own sequential color system designed by Peter Goldmark. The system combined cathode-ray tubes with spinning wheels of red, blue, and green filters and was so impressive that the *Wall Street Journal* had "little doubt that color television had reached the perfection of black and white." Also developed at this time was an RCA color system compatible with existing black and white sets. While the first RCA color TV set rolled off the production line in early 1954 with a 12-inch screen, it was not until the 1960s until color television became profitable. (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online: Academic Edition, *Television* entry)
[45] Bruce S. Jansson, *The Reluctant Welfare State: American Social Welfare Policies: Past, Present and Future* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001) Chapter Nine, "The Era of

between government, the housing industry, and the automobile industry powered economic growth. Providing cheap housing loans to veterans and other homeowners and underwriting a large share of the costs of a massive expansion of the nation's roads, the government promoted a housing boom in the suburbs and the production of large numbers of cars. [46]

While the emotional purchase of "Depression Modern" assisted by the FSA program might have lingered on (now ripe for exploitation by a potent advertising industry) most 1970s consumers of visual culture, in a daze of commodities, had forgotten where it came from.[47] It is precisely at this juncture we find Eggleston, slyly admitting to his hard-drinking, gun-collecting Southern ways. And while he may be a Southern *gent*, he's no *Southerner*. He and Szarkowski tell us that the photographs in the *Guide*—cemeteries, old trucks, and rotting plantations—are not about the South but about form for its own sake. The symmetry of *Untitled, Algiers, Louisiana*, ca. 1970, for example, is rhythmic, the frame governed by a logic that is contingent upon nothing but the smooth contrast of warm and cool colors (Fig. 9)

Social Services: The New Frontier and the Great Society," and Chapter Ten, "The Paradoxical Era: 1968-1980."

[46] Jansson, 235-236.

[47] James Curtis and Sheila Grannen have pointed out that the images made by the St. Louis-born Walker Evans demonstrated a belief that even the most commonplace dwelling or ordinary object could stand for utility, economy, or simplicity. Curtis and Grannen observe that, in Evans, Americans could see the concern for functionalism elevated to the status of fine art. [James C. Curtis, Sheila Grannen, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Photographs: Walker Evans and Documentary Photography," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol 15, No. 1. (Spring, 1980), 1-23].
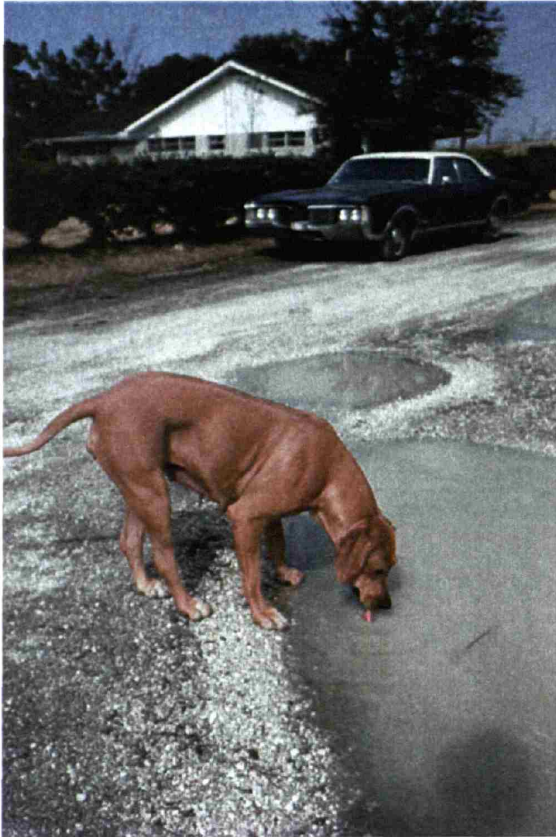
Fig. 9, *Algiers, Louisiana,* from *William Eggleston's Guide*

The copper fur—short and velvety—of a dog lapping contentedly from a milky puddle in the foreground vies for attention with a car set back in the distance. A white house behind a row of shrubs creates a geometric counterpoint to the rectangular windshield, hood, and headlights of the car. We are led to think the dog is a mongrel stray, left to its devices in this depopulated world of shapes, slurping a cocktail of engine fuel, urine, and acid rainwater from a sandy puddle in back of a modest suburban Louisiana home. While the picture, by some accident of geography, may reveal how the new wealth of the Sunbelt has been dogged by the region's poverty-stricken past, the photographer's insistent attention to form creates a Northern "frame" that reassures the (Northern) viewer of control over the familiar content

of Southern poverty evident in the picture.

Eggleston's Southerness and his exploitation of classic American tropes was parsed out by Hugo Williams in a smug, mocking profile for the *Times Literary Supplement* : "The washed-up, disjointed, incongruous imagery that we all know and love from a thousand road movies and record covers has been his tutor and his raison d'etre."[48] While Williams calls Eggleston a "Southern gentleman," he does not conflate that persona with the photographs themselves, musing that what they tell us about the South "is anyone's guess." Almost a decade later, Charles Darwent, another British journalist, characterized Eggleston as "Rhett Butler with a camera," perhaps having learned of the man's alleged fondness for driving around Memphis listening to the *Gone with the Wind* soundtrack. Appearing in London's *The Independent on Sunday*, the title of the article, "King Crimson," referred at once to Eggleston's formalism (the use of startling blood-red in the legendary Red Ceiling photograph is exemplary), his rumored rock n' roll lifestyle of pills, pricey cars, booze, and women (King Crimson is a British rock n' roll band of the 1960s and '70s), and his sage-like position as the father of color photography (Darwent likened his conversation with Eggleston to consulting an oracle) (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10, *Untitled*, no date, William Eggleston

[48] Williams, p. 16

Openly reveling in Eggleston's drawl, Darwent wrote: "It's a lovely thing to hear William Eggleston saying the word red, pronounced ray-uh-uhd with the long, long locution of his native Tennessee. You find yourself steering the conversation around to things roseate, just for the pleasure of it."[49] Darwent worked the Southern vibe further, re-casting the foment over the 1976 exhibition as the rebel South flaring up against the staid and stodgy North: "One particularly patronizing Yankee described Eggleston's work, mostly shot around his hometown of Memphis, as 'cracker chic.'"

Yet if the identity was Southern decadent, the photographic practice was ambitious and serious. Eggleston started photographing at age ten with a free-focus snapshot camera (although he did not really get into photography seriously until being introduced to it by a friend in college). He acquired his first Leica in 1958 at age nineteen and photographed in black and white. He started experimenting with color transparency film seven years later, in 1965, at age twenty-six, a photographic trajectory unfolding amidst the American civil rights movement. By 1967, he was regularly photographing in color, and decided to take a suitcase of his color slides to Szarkowski. Eggleston, a close friend of Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and Diane Arbus, already had one foot in the door of the New York art world by that time, while the other foot remained at home in the South.[50] MoMA was not the only institution courting Eggleston's attention in the early 1970s. During this time, Eggleston was introduced by artist and photographer, William Christenberry, an Alabama native, to Walter

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[49] Charles Darwent, "King Crimson," *The Independent on Sunday*, 10.

[50] Eggleston stated in an April 14, 2007 phone conversation: "There were four of us: Lee, Garry, Diane, and me. It was in the late 60s. Lee and Garry went on cross country trips and I would insist they stay with me…We had wonderful times and became wonderful friends." At the time, he noted, their black and white work was first coming to be regarded art, "and the person responsible for that was John Szarkowski."

Hopps, then curator at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. Eggleston showed Hopps a group of his color prints, and Hopps, too, was immediately impressed; "By the time I went through the prints a second time," said Hopps, "I believed them to be the finest work in color photography I'd seen."[51] Hopps and Eggleston took a road trip to the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in 1972, and some of the hundreds of images Eggleston snapped on the trip were featured in the book *Los Alamos*. The curator planned an Eggleston show at the Museum of American Art in 1974, but dropped the idea when he learned of MoMA's upcoming show.[52] "A lot of artists from the South went to New York City," said Eggleston's wife, Rosa in a phone conversation. "It was like an annual pilgrimage we made. That's just where everything was happening."[53]

Eggleston patently rejects the label of "Southern artist," and his wife Rosa agrees: "It just sticks in my craw when people drag that into the discussion."[54] Asked in the early 1990s how his show at the Barbican Art Gallery in London would be structured, Eggleston responded:

> "I hope that it reflects that I live there, but that the works are about
>
> something else. They're about making art, and using film and
>
> camera and photography to do it with. I personally do not see any
>
> Southerness in this particular picture. I really don't see it in some of
>
> these pictures that *were* taken in the South. That's the way I feel.

[51] Thomas Weski, ed., *William Eggleston: Los Alamos,* (New York: Scalo, 2003).
[52] Nathan Kernan, "William Eggleston's Democratic Photography: The Los Alamos Project."*Art on Paper*, (November-December, 2001), 66.
[53] Telephone interview with Rosa Eggleston, February 17, 2007.
[54] Ibid.

But, of course, I live there. I'm from there—the Southern United

States. This did not seem to be a foreign place."[55]

It is true of some of the photographs in the *Guide* that the viewer may not

immediately know that they were made in Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and Louisiana

in isolation from the book itself. But Szarkowski identified the images according to place

and designed the monograph as a road guide we might bring on a cross-country trip, like

the one taken by Eggleston and Hopps to New Mexico. Constructed as a "guide," the

monograph simulates the experience of a journey, leading the viewer—Northern and

immersed in the New York art scene—to a statement about color photography.[56] It must

be stressed that Eggleston was not— and is not—concerned with the reception of his

work in Tennessee and Mississippi, or what the people there think of him: "They know

me socially but generally have no idea what my status is in the art world. This is a hick

town."[57] While he himself hails from the "aristocracy," he said, "generally speaking it's a

hick world down here."[58]

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[55] Haworth-Booth, 69.

[56] In a February 22, 2007 letter to me, Szarkowski wrote: "The title was mine, and I liked it for its three-cornered ambiguity. A guide tells one how to find one's way through a tangle of strange roads, and it also tells one how to use a new machine, and it is a synonym for a teacher, and reminds us of Virgil." The physical design of the book was done by Carl Lannes, "who actually studied the pictures and read the text before he began to determine their form as a book."

[57] April 14, 2007 phone conversation with William Eggleston.

[58] Ibid.

Modern is not from the South

Despite claims to the contrary, Szarkowski was susceptible to the myth of Southern gentility when it came to understanding Eggleston and his work.[59] It was Szarkowski's choice to construe the sequence of the photographs as a guidebook, said Eggleston: "That was mostly John's idea—the reason it was named the guide was his conception, and in his mind, it was like a Michelin guide to … photography." Could it also be conceived as a guide to the region? "Not to me, but probably to him."[60] While this may be, Szarkowski's essay for the *Guide* states unequivocally that where the art of photography is concerned, formalism has priority over ostensive content: "The goal is not to make something factually impeccable, but seamlessly persuasive." He goes on to write that while it would be marvelous if the photographs tell us something about Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, this is simply not the case. More revealing, perhaps, is a strikingly emotive, humble, and candid letter to Eggleston dated June 6, 1975, in which Szarkowski's commitment to formalism seems to overpower concerns about the portrayal of regional social realities. Szarkowski begins the letter by describing the difficult, painstaking process of writing the essay for the

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[59] Szarkowski stated in a February 22, 2007 letter that while part of who Eggleston was had something to do with where he was born, etc., "…people who are not really alert to pictures but who love simplicity, or simple-mindedness, will interpret this to mean that art is autobiographical in some lead-footed reportorial sense. Art is not illustration, it is making something new. Eggleston is doubtless wise in insisting that his work has nothing to do with his life; otherwise people who aren't interested in pictures would ask him to translate them into English, preferably with a Mississippi accent." Szarkowski went on to chide me for seeking to uncover a cause and effect relationship between art and life: "I think you should read the essay again, keeping in mind two things; (1) the relationship between art and the rest of the world is not simple, it has not yet been successfully reduced to a formula, and it is not likely to be in your dissertation; and (2) It is nevertheless a charming puzzle, which intelligent artists and critics enjoy playing with—not really with the hope of solving it but as a way of *appreciating* it—of understanding better its marvelously fecund richness. In this process of exploration words are often used in a spirit less scientific than poetic, in an attempt to see what they might mean under pressure."
[60] April 14, 2007 phone conversation with William Eggleston.

Guide. "I have begun scratching away at the essay for your book: it is hard work, and consequently it is not doing our friendship any good. In the small hours of the morning, as I stare at my yellow pad, covered with pompous idiocies, I think of you leading the civilized and cultured life of a country gentleman, and am instantly filled with jealousy and rage." He goes on to bemoan the tortuous process of going back through three or four pages of draft and crossing out most of it. "Writing," he observes with startling humility,

> ...is really not complicated; it is really very much like picking beans for a
>
> penny a pound—simply a matter of sticking to the task and finally
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> overwhelming it by sheer idiotipersistence. There are after all a finite number
>
> of words and a finite number of combinations in which to put them down,
>
> and finding the right selection and the right order is merely a matter of
>
> time."[61]

Szarkowski concludes the letter by floating the possibility that he might have to "come down and see you in your native lair," before finishing the essay but retracts: "it is probably better that I make up my mind what I think before I am confused by the facts." This last statement is a telling admission. It reveals Szarkowski's reversion to the tacit MoMA credo of form over content and stands as a revelation of a curatorial insistence that the photographs must be detached from the context of their making in order to be considered art. He admits that photographs are necessarily associated with certain facts, but rather than providing edification, these facts interfere with what the mind thinks about them as art. In the case of Eggleston's photographs, the voided facts include Eggleston's class position, desegregation, bussing, Civil Rights struggles, stubborn economic inequities

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[61] Letter from Szarkowski to Eggleston, dated June 6, 1975.

between rural poverty and the "country gentleman," and the hyper-development of the New South, which engendered a proliferation of strip malls and shopping centers homogenizing the region. The point is that Szarkowski worries that such "facts" could influence his purist thinking about the photograph. Eggleston seems to have endorsed this approach.

Perhaps it could be argued that the apparent iconoclasm of Eggleston's practice vis-à-vis the black-and-white tradition of "artistic photography" was tempered by his application of the medium to representations of the South, where stereotyped vulgarity and hierarchies of color made sense of the dye transfer medium to a bastion of Northern culture such as the Museum of Modern Art. Did the photographs of the decaying South featured in *William Eggleston's Guide*—pictures of a rusty tricycle, of an old woman passing time idly on a bench, of a dog drinking water from a dirty puddle— reinforce the illusory intellectual "superiority" of New York culture?[62] Why was Eggleston chosen to brandish the banner of artistic color photography onto the New York art scene via these particular "vulgar" images? Perhaps, following Evans's direction, the subjects in Eggleston's imagery suited ingrained notions about the medium in which they were rendered—what one writer referred to as "the Southern tendency to Kitsch."[63]

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[62] Fictional treatment of poor southern whites since the 1920s has served to signify class distinctions in a highly stratified society, according to Stuart Kidd. Such treatment has also served to justify these class distinctions. By defining poor whites as anti-social deviants or helpless dependents, disparities of wealth and power in the southern region were justified and progressive reform could be dismissed as irrelevant to southern conditions. The typification of the poor white as aberrant prevented the group's adoption by American reformers. [Stuart Stanley Kidd, *Farm Security Administration Photography, The Rural South, and the Dynamics of Image-making 1935-1943*, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 2004), Chapter Four, "The Damned and Delivered: The Rejuvenation of the Southern Mountain Poor."] The historian Henry D. Shapiro has referred to Appalachia, for example, as a cultural construct developed after the Civil War as a yardstick for defining America. The "otherness" of the "strange land and peculiar people" of the southern mountain region served to identify the American norm by appearing to be an exception to it.

[63] Darwent, 10.

The legacy of *William Eggleston's Guide* has a broad reach. In introductory photography classes, for example, Eggleston is still presented as the pioneer of artistic color photography, yet he achieved this status in part due to his silence about issues of race and class in the South, in keeping with Szarkowski's formalist vision. By contrast, Kentucky-born (but now living and teaching in Massachusetts) black-and-white photographer Shelby Lee Adams completely inverts Eggleston's prima facia renunciation of regional identity.[64] Nevertheless, Adams's 1993 book, *Appalachian Portraits*, invokes the legacy of *William Eggleston's Guide* by using the MoMA monograph format, complete with an introductory essay (by writer Lee Smith) and one photograph displayed per page (most of the time) with the name of the image typed below, and a blank white page opposite each photograph. The titles are printed below each image in simple, black typeface.

Shelby Lee Adams was born in Appalachia in 1950 and educated in fine arts and photography at the Cleveland Institute of Art, the University of Iowa, and the Massachusetts College of Art.[65] Adams' twang is all but gone when he speaks articulately to art world

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[64] Eggleston will probably always live in Memphis: "I like it here," he remarked in a April 17, 2007 phone conversation. "It's living comfortably, a place where I know everyone." Unlike Eggleston, Shelby Lee Adams has chosen to live away from the area where he grew up (he lives in Massachusetts), yet speaks passionately about the importance of his Appalachian roots in the formation of his identity.

[65] Adams was one of seven photographers selected in 1978 to photograph the state of Kentucky, a project funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The resulting book, "Appalachia, a Self Portrait," was published one year later. Scholars and politicians were paying greater attention to Appalachian culture in 60s and 70s. In a 1974 article about snake handling among the Southern Appalachian Holiness Religious Sect, a subject Adams photographed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, historian Steven M. Kane pointed out that the topic had only recently become an object of "social scientific inquiry." He pointed out that several articles about the subject had been published in 1960, and 1962, and 1968. Moreover, during the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy promised to develop programs to help Americans living in poverty in Appalachia and inner cities and to "get the country moving again." Furthermore, it was in the early 1960s that the federal government attempted to define poverty and finally created a standard for poverty that is still used today.

interviewers about his love for the people of the hollers. But it mysteriously comes back

when he returns to the Hazard, Kentucky area where he stages most of his more well-known

photographs of the Appalachian people. Indeed, Adams frequently directs his subjects where

to stand and has gone so far as to furnish a pig so that a family would reenact a traditional

hog killing for a photo shoot. Adams thus has no need for the agile Leica and its capacity to

freeze ephemera, but instead uses an 8x10 view camera and elaborate lighting to achieve a

scene crtics have referred to as theatrical and spooky. Adams considers himself a

documentary photographer, but the question has been raised as to whether the photographs

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As a photographer with nine years of university education making images of the Appalachian people at a time when they were the object of sympathetic national attention, it is easy to see why Adams pointedly articulates a close identification with the people of Appalachia as a badge of honor, even if in reality his relative middle class status afforded him the luxury of studying art in college and graduate school, something most of the people he photographed would never conceive of. Born and raised in Hazard, Kentucky, the photographer openly states that the raison d'être of his work is his insider status in the mountain community. He has stated that the images in *Appalachian Portraits*, part of a series begun in 1974, are intended to be a process of self-exploration rather than a general representation of all Appalachian people or their culture today.
Unlike Eggleston who denies Southern roots in his pictures by way of a Modernist aesthetic, Adams claims this heritage and openly acknowledges that his photographs of the Appalachian mountain people are an attempt to "renew and relive" his childhood. While photographing, Adams states, "I regain my southern, mountain accent and approach people with openness, fascination, and respect; and they treat me with respect too." Implicit in Adams' work is an acknowledgement of the country's attention to the plight of the poor but noble Appalachian people. This attention came in the form of the scholarly (Appalachian "studies") the political (programs aimed at affecting economic redemption in the region), and sensationalist media hype. In this climate, the people of Appalachia were looked upon as specimens of anthropological study, as a people, in Adams' words, "bypassed by the ephemeral development of Modern America," separate from the rest of the country, living as though it were still the Great Depression. Thus Adams had no shame about using his insider status and membership in the community to produce a beautifully rendered black-and-white documentary-style series about a people, poor but dignified.

could be more aptly described as a kind of Southern Gothic poetry.[66] More troublesome are allegations against Adams of exploiting the Appalachian people, reinforcing hillbilly and *Deliverance* stereotypes, and feeding into the voyeurism of museum and gallery-goers whose shame in gawking is appeased by clean mattes, frames, and white walls (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11. *Leddie with Children*, Shelby Lee Adams, 1990

While some of the families Adams has photographed love the resultant images and hang them on the walls of their homes, at least one woman who grew up in the Kentucky mountains and received her education outside Appalachia has spoken out against Adams, claiming that he has disgraced her family by publishing the photograph known as *Melissa and Brice, Johnson's Fork, 1978*. The image shows the woman's sister, Melissa, at about seven or

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[66] "The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia," Directed by Jennifer Baichwal, Mercury Films Inc., 2002. Interview with A.D. Coleman.

eight years old on a porch with her crossed arms poking through the wooden frame of a ripped screen door. The frame of the image itself is split exactly in two, a recurring pictorial convention in Adams's images. Standing several feet behind Melissa, leaning up against the white wall at the edge of the porch is Brice—an older man with his hands folded behind his lower back and a strange, almost maniacal smile on his face. The odd pairing of the giddy man, who looks to be in his late 30s, and the pretty but world-weary blond child leaves a rather ominous impression with the viewer. In response to criticism over the image for its display of the family's dialpidated living conditions, Adams insisted on the implicit optimisim of a scene showing a beautiful child set against a clean-looking wall.

Eggleston's *Outskirts of Morton, Mississippi, Halloween 1971*, shows three white boys— they appear to be brothers— standing in a row and holding hands: shortest on the left, the mid-sized boy in the middle, and the tallest on the right (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12, *Outskirts of Morton, Mississippi, Halloween 1971*, William Eggleston, 1971, *William Eggleston's Guide*

The tallest boy is maybe 10 or 11 years old, bored looking, and dressed as a pirate for Halloween: his baggy white pants are printed with large primary-red and blue flowers. The sleeves of his white oxford shirt—probably his father's—are rolled up to his elbows and the first few buttons undone, and a blue beaded necklace droops lifelessly from his neck. A red bandana covers his head and he slouches, standing with all of his weight on one foot. The outfit, complete with a pair of wildly out of place loafers seems to have been slapped together, but becomes tackily iconic in Eggleston's image. The boy in the middle is not dressed for Halloween, wearing a blue and red striped sweater (matching the taller boy's flower-printed pants), dark blue jeans, and sneakers. He is blond and ascertains the camera with both suspicion and earnesty. His fingers interlock with those of the older boy and their bodies meld into one form. By contrast, he grasps the wrist of the younger boy, who is standing several inches away from him, pulling away almost imperceptibly, his feet angled as if ready to scamper off the minute the picture is taken. His face and bare feet are smudged with dirt and he wears an oversized military-style overcoat that falls below his knees and drapes over his hands. His eyes look askance at something outside the frame away from his brothers, some trouble to involve himself in and confirm his status as the mischevious youngest child. The frame is split into an almost perfectly portioned pie chart of otherworldly colors: the sky is pure purple, complimenting the red and blue of the boys clothing. Strips of sand surround them on either side, taking on a green cast in the peculiar evening light. The pavement foreground where the boys stand is the color of denim but speckled with tiny white dots like distant stars, making it seem as though the boys are hovering in outer space.

Evidence of social class can be evinced here in the definable position of each boy within the typical middle-class nuclear family (the impishness of the youngest child, the

requisite diplomacy and maturity of the middle child, and the authoritative responsibility of the eldest). But it is by no means obvious that this is what the picture is intended to be about. The vivid, unexpected Technicolor quality of hue contrives an utterly surreal effect.

In contrast to this and some of Eggleston's other images of Southern children, the contested life of Adams's image seems to stem from the troubled relationship between the somewhat paradoxical pairing of aesthetic formalism and the documentary tradition, languages of representation that, Szarkowski has ensured, are at odds with one another. Eggleston's recognition of this dilemma is evident in his denial of the Southern in his pictures. By contrast, Adams's announcement of the social class of his subjects (and his own regional identity) does not allow for the erasure of context. Thus he finds himself grappling awkwardly between documentary and formal tendencies.

And while New York audiences may have reveled in the voyeurism afforded by Eggleston's full-color images of Southern vulgarity, as an artist striving to be taken seriously in New York, Eggleston had every reason to drain the Southern trace from his work. After all, he was the resident of a region with a strikingly unsympathetic past—the New South— an area struggling in 1976 to shake off its legacy of slavery and segregation, freshly exposed by the Civil Rights Movement. Signs that black residents of the South would demand a new Reconstruction were apparent by the mid-1950s, at which time, church leaders—formerly resigned to the oppression of their people— began discussing strategies for attacking racist policies.[67] The Civil Rights Movement began in 1955, when Martin Luther King Jr. led a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, tipping off a series of protests throughout the South that

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[67] Bruce S. Jansson, *The Reluctant Welfare State: A historical introduction to American welfare policies* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), chapters 9, "The Era of Federal Social Services: The New Frontier and the Great Society," and chapter 10, "The Paradoxical Era: 1968-1980."

challenged segregation on interstate transportation, at lunch counters, in train stations, swimming pools, public schools, and colleges. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the nation became more aware of what were perceived to be uniquely Southern injustices, as the peaceful, nonviolent protests of civil rights demonstrators were repeatedly met with violence, unjust rulings in the courts, intimidation, and even murder.[68]

The trial for the brutal murder of Emmett Till took place in Eggleston's hometown (and the site of several photographs in the *Guide*), Sumner, Mississippi, during the summer of 1955, when the photographer was 16 years old. In fact, Eggleston's Uncle Aydn, featured in the *Guide* along with his black servant, Jasper, was a member of the jury that exonerated Till's killers, according to Eggleston. Till, a 14-year-old boy visiting Mississippi from Chicago, had been warned by his mother to behave in a docile, timid, and respectful way to Southern whites: "If you have to get on your knees and bow when a white person goes past, do it willingly," she said. Instead, Till bragged outside a grocery store to several boys that he had a white girlfriend up North. When one of them dared him to talk to the white female store clerk, Till went up to the counter to get some candy and murmured, "Bye baby," as he was leaving. Three days later, the white woman's husband and his brother-in-law came to get that "boy who has done the talking." They took Till from the cabin where he was staying, tortured and murdered him, and dumped his body into a river. When the all-white jury exonerated the defendants, mass rallies occurred throughout the North. Emmet Till became a martyr and the civil rights struggle became a national movement.[69] Mounting violence and instability finally forced President Kennedy to propose civil rights legislation in 1963 that prohibited job discrimination on the basis of race and gender, and banned discrimination in

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[68] Jansson, p. 241, Also, *Eyes on the Prize* [videorecording], a production of Blackside, Inc,, Alexandria, VA, PBS Video, 2006, volumes 1-4
[69] Jansson, 241.

voter registration. In June 1963, he gave a televised address to endorse the legislation, the first presidential address in the nation's history devoted to civil rights issues.[70] After Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency in 1963, he endorsed Kennedy's entire legislative package and thus signal to Northerners and Southerners that he would be a reform-minded president. As a gesture, he made economic concessions to Southern states, which had the lowest per capita incomes in the country.[71] Despite these concessions, Johnson refused to compromise with Southerners in 1964, when they tried to dilute civil rights legislation drafted by the Kennedy administration.

During the busing crisis of the 1970s that wreaked havoc not only in the South, but in supposedly liberal northern cities such as Boston, Eggleston's home city of Memphis was the tenth largest school district in the nation. University of Michigan Professor of History Matthew Lassiter has pointed out that, within the Memphis district, court-ordered desegregation revealed the inadequacy of a partial busing formula in a majority-black system marked by intense residential segregation. In 1971, a group called the Citizens Study Committee called for a metropolitan approach to racial integration, including reversal of the zoning policies that prevented black families from moving to the east Memphis suburbs and a civic commitment to educational and economic opportunity for minorities living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. At the time, Lassiter writes:

> Memphis leaders pursued regional planning through an apartheid
> agenda of channeling new black housing south of the city while
> annexing the white middle class subdivisions to the east. The city
> incorporated more than 150,000 residents of adjacent Shelby County

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[70] Jansson, 241-243.
[71] Jansson, 247.

during the 1960s and early 1970s, thanks to Tennessee's automatic annexation laws, but suburban voters twice rejected referendums to consolidate the city and county governments.

The Civil Rights Movement had sharpened the increasingly socially reformist consciousness emerging among the public and the government in response to the dire conditions of the poor in Appalachia and other rural and urban areas, especially in the South. Also during the 1970s, the common ethnic term, Negro, was undergoing a profound shift in popular usage, which was in turn reflected in academia (sociology textbooks and Library of Congress subject headings, for example). The choice of Library of Congress subject headings for African Americans has been one of the most controversial and mercurial in history.[72] The heading was "Negroes" throughout most of the twentieth century, but changed to "Blacks" during the late 70s. It was changed again, in the 1990s, to "Afro-Americans" and around 2003 it changed to "African Americans." The early 1970s had seen the rise of the Black Panther Party and Black Power movements, as well as the emergence of the Blaxploitation genre. Such political and cultural expression signified a growing pride based on color.

Yet the white people of Memphis and other cities adopted an ostensibly color neutral stance to deal with the integration of black bodies into white schools, affecting a pragmatic—not racial— rationale for endorsing de facto segregation. Eggleston also embraced this color-neutrality, ironically, in his experiments with color photography, seeming to ignore the potentially social potential of the medium and the racial issues raised in a few of his pictures. For example, the picture of his Uncle Adyn and Jasper standing

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[72] Jeffrey Beall, "Ethnic Groups and Library of Congress Subject Headings," *Colorado Libraries* (V. 32, No. 4, 2006), 38.

together on his family's old cotton plantation is one that, according to Eggleston, both he and Szarkowski agreed should be included in the *Guide* (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13, *Sumner Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in Background*, 1969-1970, from *William Eggleston's Guide*.

In the picture, the two men are standing beside a white car with the door hanging open. The foreground is carpeted with fallen brown leaves and there is a murky pond (Cassidy Bayou) in the distance. The two men are enclosed within the frame by three tree trunks—two on the right side behind Jasper and another one behind the car. Posed in the same position, both men are angled slightly away from the camera, with their hands in their pockets and their legs together, a slight bend in their backs. Eggleston said he liked the similarity of their posture because it reflected their close relationship. But while their relationship may have been close, Jasper's white coat—something a waiter would wear—

reflects his status as a servant, while Uncle Adyn is in a suit and a red tie (that becomes the bull's eye around which all other formal details revolve). Jasper is positioned behind Uncle Adyn, as if in his shadow.

In many of the *Guide* images, irony, like form, mediates between the viewer and a palpable undertone of violence and horror. The photograph, *Huntsville, Alabama*, for example, is a close-up shot of man from chest level upward, standing on the runway of a small airport (Fig. 14).
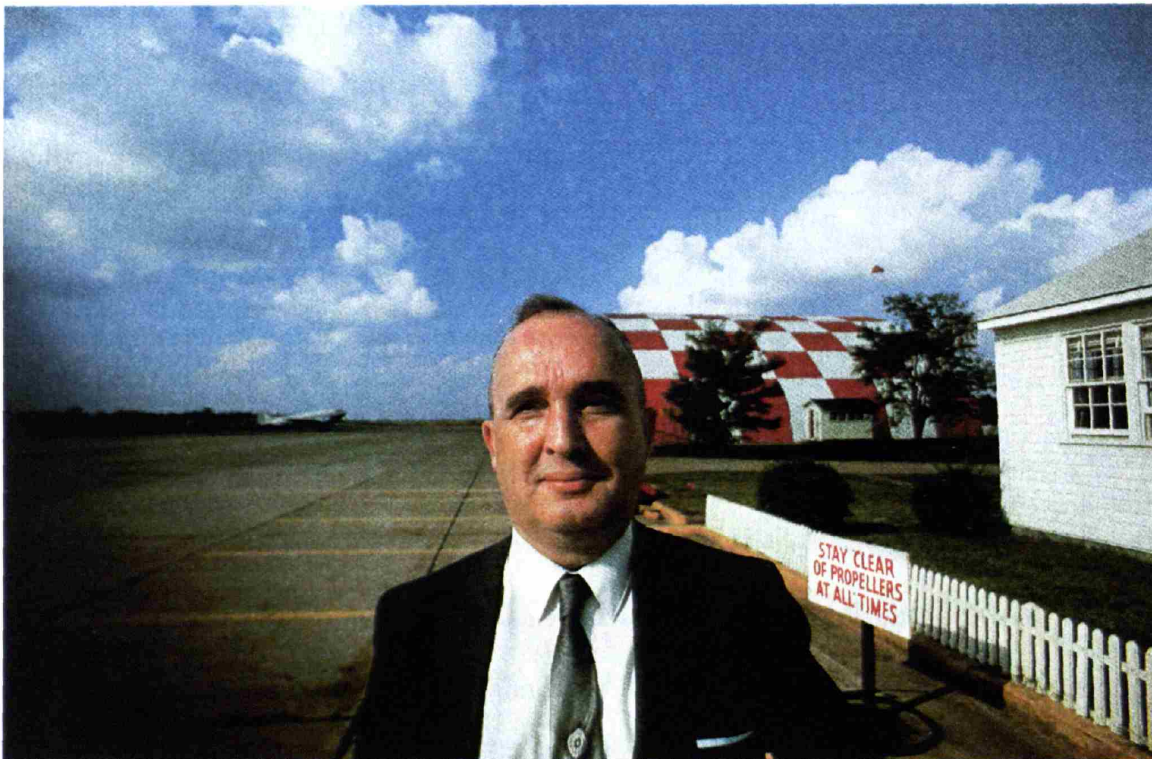

Fig. 14, *Huntsville, Alabama*, from *William Eggleston's Guide*

He is dressed in a suit and looking off into the distance with a small, ironic smile on his

pursed, moistened lips, his brown slightly furrowed and vaguely troubled. Behind him to the right is a red-lettered sign that reads, "STAY CLEAR OF PROPELLERS AT ALL TIMES," but in the distance, the nose of a plane is aimed menacingly at the his head. Described by some observers as eerie, Eggleston's photographs (including those featured in the *Guide*) often insinuate that one is witnessing the aftermath of some great bloodbath or right on the cusp of it, imparting an almost supernatural significance to seemingly trivial objects, making them appear as if left over from a crime scene.

Fig. 15, *Sumner, Mississippi*, from *William Eggleston's Guide*

Such scenes in the *Guide* include an abandoned meal of rare meat and greens paired with a garishly colored napkin and sharp silver cutlery (Fig. 15), flames shooting from a Weber grill (Fig. 16), a half inside-out child's coat impaled by the hood on the nail it hangs from (Fig. 17), an old man seated at the edge of the bed, slouching slightly, with one hand between his legs and the other limply handling a pistol, as if in surrender (Fig. 18).

Fig. 16, *Memphis*, from *William Eggleston's Guide*

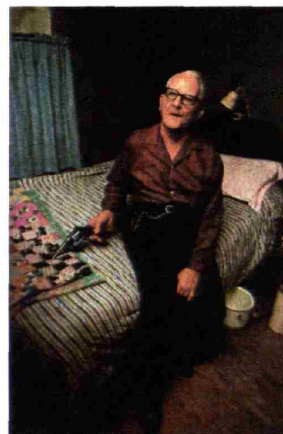Fig. 17, *Near Jackson, Mississippi*, from *Guide*

Fig. 18, *Morton, Mississippi*, from *Guide*

Eggleston had every interest in making sure that his photographs were regarded as works of modern art—for him formalism and artistic autonomy were a license to retreat from regional identity. But haunting their careful attention to form is a hint of the rot and lingering horror of the Old South. Eggleston and Szarkowski took an ahistorical stance toward the *Guide* rather than acknowledge that many of the photographs depicted ruins in the present, pairing nostalgia for the past with implicit reference to the undercurrent of violence lying slightly below the surface.

In art historical terms, the 1976 MoMA show paved the way for the name Eggleston, out of several possibilities such as Stephen Shore, Larry Babis, Joel Meyerowitz, and Ernest Haas to be attached to the legitimization of color photography as an artistic medium. As

Dan Meinwald pointed out in the September, 1976 issue of *Afterimage*, "It is well known, at least within the art world upon which the operations of MoMA wield such influence, that the circumstances in which a person's work are shown can have more effect on his or her acceptance as an artist than does the work itself. The very existence of a Museum of Modern Art confirms the fact. Its existence, additionally, also confirms its power, and there is no doubt that Eggleston is now 'in'—nothing short of holocaust could make him 'out.'[73] Indeed, the Eggleston show was the place to be on May 25, 1976, and opening night was so crowded that Rosa Eggleston recalls feeling like a sardine, unable to walk across the gallery space to speak with friends.

After the opening, New York art journalists demanded to know: why Eggleston now? Other photographers, they noted, such as Stephen Shore, Helen Levitt, and Neal Slavin were also taking color pictures. They posited that financial interest on the part of corporate sponsors and Szarkowski's personal aesthetic disposition were surely factors. In *New York* magazine, Sean Callahan wrote that Eggleston belonged to the personal documentary school Szarkowski favored, while Shelley Rice of the *SOHO Weekly News* cited the curator's "definite predilection for picture postcard views of the American landscape" as an explanation.[74] Writing for the *Village Voice* in 1977, Owen Edwards argued that the "new age dawning for color photography" had more to do with an expanding market for cameras and film than with any revolutionary artistic insight.

Douglas Crimp has written that while Michel Foucault concentrated on modern institutions of confinement— the asylum and the clinic—the museum institution and the discipline of art history are in need of such analysis: "they are, together with photography, or

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[73] Dan Meinwald, "Color Me MoMA," *Afterimage* (Sept. 1976), p. 18.
[74] Shelley Rice: "Eggleston's Guide to the South," *The SOHO Weekly News*, (June 17, 1976), 29.

perhaps more precisely the repression and selective use of photography, the preconditions of the discourse we call modern art."[75] Modernism's history, wrote Rosalind Krauss, is the constitution of the work of art as a representation of its own space of exhibition. "Thus it is now fascinating to watch historians of photography assimilating their medium to the logic of that history." Thus photographs that function in the aesthetic domain are representations of the plane of exhibition, the surface of the museum, the capacity of the gallery to constitute the objects it selects for inclusion as art.[76] The fissure between photography in the service of some practical end and aesthetic photography is well-illustrated in the images made by Timothy O'Sullivan in service of the U.S. Geological survey in the 1860s and 1860s which were, as Robin Kelsey has observed, implicitly acknowledged as the harbinger of Modernism when Beaumont Newhall brought survey photography to the Museum of Modern Art at the urging of Ansel Adams.[77] MoMA's appropriation of O'Sullivan's work demonstrates that a photograph produced under one set of ideological circumstances can be transplanted, quite without the photographer's knowledge or sanction, into an entirely different and previously irrelevant theoretical discourse. As Krauss wondered, was the injection of flatness, graphic design, ambiguity, sublimity, and transcendence into O'Sullivan's work the photographer's wish to present flatness, graphic design, ambiguity, sublimity, and transcendence perhaps a retrospective construction by Newhall designed to secure the photographs' status as art?

Supported financially by his wife and well aware of the Modernist imperative, Eggleston was greatly distanced in time and mindset from O'Sullivan, and for that matter, Walker Evans, both of whom had been commissioned at some point by the federal

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[75] Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *October*, Vol. 13. (Summer, 1980), 41-57

[76] Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal*, Vol. 42. (Winter, 1982), 311-319.

[77] Robin Kelsey, "Viewing the Archive: Timothy O'Sullivan's Photographs for the Wheeler Survey, 1871-74," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, (Dec., 2003), 702-723.

government for documentary purposes. Such an occupational impetus may have engendered O'Sullivan's preference for a graphic style that Kelsey has described as more akin to the topographic sketch than the conventional landscape. The qualities that distinguish O'Sullivan's *Snow Peaks,* for example, correspond to the graphic conventions sought by survey specialists: economy and the spare presentation of visual information, Kelsey notes. Nonetheless, the questions raised by Kelsey and Krauss with regard to the reception of O'Sullivan's imagery provide a helpful illustration of what was at stake in making photography "artistic" and, as such, Modern.

In 1967, nine years before Eggleston's landmark show, Szarkwoski was the catalyst for another "watershed moment" in the evolution of contemporary photography. That year, Szarkowski organized an exhibition titled, "New Documents," which featured almost one hundred prints by Friedlander, Winogrand, and Arbus, who were at that time still relatively unknown. The 1967 show made their careers, writes A.D. Coleman, rendering them "house brands" at the museum, to be associated with one another in perpetuity. The Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art had established itself by 1967 as one of the few departments in any art museum in the world, and it was certainly the most powerful.[78] Szarkowski offered a theory of photography and methodology for its interpretation in the 1964 book, *The Photographer's Eye,* and the book became one of the fundamental college-level

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[78] While MoMA's department of photography was seminal, other departments had been established, such as one at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, It was, furthermore, at this time that colleges and universities were adding photography to the fine arts curriculum en masse. By 1970, the majority of universities offered at least undergraduate instruction in the art of photography. Between 1964 and 1970, the number of colleges and universities that offered at least one course in photography increased from 268 and 440. (John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows,* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1975).

teaching texts in the rapidly expanding pedagogy of photography.[79] Christopher Phillips has

pointed out that a crucial feature of MoMA's critical apparatus, sustained by Szarkowski, was

the projection of the critical concerns of one's own day reflected onto a wide range of

photographs of the past that were not originally intended as art.[80] Under the directorship of

Beaumont Newhall, who helped create the department in 1940, and was replaced by Edward

Steichen in 1947, exhibition photographs were often reprinted, carefully matted, framed, and

placed behind glass, hung at eye level, thereby given the same status as other prints or

drawings.[81] Photography was made the object of expert aesthetic judgment. From 1947 to

1962, the time in which Edward Steichen was director, the slippage of the photographer

from the status of autonomous artist to that of the illustrator of another's ideas was a

constant theme, and the typical gallery installation resembled an oversized magazine layout.[82]

According to Phillips, Steichen organized large survey exhibitions in the early fifties, which

treated diverse special topics like news photography, color photography, and abstractions in

photography, exhibitions, which never raised the question of the artistic status of any branch

of photography but demonstrated that all photography could be channeled into the currents

of the mass media.[83]

When Szarkowski took over as director in 1962, he attempted to eliminate the

tension between the photograph as a mere document versus the photograph as work of art,

wrought from the individual, exceptional vision of the photographer-as-artist. In his 1978

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[79] A.D. Coleman, "Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand at Century's End," *The Social Scene: The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation Photography Collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles*, (Los Angles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 31.
[80] Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October*, (Fall, 1983, Vol. 22), 23.

[82] Phillips,23.
[83] Ibid, 24.

book, *Mirrors and Windows*, Szarkowski cites Steichen's 1955 *Family of Man* exhibition as being "perhaps the last and greatest achievement of the group journalism concept of photography, in which the personal intentions of the photographer are subservient to a larger, overriding concept." *Family of Man* was, in this way, out of step with what Szarkowski had every interest in calling the "major thrust of the new photography of the fifties," supposedly manifest in Robert Frank's *The Americans*, and *Aperture*. Founded by Minor White, *Aperture* championed the American tradition defined by Adams, Stieglitz, and Weston, the love of a perfect print, sensitivity to the "mystical content of the natural landscape," and belief in the existence of a universal formal language. Above all, the tendency in *Aperture* that Szarkowski sought to first highlight and then cultivate was its "minimal interest in man as a social animal," quite apart from Steichen's intentions. In separating artistic photography, or what Szarkowski calls "serious photography," from the magazine and documentary tradition, the photographer must have the ability "to draw," according to Szarkowski, a skill demonstrated by someone like Robert Frank. An emphasis on the capacity to sketch renders that act of taking pictures something that requires mastery—like drawing, not just anyone can do it. Frank's *The Americans,* wrote Szarkowski, was based on "social intelligence, quick eyes, and a radical understanding of the potentials of the small camera, which depended on good drawing and elegant tonal description."[84] Evidently, Eggleston embodied this seriousness in his love of the perfect (dye transfer) print, his apparent belief in a universal, formal language.

After taking over in 1962, Szarkowski swiftly reversed much of Steichen's social documentary program. Displays were shrunk from mural size and lined up uniformly with standard white mattes, wooden frames, and covered glass reminiscent of Newhall's time. Phillips writes, "it gradually became apparent that Szarkowski, trained as an art historian,

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[84]John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1975), 17

held no affection for Steichen's casting of photography in the role of social instrument and universal language," but represented "an aestheticizing reaction against Steichen's identification of photography with mass media."[85] Indeed, Szarkowski sought to rescue artistic photography from conflation with its more everyday uses. Phillips lays out a three-pronged account of Szarkowski's strategy for establishing an aesthetic realm for photography: the introduction of a formalist vocabulary to comprehend the visual structure of any one photograph, the isolation of a modernist visual poetics inherent to the photographic image, and the routing of photography's tradition away from high modernism and toward sources formerly seen as peripheral to art photography."[86] At that point, Szarkowski had assumed what Phillips has called the "judgment seat of photography."[87] True to the legacy of Beaumont Newhall, Szarkowski's curatorial decision was to display Eggleston's photographs in uniform rows, glazed, in white mattes, at eye level.

Returning to the *Guide,* which purposefully evokes a journey to the South through its image titles and presentation, the photographs display attentiveness to the formal vocabulary pushed by Szarkowski's theoretical stance. Thus, while Eggleston's photographs from the 1976 exhibition may at first appear similar to the "unwanted byproducts of careless snapshooting," closer inspection reveals careful attention to form, situating Eggleston within a group of color photographers including Shore, Babis, and Meyerowitz, whose work in the 1970s was, in the words of Sally Eauclaire, "as similar to snapshots as Abstract Expressionist paintings are to oil spills."[88] The photograph *Memphis,*[89] for example, demonstrates the careful rationing of contrasting values, simple and complex textures, complementary shapes,

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[85] Phillips, 37
[86] Ibid, 30
[87] Ibid, 37
[88] Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography.* (New York: Abbeville, 1981),24.
[89] There are several photographs in the *Guide* titled *Memphis.* This one appears on page 78.

and intense colors (Fig. 16).[90] This image is one of about four in the *Guide* that shows a somewhat haphazard quality derived from an apparent lack of attention to the centripetal composition common to other *Guide* images. Indeed, they seem to have no identifiable starting point by which we might begin to negotiate them formally (Fig. 19). At first glance, these images are not satisfying and do not seem to discover the tension between disparate visual phenomena "so exact it is peace," in the words of photographer Robert Adams.[91]

Fig. 19, *Sumner, Mississippi*, from *Guide*

Memphis appears to have been made on an early summer evening; it shows a Weber-style grill someone just fired up outside the garage of what must be, given the other pictures in the *Guide*, a middle-class suburban home. The home is not visible in the picture but implied by the tire of a parked black car reflecting the waning light and a child's green bicycle snuggled next to it, evoking the father-child relationship of the nuclear family. The scene is

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[90] Ibid, 9.

[91] On page 7 of his introductory essay for the *Guide*, Szarkowski invokes the American photographer Robert Adams in order to explain the strategy for achieving formal success in photography: "The American photographer Robert Adams has written about this process of prowling, and its purpose: 'Over and over again the photographer walks a few steps and peers, rather comically, into the camera; to the exasperation of family and friends, he inventories what seems an endless number of angles; he explains, if asked, that he is trying for effective composition, but hesitates to define it. What he means is that a photographer wants form, an unarguably right relationship of shapes, a visual stability in which all components are equally important. The photographer hopes, in brief, to discover a tension so exact it is peace."

dominated formally, however, by the bright orange flame from the Weber grill. The frame is divided into zones of dark and light, neutral and saturated hues: the reflecting metallic surface of the car balanced by the almost supernatural-looking square of sunlight grounding the bottom of the frame is countered by the orange flames shooting from the grill. The brightness of the sunlight, metal, and fire is balanced by the neutral swath of gray pavement at the top and the dark figure to the right. While this image could have been taken anywhere in the United States, the title stresses that Eggleston is here chronicling the South, Memphis in particular.

Another photographer working in the 1970s was similarly accused by at least one critic of making banal, boring, and bland color photographs—Stephen Shore. According to Eauclaire, by the end of the decade, Shore, a New York native "achieved work so assured that it was obvious he knew what he wanted and how to attain it."[92] Shore had color photography down to such a rhythm, Eauclaire asserts, that he took a hiatus from making pictures in the early 1980s to invent new aesthetic challenges for himself. Like Eggleston, Shore received little photographic training, but the little he had was critical: in 1970 he attended a ten-day workshop with Minor White at the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville Connecticut.[93] Just a few months after Eggleston's 1976 show wrapped up, MoMA gave Shore his own one-man venue from October 8, 1976 to January 4, 1977.[94] Gene Thornton, the *New York Times* critic who would one month later sum up the year in photography shows by calling Eggleston's the "most hated of the year," got around to reviewing the Shore

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[92] Sally Eauclaire, *American Indepdendents: Eighteen Color Photographers*, (New York: Abbeville, 1984), 181.
[93] Ibid, 244.
[94] Museum of Modern Art website, Exhibition History, 1970-1979: http://www.moma.org/research/archives/exhibhistory.html#1970

exhibition about one month after it opened.[95] In the wake of the Eggleston show that summer, Thornton seemed unphased by the so-called "drabness" of Shore's images. Still, he wondered, almost rhetorically, why Shore would have bothered to photograph the lovely city of Charleston, South Carolina, for example, if he only intended to make images of "filling stations and the backsides of nondescript commercial buildings" (Fig. 20).

Fig. 20, *Cumberland Street, Charleston, South Carolina*, 1975, Stephen Shore

Perhaps more oddly, Thornton mused, the images appear to have been made without any overt criticism of the homogenous shopping malls, parking lots, and other symbols of the "cultural decay" (his words) they depict. Even Shore's image of an "immobilized mobile home" juxtaposed with the ruins of an old Southern mansion "does not seem to be making the kind of outraged statement about the decay of a culture and its values that so many

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[95] Gene Thornton, "Formalists Who Flirt with Banality," *New York Times*, (November 14, 1976).

photographers have made with this kind of contrast."[96] Finally Thornton leaves off his speculating and admits that he actually *does* know why a photographer would make such pictures— obsession with form. Thornton is aggravated by the fact that Shore, like Eggleston, ignores the genteel history book South in favor of showing kitschy and banal images. Such images are in turn read by MoMA in formal terms.

Shore's *California 177, Desert Center, California, December 8, 1976* (Fig. 21) shows a two-lane interstate intersecting with a one-way, rural road in the middle of the desert. In the distance is a small farm, and well beyond that, a mountain range.

Fig. 21, *California 177, Desert Center, California*, December 8, 1976

An excess of road signs—stop, do not enter, no right turn, one way—form the perimeter around the intersection in the foreground, rendering it an interstitial zone, devoid of the kinetic activity—the traffic—that provides a context and logic for these signs. In such settings, empty of cars and human activity, road signs can become either icons of American

[96] Ibid.

independence and freedom or uncanny registers of isolation in the modern world. In Shore's image, the signs appear shiftless and confused.

Atlanta, a picture from Eggleston's *The Democratic Forest*, (Fig. 22) was made during the 1980s and shows a blue sedan cruising up an incline into what is presumably a business district of Atlanta that includes a Sheraton hotel, an AT&T building, and several commercial and housing developments.

Fig. 22, *Atlanta*, William Eggleston, from *The Democratic Forest*

As in Shore's picture, *Atlanta* depicts a junction between roads. Two split off from the route the car is following, and by the time Eggleston snapped the picture, the driver had decisively chosen this urban road and was gliding by the alternatives: a route past an abandoned tire, an empty wooden sign frame and two wooden signposts (signs missing), with brown grass sprouting through cracks in the pavement; and a route past orange and white striped barrels, a hazard sign, piles of dirt, and construction debris. Eschewing both of these roads, the blue

car motors assuredly into the city, optimistic about its destination and buoyed by the cloudless blue sky. There is none of the uncertainty or alienation of Shore's California desert.

The Eggleston pictures in the 1976 exhibition and book, with their flat planes, color contrasts, and visual economy appealed to Szarkowski because of their deference to a formalist vocabulary. Their vulgar subject was a match for the vulgar medium of color film. Like Eggleston, Shore also photographed so-called banal, bland settings and turned the camera away from obvious sources of visual gratification. The homogenization of the landscape was regarded with neutrality through these impassive lenses, as Thornton observed, but through Shore's there was also with a distinct cast of alienation. The far-flung locales of his images, ranging from California to Maine to Florida and back to New Jersey, made them less conducive to presentation in a cogent *Guide*. Like Shore, Eggleston also turned the camera on shopping malls, but with the intent of finding beauty there.[97] Because of the Southern origin of the photographs and their often tropic imagery, the images in *William Eggleston's Guide* were inflected by proxy with the cultural resonance of Walker Evans's Depression-era imagery.

Modernism and Opportunism: The Role of Corporate Sponsorship

Eggleston's photographs may have possessed a disarming undercurrent of appeal to a mass audience, but the 1976 show would not have happened were it not for the corporate sponsorship of Vivitar. The kinship between Eggleston's photographs and the snapshot was doubtless attractive to Vivitar. For one thing, like the road trip, the travelogue, and the

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[97] Rosa Eggleston told me in a February 17, 2007 phone conversation that when Eggleston first began photographing, he became discouraged by his shopping mall-saturated surroundings with little to photograph. A close friend of the family advised him to make beautiful photographs of shopping malls. An example is the photograph *Memphis* from the 1965-1974 *Los Alamos* series.

Michelin guide, the snapshot was itself by 1976 familiar and comforting to a public using its own Super 8 and Kodak cameras to make vacation slides and home movies. Furthermore, the museum, its influence waning in an age of massing culture industry was in dire need of a corporate sponsor. And who better to sponsor the exhibition than a company seeking to promote itself as Kodak's latest and greatest rival, empowering the consumer to make snapshots like Eggleston's. Vivitar was the registered trademark of the Santa Monica-based company Ponder & Best, which had set up office on Chubb Avenue in New Jersey in the summer of 1975, seven months prior to the opening of the Eggleston show.[98] The company signed a ten-year lease for 24,000 square feet for ten years at 305 Chubb Avenue, named for the Chubb Insurance Company. It was not long after—around December 1976— that Caldecot Chubb, son of the insurance mogul, began acting as Eggleston's agent:[99] "Cottie was Dad's agent in the 70s and started working with him again in the 1990s," said Eggleston's son Winston.[100] After he transitioned into making Hollywood movies in the 1980s, Chubb let Eggleston photograph the sets of movies he directed, like *Eve's Bayou.* Chubb is also the Executive Director of the Eggleston Artistic Trust.

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[98] "News of the Realty Trade: Met sells Old Opera House," *New York Times*, August 31, 1975, p. 191.

[99] From a December 17, 1976 letter from Harry Lunn to Leo Castelli Graphics, Eggleston's dealer: "I am pleased to introduce by this letter Caldecot Chubb, who will serve as William Eggleston's representative for all arrangements regarding the exhibition and distribution of Eggleston's photographs in commercial art galleries, as well as coordinate requests for reproduction of Eggleston's work" in the press, journals, and books. "The greatly increased interest in Eggleston's work over the last few years, especially since the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art earlier this year has resulted in numerous requests for exhibitions, press material, et al, and it is fortunate that Chubb is able to take responsibility for the response to this interest. Chubb is a photographer himself and has considerable familiarity with Eggleston's work." Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

[100] Personal interview with Winston Eggleston, February 15, 2007.

In a March 4, 1976 letter to Vivitar president, Jay Katz, Szarkowski expressed effusive gratitude for Vivitar's financial contribution:

> I do hope that you will find time when you are next in New York for lunch together where we might pursue further your ideas about ways in which Vivitar Corporation could continue to broaden its services to the photographic community…This is an enormously fertile idea which I am convinced could be most rewarding to photography and to Vivitar.[101]

In November, 1976, Vivitar had kicked off a $1 million ad campaign featuring a salesman comparing the new Vivitar pocket camera with a similar Kodak camera, designed to persuade the audience to ditch the old standby for a new brand. The drive for a mass TV audience was part of a campaign "to make the Vivitar brand a dominant factor in photography, worldwide," Mr. Katz was quoted as saying in the November 15, 1976 edition of *Business Week*.[102]

1976 was a good year for Vivitar—sales for the pocket camera hit $12 million, emboldening the company to shell out $1 million for holiday ads.[103] Looking like snapshots, those photographs by the somewhat unknown Eggleston had no doubt served as a good advertisement for the Vivitar 600 pocket camera. Hence the view of one journalist who wrote that Eggleston, "like Peter Frampton, is a created star, brought onstage to satisfy the

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[101] March 4, 1976 correspondence between Museum of Modern Art Director of Photography John Szarkowski and Jay Katz, Vivitar president, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives.
[102] "A Mass Image for the Vivitar Brand," *Business Week*, November 15, 1976
[103] Ponder & Best officially adopted the name Vivitar in 1978, but the Vivitar name had been launched on a variety of replacement and accessory lenses in 1965. By November, 1975, the brand was on some 35 different product lines, including zoom lenses, cameras, dark room equipment, and 52 percent of all electronic flash units sold in the United States.

specific needs of others, both aesthetic and financial." [104] While they wouldn't officially

adopt the company name Vivitar until 1978, their staff made it perfectly clear to Szarkowski

that they wanted to be referred to as Vivitar, not Ponder & Best in all press related to the

exhibition.

But while Ponder & Best was transforming itself into the new, improved million-

dollar Vivitar Inc., times were tough for MoMA—the museum was in serious debt. The

annual report for the fiscal year 1973-1974 lamented the financial difficulties that cultural

institutions faced in the "current unfavorable economic environment." For MoMA, the goal

to narrow the gap between expenditures and income had remained elusive: "For the fiscal

year ended June 30, 1974, the Museum incurred an excess of expenditures over receipts in

the amount of $1,477, 053, which is $380,411 above the previous year's deficit." The

treasurer's report concludes with a gloomy fiscal forecast, and urges the appeal to those with

fatter wallets for help:

> …it is essential that the Museum obtain substantial additional funding
>
> from individuals, corporations, and governmental sources for the
>
> support of its activities. Without such further support, a curtailment of
>
> the services rendered to the public may become inevitable at some
>
> point in the future.[105]

The 10,000 awarded from the National Endowment for the Arts on July 1, 1974 had

been $7,500 short of the amount that MoMA requested. Their application stated that

Eggleston "is the most talented and accomplished" of the younger photographers bringing a

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[104] Owen Edwards, "William Eggleston's New Clothes" *Village Voice*, December 12, 1977, 87.

[105] Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1973-74, Museum of Modern Art. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives. One of Eggleston's photographs featured in the exhibition, *(untitled) Memphis*, was used as the cover image.

"new spirit to color photography." Money, or the lack of it, had until now prevented color photography from making its debut as an art form due to the high cost of good color reproduction. "The proper exhibition and publication of Eggleston's work has already been considerably delayed because of the lack of adequate subsidy," the application stated. While the Museum had obtained "a significant pledge of private support for this project, and has earmarked funds and staff time from its own resources," additional assistance was required to make the project a reality.

Conclusion

Szarkowski has said that he admired Eggleston's photographs for several years prior to 1976, when the museum was able to afford both the exhibition and publication in *William Eggleston's Guide* (Szarkowski did not want to do the exhibition without the book). With the raw material of hundreds of color snapshots at his disposal and his curatorial decisions unimpeded by the gentle, laconic Eggleston, Szarkowski seized the opportunity to impress upon Eggleston's oeuvre a demonstration of the five tenets of photography he had enumerated in his 1966 book, *The Photographer's Eye*. *William Eggleston's Guide* had the very same pedagogical bent as the earlier book— to teach and direct—to *guide*, as it were— Szarkowski's peers, successors, students of photography, and photographers themselves. Not only this, but *William Eggleston's Guide* also guided viewers' ideas about the political and social issues of the New South.

The five issues Szarwkoski places before the photographer in the 1966 book are: "the thing itself," "the detail," "the frame," "time," and "vantage point." Szarkowski carefully chose these issues for their respective contributions to a critical perspective that would establish photography as a "unique" art form. By photographing strip malls, dirty

puddles, suburban houses, and cemeteries, Eggleston had evidently learned to deal with the actual—with "the thing itself"— and had recognized that the world itself is "the most inventive artist of all."[106] Eggleston, Szarkowski tells us through the *Guide* (in verbal and pictorial description), has mastered the act of editing nature, of snatching moments of "art" that lurk behind quotidian existence—ugly subjects can be made beautiful through the formal operation. Szarkowski stresses, however, in both *The Photographer's Eye* and the *Guide*, that pictures are very different from reality itself. As a result, any effort to link Eggleston's photographs *literally* with statements about the Old South, racial inequality, and civil rights struggles would be amateurish and crude. Thus, in keeping with his focus on "the detail," Szarkowski chose photographs for the *Guide* and exhibition that refused the logic of a narrative, but instead proffered clues to and fragments of a greater story. This clue-dropping aesthetic, cultivated by Szarkowski's curatorial selection, has contributed to what some observers have characterized as the eerie, uncanny, crime scene effect of Eggleston's pictures. **(Figs)** This aesthetic is shared, to some degree, by David Lynch, the director of bizarre, surrealist, nightmarish films such as *Blue* Velvet and *Eraserhead*, and the television series *Twin Peaks*. Lynch is friend of Eggleston's and claims to have been influenced by his photographs.[107] With regard to the issue of "frame," Szarwkowski stresses in *The Photographer's Eye*, the skill of the photographer derives from his or her gift of intuitive, almost mystical selection: "The central act of photography, the act of choosing and eliminating, forces a concentration on the picture edge—the line that separates in from out—and on the shapes that are created by it."[108] In choosing images for the *Guide* and

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[106] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 4
[107] Conversations with Winston and William Eggleston, February, 15, 2007 and April 15, 2007.
[108] Ibid.

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exhibition that intentionally crop objects awkwardly or place them off-center, such as *Memphis* (Fig 16), Szarkowski demonstrates that proper framing is not so simple as placing an object in the center, although, when executed by the right photographer, the simple, snapshot-style centered composition can likewise be aesthetically sound.

Most importantly of all, Szarkowski made "time" one of the issues of concern for the photographer, concluding firmly that each photograph can only ever describe a discrete parcel of time, which is always the present. A photograph does not, therefore, allude to historical circumstances or with "what was happening" at the time the picture was taken. Instead, it has to do with the pleasure and beauty afforded by the act of fragmenting time. Whatever cultural and social issues the photograph may connote to the viewer, these are not of concern to the photographer.

> Uniquely in the history of pictures, a photograph describes only
>
> that period of time in which it was made. Photography alludes to
>
> the past and future only in so far as they exist in the present, the
>
> past through its surviving relics, the future through prophecy
>
> visible in the present.[109]

Photographers are, and continue to be, fascinated by the act of "immobilizing thin slices of time," which, once made into pictures which are about "seeing the momentary patterning of lines and shapes that had been previously concealed" by virtue of their movement: "The result is not a story but a picture," writes Szarkowski.

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[109] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 5.

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