Images of the Urban Condition: analysis of the construction of a photograph

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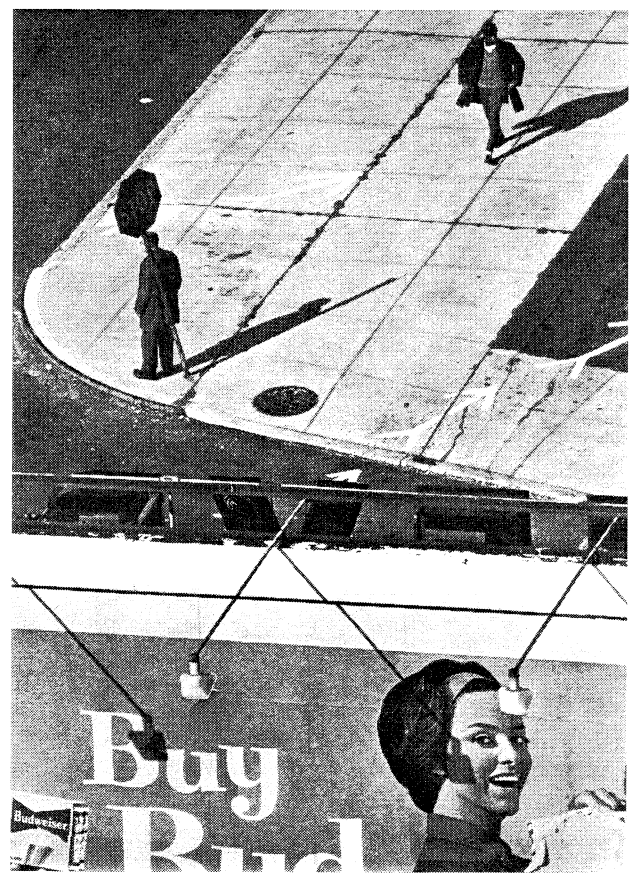
Photographic images are increasingly employed to depict and envision the North American city. Architecture, urban design, advertising and journalism rely heavily on the photograph for communication. Cultural theorists write about the current "ecstasy of communication,"[1] but designers of the physical environment rarely possess language necessary to critically analyze the photographs they confront and produce. Inspiration for this paper was found in A. Nelessen Associates' 1999 Milwaukee Downtown Plan requisitioned by the Milwaukee City Planning Commission. Like a number of recent plans for North American cities, this plan employed a planning technique or "Public Visioning Process" that relied on an image-based "Visual Preference Survey™."[2] The "VPS"™ presented community members with carefully cropped photographs of local, national and international urban conditions, and simulated images that they viewed and rated as "appropriate and acceptable or inappropriate and unacceptable" for Downtown Milwaukee.[3] "The planning consultant described the VPS™ process as allowing "members of a community to develop a consensus vision as to what they would like their community to look and feel like in the future."[4] In a subsequent "Visual Translation Workshop... groups of concerned citizens locate the appropriate sites for application of the positive VPS™ images."[5] Although provided with results of a brief questionnaire and Milwaukee planning data, workshop participants were not responsible for understanding the complexities of internal building functions or broader socio-economic, racial, cultural or political conditions behind the surface of the photographs. A "Professional Synthesis" merely "produced a 'concept' plan that was a compendium of the workshop results."[6] Do normative planning and urban design practices, following the lead of Disney and Las Vegas, now rely on the unmediated overlay of imported photographic imagery to design urban space? This question could be the basis for the paper, but there is evidence enough to answer in the affirmative. Rather than broadly discuss the cultural role of images, this paper attempts to provide environmental designers with a theoretical basis for critically looking at and making photographic images.

To this end, the paper analyzes a complex photograph of an urban street corner.



Working outward from André Kertész' photograph, Buy, a descriptive and visual theory based analysis cuts through the image on many levels. Susan Sontag's essay in Against Interpretation called for criticism to "show what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means."[7] This paper avoids interpretation by focusing on how the photograph is constructed, how tension between the reality and formality of the image is created and how content and meaning is produced. The relation of verbal text and photograph and the constitution of the subject within representation, and as embodied within structures of advertising and commodity aesthetics are briefly discussed. As a formally complex construction of an urban condition, the Kertész photograph provides rich material for analysis. The concepts elucidated are then discussed in relation to photographs from the Milwaukee Visual Preference Survey™.

Photograph As Construct

At first glance, there is an apparent lack of "things" in the Kertész photograph. There are no buildings, automobiles or vegetation, and two lone male pedestrians provide the only active occupancy within the banal urban scene. The presentation of the visual image is straightforward and in sharp focus. Why was this photograph taken? What is one intended to see? The photograph is evidence of an event that seems certain to have occurred. According to André Bazin in The Ontology of the Photographic Image, "The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making."[8] However, the common belief in the denotative function of the photograph in relation to the photographic real is called into question by the Kertész photograph. Elaborating on this view in Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes proposed that photography is fused with its referent and that the essential of photography is: "that has been." The presentation of a scene suggests that this particular figure has significance.[9] However, what is being represented in the Kertész photograph? The "real" scene is not apparently significant. The street corner location is not revealed to the viewer and a lack of street signs reinforces an idea of urban anonymity. Time is also of little importance. The men's clothing, the woman's hairstyle and the billboard typeface provide clues, but indicators such as automobiles are not included to help the viewer locate the scene in time. This lack of concern with the specifics of time and place, usually structured to reinforce the authenticity of the event, is significant to the photograph's construction. Closer analysis yields a complex relation of formal and figurative elements within the photographic image. Barthes' idea of the seamless bind between the photograph of the referent and the referent itself is not so simple, for we must reconstruct the referent from the evidence given. The real event, through the photographer's skillful use of formal structuring, projects a particular range of readings and conceptual content. Structuring organizes how the photograph is seen, and assembles the content of the image through the selection of subject and the mode of photographing.[10]

Although the Milwaukee VPS™ photographs appear to depict an unmediated "this is," they too are carefully constructed to convey "this means." Unlike the Kertész photograph, their formal construction is not meant to disrupt the authenticity of the referent. However, the specific locations of the VPS™ views are obscured to focus the viewer on the abstract qualities of the places depicted. By cutting the images loose from location, the viewer may more readily imagine transferal of those idealized qualities to any location within Milwaukee. However, the VPS™ planners did not take the act of translation into consideration. A photograph is made twice overófirst configured by the photographer, and then more significantly reconfigured by the viewer. Neither of these acts of translation are objective. While the proponents of the VPS™ claim that the photographs they employ are value-free, a majority of the two hundred and forty images shown in the survey display three dominant qualities: wealth, leisure and nostalgia.

+6 Pedestrian realm with outdoor cafe

Respondents are assumed to concentrate on the spatial and formal aspects of the (non)places depicted, but in the fore and background of one photograph after another are signifiers of prosperity; white strollers in athletic clothing amble along brick streets lined with fashionable shops, cafés and mock, turn-of-the-century gas lamps. The viewer analogizes the reality of the photograph with personal experiences of places and events. For instance, if the viewer had frequented the café depicted in the anonymous photograph of Boston, personal experiences in that location would color her perception and the subsequent VPS™ rating.

Thus, "this is" is subject to the translation of the viewer. Just as the viewer searches the seemingly banal Kertész photograph for clues of space and time, so the VPS™ participants wrestle with the banal, made-placeless survey photographsócasting votes for those that exhibit attractive trappings of contemporary consumer culture. If the photographs presented are value-free, how

+4.7 This commercial sidewalks accommodate cafés, outdoor displays and high volumes of pedestrians

+7 This type of walk is highly desired at the water's edge

could anyone possibly place a value from ten to negative ten upon them?

Tension Between the Reality and Formality of the Photograph

Within the Kertész photograph, the self-conscious presentation of the event erodes the event's reality. The viewer cannot be certain that the photograph was not constructed as a montage, with the billboard image simply layered over the street scene. Formality opens a space between the pervasive "presence" of the real in the photograph and the photograph itself.[11] This "space of difference" is the space where meaning occurs. Rosalind Krauss discussed spacing in this way: "We are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification."[12] The photograph is not understood in terms of the signified but in terms of the process of signification. The photographís formal structure does not allow the viewer to simply refer to the photographic real, for "signification arises not by reference to a given signified but through the play of signifiers. The photograph actively refuses closure or unproblematic participation in the narrative of which it is a part and instead resists such assumptions, at once participating in, and yet standing at a distance to, the systems of representation of which it is a part."[13] The viewer is a spectator of the Kertész photograph, the street scene, the billboard and the woman within the advertisement itself. Which of these roles is the intended role and where should the viewer be positioned? The viewer is dislocated and unable to connect with the real. Specific instances within the formal structure of the photograph open space between the "presence" of the real and the billboard photograph "itself", thus reinforcing the idea of the two-dimensional image within the photograph. A photograph of a case of Budweiser beer, originally located in the lower corner of the billboard, has been torn off the billboard surface. The ripped condition of the billboard emphasizes the reproduced, two-dimensional paper billboard surface. This literal removal from the reproduced image reminds the viewer that the photographed photographic image is removed another step from the "real" through a reproduced image.

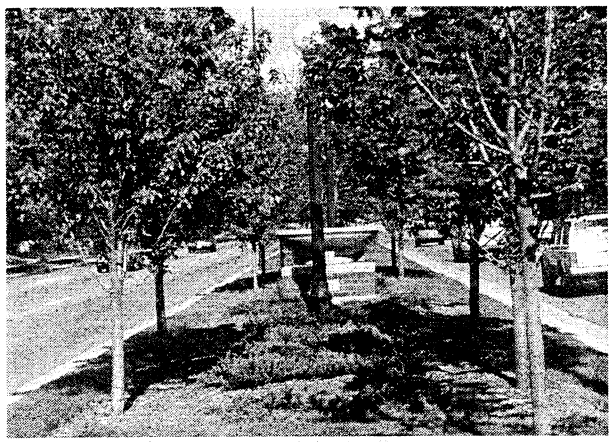
The VPS™ photographs, while posing as ordinary snaps, present an eroded reality using different means. The VPS™ photographs consistently establish the picture plane and draw the viewer into the photographic space. Depth perception is reinforced through the construction of perspectival views, as in the regularly spaced receding lampposts of the waterfront image.

Although the authenticity of the image is not undermined, another form of dislocation occurs. The Kertész photograph dislocates the viewer by formal abstraction, while the VPS™ photograph dislocates by homogenization. The viewer is asked to project one city onto another, irrespective of specific production or evolution of place. A truckload of bricks and a handful of ubiquitous shops will make any city as good as another. The individual VPS™ photographs do not possess the complex formal structure of the Kertész Buy image, but as a group they carry a concealed structure of dominant content that suppresses the critical state that confronts the Kertész photograph viewer.

Framing or Cropping

Because "manipulation is the essence of photography, [and] photography would not exist without it,"[14] an analysis of formal manipulations is necessary. Cropping is skillfully employed in the handling of the underlying ground of the Kertész photograph. The continuous dark pavement surface provides the background against which the strong curved sidewalk form is read, and a certain phenomenal transparency exists in the reemergence of the dark surface inside the sidewalk boundaries. Five white arrows point to this area. This small triangular shape, although identified with the street in tone, assumes its own critical identity, opening the question of ground to multiple readings. The cropping of this apparently larger space by the edge of the picture plane, the arrows insistently pointing out of the picture plane and the shape of this figure pointing back to the center of the photograph all work to frustrate the viewer from knowing what the arrows target beyond. The world that has not been included is essential to the construction of the photograph. Another instance of cropping may be seen in the text "Buy Bud." Although many internal relationships exist within the billboard, the power of the written word, the elaborate typeface and light tone of the text immediately draw the viewer to the phrase. The cropping of the photograph cuts the word "Bud" in half horizontally, but enough remains to allow the viewer to complete the phrase. This cutting attracts the eye to the phrase. Because neither the entire billboard nor advertising text has been shown, the advertising intention is denied. Unlike advertising's complicity with the Symbolic order, this photograph stands against that order and interferes with the photographic given.[15] The cropping and framing has become a critical act. Although cropping is inherent in the construction of all photographs, the carefully framed VPS™ street scenes appear unmediated. The viewer is not made aware of the photographer's artifice, and we are not compelled to ques-

tion what lies outside the frame. In the Boulevard photograph, extreme cropping conceals the reality of the six-lane arterial that doesn't support the intended meaning of the image.



Viewpoint

Along with cropping, the photographer's use of point-of-view is another means of locating the viewer. Victor Burgin has noted that, "It is the position of the point-of-view, occupied in fact by the camera, which is bestowed upon the spectator...through the agency of the frame, the world is organized into a coherence which it actually lacks, into a parade of tableaux, a succession of decisive moments."[16] The moment captured by the Kertész photograph, if one had been "there" at the time, would not have seemed significant. However, Kertész formally structured a compelling moment and forced the viewer to "see" reality in an unfamiliar way.[17] The view-from-above endows the photographer/viewer with a sense of disconnection from the photographic subject. The viewer is not accommodated in the shifting space and uneasy tension of the photograph. Conversely, we can imagine ourselves comfortable and in control within the VPS™ photographs, with the photographer/viewer centrally positioned within the frame.

The viewer is not drawn to unknowable places beyond the frame, but satiated within the image. This normative street level viewpoint reinforces our routine perceptions of the city. Reacting to the traditional eye-level perspectival views of most western art, Alexander Rodchenko believed that new photographic formal structures could resist bourgeois culture. He claimed that "We do not see what we look at. We do not see the wonderful perspective foreshortening and inclines of the objects. We, who have learned to see what we are used to seeing and what is indoctrinated into us, should reveal the world. We should revolutionize our visual perception."[18] Instead, viewpoint and cropping is used in each VPS™ photograph to establish a tableauxóa city of isolated, picturesque moments that cut out the inevitable contrasts that occur in every city. As a group, the photographs serve an unspoken agenda of creating a seamless, themed and nostalgic urban realm free of unsightly social and economic problems. "When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut out. The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents."[19]

Production of Content and Meaning

Victor Burgin has suggested that "content, too, may be produced as deliberately as one may plan the formal composition of the photograph."[20] This attitude runs counter to the bourgeois convention that images donít mean. Both Theodor Adorno and Roland Barthes discussed the traditional rejection of the cognitive, but perhaps the question is: To what degree of precision do images mean? Rudolf Arnheim, in his essay "The Images of Pictures and Words," claims that pictures "do not offer explicit formulations of intellectual concepts, which are the prerogatives of language."[21] Arnheim argues that we are affected by pictures, but do not know what they mean. Thus, images are poor conceptual communicators. However, the Kertész photograph shows that an image can arouse more than mere emotions. The formal composition of the Kertész photograph, juxtaposing an appropriated fragment of a Budweiser billboard and a barren street corner, produces a "third effect." The billboard is an alternately flat and quasi-spatial picture plane. The photographic representation of the woman and the six packs of beer, represented three dimensionally, are dislocated within the flat picture plane of the billboard. Because the billboard itself cannot be located spatially in the photograph, the viewer is unable to establish the billboard as a datum to the ground plane. The spatial ambiguity between the foreground and background results in the non-spatial reading of the photograph as a diptychótwo independent picture planes related by their proximity on the page. But even this reading of two independent planes is not possible, for their independence is dependent on the represented reality of each that the formal structure undermines. Thus, they are related by more than mere proximity, although it is this juxtaposition which encourages formal comparison and the third effect. The juxtaposition of the two hun-

4.4 Harley Davidson, a corporate American success story, should be more visible in Downtown

dred and forty VPS™ images also creates an intentional third effect. The photographs were presented to survey participants in series, with each slide projected for a few seconds before the next image filled the screen. This sequential presentation established relationships between the photographs that transformed the meaning of the individual image.

Contributing to the spatial ambiguity and intentional lack of closure is the duality structured into the Kertész photograph, "the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they do not belong to the same world."[22] Barthes attributes this tension set up within the photograph to the relation of co-presence and composition. However, the duality within this image is not a matter of chance circumstances, for the photograph's "punctumóthat accident which pricks me,"[23] was intentionally constructed by the photographer. The transparency between the letters of the second billboard (attached to the back of "the" billboard) which reveals the pavement beyond, and the shallow angle of the top of the billboard suggest to the viewer that the billboard is actually part of the same scene as the street beyond and not an image simply pasted below. Unlike a horizontal line, the diagonal creates spatiality while still locking the image into the photographic plane. The importance of this effect is the dependence upon the ambiguous layering of space (or nonspace) created by the location and character of the billboard as the central focus of the photograph. The formal structure refuses unproblematic participation by the viewer in the narrative or space of the photograph. Pushed beyond the photographic real, but unable to close the meaning of the work around a signifier, the viewer is able to construct "not meaning, but a fluid symbolism of questions."[24] Compare this with the unproblematic VPS™ photo, whose intention is not to raise questions, but to fulfill the preconceived expectations of the viewer.

Text and Image

A photograph is polysemicócontaining different meanings that are usually controlled by juxtaposition with a verbal text.[25] Roland Barthes discussed the function of text in relation to image as either "relay" or "anchorage." "In relay, the image and the linguistic text are in a relationship of complementarity: the linguistic message explains, develops, expands the significance of the image. The text adopts a function of anchorage when, from a multiplicity of connotations offered by the image, it selects one and thereby implicitly rejects others."[26] The VPS™ photographs use captions to anchor the desired meaning of the images, since the photographs themselves are not strong enough to control the intended meaning.

The captions shown with the VPS™ photographs in the Milwaukee Downtown Plan were not attached until after the survey. Thus, the currently anchored meaning was not necessarily the meaning understood by those judging the image "appropriateness."

The title of the Kertész photographóBuyóclues the viewer into the text "Buy" in the imageóa means of reinforcing the photographer's intentions. The inclusion of text in the image has a similar function. The word "Buy" suggests a reading of the photograph as a critique or comment on consumerism, capitalism and advertising itself. Many aspects of the photographic real and formal structures of the image reinforce this reading; the power of the billboard (sheer size emphasized by a scalar shift from the street), the persistence of the billboard (ever present by illumination), and an emphasis on shallowness. This lack of depth is apparent in the two-dimensionality of the billboard reinforced by the second billboard on the opposite side, the directional signs merely painted on the pavement surface, and the thin stop sign shadow. The world contained within the photograph is an urban void, except for the apparatus which supports text (the advertising billboard). Even the groundóblack pavement of the streetó is reduced to an apparatus that supports textual messages such as the stop sign and directional arrows. The photograph could be read as representation of the world as a support for textual messages. The image and text of the billboard itself has been opened to meaning through formal structuring as well as by textual relay.

Although the Kertész photograph possesses a title and an internal text, the pervasive influence of language would still be felt without the physical presence of writing. According to Victor Burgin, "Even the uncaptioned photograph, framed and isolated on a gallery wall, is invaded by language when it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other; what significant elements the subject recognizes ëiní the photograph are inescapably supplemented from elsewhere."[27] The idea that one brings the influence of language to the photograph assists in an understanding of the constitution of the subject within representation[28] and as embodied within structures of commodity aesthetics. What about the constitution of the subject within the billboard advertisement? Questions of subject also arise from the VPS™ photographs. "Representation is empowered to create identity."[29] We form ourselves to be like images around us, but who forms the images? Because those who represent the culture to itself have the power to create identity, the inherent power of advertising in commodity culture is obvious. Advertising influences the formation of the categories through which all communication must pass. Representations of architecture, landscape and urban space within real estate promotion and advertising have immense power to shape formal and spatial

expectations or norms. Those immersed in contemporary North American culture, especially designers of the built environment, require a language to critically receive and construct photographic images used in the production and commodification of the urban environment.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the Kertész photograph is not a single referent to reality, but an active configurational construction of the referentówith critical force. Perhaps precise meaning is not provided, but clear questions are raised. Unlike Barthes' definition of the unary photograph, which "transforms 'reality' without doubling it, without making it vacillate: no duality, no indirection, no disturbance,"[30] the Kertész photograph goes beyond "this is" to "this means." If we believe that architecture and urbanism can still mean, then we must also understand how the pervasive photographic image can transform or reinforce intended meaning. That we live in an age of image saturation is unquestionable. Photography, film, television and advertising have taught us to "see" the world, and that representation has reconstructed our understanding. We have become so accustomed to the rapid overlay and sequence of moving and still images that any image has the capacity to be overlaid with another, if only in our minds' eye, to become a third thingósignification. Thus, any photograph or sequence of photographs becomes value-loaded. Any photograph can refer to any place, any time, such that no photograph can truly represent "this is." This paper has attempted to demonstrate that the photograph cannot merely represent content "such as it is." The strength of photography lies in its ability to move the viewer beyond reception to a critical engagement with a re-representation of the world. The contemporary eye craves this kind of formal engagement, and finding none, will fall back on mere content to find meaning. The Visual Preference Survey™ is about what someone wants the city to look likeónothing else. As a tool for constructing meaning in the city, photography offers both designers and inhabitants the possibility of a shared critical engagementónot simply imagery.

NOTES

1 See Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988).

2 For additional information on the Visual Preference Survey™, see Anton Nelessen, Visions for a New American Dream: Process, Principles and an Ordinance to Plan and Design Small Communities (Chicago: American Planning Association, 1994) or A. Nelessen Associates web site at http://www.anavision.com.

3 A. Nelessen Associates, Milwaukee Downtown Plan (1999), p.18.

4 Ibid. In the case of Milwaukee, only 1,647 citizens responded to the VPS during three public meetings and on the Internet. Just 1/4 of 1% of the Milwaukee population of 628,088 residents (based on 1990 census population statistics) participated in the "design by democracy" process.

5 A. Nelessen Associates website at: http://www.anavision.com/philosophy/vision_planning/VTW.htm.

6 A. Nelessen Associates, Milwaukee Downtown Plan (1999).

7 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

8 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," What is Cinema? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.13.

9 John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin/BBC, 1972), p.1.

10 An example of this idea is the ethical questions that the formal structures of Diane Arbus' photographs force us to ask. The unselfconscious frontal pose of Arbus' "lower-class" subjects upsets conventional class sensibilities and aesthetic judgments regarding appropriate pose. One may easily anticipate the questions regarding advertising and commodification opened up by the formal structure of the Kertész photograph.

11 Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), p.106.

12 Ibid., p. 107.

13 Clive Dilnot, Carpenter Center lecture, Harvard University, 1991.

14 Victor Burgin, "Art, Commonsense and Photography," Cameraworks (London, 1980), p.1.

15 Active resistance to the symbolic order is similar, although in a much less potent form, to the work of Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence. See Jo Spence, Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography (London: Camden Press) and Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman'," Screen 24 (6), Nov-Dec 1983.

16 Victor Burgin, Photography, Fantasy, Function," Thinking Photography (London: The Macmillian Press Ltd, 1982), p.146.

17 Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bukhtin and his world (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.61. This analysis may be pushed further by Buhktin's theory of the utterance. "An utterance takes place between speakers, and it is therefore drenched in social factors. This means that the utterance is also on the border between what is said and what is not said..." Kertesz' formal structuring forces the viewer into an awareness of the dialogical exchange enacted by the image. When a photograph is understood to enact relations similar to utterance and dialogue, one is no longer able to focus merely on "communication"óthe photographic real that is presented. The internal structure of the photograph embodies and re-enacts (when the image is read) relations between the photographer, viewer and subjects.

18 Victor Burgin, Photography, Fantasy, Function, p.178. This quote was taken from the Russian photography magazine Novy Lef in 1928. Rodchenko was replying to criticism of his unusual photographic point-of-view and his concern with formality.

19 Rosalind Krauss, Steiglitz/Equivalents, quoted from Cavell.

20 Victor Burgin, Art, Commonsense and Photography, p.3.

21 Rudolf Arnheim, "The Images of Pictures and Words," Word and Image, Vol.2, no.4 (Oct-Dec 1986), p.310.

22 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p.23.

23 Ibid., p.27.

24 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Feminism

and Film Theory, Constance Penley (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 1988).

[25] Victor Burgin, Art, Commonsense and Photography, p. 5.

[26] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," Image, Music, Text (London: Fontana, 1973).

[27] Burgin, Photography, Fantasy, Function, p.192.

[28] A careful reading of the photograph finds that the two male figures are subjectóactive, self-possessed, and independent of the viewer. In compliance with the traditional Western portrayal of the female figure in art, the image of the woman in the billboard advertisement looks directly out of the frame to the viewer. She is the object of the gaze of the presumably male spectator and beer consumer. As noted by John Berger in Ways of Seeing, "Women are depicted in quite different ways from menónot because the feminine is different from the masculineóbut because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him". Employing Victor Burgin's four types of look in photography, we see that the woman's gaze satisfies "the look the actor may direct to the camera." She becomes the central focus, but not really an actor in the frame. In Orientalism Edward Said discussed woman as a category against which men define themselves. Thus there is no possibility for female specificity if woman only exists as a category. The woman represented in the billboard is solidly placed within an appropriate category created for heróshe is a construction, just as the photograph itself is a construction. An in-depth understanding of the advertising image would require further analysis. However, it is apparent that the critical photograph does have the power to question and influence change in these established categories.

[29] For a comprehensive Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of representation, see Kate Linker, "Representation and Sexuality," Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation, Brian Wallis (ed.) (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: D.R. Godine, 1984).

[30] Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 41.

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