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Caitlin Elizabeth Ryan

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The Most Refractory Medium:
*Albert Renger-Patzsch, Edward Weston, László Moholy-Nagy
and Photographic Discourse circa 1929*

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Abstract

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This thesis considers the artistic practice and theory of three major modernist photographers of the interwar period: László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966) and Edward Weston (1886-1958). While these artists worked throughout the interwar period my focus will remain around the year 1929 and the moment of the watershed exhibition presented by the Deutsche Werkbund entitled *Film und Foto*, where all three artists were featured. The underlying goal of this project is to examine the ways in which each artist's photographic production responded to the central discourse of the day, particularly the question of photography's tenuous status as art. Each chapter considers the work of one photographer in the critical context in which their work has been conventionally viewed in the discipline of Art History. Through close visual analyses of key photographs and close readings of the writings by the artists themselves, this thesis challenges many of the canonical assumptions of photographic discourse in this important moment in the history of art.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Emory University Art History Department and my committee members, Elissa Marder and Molly Warnock for their help in this process, as well as my friends and family for their support throughout. Most importantly, I would like to thank my advisor, Todd Cronan, for his thoughtful readings of countless drafts and immeasurable intellectual insights.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis considers the artistic practice and theory of three major modernist photographers of the interwar period: László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966) and Edward Weston (1886-1958). While these artists worked throughout the interwar period my focus will remain around the year 1929 and the moment of the watershed exhibition presented by the Deutsche Werkbund entitled *Film und Foto*, where all three artists were featured. The underlying goal of this project is to examine the ways in which each artist's photographic production responded to the central discourse of the day, particularly the question of photography's tenuous status as *art*.

Renger-Patzsch wrote in 1928: "due to its mechanical processes, photography is without doubt the most refractory artistic medium."¹ The mechanical nature of photography and its objective rendering of reality posed a problem regarding the artist's intentionality and the medium's capacity to function as a mode of creative expression. We take for granted today, for the most part, that photographs are works of art and that photographers are artists. In the 1920s, however, photography's status as an artistic medium was on the mind of all the major voices in the discourse. The question of whether a photograph should be considered an art-object, or something akin to a document remained unresolved well into the twentieth century.

Photographic discourse of the 1920s and early 1930s centered on the question of photography's medium-specific qualities: virtually all of the major theorizers settled on the

¹ Albert Renger-Patzsch, "Joy Before the Object," in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 108.

medium's essential transparency to the world it recorded. The words in most frequent circulation at this moment, words that were often used interchangeably, were realism, documentary, objectivity, transparency and directness. In Ansel Adams' words at the time: "the prime message of photography—absolute realism."² Simply put, photography's putative objective relation to the world put it at odds with the other dominant art medium of the day: painting. Writing two decades later, the critic Clement Greenberg succinctly characterized the problem of photography:

Photography is the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for this reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as a document and function as a work of art as well.³

Photography's indexical relationship to the referent makes it a suitable mode of reportage, but problematizes the possibility of expression. Unlike a painting, a photograph does not bear the skilled mark of the artist's hand, or rather, the artist's "hand" is found in something removed from their actual mark-making.

Contemporary writers have continued to grapple with the problem of photography's transparency and its status as art. Writing in his final book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* published in 1980, the French literary theorist Roland Barthes described photography's difference from painting in terms of its relationship to the referent:

I call the "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there can be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it.⁴

Whereas the painter creates every aspect of his painting, the photographer can only render reality as it is. This opens the photograph up to *accident*, elements of the composition beyond the

² Ansel Adams, "Photography," in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Edward Weston Omnibus* (Layton: Peregrine, 1981), 46.

³ Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye," in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Edward Weston Omnibus* (Layton: Peregrine, 1981), 87.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76.

photographer's control. Barthes celebrated the anti-art possibilities of the medium and the minimized role of the author, inasmuch as accident and chance also opened up the photograph to the experience of *the viewer*.

The photograph, as Barthes understands it in *Camera Lucida*, is comprised of two parts: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is the result of the photographer's specific intention. Barthes describes it as the cultural knowledge that is equally accessible to any viewer, provided they come from the same cultural background. The *punctum* has various related iterations, but it can be described as, "a detail that overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration."⁵ Simply, the *punctum* is the "unintended detail" in a photograph, the element left to interpretation by the beholder. In his essay, "Barthes' *Punctum*," Michael Fried calls attention to the "structural invisibility" of *punctum* for the photographer. What excites Barthes about the *punctum* is precisely that it is *unintentional*, while for Fried the *punctum* is not centrally unintentional but rather *unconscious*, and therefore fundamentally *antitheatrical*: the photographer's unawareness of the *punctum* signifies his unawareness of the beholder.⁶ Thus, for Fried, Barthes account maintains photography's status as art.

As Walter Benn Michaels points out in "Photographs and Fossils," Fried employs Barthes' notion of the *punctum* in his critique of post-modernism for the same reason figures such as Rosalind Krauss use Barthes to defend post-modernism—his celebration of the unintentional in the photograph.⁷ Each beholder brings a different personal history with him in his viewing. The production of the photograph's meaning is thus left up to the beholder. Barthes

⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.

⁶ Michael Fried, "Barthes *Punctum*," in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 95-114.

⁷ Walter Benn Michaels, "Photographs and Fossils," in *Photographic Theory*, ed., by James Elkin (London: Routledge, 2007), 431-450.

viewer-driven aesthetics come at the cost of the photographer. He writes: “[t]he Photographer’s ‘second sight’ does not consist in ‘seeing’ but in being there.”⁸ The photographic act, for Barthes, is the operation of the camera in a certain place, at a given moment in time. That is to say, two photographers standing in the same place, despite their conscious aims, will take the same photograph. For Barthes and others, this is a marker of photography’s fundamental *indexicality*. In “Photography’s Discursive Spaces” Rosalind Krauss argues that photography’s objective relationship to reality makes it difficult to be considered a representation. The photograph’s status as an index throws into question the authorial intention implicit in our very definition of art. She argues subsequently that the history of photography cannot be cast in the conventional “logic” of art history and, in fact, undermines the category of art.⁹ I will return to Krauss’ account of photography in my conclusion.

*

Film und Foto was held from May 18 to June 7, 1929 in Stuttgart. The show was intended to demonstrate the possibilities of the photographic medium and exhibited work from photographers around the world. Moholy was responsible for designing the first room of the exhibition, which served as an introductory study of the history of photography based on his 1925 Bauhaus publication *Painting, Photography, Film*. The subsequent thirteen galleries of the exhibition featured nearly a thousand photographs celebrating the multifarious applications of photography, organized by country. Weston served as the curator for the American section of the exhibition, including twenty of his own photographs and twenty by his teenage son Brett. In a review of the exhibition, Andor Kraszna-Krausz characterized the message of Moholy’s

⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47.

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986)

introduction: “the task of photography today is to devote its specific technical means to the active service of the present time, by immediate unembellished, catching of true impressions of life.”¹⁰ Renger-Patzsch, Weston and Moholy hailed photography as a new way of seeing. The dominant understanding of medium was that its objective—unembellished— relationship to the world was superior to the limited human eye.

The canonical account of *Film und Foto* emphasizes a dichotomy between two approaches regarding the limitations of the photographic medium: Moholy emerges as the champion of experimental photography and Renger-Patzsch and Weston of “straight” realist photography. The juxtaposition of two statements on the nature of the medium in the same volume of the journal *Das Deutsche Lichtbild* by Moholy and Renger-Patzsch had already established the fundamental differences in their approaches to photography in 1927. Weston’s approach is conventionally understood as the American manifestation of New Objectivity and he and Renger-Patzsch are viewed as counterparts. The German art historian, Carl Georg Heise, who wrote the introductory essay for Renger-Patzsch’s famous collection of photographs *Die Welt ist schön*, claimed in a review of *Film und Foto* that Weston’s image of the Mexican senator *Galván Shooting* (1924), was one of the best in the show.¹¹ I will claim, in chapter two, that their two approaches are more different than is conventionally understood.

Renger-Patzsch wrote that the camera captures the world with “greater precision and greater objectivity than the hand of the artist.”¹² Consequently, he argued against the application

¹⁰ Andor Kraszna-Krausz, “Exhibition in Stuttgart, June 1929 and its Effects,” in David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933*. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 35.

¹¹ Beaumont Newhall, “Photo Eye of the 1920’s: The Deutsche Werkbund Exhibition of 1929,” [1977] in David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933*. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 81.

¹² Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Photography and Art,” [1927] in David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933*. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978.): 15-16.

of any techniques beyond that which occur prior to the photographic capture, the moment of exposure. Weston too, felt that, “photography is too honest a medium, direct and uncompromising, to allow of subterfuge,” by which he meant manipulation of the medium in the darkroom. In this respect, Weston and Renger-Patzsch were different from Moholy. Moholy experimented with the medium in the darkroom, including camera-less photography, layering negatives and reversing negatives. However, Moholy’s photographic theory, in actuality, shared more with Renger-Patzsch and Weston than is usually recognized. All three agreed that photography’s primary task was to distinguish itself from painting. If photography could function as art, it was only if it freed itself from its “dependence on traditional forms of representation.”¹³ Moholy described the task of photographers to

[d]evelop an integrally photographic approach that is derived purely from the means of photography itself; only after a more or less exact photographic language has been developed will a truly gifted photographer be able to elevate it to an “artistic” level.¹⁴

In his call for medium-specificity, Moholy used “language” quite explicitly; he believed that unfamiliarity with the photographic means would be the illiteracy in the future. Although Moholy has often been portrayed as an anti-realist, with express emphasis on his experimental ideal, this does not capture his primary ambition. In Moholy’s words: “the exact reproduction of everyday facts, without distortion or adulteration” is a central “social responsibility” of photography.¹⁵

Photography’s status as art was an unavoidable question for Renger-Patzsch, Weston and Moholy. While they were compelled to address the question, they nonetheless claimed that it was

¹³ Laszló Moholy-Nagy, “Unprecedented Photography” [1927] in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989): 84.

¹⁴ Moholy-Nagy, “Unprecedented Photography,” 84.

¹⁵ Moholy-Nagy, “Photography in a Flash,” in Richard Kostelantz, Ed., *Moholy-Nagy, An Anthology* (New York: De Capo Press, 1970), 56.

not central to the practice of photography. They were interested in the medium itself. Moholy argued in his 1927 article “Unprecedented Photography”: “the *fact* of photography does not grow or diminish in value according to whether it is classified as a method of recording reality,” he says, “or as a basis for the process of reproduction, or as ‘art.’”¹⁶ Weston famously crossed out the word artist after his name, declaring himself a *photographer*. Renger-Patzsch described what he saw as the problem of classifying photography as art, or non-art, with clarity: “one can prove everything: that it is art and that it is not, that it assumes an intermediate position, that one must extend the concept of art to take into account the of photography, and so on.”¹⁷ It would be a fruitless endeavor to try to come down on one side or the other.

The notion that photography changed the “concept of art” was central to a key figure of the day, Walter Benjamin. In his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin celebrated the photograph as fundamentally challenging the traditional definition of art, rendering it *political*.¹⁸ Franz Roh also spoke to this in his essay, “Mechanism and Expression,” the introduction to *Foto Auge*, a collection of photographs assembled by Roh and Jan Tschichold, one of the primary organizers of *Film und Foto*, in 1929. He wrote:

If however we understand art as an end in itself, called forth by man and filled with ‘expression,’ good photographs are included. Yet, should art be understood as manual production expressed *by the human hand* under a guidance of the mind (that would be unwise indeed), we can establish a new category without diminishing the aesthetic value of forms.¹⁹

Roh comes down emphatically on the side of photography *as art*. I want to argue that despite their desire to skirt the question, Renger-Patzsch, Weston and Moholy also saw photography as a

¹⁶ Moholy-Nagy, “Unprecedented Photography,” 83.

¹⁷ Renger-Patzsch, “Photography and Art,” 15-16.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Ardent (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 227-230.

¹⁹ Franz Roh, “Mechanism and Expression,” in *Foto-Auge: 76 fotos der Zeit*, eds. Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold (New York: Arno Press, 1973)

fundamentally artistic medium. As I will attempt to show, their *photographs* forcefully declare their status as art-objects.

The fundamental difference between Renger-Patzsch and Weston, on the one side, and Moholy, on the other, is not simply a question of a commitment to realism versus a commitment to experimentation. The difference is rather where they felt the *creative force* of photography lay. Weston and Renger-Patzsch declare their intentionality in the face of photography's "objectivity" through their claims to *previsualization*. What is previsualization? Weston defined it this way: "one must prevision and feel, BEFORE EXPOSURE, the finished print—complete in all values, in every detail." Renger-Patzsch expressed an almost identical sentiment; he finds "it absolutely necessary to have an exact image in [his] mind" before an exposure, ridding it of the "appearance of anything accidental."²⁰ While this is, in rather obvious ways, a fantasy, it speaks to Weston's and Renger-Patzsch's desire to express their intention beyond, outside or in tandem with the mechanical limits of the medium. For Weston and Renger-Patzsch, if the photographer can "reveal the essence of what lies before his lens," then "the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object."²¹ Without any intervention by the photographer, a photograph would be mere document, an index of the world. Moholy, however, was committed to the photograph as an object, an object that could be manipulated, rotated, metaphorically and literally changed, by the viewer. Photography as art, for Moholy lay in a process of *post-visualization* (a term I borrow from Jerry Uelsmann, writing in the 1960s).²²

²⁰ Albert Renger-Patzsch, "A Lecture that Was Never Given (1966)" in Wilde and Weski, Eds. *Albert Renger-Patzsch, Photographer of Objectivity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998): 169.

²¹ Weston, "Seeing Photographically," in *Edward Weston: On Photography*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), 174.

²² Uelsmann defines the of the term post-visualization in direct contrast to Weston's practice as "the willingness on the part of the photographer to revisualize the final image at any point during the photographic process." (Jerry Ulseman, "Post-Visualization," 1967.) My use of term in reference to

Chapter 1 considers the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch, the primary figure of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity. I challenge Walter Benjamin's critical, and increasingly canonical, reading of Renger-Patzsch's oeuvre in his 1934 lecture, "The Author as Producer." Benjamin criticizes "technical perfection" of Renger-Patzsch's photographs, claiming that they naturalize their referent. I demonstrate how Renger-Patzsch's photographs, through their occlusion of the viewer, forcefully declare their separateness from the referent and assert their status as works of art. In Chapter 2, I examine ways in which, despite their shared commitment to realism, Weston's photographic practice differs from Renger-Patzsch's. Weston imagines his camera as an extension of the photographer's body and mind. Rather than declaring their difference from the world, Weston's photographs emphasize his connectedness to the referent. In both their approaches, however, the artist's intentions are paramount. Finally, in Chapter 3, I consider Moholy's photographic theory and the complicated relationship he posits between the photographer, beholder and photograph. Moholy, realism lay not in the inherent qualities of the medium, but in the bodily experience of the viewer. As I will argue, however, the photograph's openness to the beholder does not necessarily preclude the artist's guiding hand in the process of reception. For Moholy, the *truly gifted photographer*, in mastering the limits of the medium, would be able to reveal a heightened version of reality that jolted the viewer from his complacent, everyday perceptions of the world.

Moholy predominately refers to physical manipulations of the print, for instance deciding its orientation, after its exposure. This is different from Ulsemann's use of the term, which he used to describe his darkroom practice of combining negatives to create novel compositions. Still, it is a useful term to describe a "non-straight" approach to photography and to the openness of the photographer to a finished photograph different from the one imagined at the moment of exposure.

Chapter One

The Author as Creator

For rendering our impressions of nature, of plants, animals, the works of architects and sculptors, and the creations of engineers, photography offers us a most reliable tool. We still don't sufficiently appreciate the opportunity to capture the magic of material things.²³

--Albert Renger-Patzsch, "Aims" (1927)

Albert Renger-Patzsch's (1897-1966) *Industrial Landscape Near Essen* of 1930 (Fig.1) exemplifies the photographer's basic aesthetic approach. Above all, I will characterize it, following Renger-Patzsch's own ambitions, as "realist." The industrial subject, a common motif in the photographer's oeuvre, is presented with almost brutal clarity: no detail is forgotten as the photographer's broad depth of field and all-over focus attest. At first glance, the technical perfection imbues the image with utter legibility and no detail seems to outweigh another. In the foreground hangs a clothesline, supported on the left edge of the composition by a wooden pole and in the center by a large, leaf-less tree. The clothes obscure our view of train tracks and a man standing just beyond them. The center of the composition is dominated by the landscape itself. Houses and factory buildings in the background mimic the formal structure of the clotheslines, framing the central landscape. By exploiting scale, Renger-Patzsch analogizes the row of houses in the background and the foreground clotheslines, at once highlighting the depth of the landscape and foreshortening it.

²³ Albert Renger-Patzsch, "Aims," in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 105.

Far from the immediately legible scene it first presents, the space seems to slowly emerge as a visual puzzle, one that the beholder must unpack. The beholder is compelled to contemplate the landscape in time, discerning its structure and how a three-dimensional space is dramatically rendered in two dimensions. The initial moment of legibility is lost as the scene denies the beholder access to the space of the photograph. Indeed, several elements of the composition specifically occlude empathetic access. First, the clothesline in the foreground creates a boundary between the landscape and the viewer. Just beyond the clotheslines, the railway tracks provide yet another obstruction. The layering of these elements obscures the only person in the scene, the man standing at the intersection of the tree, clotheslines and railroad tracks on the right. Barely noticeable, it is as if he is made of the same material as the rubble mound behind him. Further, the viewer's imagined entry to the path that connects the foreground and background is obscured behind the rubble. *Industrial Landscape near Essen* reveals a paradox of Renger-Patzsch's practice: how can we reconcile his aesthetic fidelity to realism, to transparency to the referent, with this anti-empathetic or willful disengagement of the viewer? As I will argue, Renger-Patzsch's photographic project is more complicated than the traditional account of Realism implies. The camera is not simply a "tool" for rendering reality, but gives us access to "magic" through its difference from it.

In a 1927 article entitled "Aims" published in *Das Deutsche Lichtbild*, Renger-Patzsch articulated his clearest commitment to realism. He wrote: "the secret of a good photograph, which can possess artistic qualities just as a work of visual art can, resides in its realism."²⁴ In this same volume, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy contributed a manifesto on photographic practice. Both agreed on the need for a medium-specific photographic language, rejecting the methods

²⁴ Ibid., 105.

developed in the discourse of painting. Indeed, Renger-Patzsch developed his realist aesthetic in opposition to so-called “artist-photographers,” those who relied too heavily on the established conventions of painting rather than on the qualities of the photographic medium.²⁵ Moholy also stressed medium-specific techniques. They differ, however, on their understanding of the limits of the medium. Renger-Patzsch came to exemplify the technical realism of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity on one hand and Moholy-Nagy the experimental and functional “New Vision” on the other. This distinction has been canonized in the art historical discourse, often to Renger-Patzsch’s discredit. I aim to amend, at least in part, that situation here.

As with many discursive voices in photographic theory at this moment, Renger-Patzsch believed photography could reveal truths about the world unseen, or unnoticed, by the human eye. In 1928, Hugo Sieker described Renger-Patzsch’s photographs as capturing the “miraculousness of physical reality.”²⁶ For Sieker, Renger-Patzsch’s camera was capable of unveiling hidden—or overly habituated—aspects of the world for the viewer. This is no accident of the photographic medium however, but rather Renger-Patzsch’s unique ability as a photographer to transform “even the most accidental and transient phenomena into pictures that are superbly organized, balanced and structured.”²⁷ The camera provided the means to reproduce reality, however, it was the duty of the photographer to uncover these truths. Like the American photographer Edward Weston—the subject of Chapter 2—Renger-Patzsch saw it as the

²⁵ Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Joy Before the Object,” in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 108.

²⁶ Hugo Sieker, “Absolute Realism: On the Photographs of Albert Renger-Patzsch (1928), in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

photographer's job to identify the "essence" of the subject.²⁸ Whereas for Weston, "essence" is something mystical, for Renger-Patzsch, it referred to the structure and materiality of his subjects. Weston saw the relationship between the photographer, camera and referent as continuous and this is very much reflected in the formal structure of his photographs. Renger-Patzsch's photographs, in contrast, seem to declare their difference from the world, despite the fact that both he and Weston share a commitment to a similar realist aesthetic.

Neither Weston nor Renger-Patzsch saw the mechanical processes of photography as at odds with their artistic intentions. As Walter Benn Michaels writes of Stieglitz and Weston, "the actual act of pressing the button is fundamentally irrelevant to the photographic act."²⁹ Renger-Patzsch and Weston both claimed to envision the image before taking the picture, a process that Weston termed *prevision*. Looking back on his career in 1966, Renger-Patzsch described his method in similar terms:

Before taking a picture, I find it absolutely necessary to have an exact image in my mind. This image must be reconciled with what I see on the focusing screen. At this point I proceed by viewing reality in terms of space. The space should be presented in such a way that, projected on to a plane, it creates an ordered picture surface. The image should not appear to be a detail; rather through it a new image is created that appears to be entirely free from anything accidental.³⁰

Renger-Patzsch was acutely aware of the threat that transparency posed to his intentions as a photographer. This claim to compose the image in his mind before taking the photograph affirms the authority of the photographer over the mechanical processes of the camera. His careful, mediated compositions are intended to reveal the depth, spatiality and structure of his subjects, but also to eliminate what for many theorists is an inevitable quality of photography: accident. It

²⁸ Renger-Patzsch, "Joy Before the Object," 108.

²⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, "Action and Accident," in *The Gold Standard of Logic and Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 219.

³⁰ Albert Renger-Patzsch, "A Lecture that was Never Given," in *Albert Renger-Patzsch, Photographer of Objectivity*, ed., by Ann and Jürgen Wilde and Thomas Weski (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 169.

goes without saying that photography's transparency to the world, what is typically described under the category of *indexicality*, makes any claim to total control of the image impossible. Moholy and those writing after him accepted the presence of accident in photography as one of its essential properties; it opens the work up to constant rediscovery, or rather *creation*, by the beholder. Roland Barthes famously described the accidental element that opened up the photograph to the reality of the *beholder* as the photographic *punctum*, the unintended detail that draws the beholder's attention.³¹ By stressing *his* role as the beholder, the photographer's authorship is irrelevant (a matter of what Barthes calls the "*studium*"). That Renger-Patzsch wished to deny accident, reflects an underlying anxiety over the tension between the objectivity of his aesthetic and his agency as an author and an *artist*. Simply put, Renger-Patzsch pre-empted his prints to ensure that objectivity and intentionality were not at odds in his engagement with the medium.

Renger-Patzsch's claims of authorship, something permanently at risk in terms of the medium's transparency, are further complicated by the context of his photographic production. During 1920s, Renger-Patzsch's photographs were predominately used as illustrations in mass-produced books. The publisher Ernst Fuhrmann of Folkwang and Auriga Verlag hired Renger-Patzsch to provide photographic illustrations for a collection of books, *The World of Plants*, published in 1923 and 1924 and in 1925, Renger-Patzsch produced a third book for the publisher, *The Choirs of Cappenberg*. After several years working as an independent photographer, Renger-Patzsch met Carl Georg Heise, the man who was to become his most important advocate and arguably his critical downfall. In 1927, Heise, then director of Lübeck's Museum for Art and Cultural History, organized the photographer's first one-man show,

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.

followed a year later by the publication of Renger-Patzsch most famous photographic book, *Die Welt ist schön*, to which Heise contributed the introduction.³² *The World is Beautiful* featured one hundred images of plants, architecture, industrial materials and landscapes all rendered with Renger-Patzsch's signature clarity. Though immensely popular, *The World is Beautiful* was the subject of contemptuous criticisms by both Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin.

As Virginia Heckert writes in her in her 1999 dissertation, "Albert Renger-Patzsch: Contextualizing the Early Work 1920-1933," Renger-Patzsch relinquished the ownership, and perhaps authorship, of his photographs to the context of the book. The publishers, she argues, exploit the inherent qualities of the medium in order to support their own ideological needs.³³ In retrospect, it difficult not to read the images in *The World is Beautiful* as a reflection of Heise's accompanying text. In his introduction, he writes:

the work of the photographer does not create symbols, but merely makes them visible! But the pointing of the way towards independent seeing and to the strengthening of our feeling for the reflection of the universe in single objects of creation...since the powerful symbols of our forefathers are beginning to lose their meaning, it is of the greatest importance that we should re-learn to recognize the inexhaustible life itself in all its parts as symbols.³⁴

This account is consistent with Renger-Patzsch's inasmuch as it affirms the transparency of the camera's lens. Photography provides us access to universal symbols that already exist in the world rather than constructs them. Renger-Patzsch assented to the idea that the photographer's task was to make visible those things hidden in the everyday. On the whole, however, Heise's assessment of the purpose of photography misrepresents Renger-Patzsch's aims. The art historian was concerned with a major trope of modernist discourse: the loss of shared, universal values.

³² Donald Kuspit, *Joy Before the Object* (New York: Aperture, 1993), 5.

³³ Virginia Heckert, "Albert Renger-Patzsch: Contextualizing the Early Work, 1920-1933." (PhD diss. Columbia University, 1999), 1-20.

³⁴ Carl Georg Heise, "Preface to A. Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist schön*" in David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933*. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 13-14.

Photography, for Heise, had the capacity to serve as a sort of replacement for religion. For Renger-Patzsch, prevision, and the elimination of accident, created a “new image” of reality—simply put, *a photograph*.

The presence of two distinct agents in the production of a photographic book, the publisher/author and the photographer, problematizes viewing Renger-Patzsch’s photographs as art-objects in and of themselves. Consequently, in order to comprehend Renger-Patzsch’s photographs in light of his own understanding of the medium and the role of the photographer, it is necessary to separate the publisher from the artist. Indeed, Heckert criticizes Benjamin for failing to do this in regard to other photographers in *A Short History of Photography*.³⁵ As Renger-Patzsch’s later work makes clear, separating out the aspects of the text or discursive apparatus from the visual production is a crucial, if fraught project. By relying too heavily on the Heise narrative, we lose sight of the vast formal undertaking and the medium-specific discourse of Renger-Patzsch’s achievement.

The question arises, of course, as to how much we can truly separate the images from their context. Heise’s introduction begins, “whether we admit it or not, the fact that the world is beautiful is a precondition for art of all kinds.”³⁶ For Heise, natural phenomena are as aesthetically beautiful as factory buildings. For Renger-Patzsch’s most important critic, however, the exact opposite is true. In a 1934 lecture entitled “The Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin denounces New Objectivity, and *The World is Beautiful* specifically, declaring “It has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty—by apprehending it in a fashionably perfected manner—

³⁵ Heckert, “Albert Renger Patzsch, 376.

³⁶ Heise, “Preface to A. Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist schön* (1928),” 9.

into an object of enjoyment.”³⁷ Benjamin finds fault in the relationship of content to form in Renger-Patzsch’s photographs, a relationship which he understands as inherently political.³⁸ Renger-Patzsch’s technique, Benjamin claims, is not suited to his subject matter, unlike his contemporaries August Sander and Karl Blossfeld.³⁹ Benjamin’s critique is similar to Clement Greenberg’s criticism of Edward Weston for treating portraits in the same manner as his “root or rock or sand forms: we get their coverings of skin or cloth but not their persons.”⁴⁰ What is at stake in Weston’s technique, according to Greenberg, is photography’s value as an artform. According to Benjamin, the stake of Renger-Patzsch’s photographic technique is perhaps the opposite: its *political* value. Benjamin understands the politics of New Objectivity photography to be a negative one, turning misery into a consumer good.⁴¹ In *The World is Beautiful*, landscapes, flowers and other natural phenomena are depicted with the same clarity and overall focus as factories and industrial machinery. For Benjamin, Renger-Patzsch’s technique naturalizes and depoliticizes the referent, namely the factory, by aestheticizing it.

This increasingly canonical reading of Renger-Patzsch’s oeuvre finds its roots in another criticism by Benjamin from 1931. One particularly oft-cited passage, which cannot be ignored here, appears in Benjamin’s collected reviews of several photo-books, *A Little History of Photography*. Benjamin writes:

The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. *The world is beautiful*—that is its watchword. In it is unmasked the posture of a photography that can

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” [1934] in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2*, edited by Walter Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 775

³⁸ *Ibid.*,” 775.

³⁹ Heckert argues in her dissertation that Benjamin’s criticisms may have more to do with Heise’s introduction and with the title, which he selected over Renger-Patzsch’s less doctrinaire choice *Die Dinge*, than with the actual photographs. She does not, however, find fault with Benjamin’s argument.

⁴⁰ Clement Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye,” in *Edward Weston: Omnibus*, ed. Beaumont Newhall and Amy Conger (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), 89.

⁴¹ Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 775.

endow any soup can with cosmic significance, but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists, even when this photography's most-dream laden subjects are a forerunner more of its salability than of any knowledge it might produce. But because the true face of this kind of photographic creativity is the advertisement or association, its logical counterpart is the act of unmasking or construction"⁴²

By referencing the title of Renger-Patzsch's book, Benjamin criticizes its contents as naturalized views of the world, as empty commodities; a result of his treatment of the photographic surface. The beholder of a given image is thus transformed from acting as a participant imbued with intellectual agency to merely a consumer of fashion. Using Moholy-Nagy's terminology, which influenced Benjamin's own thinking about photography, we might describe these photographs as being "reproductive."⁴³ Photography's aim should rather be "productive"; it should provide cognitive value of the realities of modern modes of capitalist production. In *Art Since 1900* Benjamin Buchloh cites this passage as exemplary of the problems of New Objectivity. In accepting the "salability" of Renger-Patzsch's photographs as fact, he extrapolates that the photography associated with New Objectivity is a commodified response to the rapid industrialization of the Weimar Republic.⁴⁴ Buchloh finds the "essentially affirmative" nature of New Objectivity problematic, specifically the "claim to correspondence" between technology and nature.⁴⁵

⁴² Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2*, edited by Walter Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 526.

⁴³ Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction," *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 80.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Buchloh, "1929" in *Art Since 1900 vol. 1* ed. Hal Foster, et. al., (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 235.

⁴⁵ Buchloh uses the phrase "a perplexing claim to correspondence" to describe the image on the cover of the first edition of *Die Welt ist schön*, an emblem featuring a simplified telephone tower and an agave plant. This image reflects the juxtaposition of technology and nature that both Benjamin and Buchloh find problematic about the *Die Welt ist schön*. Therefore, I take this phrase to be directed at the project as a whole.

Against Renger-Patzsch, Benjamin celebrated photomontage in its reappropriation of preexisting photographs into novel productions. Renger-Patzsch's precise renderings of reality failed to transform reality, or to help us understand it better. Benjamin, citing Brecht, writes that rarely does "a mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality."⁴⁶ For Brecht and for Benjamin, the factory façade, as rendered by Renger-Patzsch, cannot possibly reveal the social relations behind it. He continues, "so something must be *built up*, something artificial, posed."⁴⁷ Benjamin wanted something that provided a *cognitive punch* to the beholder and therefore give it a political usevalue. Benjamin preferred photographers like August Sander to Renger-Patzsch. Sander's photographic book *Faces of Our Time*, published in the critical year 1929, embodied, for Benjamin, photography's commitment to politics. *Faces of Our Time* was a systematic compilation of portraits of German citizens that Benjamin described as, "more than a picture book. It is a training manual." The antithesis of Renger-Patzsch according to Benjamin, Sander's impartial rendering of all his subjects made visible class distinctions.

The failure of Renger-Patzsch's photographs for Benjamin is that they have not accomplished the critical function of mechanical reproduction, the elimination of "aura." Benjamin describes "aura" as the feeling of distance despite how close an object may appear.⁴⁸ Considering my analysis of *Industrial Landscape Near Essen*, one might agree that Renger-Patzsch's photographs are auratic *in extremis*. Renger-Patzsch specifically described his work as "magical" in its apprehension of the object world. The dialectic Benjamin described between closeness and distance is precisely what Renger-Patzsch valued about photography: a photograph's difference from the referent allowed for greater comprehension of the subject.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," 526.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Berlin: Schocken, 1968), 257.

Renger Patzsch cited Ernst Junger's essay "On Pain" to this effect. Junger, who eventually authored introductions to two collections of Renger-Patzsch's photography, declared that "The photograph stands outside the zone of sensitivity. It has a telescopic quality; one can tell that the event photographed is seen by an insensitive and invulnerable eye."⁴⁹ The occlusive elements of Renger-Patzsch's compositions, deliberate structural choices slow down the eye of the beholder. Far from naturalizing their subjects, Renger-Patzsch's photographs are explicitly *photographs*. They are artworks, artifacts that *exemplify their difference from the referent in the face of, or in tension with, the work's equally forceful engagement with the medium's transparency*. *Industrial Landscape Near Essen* does, in fact, offer the beholder an "unmasking or construction" of reality in its explicit marking of its difference from it. In declaring the photograph a work of art, something not transparently available to the beholder's empathetic engagement, something thoroughly constructed in the act of prevision, Renger-Patzsch declares authorship and the photographic object as unavailable to unmediated claims to documentation.

Finally, I would like to consider Benjamin's reference to the loss of "human connections" in a technically expert photograph. This is a complicated issue in Renger-Patzsch's oeuvre. In *Industrial Landscape Near Essen*, for example, the clothesline and the house suggest a human presence, yet, the human figure in the frame is entirely dwarfed by the large mound at the right, masked by the opacity of the aprons that hang in front of him. Indeed, each article is hung upside down, emptying it to an extent as a signifier of humanity. The human element is never on the surface of a Renger-Patzsch photograph. His interest is rather in compositions that occlude both the human subject and, by analogy, the beholder engaging with the photograph.

⁴⁹ Ernst Junger, *On Pain*, trans. David C. Durst (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2008), 39.

Consider one final example on this subject, *Shrimp Fisherwoman* (1926). (Fig. 2) A woman stands on a beach carrying a large net. The figure has her back to the viewer, turned instead to the unspecified recessive space in the background. This space is at once infinite and nonexistent, it is perhaps auratic in ambiguities. The texture of the net, rendered in black and white, mimics the gingham of the woman's dress. Again, Renger-Patzsch seems fundamentally concerned with slowing the beholder's access to the subject, without completely occluding it. The arch of the net, as it falls over the woman's frame creates a semi-transparent veil that is, perhaps, analogous to Renger-Patzsch's camera. The net is not entirely occlusive of the beholder's gaze, but rather interposes a transparent layer, pressed against the surface of the image. Despite, however, the delaying function of the net, it remains an index of the woman herself, she is only shrouded by the net, not entirely masked, Renger-Patzsch actually reveals more to the viewer about her condition than a more direct portrait of her face could possibly capture: the opposite of a naturalized view.

Chapter Two

The Camera's Empathetic Eye

I herewith express my feeling for Life with Photographic Beauty;
present objectively the rhythm, and form, and texture.⁵⁰

-- Edward Weston, "Statement," 1927

In the United States, Edward Weston (1886-1958) worked in a manner as Renger-Patzsch, rendering his subjects with an overall focus, clarity and precision of detail. Weston declared, with equal force, his intentionality in the face of the medium's transparency through the act of *prevision*. Renger-Patzsch's understanding of *prevision* is different from Weston's understanding—far more than anyone has yet to acknowledge. Despite their shared aesthetic of *previsualization*, Weston's photographs suggest a more *empathetic* attitude toward their subjects. For both, photographic realism revealed the underlying "essence" of objects, but Renger-Patzsch's photographs do this by declaring their difference from the referent, while Weston's seem to *emphasize* the relationship between the referent and the photographer. *Prevision*, for Weston, dissolved the difference, potentially erased the gap, between photographer and referent. *Prevision*, for Renger-Patzsch, signified a break from reality. Or rather, for Renger-Patzsch the act of *prevision* created an *artwork* and for Weston the act *was the work*.

A comparison of two works, Renger-Patzsch's *Fungi Lepiota Procera* (1930; fig. 3) and Weston's *Toadstool* (1931; fig. 4) will exemplify the difference. Capturing the underside of a mushroom cap, Renger-Patzsch was so close to his subject that the gills of the mushroom extend

⁵⁰ Edward Weston, "Statement," [1927] in *Edward Weston: On Photography*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), 46.

beyond the frame of the lens, rendering it is almost unrecognizable. Even though the folds of the cap converge upon the center, drawing the eye inward, the stem itself seems to protrude into the space of the beholder. The oscillation between the protruding white gills and the black recesses creates a harsh surface effect that is almost abrasive to the eye. The microscopic closeness and frontality of the photograph occludes the viewer, declaring its separateness from the beholder's world.

Weston's *Toadstool* treats the same fungal subject matter, but it is more inviting in its execution. The mushroom also fills the frame, but in the corners one can glimpse its surroundings. Far from the quasi-scientific gaze of Renger-Patzsch's camera, Weston situates his subject within its natural context. The softness of the sky beyond the subject imbues the image with a mystical quality characteristic of Weston's work. Where *Fungi Lepiota Procera* is entirely frontal, the dark recess of *Toadstool*, while hidden and obscured, draws the beholder inward. Though shot at a greater distance from the subject, the closeness and sense of connectedness to the referent is more powerful. Indeed, even their titles register this difference. Where Renger-Patzsch uses the scientific name, *Fungi Lepiota Procera*, Weston refers to the mushroom by its vernacular name.

Despite their different approaches to prevision, Weston and Renger-Patzsch both believed that the objective lens of the camera captured aspects of the world unseen by the human eye. After attending the Illinois College of Photography, Weston began his career as a commercial portrait photographer, gaining considerable success using more or less painterly motifs. Early works such as *Violet Romer* (1916) reflect this painterly commitment. In this portrait, the subject, dressed in an elaborate costume, is overtly posed, casting a dramatic reflection into the pool before her. In 1922, however, Weston's career shifted starkly away from

pictorialism in favor of “realist” photography, a mode of practice derived, so he thought, from the objective qualities of the medium. Only by distinguishing itself from painting and embracing the camera’s transparency to its referent, did Weston believe that photography could function as a creative medium. Consequently, Weston derided the use of “technical tricks” and even “experimentation with perspectives and distortion.”⁵¹ Ansel Adams concisely described Weston’s printing process, “8 x 10 for landscape, 4 x 5 for portraits, no enlargers, no retouching (in the usual sense), no dark-room manipulations, pyro for negatives, amidol for prints...no exotic techniques.”⁵² These forbidden techniques undermined the “honest,” “direct” and “uncompromising” qualities of the photographic medium.⁵³

Throughout his career, Weston stressed the intrinsic objectivity of photography, while nonetheless affirming it as a medium of self-expression. This is the paradox of Weston’s photographic theory: the transparency of the camera’s lens did not preclude the possibility of expression, but rather enabled it. In the hands of a capable photographer, the honesty, and even harshness, of the camera’s transparent lens exposed something about its referent unseen by the human eye, which Weston calls its “quintessence.”⁵⁴ In 1943 Weston wrote that photographer could “reveal the essence of what lies before his lens with such clear insight that the beholder might find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object.”⁵⁵ Expression, as Weston uses it, is not an *interpretation* of a subject, a notion he rejected, but rather the objective presentation of this essence. As I will argue, Weston’s larger photographic

⁵¹ Ibid., 46

⁵² Ansel Adams, “Edward Weston,” in *Edward Weston: Omnibus*, ed. Beaumont Newhall and Amy Conger (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), 120.

⁵³ Weston, “Photography—Not Pictorial,” in *Edward Weston: On Photography*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), 59.

⁵⁴ Weston, “Statement,” [1927], 46.

⁵⁵ Weston, “Seeing Photographically,” in *Weston: On Photography*, 143.

project was to reveal the universal, or *human*, qualities of all objects, whether animate or inanimate. Writing five years after Weston's death, Ansel Adams described his friend's desire to express "mystical currents of life."⁵⁶ Weston saw the photographer himself as the mediator, as much as the camera, between everyday perceptions of reality and its hidden essence.⁵⁷

In a 1946 review of a Weston retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the critic Clement Greenberg proposed an opposing view of Weston's oeuvre. He wrote that Weston's photographs were:

[m]erciless, crystalline clarity of detail and texture, combined with the anonymous or inanimate nature of the object photographed, produces a hard, mechanical effect that seems contrived and without spontaneity.⁵⁸

According to Greenberg, Weston's all-over focus and detail prevented the photographs from functioning as works of art. Greenberg's review is characteristic in its call for medium-specificity, but he understood the medium differently from Weston. For Greenberg, the photographer was at a disadvantage from the painter because he cannot convey meaning through his handling.⁵⁹ Greenberg consequently thought that realism was insufficient as a mode of artistic expression and that photographers should instead focus on "literary" subject matter, something he believed painting should no longer do.⁶⁰ The medium's *transparency* to the world necessitated an approach to photography based on the selection of subject matter for its anecdotal, rather than formal, value.

Arguing that Weston's technique stripped his subjects of their of human qualities, only capturing their outer aspects, Greenberg wrote: "The human subjects of Weston's portraits seem

⁵⁶ Adams, "Edward Weston," 118.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁸ Clement Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye," in *Weston: Omnibus*, 88.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

to me for the most part as inanimate as his root or rock or sand forms: we get their coverings but not their persons.”⁶¹ It seems to me that Weston’s camera does the *opposite* (and that Greenberg’s analysis might be a better directed toward Renger-Patzsch). Or one could say that Greenberg understands *part* of Weston’s approach. The “merciless” vision of the camera does a kind of violence to reality. But for Weston the camera’s objectivity reinforces our *connection* to the world, bringing its subjects into a human scale. Furthermore, it reveals the *connectedness* of everything: “Clouds, torsos, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smokestacks are but interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole—which is life.”⁶² The details of a shell’s surface or the gradations of a sand dune, which for Greenberg appear hard and “crystalline,” become, for Weston, something like skin or flesh. The heightened reality produced by the camera captured the *empathetic* qualities of the world, which, for Weston, was the nature of “Photographic Beauty.”

Casa de Vecindad (1926; fig. 5) exemplifies Weston’s empathetic approach. At first glance it seems to support Greenberg’s claims. In taking this photograph, Weston stood above the courtyard, on the roof of a building. Clotheslines crisscross across the courtyard, casting shadows on the stone ground. The clotheslines obscure the women the left background, whose backs are turned away from the camera. The geometry of the composition seems at first to occlude the viewer. One might be tempted to liken *Casa de Vecindad* to Renger-Patzsch’s *Industrial Landscape Near Essen* and see the clotheslines as declaring the photograph’s separateness from us. Yet, the sweeping of the lines actually draws the eye inward, toward the shadowed inner recesses of the courtyard and toward a group of woman in the left background. This geometry becomes a sort of dialogue. The clotheslines intersect with each other and with their own shadows, imbuing a sense of movement, subtly *anthropomorphizing* the hanging cloth.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Edward Weston, “Statement” [1930], in *Weston: On Photography*, 61.

Whereas in *Industrial Landscape near Essen*, Renger-Patzsch analogizes the clotheslines with the factory buildings in the background, Weston analogizes the cloth with the group of women, two “interrelated parts of a whole.” If we contrast the human figures in *Casa de Vecindad* with the sole human in *Industrial Landscape near Essen*, we see the difference in the two photographer’s approaches, despite their related aesthetics. The figure in *Industrial Landscape Near Essen* seems no more animate than the earth mound by which he stand and is utterly dwarfed by the enormity of the landscape.

Despite the empathetic qualities of his photographs, Weston described the camera’s lens in almost the exact terms as Renger-Patzsch, who cited Ernst Jünger’s affirmation of the *insensitivity* of the photographic medium. In a statement from 1932, Weston wrote:

Fortunately, it is difficult to see too personally with the very impersonal lens-eye: through it one is prone to approach nature with a desire to learn from, rather than impose upon, so that a photograph, done in this spirit, is not an interpretation, a biased opinion of what nature *should be*, but a *revelation*,—an absolute, impersonal recognition of the *significance of facts*.⁶³

This statement problematizes Weston’s assertion that he expresses himself through photography. The photographic act is not an active one of imposing, but rather a passive one of learning. In his daybook, a series of diaries recording the details of his photographic practice, in addition to the sordid details of his personal life, Weston recalls a conversation with the Dutch horticulturalist and photographer Johan Hagemeyer, which addresses the dialectic between interpretation and expression. Weston criticizes a series of Hagemeyer’s industrial prints as inadequate self-expressions because they are not sharp enough in their detail. In the subsequent conversation with Hagemeyer, Weston claims that the photographic is not “suited to interpretation,” but rather

⁶³Weston, “Statement” [1932], in *Weston: On Photography*, 70.

an “objective means to an end.”⁶⁴ If the artist interprets his subject, the resulting photograph will not convey any sort of truth, it merely presents an individual viewpoint. Creative expression is not a construction of reality exemplifying the personality of the photographer, but rather his ability to identify and capture some objective truth about the subject. Perhaps the best way to understand the difference between Weston’s understanding of interpretation and expression is through Greenberg. Weston’s all-over quality of focus and equal emphasis on every aspect of the composition is “a failure to select.”⁶⁵ Bias, the selection of a single point of focus, is a good thing. What Greenberg wants when he calls for “literary” photography is an *interpretation* of the world because it solves the problem of photography’s transparency. For Weston, however, the transparency of the medium is not something that needs to be overcome for it to function as art. Rather, the photographer’s expression is achieved through his *selecting* and framing of a portion of reality.

Selection, Weston wrote, was “another way of arranging.”⁶⁶ Selection and arrangement, which he referred to as “prevision,” were means to “transcend” the *documentary* function of photography in the face of the medium’s objectivity and for Weston to declare his expressive intentions. Weston stressed the instinctual nature of his process. Previsioning a print was not something that can be learned, but rather something the truly gifted photographer inherently knew how to do.⁶⁷ In his daybooks Weston wrote, “If composition could be taught, anyone might become an artist.”⁶⁸ When writing, Weston lamented that he had to think, something he did not do while taking photographs. A true artist, he continued, should not have to think in order

⁶⁴ Weston, *The Daybooks: Part I, Mexico*, ed. Nancy Newhall (New York: Aperture, 1990), 9.

⁶⁵ Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye,” 89.

⁶⁶ Weston, *The Daybooks: Part II, California*, 146.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

to create.⁶⁹ The act of taking a photograph is so unconscious for Weston he wrote that only after the development of negatives was he able to even comprehend the feelings that his photographs expressed.⁷⁰ Simply put, the artist had the unique, mystical, capability of recognizing the composed photograph in the world. The photographer's particular framing of reality captured the world as *art*. Weston describes his process of prevision:

One must prevision and feel, BEFORE EXPOSURE, the finished print — complete in all values, in every detail — when focusing upon the camera ground-glass—then the shutter's release fixes for all time this image, this conception, never to be changed by afterthought, by subsequent manipulation. The creative force is released coincident with the shutter's release. There is no substitute for amazement felt, significance realized, at the TIME of EXPOSURE.⁷¹

Selecting each element of the composition before exposure was most importantly a means to *eliminate accident and minimize the mechanical nature of the process*, affirming the authority of the photographer. Prevision is furthermore an expression of an idea in the mind of the photographer. Weston wrote in 1916 that a painter must use “his brain to make the brush—and hand—create an idea and express his personality, then and only then is he an artist.”⁷² The same, Weston argued, was true of photography. The distinction between *draughtsmanship* and *art* is similar to the one Moholy makes between *reproduction* and *production*. Moholy argues that greater technical exploration of the medium is needed if photography is to become a truly *productive* medium. Weston does not wish to alter the medium, as Moholy does: The act of prevision is an act of creative production.

In this sense, prevision functions in the same way for both Weston and Renger-Patzsch, transforming reality into an art-object. Weston's notion of prevision differs from Renger-

⁶⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁷¹ Edward Weston, “Statement to The San Franciscan,” [1930] in *Weston: On Photography*, 62-63.

⁷² Edward Weston, “Photography as a Means of Artistic Expression,” [1916] in *Weston: On Photography*, 18.

Patzsch's, however, in its emphasis on the immediacy of the act. In the immediacy of the photographic act, the camera becomes something like a prosthetic extension of his will, or even something akin to a gun. Weston recounts an outing in his Mexico daybooks with his friend, the Mexican senator Galván. Releasing the shutter of his camera at the same time that Galván released the trigger of a gun, Weston captured his famous image, *Galván Shooting* (1926; fig. 6). Leaving out Galván's arm and the gun itself, Weston was focused on capturing the transient nature of his subject's expression at the moment of release.⁷³ In this sense, Galván's portrait is the manifestation of the act of prevision, as though the lines on the face are the physical marks of the act of visualization. The marksman's selection of a target and the calculated aiming must all occur before the trigger is released. As with the release of a shutter, the trajectory of the bullet is fixed after that moment. The lines around his eyes and his furrowed brow become representations of the "creative force" released with the shutter. The metaphor of the gun and the example of *Galván Shooting* are useful in understanding Weston's engagement with the camera. The act of shooting, a target or a picture, forms an unbreakable connection between the agent and his object. Immediacy, for Weston, signified the lack of separation between artist, camera and subject. Weston saw the camera as metonymic of his own body and mind: the conception in his mind, the organization of his expressive feelings, flowed from his mind through the camera in a process that was entirely spontaneous and immediate.

The connection between the photographer, camera and referent allowed him to capture his subjects with *empathy*, as *Toadstool* and *Casa de Vecindad* both demonstrate, far from declaring their separateness from the referent, as Renger-Patzsch's photographs seem to do, Weston's works are *continuous* with the referent. In both, there is an inward sweeping motion

⁷³ Weston, *The Daybooks: Part I, Mexico*, 47.

that reflects the flow of the photographer's conception through the camera and into reality. Carol Armstrong describes this continuity as a sort of libidinal impulse, the camera becomes a "a phallus: as if without representing a woman, [the subject] were the ne plus ultra of the "male gaze.""⁷⁴ Whether or not we accept this as the ultimate gaze of Weston's camera, it speaks to the sense that Weston imbued his subjects with *human qualities*. Upon seeing his prints of shell series, Weston's lover and artistic-partner, Tina Modotti wrote that they made her think of "lilies and embryos. They are mystical and erotic."⁷⁵ While Weston found the reaction to these images bizarre, they remain in concert with the notion that it the artist's, not the viewer's feelings that are imbedded in the work. This Modotti does not claim to see her own sexuality in the work, but rather Weston's.⁷⁶

We are brought back to initial paradox and must ask how the artist can express himself through the "impersonal" eye of the camera. The camera, for Weston, registered truth. The truth Weston saw in the world and wished to convey with his camera, was the interconnectedness of all things, peppers, shells, nudes, faces, industrial plants in Ohio and even toilets. A mushroom and hanging clotheslines are every bit as *human* for Weston as a man with a gun. Rather than presenting an *interpretation* and transforming these subjects into *symbols* of humanity and of life, Weston believed he could employ the merciless transparency of the camera to make this visible.

In conclusion, I would ask the following: What role does the beholder play in Weston's formulation of photography? For a figure like Moholy, photography as a new mode of seeing had grand, societal implications. As we will see, Moholy was fundamentally interested on the effect

⁷⁴ Carol Armstrong, "This Photography Which is Not One: In the Gray Zone with Tina Modotti," *October* vol. 101, 2002: 26.

⁷⁵ Weston, *The Daybooks: Part II, California*, 32.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

that photographic reality would have on the beholder. Weston, in contrast, was relatively unconcerned with how his work is seen and interpreted by the beholder. In hearing how someone once interpreted one of his photographs, Adams remembers Weston replying, “Well if it means that to him, that’s alright with me.”⁷⁷ Moholy-Nagy celebrated the beholder’s unique experience of his photographs also, but he explicitly posits a beholder, where Weston does not. Overall, Weston was unconcerned with the reception of his photographs because for him photography was an act, a mode of seeing. This is why he refused to alter his negatives and why his printing process was so standardized. As objects, his prints were simply the tangible manifestations of prevision, reflections of own self-expression before a subject at a given moment in time. The previsioned mental image and the photograph were, for Weston, one in the same thing. Thus, in viewing a photograph, the beholder embodies Weston at the moment before exposure.

Adams writes, however, that Weston would have wanted the viewer to “discover” his own *goodness* within the photograph.⁷⁸ Perhaps by goodness, Adams meant his own humanity. The idea that a beholder might be incited to something like *goodness* by observing the heightened sense of reality of a photograph is central to Moholy-Nagy’s photographic theory. If Weston did indeed believe that his photographs could compel goodness, it was through his objective rendering of reality and his revelation of the essential connections between all things. The meaning of the photograph did not change, depending on the beholder. For both Renger-Patzsch and Weston the meaning-making or artistic aspect of photography lay entirely in the process of *prevision*. For Moholy, the interaction between the photograph and the beholder *created* meaning. But, as I will argue in the next chapter, this is more complicated than it at first appears.

⁷⁷ Adams, “Edward Weston,” 117.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*,” 123.

Chapter 3

The Beholder as Producer?

It is in the nature of human existence that the senses are insatiable, that they reach out for more new experience every time they take something in.⁷⁹

--Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction," 1922

László Moholy-Nagy's (1895-1946) *In the Sand* of 1925 (fig. 7) shows a woman sitting on a beach, legs outstretched before her. The camera is elevated behind her, so that she appears upside-down in the left corner of the composition. Her legs sweep outward toward the right and her head, slightly out of focus, is thrown backwards. Unlike Weston and Renger-Patzsch, Moholy was not concerned with having every aspect of his composition perfectly in focus. Beyond the figure, the sand creates a patterning of dark and light and at the very edge of the composition one can just make out the corner of a blanket, a white book and a pair of shoes. The caption under the image, reprinted in Moholy's *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), reads:

Formerly regarded as distortion, today a startling experience! An invitation to re-evaluate our way of seeing. This picture can be turned round. It always produces new vistas.⁸⁰

The manipulation of the camera creates a photograph that can be viewed multiple ways, or rather in an *infinite* number of ways. There is no *wrong* way to look it. Moholy imagines that in each subsequent viewing, the photograph might reveal something different. Turning it on its side might expose the shoes, formerly unnoticed. Turned back around, with the knowledge of the

⁷⁹ László Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction," *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 80.

⁸⁰ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 61.

shoes' existence, the beholder sees an entirely new image. This can go on *ad infinitum*. Unlike Renger-Patzsch and Weston, for whom the photographic image was fixed at exposure, Moholy believed a photograph might reveal new things from later manipulation. The question that emerges: Is it the beholder that produces the “new vistas,” or are they a result of the artist’s intentions? *In The Sand* is open to “interpretation” by the beholder—it begs to be handled, turned and reconsidered—but only because the photographer was able to produce this new relationship through his distortion of reality. Through his encounter with the new reality of the photograph, the beholder is *compelled* to see differently. As I will argue, Moholy was interested in modes of intentionality that are more expansive than at first glance.

Painting, Photography, Film was published in 1925, while Moholy was the instructor of the foundation course at the Bauhaus. Although Moholy’s production ranged from painting and sculpture to typography and design, from an early moment, the creative potential of photography especially excited him: the primary instrument of photography was not the camera, but light. While the Bauhaus did not offer a formal course in photography until the end of the 1920s, Moholy was engaged with the medium early in the decade both in practice and as a writer.

Moholy compiled a collection of photographs from various sources, including mass media photography from magazines and advertisements, works by avant-garde photographers, Dadaist photo-collage and photograms. *Painting, Photography, Film* paired this collection with a series of short essays intended to demonstrate the creative possibilities of the photographic medium and its value in the twentieth century. The book established Moholy’s photographic theory as essentially realist: photography is able to “arrest fragments of the world” better than the human eye.⁸¹ The camera’s indexical relationship to its referent produced unfamiliarity out of the

⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

everyday. Moholy's aim was not to supplant the photographic medium's transparency, but rather to use it to capture reality in a way that the human could not. For Moholy, even cameraless photography was based in the medium's indexicality. The photogram, a photographic image made without a camera by arranging elements directly on top of light-sensitive paper and making an exposure, did not challenge his commitment to transparency. The opacity or translucence of the used objects would result in tonal variations of black, white and gray. Despite the abstraction of the resulting image, it was an index, a "diagrammatic record of the motion of light translated into black and white and gray values."⁸² The resulting photogram is the physical trace left behind by objects and light. For Moholy, all uses of the photographic medium evoked a particular type of response in the beholder.

Concerned primarily with the extra-artistic purpose of photography, Moholy did not attempt to define it as an art form or explicitly stress the photographer's *intentionality*.⁸³ Rather than the expression of the artist, Moholy emphasized the finished product, an object subject to the *individual* experience of the beholder. When pushed to its creative limits, Moholy believed that photography incited a "state of increased activity in the observer," by reorienting his sensory relationship to reality and challenging his preconceived notions about the world.⁸⁴ He used the words *sensory*, *emotional* and *biological* interchangeably to describe the cognitive effect that all art, including photography, should produce in order to adequately fulfill its societal function, as part of his larger discourse on the unity of art and life. In an essay on architecture in *Painting, Photography, Film*, Moholy called for the creation of "*Gesamtwerk* (life) [or total work] which

⁸² Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, (Chicago: P. Theobald, 1947), 188.

⁸³ Moholy-Nagy, "Unprecedented Photography," in *Photography in the Modern Era, Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 83.

⁸⁴ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, 18.

abolishes all isolation, in which all individual accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a universal necessity.”⁸⁵ Used properly, photography could function as an example of the *Gesamtwerk*, addressing the *biological* needs of humanity.

Based on the didactic program at the Bauhaus, *The New Vision* (1928) outlines Moholy’s pedagogical theory and utopian vision and grounds his teachings within a biological framework. The task of art should be to uncover “primordial, basic elements” of creative expression, which are “firmly anchored in the biological.”⁸⁶ The biological determinism in *The New Vision* reflects Moholy’s desire to reclaim some essential aspects of humanity in the face of an industrialized society where meaning is constructed by “moneymaking, competition and trade.”⁸⁷ While photography does not play a major role in *The New Vision*, Moholy includes photography as one of the central arts in the education of a more total human in his later expansion of this text, *Vision in Motion* (1947)⁸⁸

Moholy’s *Siesta* of 1926 (fig. 8) dramatically thematizes photography’s appeal to the biological reality of the beholder. *Siesta* is one of three part series in which the subjects, Moholy’s colleague at the Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer, two young girls (his daughters), and a pair of dolls owned by the girls, are depicted in the same compositional formation on the balcony. Taken as a series, the photographs emphasize our biological relationships to each other, using a father and his daughters as subjects in two different, but compositionally similar photographs. In *Siesta*, Schlemmer’s daughters are shown—the camera positioned at their feet—sleeping on a balcony. Both *In the Sand* and *Siesta* share a thematic dimension: rest, the restoration biological fundamentals and something that is explicitly not competitive

⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁶ Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 4th ed. (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1947), 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1.

moneymaking. At the same time, *Siesta* seems to be an assault on the subject's—and therefore the beholder's—humanity. The fact that the girls are sleeping seems to highlight their inanimate position before the camera. The human figures act primarily as formal elements of the composition, dissecting and being dissected by the graphic pattern created by the balcony.

In the third print in this series, *Dolls*, (fig. 9) artificial counterparts, that is to say, dolls, replace the two girls, further stripping them of their humanity. Like *In the Sand*, the elevated perspective allows for many possible orientations. *Dolls* can be turned around to “produce new vistas.” The effect, in this case, is even more disorienting. The caption beneath *Dolls* in *Painting Photography Film* reads: “the organization of the light and shade, the criss-crossing of the shadows removes the toy into the realm of the fantastic.” In *Siesta*, the pattern seem dissects the girl on the right. This is literalized in *Dolls*; one of the dolls is missing its leg. Here, the dolls disrupt the netlike shadow cast on the balcony. In their simultaneous emphasis on and alienation of the human qualities of their subjects, these photographs seem to alert the viewer to his *own*, perhaps submerged, humanity.

Pepper Stetler argues in *Bound Vision: Reading the Photographic Book in the Weimar Republic* (2009) that *Painting Photography Film* creates “a new perceptual world that necessarily depends on photography to exist.” The context of the book requires the close attention of the beholder and brings him to a heightened mental state.⁸⁹ In response to a film still featured in *Painting Photography Film*, she writes: “the viewer completes the film, but it remains in the realm of the optical, uninfluenced by the viewer’s subjective comprehension.”⁹⁰ It is difficult to construe this claim. According to Moholy, it is nature of our biology that the body of

⁸⁹ Pepper Stetler, “Bound Vision: Reading the Photographic Book in the Weimar Republic,” PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2009), 131.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*,” 126.

each beholder would have a different sensory response to the photograph. Moholy seemed to celebrated the idea that each beholder would have a unique interaction with a photograph—each producing “new vistas.” The universal necessity that most interested Moholy was the “insatiable” need for novel experience.⁹¹ Each beholder would not necessarily produce the *same* photograph, but rather be compelled to constantly discover new meaning.

We might understand Moholy’s photograph’s as fundamentally open to the experience of the beholder. Moholy embraced the possibility, or rather the *inevitability*, of *accident*. In a telling anecdote, the art historian Beaumont Newhall recalls a visit he took with Moholy to Weston’s studio in Carmel, California. Studying Weston’s prints, which for Weston represented his previsualization of the photograph before exposure, Moholy turned them upside down, finding new “hidden and fantastic form.”⁹² The act of turning the photograph on its head denies the intentionality associated with prevision. Previsualization is an attempt on the part of the photographer eliminate *accident*, by envisioning the print “complete in all values, in every detail.”⁹³ Moholy’s practice of *post-visualization*, a term I borrow from Jerry Uelsmann, opens up the photograph to the experience of someone other than the photographer. Uelsmann defined post-vision as “the willingness of the photographer to revisualize the final image at any point in the entire photographic process.”⁹⁴ While for Uelsmann, post-visualization refers to his specific practice of altering and manipulating the negatives in the darkroom to create novel compositions (a practice Moholy undoubtedly would have supported), I use it here to describe the ways in

⁹¹ Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” 80.

⁹² Beaumont Newhall, “Review of Moholy’s Achievements (1948)” in *Moholy-Nagy: an Anthology* ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 70.

⁹³ Edward Weston, “Statement to The San Franciscan,” [1930] in *Weston: On Photography*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), 62.

⁹⁴ Jerry Uelsmann, “Post-Visualization,” *Florida Quarterly* no. 1 (Summer 1967): 87.

which the finished photograph could be reimagined and rediscovered by both the photographer and the beholder.

Moholy celebrated the medium's openness to accident as an opportunity for rediscovery: Newhall also recalls Moholy being overjoyed after noticing a coil of rope in one of his own prints for the first time.⁹⁵ The photographer who actively seeks to eliminate accident tries to deny the beholder their "insatiable" need for novel sensory experiences. Moholy's excitement over the coil of rope might amount to something like Barthes's *punctum*. Coming to the photograph with his unique experiences, each beholder understands the photograph differently on the level of the *punctum*. What stirs "great sympathy" for one, might elicit anger from another. In Moholy's case: one beholder might rotate the photograph clockwise and the other counterclockwise. How we regard Moholy's theory of photography, however, might depend on how we define Barthes' *punctum*. Dealing most directly with subject matter, the *studium* leads to an "encounter [with] the photographer's intentions."⁹⁶ A photograph's *punctum*, in contrast, is "that accident which pricks" the beholder, by appealing to his emotion and personal history.⁹⁷ The presence of *punctum* is a product of the indexicality of the medium and is said to undermine the intentionality of the author. What the *punctum* "means" is a matter for the beholder to decide. Photography invites each beholder to become a *producer* in his own right. Alternatively, if we interpret the *punctum*, as Michael Fried would have us do, as a sign of the *anti-theatricality* of the photograph, then the unintentional aspects of Moholy's photographs become a sign of their absorption.

⁹⁵ Newhall, "Photo Eye of the 1920s: The Deutsche Werkbund Exhibition of 1929," in *Germany, The New Photography 1927-33*, ed., David Mellor (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 79.

⁹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 27.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27, 43.

Despite my emphasis on the beholder's response to Moholy's photographs and on accident, a closer look at Moholy's writings and works demonstrate that the photographer's intentions were far from irrelevant. His photographs acknowledge the subject position of the photographer and his role in producing new visual relationships. The importance of authorial intentions is implicit in Moholy's distinction between *reproductive* and *productive* uses of the medium. In "Production-Reproduction" (1922), Moholy decried the current state of photography, claiming that the medium had, until then, been used primarily for *reproduction*. Moholy defined *productive* photographs as those that "produce new, as yet unfamiliar relationships" between the beholder and the referent.⁹⁸ In *Painting Photography Film*, Moholy provides captions describing the ways photographs, particularly his own, can challenge the perceptions of the human eye. A close-up of a gramophone record provides a "heightened reality of an every-day object."⁹⁹ A view of the balconies of the Dessau Bauhaus shot from below, Moholy writes, provides "the optical truth of the perspectival construction."¹⁰⁰ Truth is achieved through the production of a new relationship between viewer and the subject capture by the lens.

Following Moholy, Walter Benjamin described a similar distinction between productive and reproductive photographs in his lecture "Author as Producer." As I suggested in chapter one, Benjamin criticized Renger-Patzsch for naturalizing his subjects through "technical perfection." The difference between a productive and reproductive photograph is the element that breaks the spell of the image and provides a *cognitive punch* to the beholder. In this regard, it is the element of the photograph that is political. Benjamin describes this as the "capacity of giving a print a caption which would tear it away from fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary

⁹⁸ Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction," 80.

⁹⁹ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

usevalue.”¹⁰¹ What Benjamin and Moholy share is an understanding of photography as having the capacity, when used productively, to shape the beholder, rousing him from the state of passive consumption.

La Canebière Street, Marseilles—View Through the Balcony Grille of 1928 (fig. 10) demonstrates Moholy’s basic photographic aims. Overlooking a busy street, the elevated perspective disorients the viewer, dislocating him from his naturalized position at street-level and from those associations built up in his immersive experience of urban space. An ornate balcony railing obscures the street and superimposes an abstract pattern over the scene, impeding any immediate mode of visual access. The balcony is out of focus and, as a result, ambiguous. Far from being a transparent rendering of the city street, the balcony forces us to acknowledge the presence of the camera, as we are not simply looking *at* something, but *through* something that fundamentally changes the way we see.

The pattern cast by the balcony functions much like the shadow of the camera in Otto Umbehr’s *Self Portrait on a Beach* (ca. 1927; Fig. 7). Umbo, as he was known, took his self-portrait lying down, his arms outstretched above him, so that the shadow cast by the camera falls directly over his eyes. This inclusion is the acknowledgement of photography as a new kind of vision, a new presentation of reality. Rosalind Krauss writes to this effect:

The introjection, into the very field of the photograph, of the image of that extending, amplifying device for the mastery of reality is what is shared not only by these two works [by Umbo and Henri], but by the majority of objects produced by The New Vision. Thus what unites the various techniques and formal tropes of The New Vision’s camera-seeing is the constant experience of the camera-seen. That is what lies beyond Moholy’s rhetoric, actually to enter the frame of the image as a visual testimony to a technological apparatus that has usurped nature.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” [1936], in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 775.

¹⁰² Rosalind Krauss, “Jump Over the Bauhaus,” *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 109.

For Krauss, the camera's shadow in Umbo's portrait is not just a mark of its presence, but a claim that photographic vision is superior to our own. Moholy's photographs also emphasize the "camera-seen." While not a direct reference to the camera, as in Umbo's portrait, the balcony in *La Canebière Street* acts as a reminder of the camera's mediation of reality. It is as if the form of the balcony adhered directly to the camera's lens and imposed itself over the street and onto the façade of the building.

Krauss' term "camera seeing" embodies Moholy's belief that photographic vision *could* amount to something superior to the human eye. In order to function as an "instrument of visual expression," however, the first task of photography was to distinguish itself from painting.¹⁰³ Like Renger-Patzsch and Weston, Moholy believed that photographers had to develop a "photographic language" based on the qualities of the medium. Seeing the camera as the dominant feature of the medium, Renger-Patzsch and Weston proposed to do this through photographic realism. Moholy, in contrast, placed equal emphasis on all the medial components of photography, such as the camera's lens, enlarger and sensitive paper, and their shared capacity to capture motion and light.¹⁰⁴ Moholy urged photographers to experiment with techniques and perspectives—distortion using mirrors and lenses, oblique camera angles and birds-eye views, cameraless photographs, and other untried techniques.

Umbo's portrait acknowledges its own productivity: the shadow, which captures not only the camera, but also Umbo's arms, is an admission of the photographer's physical manipulation of the camera, flipping it upside down to capture a self-portrait. This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, Umbo could not have fully *previsioned* this photograph; it is accidental in large part. Secondly, it declares the photographer's subject position in the photographic act. The

¹⁰³ Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 178.

¹⁰⁴ Moholy-Nagy, "Unprecedented Photography," 84.

shadow reveals both how the photographer controls the camera and how the medium resists his control. Moholy would have reveled in this sort of paradox. I believe this paradox to be at the core of Moholy's practice, which I want to argue, occupies a middle ground between a modern and postmodern approach to photography.

Through his mastery of the medium, photographer produced a new version of reality that would free the beholder from the "laws of association" that govern his perception.¹⁰⁵ Through experimentation with perspectives and techniques, Moholy wanted to jolt the beholder out of a conventional mode of viewing. In 1928, Moholy wrote: "Good photography is creative and—although mostly executed by means of machine—not a mechanical matter. The machine is only a tool in the hands of men."¹⁰⁶ Moholy's notion of production might be read as an *assertion* of his *intentionality*. Moholy's celebration of accident—of finding a coil of rope unexpectedly within one of his photographs—is not quite accident, but rather the unconscious intentionality of a truly gifted photographer. It is as if, because he had taken so many photographs, art and life melded for Moholy.

¹⁰⁵ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Moholy-Nagy, "Neue Wege in de Photographie," *Photographische Rundschau and Mittelungen*, vol. 65 no. 2 (1928): 33.

CONCLUSION

From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.

--Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935)

What I hope to have demonstrated in my analyses of several key works by Renger-Patzsch, Weston and Moholy-Nagy at the end of the 1920s is that there remained something profoundly at stake in establishing the artistic status of photography at this critical moment in its history. This seemed to be, to crucial voices of the period like Walter Benjamin, a mistake. From a dominant position, called postmodernism, I have been looking at these artists and their works in the wrong way. According to the field of photographic theory, history and practice defined in light of Benjamin’s claims, the very question of art is wrong-headed. I have argued that Benjamin has distorted the picture of what was actually happening in photography at this moment, inasmuch as these key figures in the photographic discourse—Weston, Renger-Patzsch and Moholy—emphasize to a greater or lesser extent their artistic intentionality and the status of photography as an art. Benjamin cited Moholy in “A Little History of Photography,” writing that photography exceeded the human eye and presented a defamiliarized account of reality. While Weston, Renger-Patzsch and Moholy embraced this claim, they nonetheless saw this as a result of the photographer’s intentional choices. Benjamin saw the photograph’s alienation from reality as the end of art, whereas these photographers saw it as a new achievement for art. Weston,

Renger-Patzsch and Moholy challenged the same central assertion: If art is equal to intention, photography cannot function as art because its mechanical processes and transparency to the referent defies the control of the photographer. As if anticipating Barthes, they resist the notion that the meaning of the photograph is left to be construed by the beholder.

In his “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin’s primary concern was the “revolutionary demands in the politics of art.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, the loss of authenticity—the fact that can be no true “original” photograph—that necessarily resulted from the mechanical processes of the medium was a good thing: it removed the photograph from the “realm of beautiful semblance” and changed the “total function of art” into a political one.¹⁰⁸ Moholy, an important figure for Benjamin, shared this revolutionary idea about photography, but, as I argued in chapter three, Moholy’s work was not anti-art, even in his willingness to embrace chance and accident. Moholy wanted to preserve—or rather, assert—the artistic status of photography, even when the stakes were political, perhaps especially when the stakes were political.

From the perspective of Weston and Renger-Patzsch, one wants to ask: Why, exactly, photography was best construed as political? Both Weston and Renger-Patzsch suggest, both in their rhetoric and through their photography, that photography is best suited towards expression, operating outside the practical (if not theoretical) discourse of politics. The canonical account of Renger-Patzsch’s works have been cast in terms of Benjamin’s politics—and thus as unsuccessful photographs—when in fact, his aim was not political, or rather his progressive politics were more elliptical than would satisfy Benjamin. Benjamin criticized Renger-Patzsch’s treatment of subjects as the aestheticization of the world, a treatment he felt masked the political (specifically, class) tension inherent in many of these objects and the relations of production that

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 218.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 224, 230.

were responsible for them. In the final section of “The Work of Art” essay, Benjamin wrote: “Fascism is rendering [politics] aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.” The necessary conclusion of this account is that Renger-Patzsch’s work amounts to Fascism. Whether or not this is true, and I do not think it is, considering these images for their political value, or lack thereof, seems to miss the point. When considered as works of art, it becomes clear that Renger-Patzsch was an exceptionally talented photographer. They do, in fact, declare *the world is beautiful*, but for reasons Benjamin could not assent to—or recognize.

The position taken after Benjamin is that photography does not simply resist classification as art or non-art, but fundamentally undermines *the category* of art. In “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” Rosalind Krauss argues that photography challenges the ontological notions of authenticity and authorship fundamental to our understanding of the work of art. As a result photography resists the traditional narrative of art history. Krauss writes:

Everywhere at present there is an attempt to dismantle the photographic archive—the set of practices, institutions, and relationships to which nineteenth century photography originally belonged—and to reassemble it within the categories previously constituted by art and its history. It is not hard to conceive of what the inducements for doing so are, but it is more difficult to understand the tolerance for the kind of incoherence it produces.¹⁰⁹

Krauss argues that trying to fit works by nineteenth century photographers into the space of the museum denies the context of its production. Specifically referring to the works of Timothy O’Sullivan (1840-1882) Krauss claims that they should not operate within the “aesthetic discourse.” Photography’s indexical relationship to the world precludes this. The problem at issue here is not photography’s status as art, but rather art’s status as art.

¹⁰⁹ Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 150.

The loss of “authenticity” in photography implies, or perhaps is a result of, the disappearance of the hand of the artist. Renger-Patzsch, Weston and Moholy-Nagy, in different ways, challenged this notion. Moholy’s particular notion of production allowed, specifically, for the creation of an “authentic” work of art. Previsualization was an attempt to reclaim the hand of the artist. For Weston and Renger-Patzsch, prevision is not simply an empty—or misguided—assertion of the artist’s intentions in the face of the transparency of the photographic medium. Despite the reasons that the photographic medium, pointed out by nearly all subsequent writers on photography, eludes the control of the photographer, the work of these two photographers, as I have shown, reflect their intentions, even if those intentions are not of the order of traditional media such as painting or sculpture. Renger-Patzsch’s and Weston’s photographs are intentional, despite their realism. As I claimed in chapter one, Renger-Patzsch’s photographs thematize their separation from the world and in chapter two I argued that Weston’s work showcases the camera’s continuity with the world.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight a couple of themes that emerged in my study of these three photographers and identify questions for further study. The first is the question of the nature of medium-specificity in regards to photography. Perhaps more than any other medium its limits were, and remain, somewhat ambiguous. In the 1920s, there was a universal call for the development of a purely photographic language, based on the ontological qualities of the medium. Everyone agreed that photography was direct, objective and transparent. Yet, the dichotomy between Renger-Patzsch and Weston, on one side, and Moholy, on the other, exemplifies how different this language could be. Regardless, they stressed the medium and not their choice of subject-matter. Greenberg’s notion of the medium specificity of photography deserves further attention. Here is Greenberg:

Weston concentrates too much on the medium. But while we forgive the painter for this, because he puts the feelings he withholds from the object into his *treatment* of it, we are reluctant to forgive the photographer because medium is so much less immediately receptive to his feeling and as yet so much less an automatic category of art experience.¹¹⁰

What implications does this have for Greenberg's critical theory more broadly and where does photography fit in his narrative of modernism? Why, for instance, can a tacked up canvas function as art, but a consciously arranged or stylized photograph of a shell or a rock cannot?

Secondly, Renger-Patzsch, Weston and Moholy shared a profound interest in the relationship of the camera to the human body and spirit. This, I think, is something that calls for greater examination in Renger-Patzsch's oeuvre specifically because it is often more subtle.

While *Industrial Landscape near Essen* makes a reference to the human form in the clotheslines, some of his other works from the period dramatically thematize the human qualities of inanimate objects. Even the works that do speak to the body—I am thinking of a particularly striking photograph of a group of stacked washbasins of the late 1920s—are, like all of his works, occlusive.

Franz Roh articulated something I believe to be central to all three of their practices when he wrote:

Naturally, the essential ingredient is a human being with a clear instinct to stop at the right point, and to use framing, lighting, spatial tension, sharp or soft focus or a combination of both, and occasionally even expressive distortion. For the technical apparatus is merely a medium through which a human conception of the world seeks to realize itself. But "human" must not be understood in the sense of philistine, average or anthropomorphic: an "astronomical" understanding of the microscopic world is perhaps the most human one, since the ability to experience such a concept is given to man alone.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye," 89.

¹¹¹ Franz Roh, "The Value of Photography," in *Photography in the Modern Era, Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 162-163.

Not only does this explicitly state the intentionality of the photographer, it also speaks to the notion that somehow photography makes us more, not less, human, or rather, makes our humanity more available to us. As I have noted, the central claim about photography in the 1920s was that the camera's lens perceived reality better than the human eye. More than that, Weston, Renger-Patzsch and Moholy all believed that photography had the capacity to reveal something about the human, or empathetic, elements of the world. Moholy was (literally) interested in the human body and its biological response to the world of his photographs. Weston and Renger-Patzsch sought out the empathetic qualities of the world with their cameras, even if Renger-Patzsch typically evaded any easy connection with the beholder.

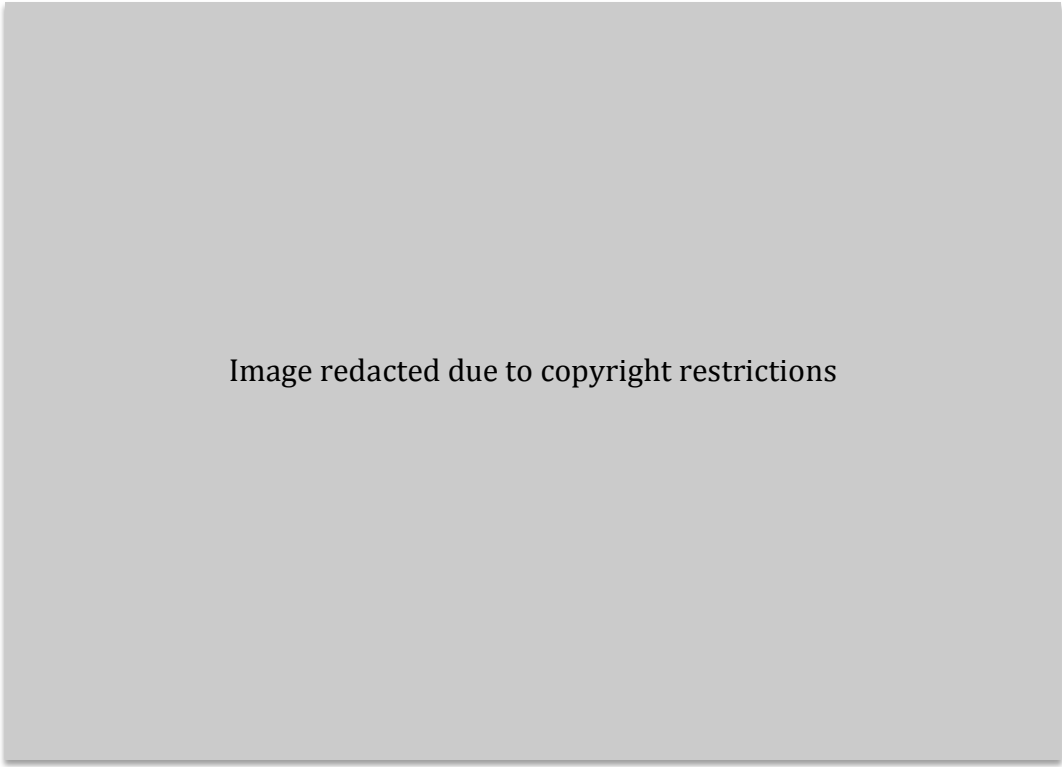


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Figure 1 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Industrial Landscape Near Essen*, 1930

Image can be found in: Renger-Patzsch Albert. *Die Freude am Gegenstand*. Edited by Ann and Jürgen Wilde. Paderborn: Fink Wilhelm GmbH, 2010. Page 124.

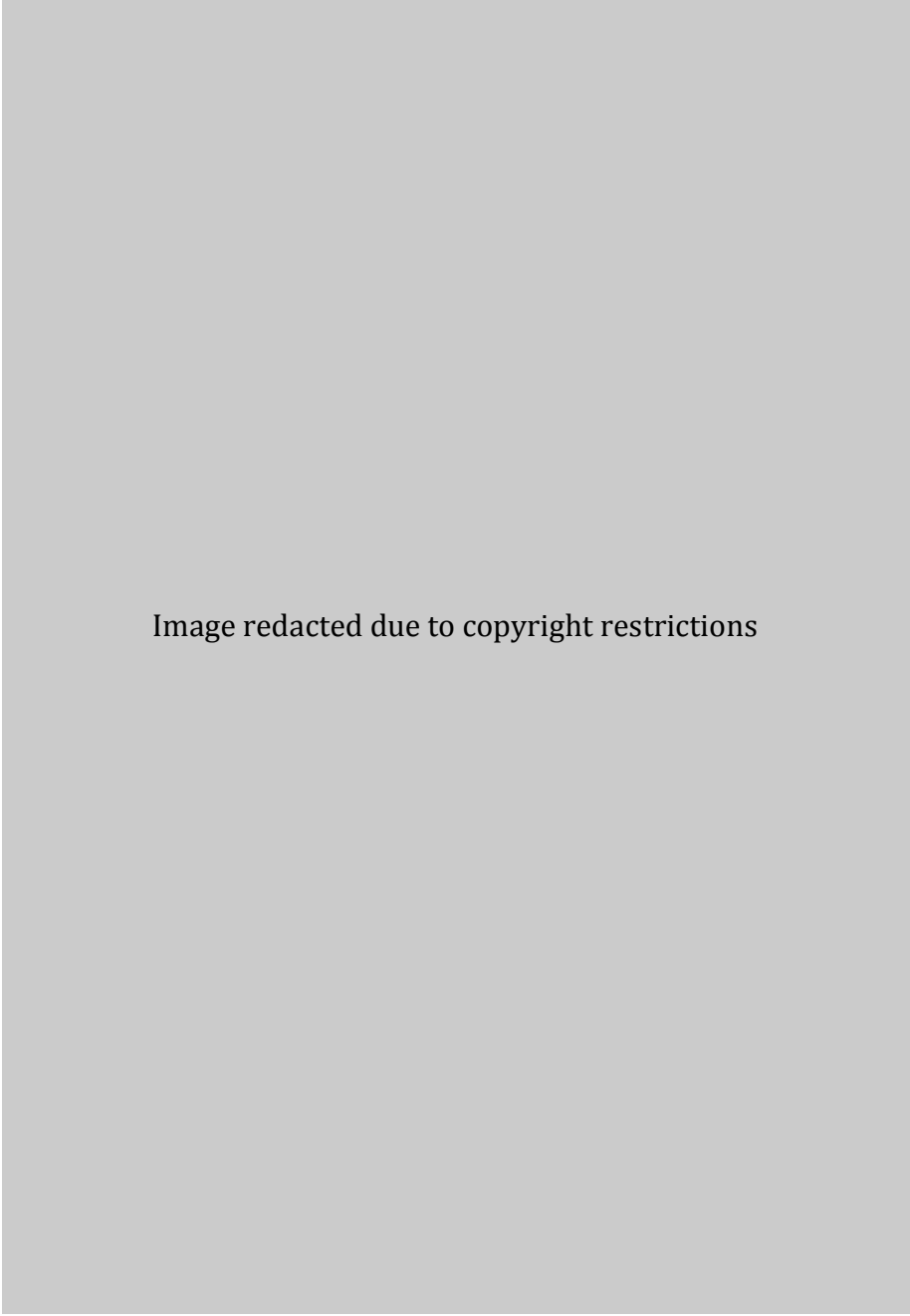


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Figure 2 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Shrimp Fisherwoman*, 1926/7

Image Source: Wilde, Ann and Jürgen and Thomas Weski, Eds. *Albert Renger-Patzsch, Photographer of Objectivity*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

© Albert Renger-Patzsch Archiv / Ann u. Jürgen Wilde, Köln / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Image can be viewed online at: <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/artwork/42953-halligen-krabbenfischerin>

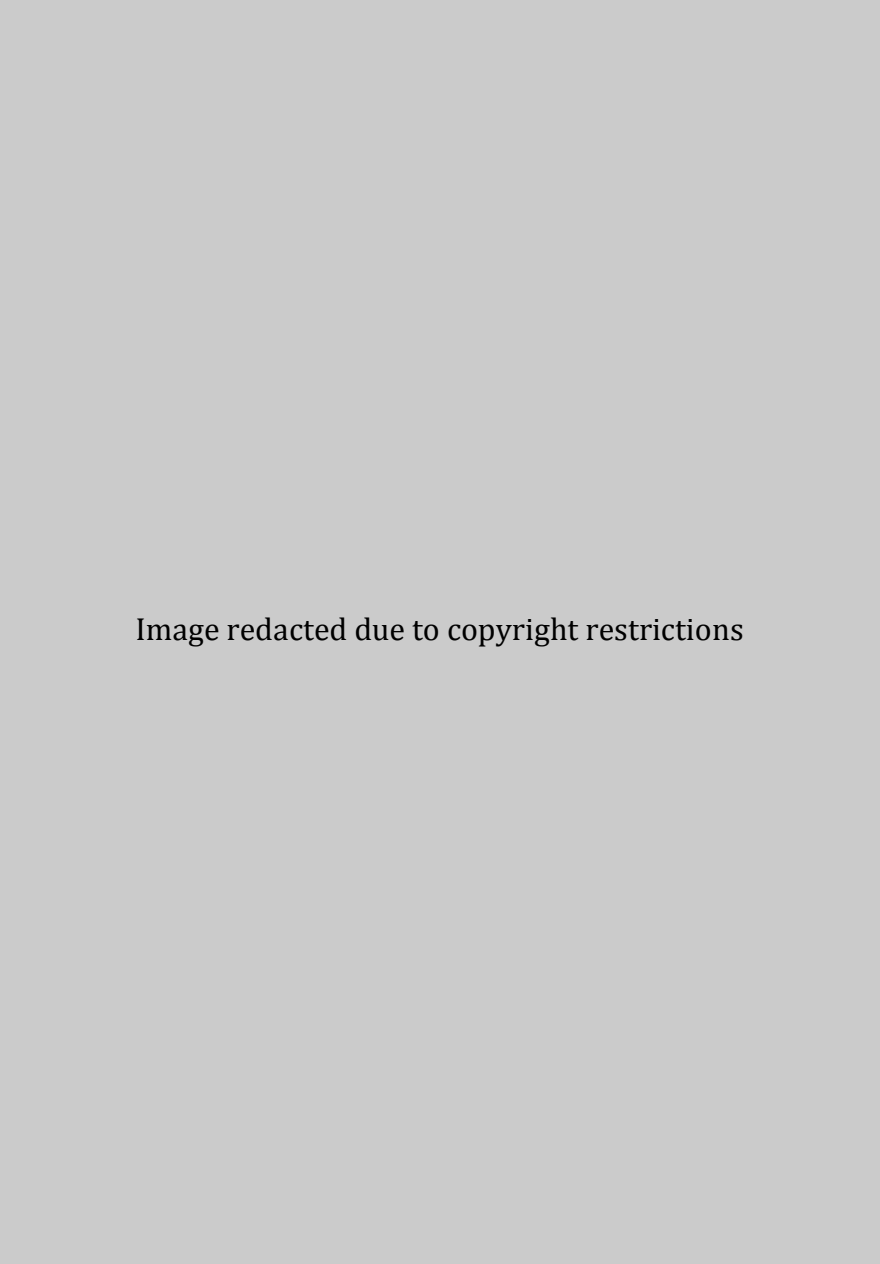


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Figure 3 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Fungi Lepiota Procera*, 1930

Gelatin silver print

Image Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Image can be viewed online at: <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190039038>

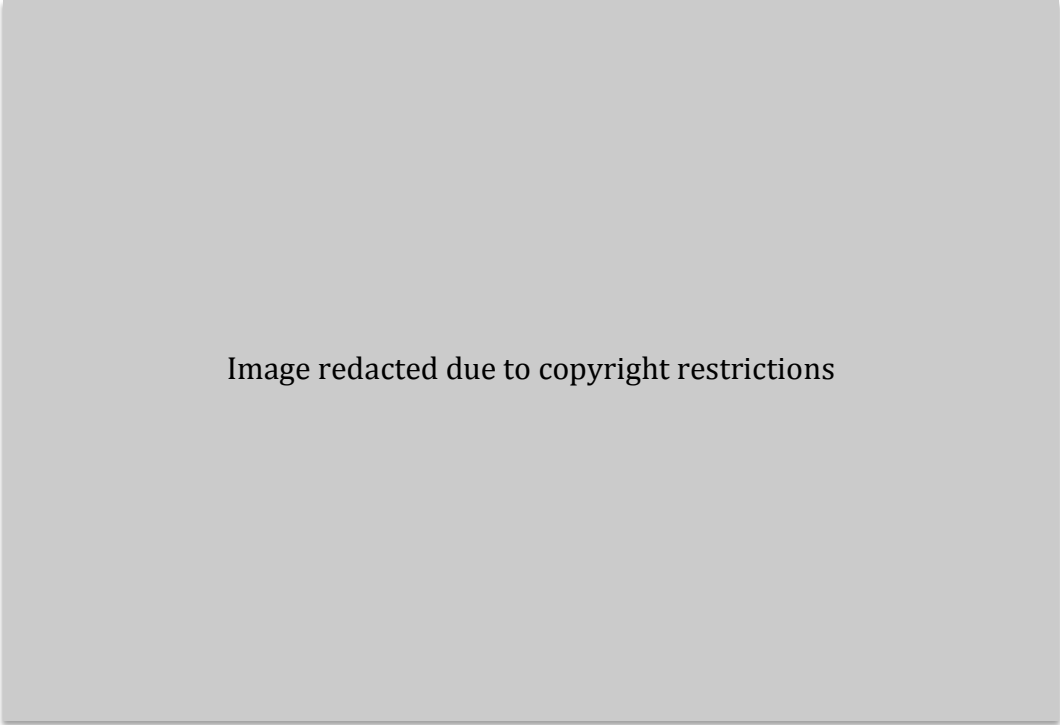


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Figure 4 Edward Weston, *Toadstool*, 1931

Gelatin silver print

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Image can be viewed online at: http://www.edward-weston.com/edward_weston_natural_16.htm

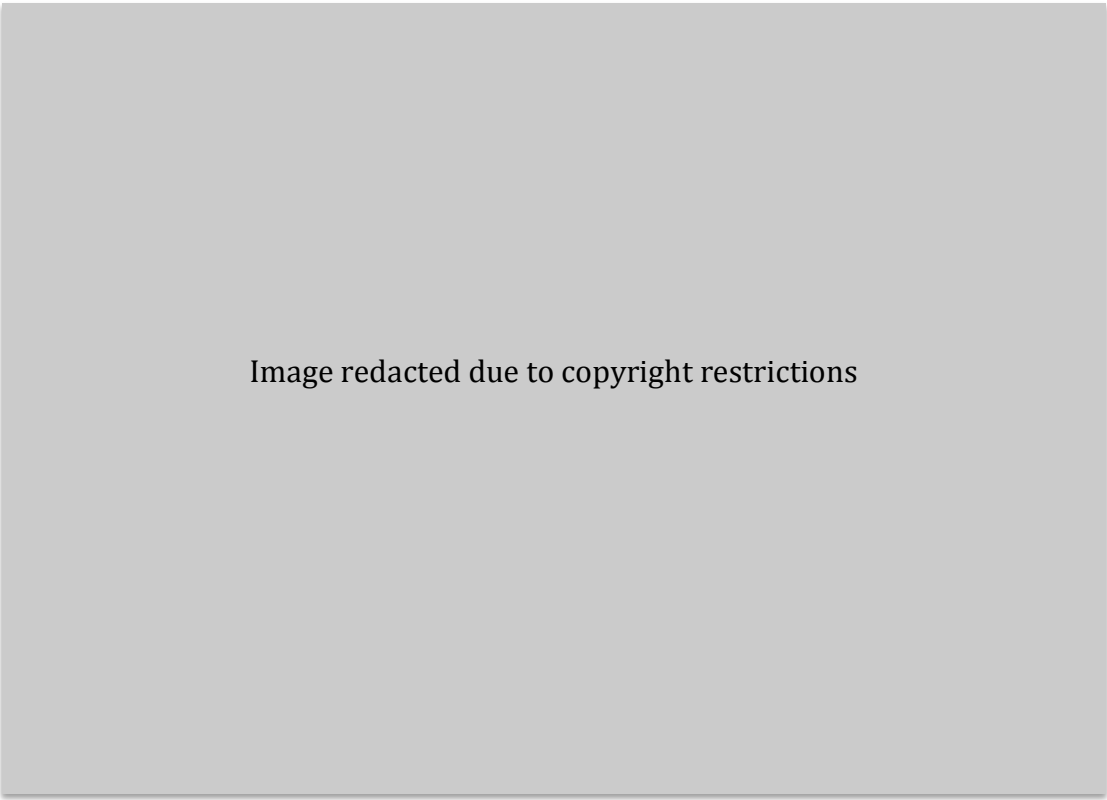


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Figure 5 Edward Weston, *Casa de Vecindad*, 1926

Gelatin Silver Print

Source: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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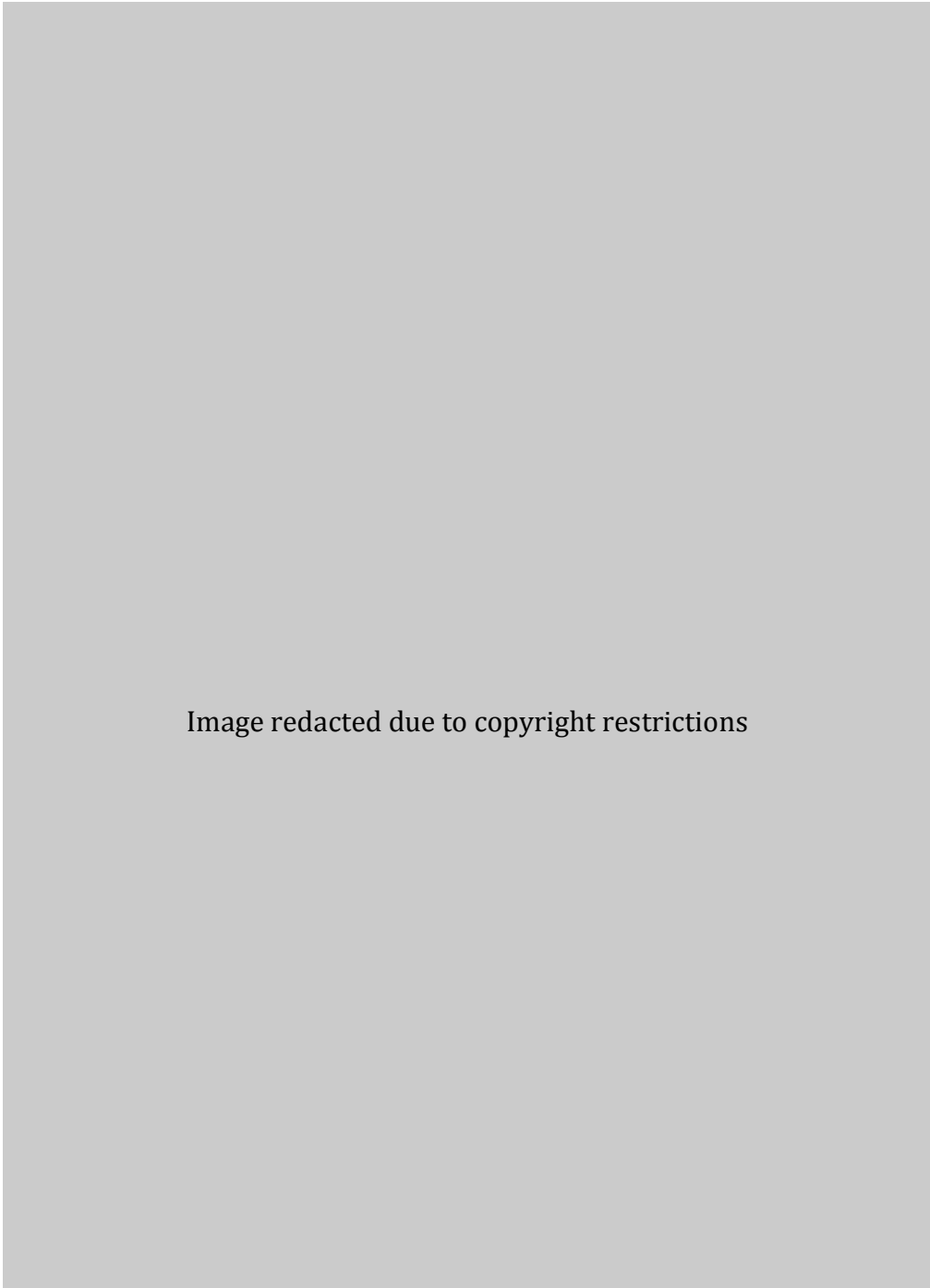


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Figure 7 Edward Weston, *Galván Shooting*, 1924

Gelatin Silver Print

Image Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Image can be viewed online at: http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190021728?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=* &deptids=19&who=Edward+Weston&pos=3

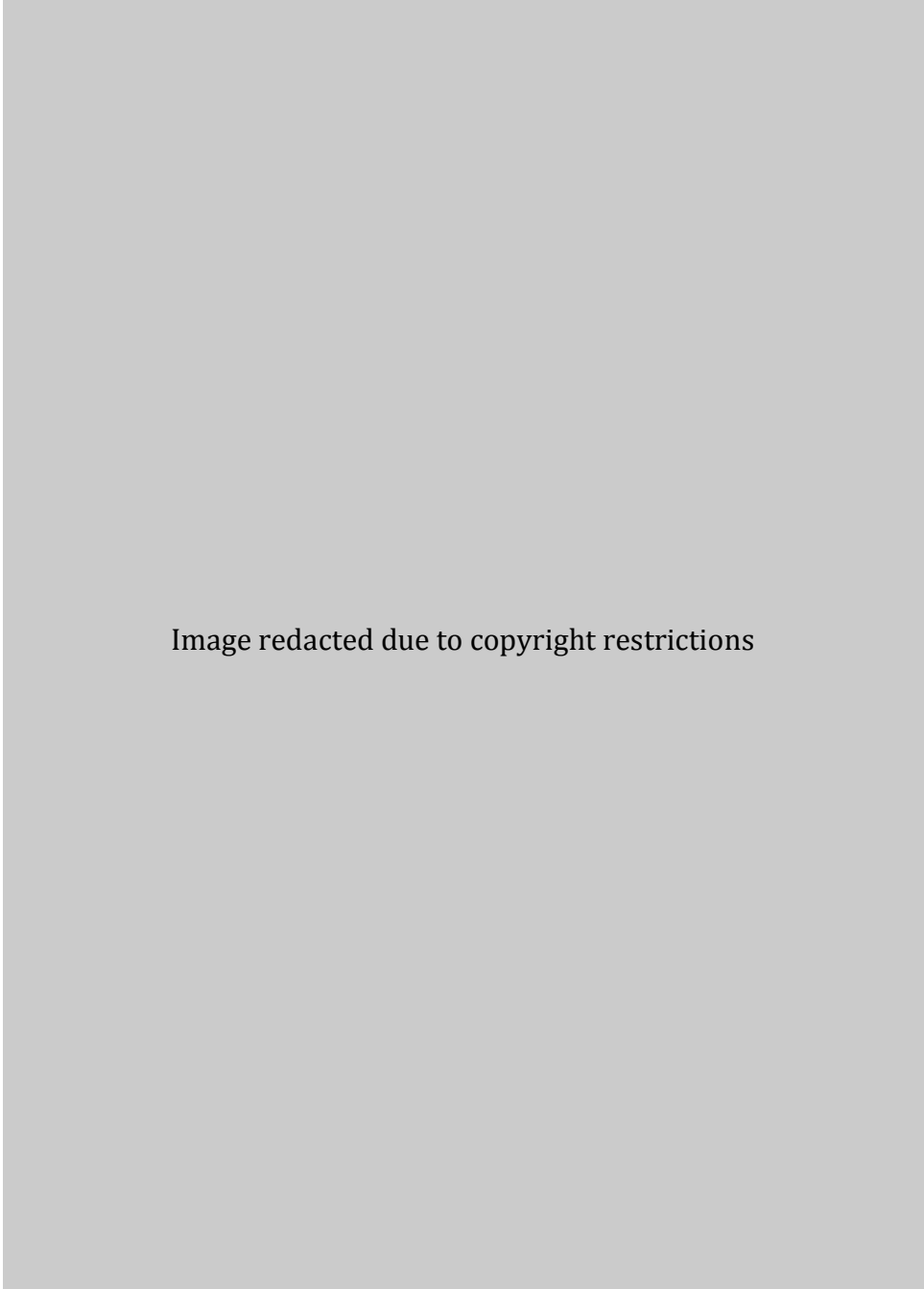


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Figure 8 Moholy-Nagy, *In the Sand*, 1925

Image source: *Painting Photography Film*. Translated by Janet Seligman. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

Image can be found on page 61 of *Painting Photography Film*.

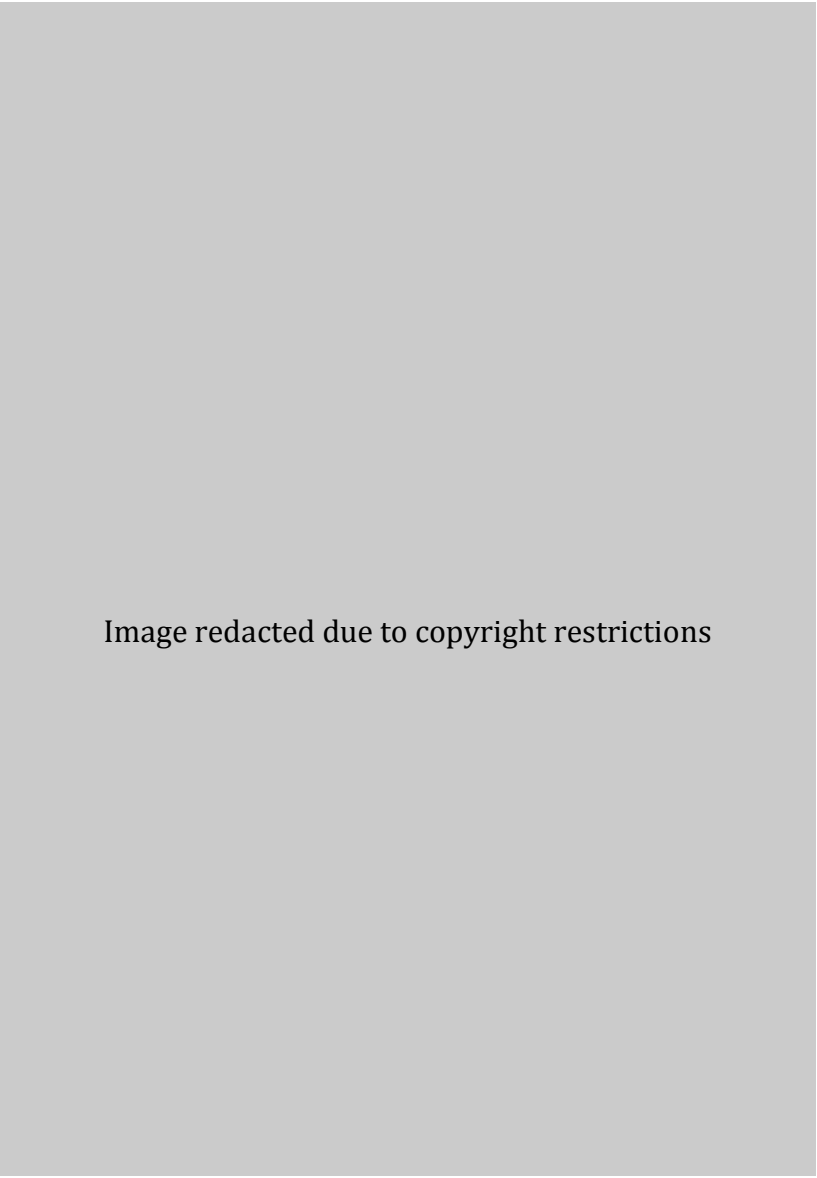


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Figure 9 Moholy-Nagy, *Siesta*, 1926

Gelatin Silver Print

Image Source: Museum of Modern Art

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Image can be viewed online at:

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=54088

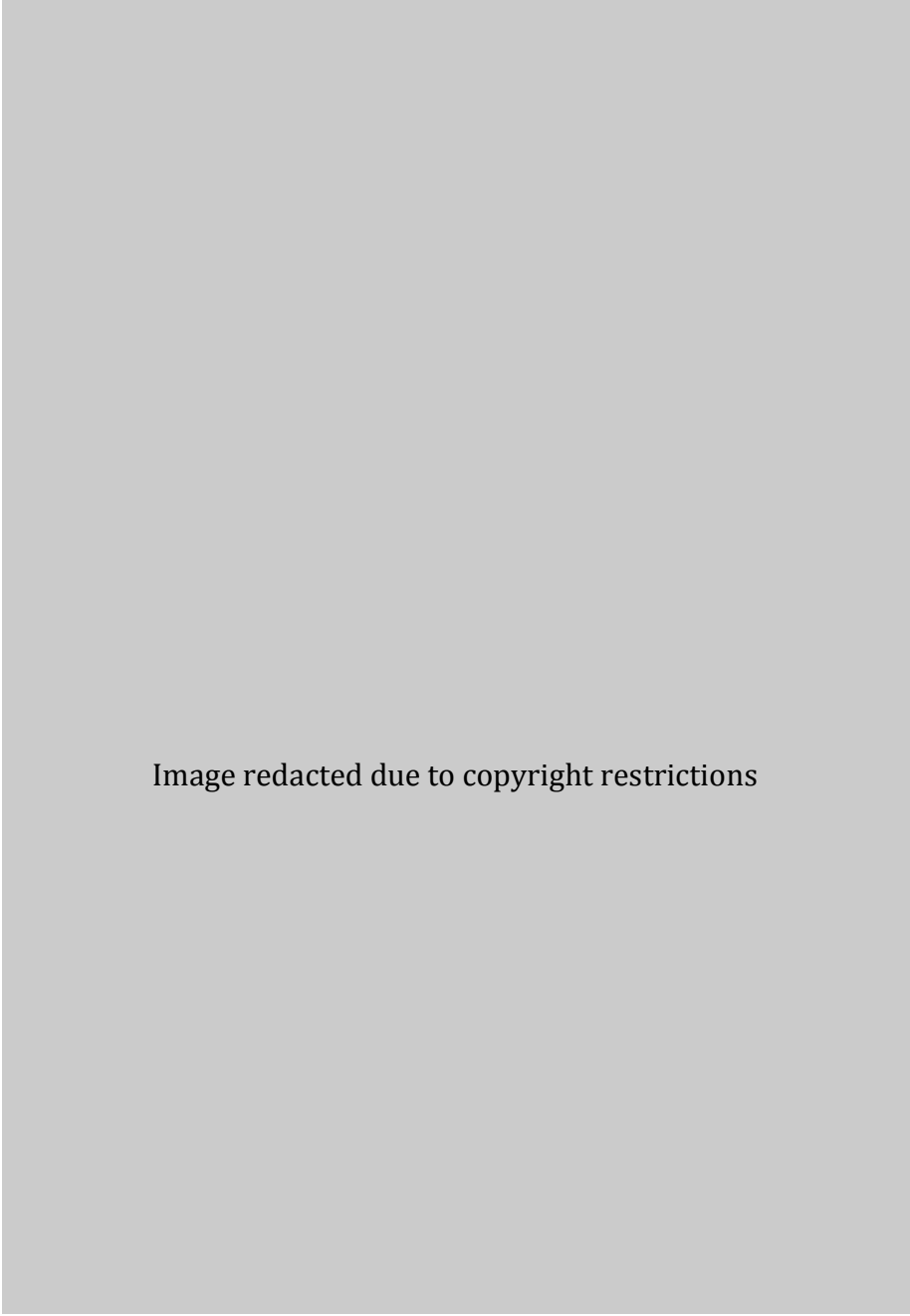


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Figure 9 Moholy-Nagy, *Dolls*, 1926.

Image source: *Painting Photography Film*. Translated by Janet Seligman. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

Image can be viewed on page 92 of *Painting Photography Film*

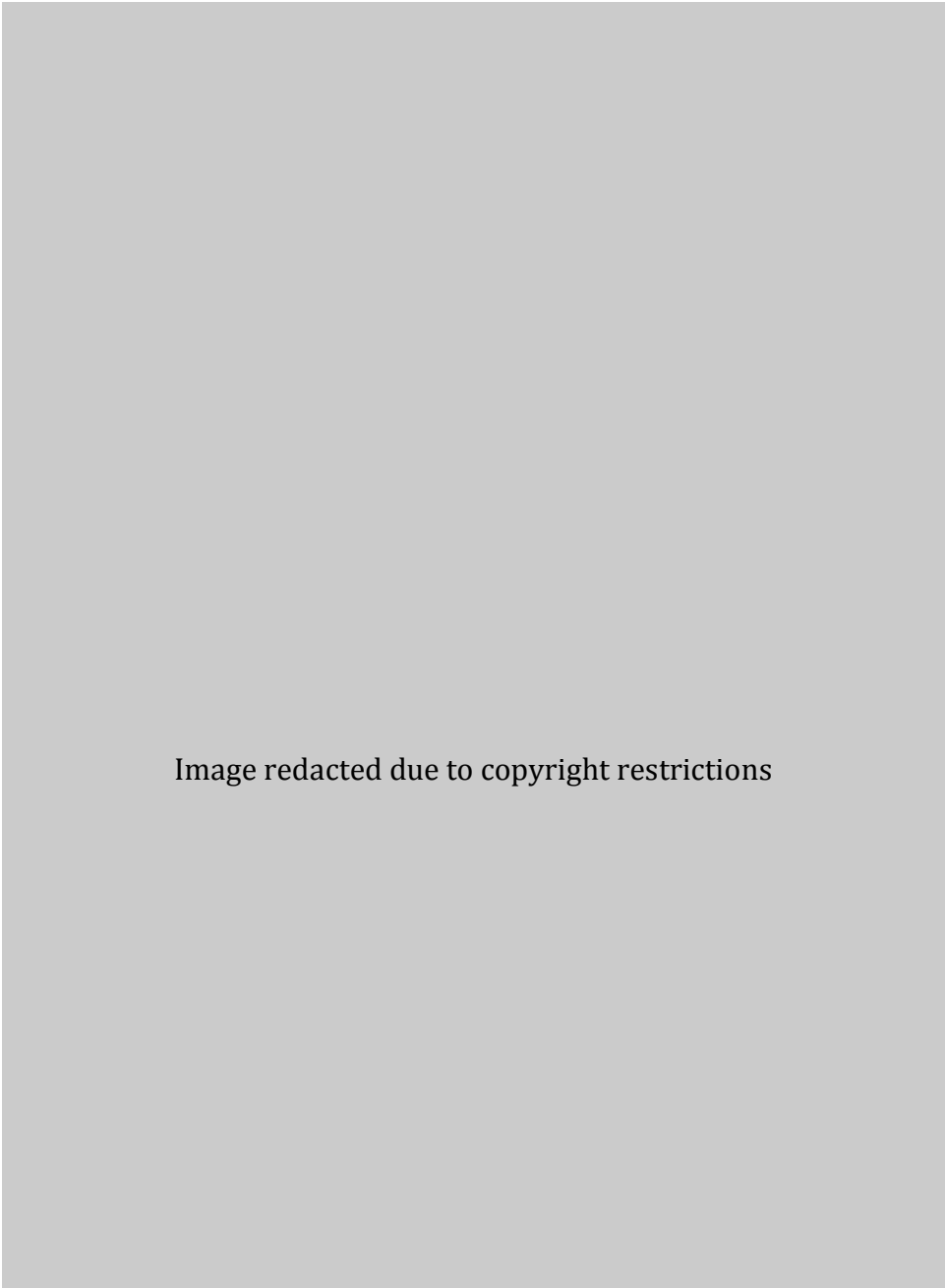


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Figure 10 László Moholy-Nagy, *La Canebière Street, Marseilles – View Through the Balcony Grille*, 1928

Gelatin silver print

Image Source: George Eastman House Collection

© Hattula Moholy-Nagy/VEGAP 2011




Image redacted due to copyright restrictions

Figure 11 Umbo (Otto Umbehr), *Self-Portrait at the Beach*, c. 1930

Gelatin Silver Print

Image Source: Museum of Modern Art

© 2013 Umbo / Gallery Kicken Berlin / Phyllis Umbehr / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Image can be viewed online at:

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=49830

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