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Eggleston, Christenberry, Divola: Color Photography Beyond the New York Reception

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

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Dr. Susan Laxton, Chairperson

This thesis will examine the history of color photography in America, with specific attention to the exhibition and review of color photography across the country in the 1970s. The first chapter looks at recent exhibitions and texts on the topic, identifying their common shortcomings as the focus on the exhibition and review of color photography in New York City in the 1970s, and the use of New York exhibition and review of color photo as a stand-in for understandings of color photography throughout America. Through a series of case studies, namely, William Eggleston in New York, William Christenberry in Washington D.C., and John Divola in Los Angeles, this thesis reevaluates the significance of Eggleston's 1976 MoMA exhibition and offers examples of color's acceptance and embrace by institutions and critics prior to 1976 outside the New York context.

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Introduction

Color photography appears to be having a moment. This is not to say that prior to now color photography has been discounted or ignored, but rather that the recent uptick in programs and publications directly addressing color photography reveals a sense of urgency around reassessing the medium's historical and material development in greater detail. In the past six years, three separate large scale exhibitions focused specifically on redressing the history of color photography in America were mounted in the United States, each accompanied by in-depth catalogs. In addition to these presentations, the Getty Conservation Institute published not one, but two manuals on the history of color photographic technologies and the identification and care of color plates, slides, and prints.¹ The questions of how we understand the history of American color photography in the present and how we can preserve analog color photographic materials for study in the future seem to be buzzing in the air.

The current interest in writing the history of color photography is not surprising considering analog color technologies are disappearing at an increasingly rapid pace.² On June 22, 2009, Kodak announced it would cease manufacturing Kodachrome, a film that had been on the market since 1935 and had monumental impact on the use of color photography. The decision to discontinue the product was based on increasingly dismal sales. As reported in Kodak's discontinuation notice, "Kodachrome currently represents a

¹ Please see: Sylvie Pénichon, *Twentieth-century Color Photographs: Identification and Care* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2013) and Bertrand Lavédrine et al., *The Lumière Autochrome: History, Technology, and Preservation* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2013).

² A fact touched upon by Kate Bussard and Lisa Hostetler in their preface to *Color Rush* and John Rohrbach in his introduction to *Color! American Photography Transformed*.

fraction of 1% of Kodak's still film sales.³ While Kodachrome is an truly iconic product that has served photographers very well for 74 years, the simple truth is that people have moved on and are no longer purchasing it in sustainable volumes.”⁴

And it is undeniable: photographers and companies *are* moving on. The equipment and chemicals needed to shoot and print color photography are vanishing from the market, going the way of Kodachrome. Labs for developing color film are being downsized or packed up altogether. Universities and community centers are cutting their analog color photo courses and eliminating darkrooms due to the cost of materials and upkeep of studio spaces. Many artists who established their careers using color film have transitioned to digital shooting and/or printing because the technologies have improved greatly, and digital processes allow more flexibility.⁵ It seems only natural that in this

³ As per Kodachrome's discontinuation notice: "Although Kodachrome has very distinct characteristics and no film will give the exact same results, current users are encouraged to try other Kodak films. Kodak continues to bring innovative new film products to market, having released seven new professional films -- over the last three years alone." Alternatives to color films suggested by Kodak included: Kodak Professional Portra 160 NC and VC Film, Kodak Professional Portra 400 NC and VC Films, Kodak Professional Portra 800 Film, Kodak Professional T-MAX 400 Film, Kodak Professional Ektar 100 Film. "Kodachrome Discontinuation Notice," Kodak, accessed September 20, 2015, http://www.kodak.com/eknec/PageQuerier.jhtml?pq-path=15359&pq-locale=en_US&_requestid=94646.
⁴ "Kodachrome Discontinuation Notice."

⁵ For example, Stephen Shore began shooting digitally in 2003. As described Suzanne Cotter discussed when describing his recent Abu Dhabi commission: "Having spent more than twenty-five years working with a large-format camera, his move to digital photography in 2003 enabled Shore to reintroduce the idea of the snapshot and the journey which had been part of his own history and evolution as a photographer from The Velvet Years documenting the activities and habitués of Andy Warhol's Factory in the 1960s to his road trips across America in the 1970s. Digital photography made it possible to reintroduce the immediacy afforded by the 35 mm camera on which Shore came of age while maintaining a level of visual information that is possible with large format photography and which Shore expressively exploited for Uncommon Places." Suzanne Cotter, "A World Unto Itself," introduction to *Abu Dhabi*, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://stephenshore.net/press/abudhabi.pdf>, 4.

Photographer, Richard Misrach, has similarly described his transition to digital technologies: "I was shooting with my 8x10 after Katrina for 12-14 hours, from dawn to dusk, over a three month period. I was pushing hard and blew a disc in my back. I was unable to lift anything for ten months. I not only had to throw in the towel on what was going to be a long term project, but I had to consider alternatives to the 8x10. I started testing a medium format camera with a digital back. And that was that. I haven't shot film in 3 years (I've been accused of going over to the dark side!)."

moment of technological loss that photo historians, curators, and conservators alike would clamor to reconsider the medium's history; hoping to capture a sense of its trajectory and impact before firsthand technical knowledge and experience of the medium's rise and fall fade.

Until recently, many accounts of color photography's history have built up its controversial nature, centering their narratives around the canonical work of William Eggleston, and marking the advent of color photography as a form of "fine art" as his 1976 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. When I first began studying this topic, I bought into that version of the medium's history wholesale. However, closer analysis revealed to me that color photography was already in use across the country for many years prior to 1976, and had been embraced by artists and critics alike, regardless of the Museum of Modern Art's approbation.

The first chapter of this thesis charts the development of the "Eggleston-centric" understanding of color photography in the 1970s, beginning with Sally Euaclaire's *The New Color Photography*, and moving forward to more recent exhibitions and

It is different. I don't have the quality that I had, but the quality of the image is still good. In exchange, I can photograph in the wind, I can make hundreds of photographs in succession, I can stop action. When I get home I can download, process and print five foot photographs within twenty-four hours of returning. In the past it would take months to have the 8x10s developed, processed and contacted just to see what I had.

But perhaps most importantly, the new technologies allow me to print my own work which I haven't done since the seventies. I am able to get prints exactly the way I want. And I'm back to experimenting and exploring with the printing process. I feel as though I'm discovering the medium all over again. And I must say, as the advancement of color technology in the 70s had a revolutionary impact, I think the digital revolution taking place is going to have even a bigger one. Kids coming out of school have access to the means of production right in their bedrooms. And the new tools have infinite potential. This is going to be an amazing period for photography and photographers." "Richard Misrach with Peter Brown," interview by Peter Brown, Spot, Spring 2011, accessed May 2, 2016, http://spot.hcponline.org/pages/richard_misrach_with_peter_brown_488.asp.

publications—Kevin Moore’s *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, Katherine Bussard’s and Lisa Hostetler’s *Color Rush: Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman*, and John Rohrbach’s *Color! American Photography Transformed*—noting shifts in descriptions of the medium.

Even as it acknowledges the important contributions that each of these scholars has made in terms of expanding and shaping the current conceptions of color photography, this thesis also points to the major flaw in previous narratives: they all claim to provide an understanding of color photography’s status within American art and culture, yet focus almost exclusively on the exhibition and review of color photography in New York City. As a result, previous histories of the postwar emergence of color photography have provided only a partial view of attitudes toward the medium. While New York City was a major center for photographic activity, the actions of institutions and critics in New York cannot and should not stand for the actions and opinions of America as a whole.

Thus, the questions driving this project became: How could I write a history of color photography in the 1970s that acknowledged the importance of William Eggleston’s color photography and his 1976 Museum of Modern Art show without giving him the ultimate position of power in shaping the medium’s history? And following on this, how could I expand the history of color photography to incorporate the exhibition and review of the medium in cities outside of New York in a way that pointed out the problems with presenting New York’s understanding of color photography as representative of the critical attitudes of all of America?

The second chapter of my project examines William Eggleston, specifically his 1976 MoMA exhibition. I set out to provide a thorough explanation of the show that focuses on how Eggleston did not change the medium itself, but rather that John Szarkowski's presentation of the work changed the discourse surrounding color photography to the extent that New York critics effectively copied and pasted Szarkowski's assessments into their reviews. To support this, I follow the exhibition as it traveled to five venues along the East and West coasts, showing how not only Szarkowski's words and vision of color photography spread, but how New York City critiques of the show followed it throughout the country.

The third chapter of this project looks at the photographic practice of William Christenberry. As an artist who began working with color photography many years before Eggleston, and started exhibiting that work in Washington D.C. three years prior to the Eggleston MoMA show, I first thought his career might offer a counterpoint to the New York story. In fact, in looking at the exhibitions and reviews of his work, I discovered that color was not even an issue or a focus of curators and critics until after 1976, a fact that is clearly demonstrated in shifts of presentation and reception between Christenberry's first Corcoran Show and his second.

The fourth chapter of this thesis examines John Divola and his use of color photography within the unique arts environment of Southern California. Coming from an academic system that encouraged experimentation and a community that lacked a real institutional framework for the exhibition and review of photography, Divola provides an additional counterpoint to Eggleston and Christenberry. The exhibition and review of his

color works just after the Eggleston exhibition traveled to Southern California shows color photography as non-problematic at the time; in fact the conceptual and performative elements of Divola's work drew much more comment than the use of color.

Up until now, color photography in the art scene of America in the 1970s has been labeled “controversial.” This thesis challenges that characterization. Placing the exhibition and review of William Christenberry’s color photography in and around Washington D.C. and John Divola’s photographic practice on the west coast in comparison to William Eggleston’s in New York City, brings to light an expanded understanding of color photography in America—an alternative account in which color is recognized as having played an active part in the ever-evolving technology and aesthetics of the broader photographic arts.

Chapter One: Understanding Color Photography after *New Color*

The three major recent exhibitions and publications that have attempted to take on the task of assessing the history of American color photography speak directly to this desire. While *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980* (Cincinnati Art Museum, February 3-May 10, 2010, and the Princeton University Art Museum from July 10-September 26, 2010); *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman* (Milwaukee Art Museum, February 22-May 19, 2013); and *Color! American Photography Transformed* (Amon Carter Museum of American Art, October 5, 2013-January 5, 2014 and the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, Tennessee, January 19 through March 23, 2014) each address different timelines of American color photography (1970-1980, 1907-1981, and 1851-2010, respectively), they all grapple with the same central questions: Why was color photography so divisive? When and how did color photography come to be embraced as a form of fine art? While today, color photography is ubiquitous, widely used and accepted across magazines and museum walls alike, there was time not too long ago when color photography was a controversial topic among artists, institutions, and critics.⁶

Despite the fact that the methodologies, and details of their arguments differ, all three of these histories agree on one thing: the watershed year of the shift was 1981.

⁶ While much division on whether or not to collection color photography had diminished by the 1980s, In a talk given by Jennifer Watt's a symposium on color photography at the Huntington, she made clear that as late as 1992, when she ascended to her position as the first full time curator of photographs for the library collection, there was an oral policy not to collect color photography. Jennifer Watts, "Why We Have Not Collected Color Photography," proceedings of Fading Histories: A One-day Symposium on Preserving Color Photographs and Digital Output Media Sponsored by the Los Angeles Preservation Network, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, 1-7.

1981, writes Bussard and Hostetler, “hailed the widespread acceptance of color photography in contemporary art” as signaled by the “landmark exhibition” *The New Color Photography: A Decade of Color Photography*.⁷ Curated by Sally Eauclore for the International Center of Photography in New York, the show was accompanied by a publication simply titled *The New Color Photography*.⁸ The book was widely popular, enough so that it prompted two more publications by Eauclore on the topic: *New Color/New Work* in 1984 and *American Independents: Eighteen Color Photographers* in 1989.⁹ In order to trace current explanations of American color photography, one must comprehend the foundation of knowledge and canonization *New Color* established.

In Eauclore’s words, *New Color* was meant to offer “an in-depth look at color photography as an art form,” highlighting artists such as William Eggleston, Joel Meyerowitz, Stephen Shore, Neal Slavin, John Divola, William Christenberry, Jan Groover, David Hockney, Eve Sonneman, and Lucas Samaras among others as it’s champions.¹⁰ In her introduction, she claims that that fine art color photography should to be considered a new phenomenon— that while the history of color photography dates back more than a hundred years, and modern film technologies have been on the market since 1935 (when Kodachrome first appeared), color photography did not come of age as

⁷ As per Aperture’s press description of the contents of color Rush. "Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman," Aperture Book Store, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://aperture.org/shop/books/color-rush>.

⁸ The show ran from October 16-November 11, 1981 at the International Center for Photography in New York, and traveled to Syracuse. Sally Eauclore, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981).

⁹ Both of these books featured many of the same artists as well as some new work (as the title suggest), but neither was as successful, in terms of sales or cultural impact as *New Color*.

¹⁰ Eauclore, *The New Color Photography*, 7.

an art form until the late 1960s.¹¹ Since then, she writes, the “explosion of exhibitions, publications, course enrollments, museum acquisitions, symposiums and grants attests to the view that color is *the issue* in contemporary photography.”¹² Undoubtedly America saw increased use and visibility of color photography by the fine arts community after the 1960s, but as I will make clear in the following pages, the idea that color was a new phenomenon—“the issue in contemporary photography”—is neither clear nor conclusive.¹³

Although today *New Color* is often described as a “survey show” of color photography in the 1970s, Eauclaire’s intentions were to provide “critical text” that could identify the visual and conceptual standards that characterized this new art.¹⁴ Eauclaire did not want to “denigrate the old color photography by extolling the virtues of New Color,” but rather set out to promote greater understanding of why artistic predecessors of the medium had not had a major impact on the field. In addressing this question, she makes the important point that “full credit for the color phenomenon cannot be accorded to the technical advances and home processes that offered personal control over printing that black and white allowed. The convenience made possible an easier and less expensive realization of vision but hardly helped define the vision.”¹⁵ Color processes

¹¹ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 7.

¹² Italicization by me. *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ The “explosion” of color’s usage was not limited to the fine arts community—it was a national epidemic so to speak. For more information on the trajectory color technology usage, which overtook B&W use by consumers in 1964, please see: Pénichon, *Twentieth-century Color Photographs: Identification and Care*, 174.

¹⁴ The fact that New Color has come to be seen as a survey of American color photography of the time is not surprising given the format of the exhibition/book (i.e. themes followed by artistic examples, with short biographies for each of the artists featured.) “Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman,” Aperture Book Store, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://aperture.org/shop/books/color-rush>.

¹⁵ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 8.

had long been very expensive and hard to control. Part of the reason that color was associated with advertising photography is that established companies had the budget to commit to professional and permanent printing processes.

Rather than place the fate of artistic embrace in the hands of technology, Eauclaire cites the inability of color photography advocates to articulate its allure or to characterize the difference between a good color photograph and a bad color photograph as the primary hindrance of the medium.¹⁶ Lack of adequate guidelines for judgment left audiences and critics dumbfounded, and they questioned whether the color photographic work they were seeing in museums and galleries was in fact “fine art” or an elaborate ruse constructed by curators. For example, A.D. Coleman, in a 1971 exhibition review for the *New York Times* titled “I have a Blind Spot for Color Photographs” wrote, “I am going to disqualify myself from commenting on a large portion of the show by acknowledging a personal blind spot—specifically color photographs in general. Of all the color photographs I see—and that’s a lot, if you include reproductions as well as original prints—very few achieve anything for me beyond a momentary gratification of the retinal synapses.”¹⁷ Major critics were dropping color photography from consideration completely, unable to move beyond the feelings of immediate sensory pleasure that color images offered.

Eauclaire commits a full chapter of her book to the “problematic precedents” of color photography. Despite her claim that technological advancements should not be seen

¹⁶ Specifically making a nod towards John Szarkowski’s essay in the monograph *William Eggleston’s Guide* and Hilton Kramer’s review of the exhibition. This moment will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.

¹⁷ A.D. Coleman, “I have a Blind Spot About Color Photographs,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1971.

as the root of the issue, she does link artists' discomfort with the medium to the challenge color film and print posed to them. Hues were often exaggerated, so that photographers could not reconcile color with form, and the results "gave the medium an aura of vulgarity."¹⁸ While the first advertisements for color film promised vivid depictions of the world with "all the wonders of awakening," the reality of the matter was, as Moholy-Nagy pointed out, color photographers were attempting naturalism, but ended up "back where realistic painters started in the Renaissance—the imitation of nature with inadequate means."¹⁹ For Eauclaire, the major photographers who did work in color seemed more "curious than cogent," operators for whom "technical wizardry amplifies rather than recreates on-site observations."²⁰

When featured in advertising, color was used for "message impact...saturation [pushed] to the limits of credibility" and forms simplified into "catchily rhythmic semi-abstractions." These compositions, while graphically striking, were viewed as "entering realm of kitsch." Eauclaire notes that "popular photographers," such as Ernst Haas, dazzled audiences with "pyrotechnics and ingenious improvisations."²¹ Such photographers, she claimed were problematic for New Color photographers because of their preference for "transformation over truth" or, in the words of critic Max Kozloff, "not the sensations, but the sensationalizing of color."²² This sensationalization stood in the way of the color photograph's ability to maintain any level of seriousness. Eauclaire

¹⁸ This connection between color photography and "vulgarity" that Eauclaire references plays off a quote from Walker Evans, in which he described the medium as such. Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

goes so far as to say that “informed opinion has been so convinced that serious sober pictures could not be truthfully represented in color in 1975.”²³ Color photography was associated with the grab for attention associated with commerce; and the “more is more mentality” associated with entertainment.²⁴ The attitude recalls Coleman’s reference to color photography as nothing “beyond a momentary gratification of the retinal synapses.”²⁵ It seemed that the more visual impact a color photograph had, the less likely it was to be taken seriously.

In order to achieve a successful color image, artistically speaking, manipulative control prior to exposure was needed—a real understanding of how shooting techniques could be used to control the deficiencies of the medium. Color photographers couldn’t seem to control the picture of the outer world that they were photographing. As Eaucloire notes:

...directorial control over illumination, object color, and relative physical position is obviously difficult if not impossible to attain, color photographers mainly fumbled and floundered until around 1970 when they modified their traditional naturalistic priorities. Although adopting a modernist position, they avoided the simple-minded approach, which regarded a patinated wall or some already two-dimensional forms as ‘modern art-like’ forms and worthy of recognition. Instead their photographs revealed the purely visual, two-dimensional viability of the three-dimensional world. By careful framing of a selected section of the world, they learned to anticipate and enlist color film’s hue exaggerations and the spatial codification imposed by the lenses.²⁶

²³ Eaucloire quotes Max Kozloff’s question: “Is there a single photo of the depression in color?” which leads to a brief discussion Sally Stein’s dissertation which examines a cache of FSA color photographs discovered within the Library of Congress archives. For more information please see: Sally Ann. Stein, *The Rhetoric of the Colorful and the Colorless: American Photography and Material Culture between the Wars*, PhD diss., Yale University, 1991. Quotes from: Eaucloire, *The New Color Photography*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵ Coleman, “I have a Blind spot About Color Photographs.”

²⁶ Eaucloire, *The New Color Photography*, 13.

By this Eauclaire meant that color photographers of the 1970s redefined the “modern” approach to photography—focusing on the translation of three-dimensional spaces to two-dimensional image, giving up local color and embracing visual breakdown. As John Szarkowski described it in his introduction to *William Eggleston’s Guide*, “photographers have found it too difficult to see simultaneously both the blue and the sky.”²⁷

The stylistic choices of these New Color photographers bore the signs of amateur photography: “the unintentional, unwanted by-products of careless snapshotting (such as overexposure or accidental cropping),” which caused some critics pause—they questioned whether this approach shouldn’t be seen as merely “a wholesale indulgence in chance.”²⁸ Eauclaire stresses that this is not the case; and she emphasizes that these “capable photographers” applied such methodologies deliberately, fastidiously, and intentionally, hoping to “extract the qualities unique to their medium.” She continues, “Though often inspired by an amateur’s accidents, their works are as similar to snapshots as Abstract Expressionist paintings are to oil spills.”²⁹ For Eauclaire, what separated these New Color images from their amateur counterparts and raised their status to that of “fine art” was intentionality and thorough knowledge of the standards by which art was judged as such.³⁰

²⁷ John Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 9.

²⁸ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰ “As Clement Greenberg dictated, each art ought to “determine through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself” has filtered into photography. Photographers make photos about photography enlisting, even embracing the visual peculiarities of the medium that capable professionals once avoided or implicitly or indirectly acknowledged. Exploiting color photography’s special descriptive powers, do not typically produce images that seem obtrusively photographic. To purposefully court and coax the perceptual ambiguities and accidental visual excesses typically found in unselfconscious amateur snapshots.” *Ibid.*, 69.

Eauclaire's assessment of deskilling in New Color photographs also dismantled contemporary claims that photorealist painting had been the catalyst by which the snapshot aesthetic—including New Color photographs—had traveled from albums to art galleries. Influential *New Yorker* critic Janet Malcolm had put forward the idea that photorealism was the forebear of New Color photography, but that the photographic establishment would never admit it because “one of the unwritten laws of the contemporary photograph is that no photography shall ever publically admit to painterly influence.”³¹ According to Eauclaire, Malcolm's assumptions were narrow—the only real connection between the two art forms was their use of color to portray the contemporary landscape. While photo-realist painters often chose similar subject matter as New Color photographers, a “crowd-pleasing subjects that extol the emotively neutral, epicurean visual excesses of modern civilization,” with photorealism, she argued, “the subject is then photographed with unexceptional skill so the resultant snapshot replicates the blandness of the average amateur photographer. The subject and its photographic transcription thus combine to form a cultural artifact that provides the form and content of the painting.”³² This, unlike New Color, “renders the subject and its snapshot transcription a single object,” removing any potential to establish “visually or narratively transcendent meanings.”³³ Furthermore, size played an important part in the overall impression of the images: New Color photographs were significantly smaller. According to Malcolm, this made the images appear “‘dejected’ on museum walls...as if in

³¹ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

awareness of their inferiority to their counterparts in paint.”³⁴

Yet Eauclaire cites their size as an asset—the relatively small scale not only suited “photography’s own unique capacities” but encouraged an intimate encounter: because “people must move up to and peer into [them], these photographs contain their own special attributes of immaculate transitions of tone and hue, rich color idiosyncrasies, crisp delineation of textual detail, and omnivorously recorded information.”³⁵ And whereas photo-realist painters could maintain manipulative control over the details of their image (size, shading, hues, etc.), New Color photographers were constrained by the physical world; required to “orchestrate contemporary subject matter” in order to produce “subtler, more precisely tuned chromatic arrangements.”³⁶

Upon addressing the problematic precedents and critiques of New Color photography, Eauclaire attempted to identify its unifying characteristics. The images and artists featured in the subsequent chapters of her book were meant to visually “establish that the medium’s intrinsic quality [which] stems from the photographers thorough sensitivity to the full color spectrum with its myriad subtleties of gradation.”³⁷ These photographs were supposedly not about color per se but rather New Color photographers’ abilities to “consider color’s role in a formal, descriptive, and symbolic totality. Their visually and conceptually full-bodied works have prompted color photography’s emergence in the 1970s as a distinct and distinguished art form.”³⁸ In doing so, Eauclaire

³⁴ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

also established formalism as the defining trait of New Color, and devotes the second chapter of her text to the topic.

For Eauclaire, “Formalists have been idealists in search of optimum pictorial structures. Content and materials were subordinated to that end. In recent years, formalism’s scope has narrowed to an almost exclusive preoccupation with medium and process.”³⁹ While some photographic formalists bore out this position, those highlighted in the “Color Photographic Formalism” chapter of *New Color*, like William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, did not emphasize medium and process, but rather “devised a language” that reconciled color photography’s descriptive capacities and chromatic tendencies without lessening the images’ “photographic” nature.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, formalism was regarded as a necessary step towards understanding how to use the medium:

Color is a fundamental structural force but there was no significant precedent for strategies employed by the best contemporary color photographic formalists. Unlike pre-modernist paintings, which retain much of their spatial intelligibility and decorative cohesion when reproduced in black and white, these new color photographs share with modern painting a heavy dependency on color. When translated into monochrome, they lose their formal and metaphorical meanings.⁴¹

Furthermore, Eauclaire presented the New Color photographers as figures skilled in a new, formally oriented photography. Their special talent was:

[to] perceive real objects and intervening spaces as intervening segments of a total visual presentation. They test every edge, tone, color, and texture for its expressive potential and structural function. Each photograph represents a delicately adjusted equilibrium in which a section of the world is co-opted for its visual possibilities, yet delineated with the utmost specificity. The resultant image exists simultaneously as a continuous visual plane on which every space and object are interlocking pieces of a constructed jig-saw puzzle

³⁹ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 17.

⁴⁰It is “photography’s unseverable connection to optical reality [that] makes the modernist ideal of the autonomous artwork elusive, if not impossible.” *Ibid.*, 17

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

and a window through which the viewer can discern navigable space and recognizable subject matter.⁴²

Here Eauclaire argues against the notion that these artists were simply co-opting the snapshot aesthetic, pointing to the myriad ways in which they translate a visual experience into a fine art photograph—the special skill-set and attention required to make a work of art with this medium. It is only the “the most resourceful photographic formalists” that are able to “regard the complexion of the given environment as potentially articulate aesthetic material. They consider the subject and its visual essence as indivisible.”⁴³ For Eauclaire at least, New Color photographs were not created using a set of formulas, but rather a variety of techniques that responded uniquely to “each image-making situation.”⁴⁴ Man-made and natural structures were used to establish order within the pictorial frame, and repeated patterns, inversions, alignments, and overlapping were mixed together in a manner meant to formalize compositions.⁴⁵

Echoing the opinion of curator John Szarkowski, Eauclaire saw William Eggleston as the champion of this New Color formalism: “Eggleston seems to have been the first photographer consistently to employ sophisticated formal strategies by which the medium could be controlled and from which its unique visual syntax developed.”⁴⁶ While “other photographers refined Eggleston’s strategies... he paved the way” with an “adroit application of various formalist approaches produces narratively potent, poetic

⁴² Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁶ More to follow on the work of William Eggleston and the significance of his work and its exhibition in the 1970s will be discussed in the following chapters. *Ibid.*, 21.

photographs.”⁴⁷ Whereas in other hands, the “careless cropping, negligent alignments, and imprecise exposures” could be seen as amateur, a “list of effects [that] reads like an inventory of flaws cited in many technical manuals,” Eggleston was able to arrange these details in a manner that was aesthetically appealing and that informed the photograph’s “narrative implications.”⁴⁸ That is, these so-called technical flaws became means of avoiding “schematic symmetry” while still attaining “equilibrium through careful rationing of contrasting values, simple and complex textures, complementary shapes, and intense color.”⁴⁹ Very specific uses of color fields, values, shapes, darks, lights, reflections, sunlight, patterns, repetitions, and instances of intensity and saturation, were used to transform the dimensional forms of reality “into crazy-quilt fragments and effects. Eggleston achieves pictorial cohesion and emphases through contiguous visual relationships that are more specific to his photograph than to the scene itself...”⁵⁰ This creates an “illusionistic sensation” which is visual satisfying without needing a “clear description of actual depth and volume.”⁵¹ For Eauclaire, these are the elements that make Eggleston’s work artistic – that allow it to “portend poetic and potent possibilities.”⁵²

The chapters of *New Color* that follow are thematically built around the remaining characteristics, subjects, and styles of the movement: The Vivid Vernacular, Self-Reflections, Documentation, Moral Visions, Enchantments, and Fabricated Fictions. For

⁴⁷ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

each section, new artists were profiled, but William Eggleston was obviously her paradigmatic example – the only artist discussed in four separate sections.

Despite Eauclaire's explicit efforts to make *New Color* more than a survey show, the exhibition was immediately understood in those terms. Given its format, how could it not? The show provided the visitor with the work of a variety of artists working over the course of a decade in the medium, along with thematic umbrellas under which their work could be understood. But as New York Times critic Gene Thornton pointed out, surveys are not immune to institutional critique:

about the only thing some of the photographers in this show have in common is that they work with color film... that all of them first came to public attention not through publication in the mass media but by exhibiting in museums and art galleries... There is, therefore, a difference in intention between the new color photographers and the old that leads one to the mass media and the other to the museum. Art lovers tend to assume that the ones in the museum are better than the ones in the mass media, but on the basis of this exhibition I am not sure that is necessarily so.⁵³

With this observation, Thornton calls out an element of the New Color phenomenon that Eauclaire left unsaid: artists were not the ones driving the canonization of color photography, institutions and critics were. These photographers were not united around a manifesto of color, rather, they had been gathered together for consumption on the walls of museums and galleries instead of in magazines. If they had a prominent spot in contemporary culture, it was because it had been bestowed upon them by the curators and critics of the day. Color was only *the issue* because the guiding tastemakers of the time brought it to the forefront of discussions—and only did so in New York. Understanding

⁵³ Gene Thornton, "Photography View: Is the New Color Work So Different from the Old?," *New York Times*, November 07, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/08/arts/photography-view-is-the-new-color-work-so-different-from-the-old.html>.

Eauclaire's project in this light is particularly important because while it does provide a very specific vision of color photography in the 1970s, its establishment of themes, characteristics, and canonical artists was the first of its type. All subsequent texts and exhibitions, including those of recent years, have had to contend with that foundation in some manner.

In *Starburst: American Color Photography*, Kevin Moore plays off of many of Eauclaire's ideas, identifying her exhibition as the "culmination" of the rush to color that occurred in the 1970s, but he attempts to create a much fuller picture historically and seeks to identify the socio-cultural forces that drove color photography to "stardom" in that decade.⁵⁴

Moore acknowledges that while photographers were skeptical of color prior to the 1970s for practical and aesthetic reasons, there were many who were already exploring its potential. Artists based at the Institute of Design in Chicago, for example, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Arthur Siegel, and Harry Callahan, worked with color materials and advocated for experimentation, but Moore makes the point that this exploration was a "facet of a continuing investigation into all forms of industrially manufactured materials," rather than a concerted focus on developing an aesthetic of color photography.⁵⁵ The images these artists created were often considered studies, not meant to be exhibited outside of the institution.⁵⁶

But as Moore points out, that is not to say that there were not public exhibitions of

⁵⁴ Although it should be noted that he does describe *The New Color Photography* as "cumbersome." Kevin Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 10.

⁵⁵ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

color photography prior to the 1970s. In 1950, Edward Steichen organized *All Color Photography* (1950), a massive exhibition of 342 photographs by 75 photographers.⁵⁷ The show included a range of subject matter and styles that reached beyond artistic photography including industrial and government photographs, photojournalism and amateur images; a fusion of “high” and “low” meant to inclusively account for all manner of color production. However, Moore contends, “despite Steichen’s progressive and integrationist intentions, the show only emphasized what was commonly believed: color was a commercial and amateur medium not suitable for art.”⁵⁸ As a result the show only further emphasized color’s “low” connotations in the artistic community. The exhibitions that followed in the 1950s under Steichen’s direction at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, such as *Abstraction in Photography* (1951) “fared little better” in Moore’s estimation. While in such shows Steichen sought to emphasize color photography’s aesthetic potential, as against its commercial uses, critics deemed them merely derivative of abstract painting.⁵⁹ Color photography’s task was clear: to identify its high art characteristics while differentiating itself from other media.

As the technological development made it easier and less expensive to shoot and print in color, it became available to a larger audience of photographers, increasing the likelihood that they would play with it. However, Moore states, “the rise of color—and resistance to it—was a cultural phenomenon.”⁶⁰ Black and white photography had long reigned as the primary medium of both art photography and photojournalism. Through

⁵⁷ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

the 1960s, the lines between these two categories began to blur, and increasingly, documentary and “documentary style” photographs began to enter museum collections. This type of monochromatic photography was embraced for its formal structure, inherent social purpose, and consideration as a form of “performance infused with subjectivity.”⁶¹ Black and white photography was historical, associated with visual truth, and imbued with a sense of social engagement; photographers “maintained an attitude of profound respect for photography’s ability to tell a true, to reveal some aspect of the human condition”—an understanding of the medium which began to unravel in the 1970s.⁶²

Color photography, on the other hand, had low associations with the commercial worlds of advertising and entertainment.⁶³ Without attaching color photography to already established visual languages (Conceptual art, street photography, film, vernacular photograph, etc.) many artists using photography struggled to find a vocabulary that made “their motives intelligible.”⁶⁴ To get around color’s previous low associations, artists adopted commercial visual vocabularies under conceptual projects, such as Neal Slavin’s group portraits. The other methodology Moore cites is dropping concern for artistic traditions completely, “eschewing both the roster of worthy subjects and any overt commentary on the part of the photographer,” such as with William Eggleston and the later color photography of Stephen Shore, which Moore sees this as representative of an

⁶¹ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁶³ “Color photography had certain “low” associations with advertising and entertainment, which formed an initial stumbling block for some. But it was color’s suggestion of social—and by extension moral—indifference that underlay the fiercest resistance to the medium. With color came a new aesthetic vocabulary of transparency and ambiguity.” *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

“apathy toward social life” which arose in the 1970s.⁶⁵ This reasoning, however, eliminate any consideration of the impact movements such as Pop Art could have had in the development of color photography.

As time passed color photography’s blank slate status became an asset; the medium became a playground for artists to work out issues. As Moore describes:

“As the country struggled to regain its sense of direction following the political activism and social idealism of the 1960s, photographers embarked on a search to discover new subjects, methods, and meanings. Color offered an obvious if indistinct way forward, a path leading beyond the void left by the 1960s and the era of the “concerned photographer” (as defined by Cornell Capa in 1968) toward some new as yet to be defined sense of purpose. 1970s color photography may thus be characterized as a chaotic and disparate search, a heterogeneous effort encompassing diverse bodies of work by artists as dissimilar as Mitch Epstein, Jan Groover, Les Krims, and others toward the rediscovery of something ennobling and purposeful in modern American life.”⁶⁶

While engaging, this synopsis feel oversimplified, leaving many questions unanswered, the least of which is not just how did color photography such as Jan Groover’s lead “toward the rediscovery of something ennobling and purposeful in modern American life”? His analysis of her work describes its popularity and favorable reviews in the 1970s, in comparison to William Eggleston. Moore’s reasoning for this is that her work was more “opaque” than Eggleston’s, containing “none of the social or political content viewers expected to find in photography.”⁶⁷ Whereas Eggleston’s images “conveyed apathy and indecision, Groover’s communicated an ambitions (if obscure) exploration of photographic ideas and aesthetics.”⁶⁸ How this specifically spoke to “ennobling” the

⁶⁵ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

American life, beyond simply “declaring a high sense of purpose” for color photography, goes undisclosed.⁶⁹

This is how Moore characterizes the late 1970s “rush to color”: a flush of experimentation whose peak was indicated by Eau Claire’s 1981 *New Color* exhibition.⁷⁰ By 1985, color photographs had become such a standard in art photography that the word “color” was typically dropped from exhibition and publication titles, signaling that “color” had assimilated to the point that the distinction no longer had to be made.”⁷¹ Thus Moore is justified in asserting that New Color Photography was no more nor less a “movement” than New Topographics and the Pictures Generation. The “members” of New Color were united by a “constellation of exhibitions, personal associations, critical commentary, and shared interest in a in a complex set of ideas, all flourishing with great intensity during a fairly short period of time.”⁷²

Moore evocatively describes this period of time as a starburst, “an intensely destructive and creative environment, caused by a collision or close encounter between two or more galaxies, resulting in the formation of stars. New Color was, on the surface

⁶⁹ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 28.

⁷⁰ Lewis Baltz identified this rush to color and the *New Topographics* as the biggest trend in photography trends of the 1970s. *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷¹ Quote from page 10. On page 36, Moore goes a bit more in-depth noting: “Not only had color been dropped from titles but “photography” as well, signaling the assimilation of photography to the mainstream of contemporary art—color absorbed by photography, photography absorbed by art. This might be seen as a long-awaited victory for photography, what advocates for the medium’s acceptance and appreciation as an art form had dreamed of all along. Yet the phenomenon also represents a form of erasure, a submersion of the historical record. Today an entire complex and unique history, which is to say photography’s modernist history, is undergoing transformation as photography is increasingly swept into the framework of post-1960s, post conceptual, postmodern paradigm. As older proponents of photography’s fade out or lose their prominence within the art world, the history of photography, including chapters on events such as color photography, runs the risk of being seen as relevant only in relation to what came after.” *Ibid.*, 10-36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 10.

at least, a promiscuous photographic enterprise, a flirtation with numerous practices and ideas occurring simultaneously in other art movements and the popular culture”: Pop, Minimalism, and Land Art in addition to vernacular photography and mass media imagery. With this, New Color took “a conscious step outside the bounds of traditional art photography, modernist photography in particular, which had maintained a standard of media separation since the beginning of the twentieth century...[yet] hewed to a photographic discourse throughout the decade.”⁷³ This idea is exemplified by such artists as John Divola, who took up conceptual and performative practices with the strict understanding that his interventions and interactions with sites were being done with the purpose of being photographed.⁷⁴

Essentially, without a defined role in the art world, color photography offered a venue for exploration without rules and traditions. It was a mystery. As late as 1982, critic A.D. Coleman as stated, “One of the most exciting aspects of contemporary color photography is that everyone concerned with it—inventors, manufacturers, historians, critics, curators, dealers, collectors, audience, and photographers—are all operating in a state of roughly equivalent ignorance.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 10.

⁷⁴ “So, I’m starting out as a photographer, I’m in graduate school, and I’m learning about art. I’m looking at slides of art as well as books and magazines. At some point, I get this idea that it’s a really interesting time because Modernism is working toward an essentialism, an idea of authenticity, it’s working toward minimalism, conceptualism, earthworks, and yet I’m experiencing it all in reproduced form. There are all of the obligatory disclaimers: this trench is out in the desert, here’s a photograph of it, but you ought to drive out and see the real thing. This is a performance with twenty people in a gallery in New York, here’s a photograph, but you should have been there. So, I came to the conclusion that this was the primary arena of contemporary art, and that all painting and sculpture and performance was, from a practical point of view, made to be photographed, to be recontextualized and talked, or written, about.” John Divola and Jan Tumlrir, “Interview with Jan Tumlrir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ), Zuma* (New York: Aperture, 2006), 135.

⁷⁵ A.D. Coleman, “Is Criticism of Color Photography Possible?,” *Camera Lucida* 5 (June 1982), 29.

While Sally Eaucloire had downplayed the importance of the technological advancements during the time period of New Color, Moore emphasizes the significance of these photographers having organized themselves around a technical point. “That the group was identified by a technology,” he writes, “though, in fact, color technologies were myriad and remained troubling unperfected throughout the decade—reveals a firm commitment, even through all the experimental excesses of the 1970s, to photography and its traditions.”⁷⁶ Moore maintains this point of view in spite of the fact that many of the artists identified within the New Color group (for example Robert Heineken, William Christenberry, Jan Groover, and Barbara Kasten) came to photography via other mediums while many others who considered themselves photographers adopted practices of common to other mediums, among them performance and conceptual art (Les Krims, John Divola, and John Pfahl).⁷⁷ In constantly reiterating this point, Moore reveals his own desire to keep the conversation surrounding color photography in the 1970s strictly photographic.⁷⁸

⁷⁶As late as 1980, permanence issues were still a problem with financial and legal consequences. Andy Grundberg writes, “A search for more permanent, fade-free color prints is now going on amid a flurry of lawsuits against Kodak and a general uneasiness among collectors. Hung in light, the average Ektacolor-type print will undergo drastic changes in appearance within a decade. The negative form which it was made meanwhile, will also lose color unless stored in a frost-free freezer.” Andy Grunberg, “Some Fare Over the Rainbow,” *Soho Weekly News*, May 21, 1980, 43.

⁷⁷ While many artist may have come to color photography from work in other media, “discussion always came back to photography—its precedents, exploration, potential. New Color was fundamentally a photographic discourse. In that sense, New Color may be seen as a protective historical frame, preserving the history and practice of a medium that had only very recently been accepted as an art form...the color phenomenon as a whole should be seen as a moment of both widespread exploration and self-conscious preservation. New Color, based on a technological distinction, became the point of reference for a historical moment. While the technologies may not have had great historical significance, the dialogue that sprang up around them during the 1970s.” Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 12.

⁷⁸ With the exception of Heineken (offset lithography on magazine page), all of the artists and works Moore selected for *Starburst* were strictly photographic in the most traditional sense (no collage, no sculpture featuring color photography, no printing on nontraditional materials).

Moore's other bias lies in the primacy he gives to New York: by his account, New York City was the site of "collision" for all these practices; the site where color photographic works from West Coast and East Coast were being exhibited together, where publications were discussing the color phenomenon, and where "photographers mingled with artists from other solar systems."⁷⁹ Moore identifies the Light Gallery, which opened in 1977, as the most prominent exhibition space for photography, along with a number of other contemporary art galleries that mixed New Color work with that of other artists working with photography.⁸⁰ Critics based in New York City such as Gene Thornton, Jacob Deschin, and Max Kozloff, A.D. Coleman, Ben Lifon, Andy Grundberg, and Julia Scully reviewed New Color work in prominent publications such as *Artforum*, *The Village Voice*, *SoHo Weekly News*, and *Modern Photography*.⁸¹ Yet while Moore had legitimate practical reasons for using the concentration of New York City exhibition and critique as his central focus, this presents a partial and myopic view of the New Color "starburst," and only serves to reinforce New York's mythic status – a status that, absurdly, allows New York to stand for the photographic production of an entire country.

Yet in spite of his emphasis on the crucible of art practice in New York City and his insistence that technological determinants kept color photography medium specific, Moore ultimately claims that, photographic criticism of the 1970s shows color not as the central issue, but (in the words of Lewis Baltz) a "pseudo-issue":

⁷⁹ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

The cultural underpinnings associated with color photography are perhaps more deeply meaningful than color's impact on art photography. In its schematic trajectory across the 1970s, New Color's development may be seen to mirror the political and cultural patterns that characterized the "un-decade. Starting out in 1970 with a politically engaged, socially conscious attitude, color photography by mid-decade had cooled to a more detached, inward-looking, regional, and at times, nostalgic set of activities, arriving finally at 1980 as a self-consciously formalized, highly synthesized, institutionalized, and ties, arriving finally at 1980 as a self-consciously formalized, highly synthesized, institutionalized, and globally-conscious set of practices... A period of cultural stabilization, economic prosperity, and, most importantly, a renewed sense of purpose was on the horizon."⁸²

Moore's summary identifies New Color, "like the 1970s itself" as a "missing link, a connection between the rampant often heroic creative agitation of the 1960s and the stabilizing rationalizing impulses of the 1980s."⁸³ This characterization allows Moore to see the move to color as a form of political engagement in which artists worked out photography's relation to the world, just as society was attempting to define how the country at large was going to do the same.⁸⁴

But how did they accomplish this? What methodologies did the New Color photographers use to sort out photography's sociocultural positions? Moore identifies the important elements of color photography in the 1970s as "insurgency and naiveté," "seriality," and "nostalgia."⁸⁵ Bringing back some of the same vocabulary Eauclaire uses to chapter her text, Moore writes of a politics of the everyday that color afforded these artists:

⁸² Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 12.

⁸³Ibid., 12.

⁸⁴ While this work has enjoyed a resurgence, both in terms of market value and exhibition, Moor wonders, "how well those pictures are understood by their contemporary audience—if they are not now appreciated through some combination of nostalgia and resemblance to current photographic art... The unembellished past has much to offer. Just as the decade of the 1970s continues to hold many of the keys to understanding our present political, economic, and cultural state, color photography of the 1970s shows both the range of what was once thought possible and what photography would indeed become." Ibid., 36.

⁸⁵Ibid., 18-25.

How might the “new realism” proposed by color photography suggest new ways of relating to contemporary life? While some saw color, especially at first, as just another layer to be integrated into the formal structure of the photography, others saw in it a democratic attitude, an aesthetic of the ordinary and the everyday. In the most skilled hands, color photography became useful in two distinct ways: as both a means of describing the immediacy of mundane experience and, in its resemblance to the fantasy world projected by the mass media, a way of acknowledging the creeping influence of mass culture on individual perception and the nature of representation itself.”⁸⁶

Essentially, this emphasis on the ordinary in color photography served to throw the fantasy world of media images into high relief. Color film, for artists such as Garry Winogrand and Stephen Shore, became a means to self-consciously adopt the “vulgar aesthetic of their subjects.” It also served to emphasize the ambiguity—the found artistry—of the everyday, summarized in Winogrand’s words: “There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described”—was more exposed.”⁸⁷

As seriality, a natural photographic quality that had been suppressed as photography struggled to gain market value, began to show in other forms of contemporary art, series, sequences, and groupings “filtered” back into photographic practices of the 1960s.⁸⁸ This in turn, Moore argues, shifted photography away from the single point of view implied by documentary images, generating “a healthy skepticism toward the notion of a whole self and a decisive moment.” Photographers turned away from “the great humanist themes—war, poverty, social injustice” and toward “personal, open-ended, and ambiguous,” meaning.⁸⁹ Seriality signaled the rejection of the old guard of photography, characterized by photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson “whose

⁸⁶ Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 19.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

perfect formal compositions presupposed a stable self confronting a world in flux.”⁹⁰

Rather, *New Color* used juxtapositions of related images to create an air of *indecisive* moments.

Three years after *Starburst*, Katherine Bussard and Lisa Hostetler published *Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman*, which accompanied their exhibition by the same title at the Milwaukee Art Museum. *Color Rush* sought to offer an expanded history of color photography in America, examining the medium from 1907-1981. This timeline was determined to roughly coincide with the unveiling of the autochrome, or the moment color photography became a commercially accessible medium, to Sally Eauclore’s *New Color* exhibition, which “hailed the widespread acceptance of color photography in contemporary art,” benchmarking the moment where it no longer seemed like an unusual choice for artists.⁹¹

The catalog features two essays, one by each of the show’s curators, followed by entries on each of the artists and institutions featured in the exhibitions and a chronology of exhibitions, publications, presentations, and technological developments.⁹² The artist entries are largely chronological and divided into four sections: “Early Automatic Color,” “Consuming Color,” “Choosing Color,” and “An Explosion of Color.” These sections correspond with the uses of and attitudes towards color photography as they developed

⁹⁰ For example, Eve Sonnemen’s pairings of indecisive moments made her into “a participant in the disorder and randomness she records. Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 22.

⁹¹ “Color Rush: American Color Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman,” Aperture Book Store, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://aperture.org/shop/books/color-rush>.

⁹² As this thesis deals primarily with constructing histories based on exhibition and review, the bulk of analysis of *Color Rush* will focus on the first essay, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography,” by Katherine Bussard with brief references to “Real Color,” by Lisa Hostetler, when discussing relevant counterpoints made in John Rohrbach’s *Color! American Photography Transformed*.

over time, and the artists and institutions chosen are meant to serve as the visual extension of the histories described in the essays as well as illustrations of key moments noted in the chronology.⁹³

Katherine Bussard's essay, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography," takes issue with Eau Claire and Moore, who claim that prior to the 1970s color photography was strictly "amateur or commercial and recognized only as such":

Color photography prior to the 1970s was rarely, if ever, exclusively "high" or "low." The flexibility of the medium is demonstrated in its wide range of applications, from the 1907 debut of the first mass-marketed photographic process through the consistent mid-century displays of color at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which included advertisements, journalism, and fashion and fine-art abstractions. Even after color arrived on the art market in the 1970s, it enjoyed a fluidity of boundaries between high and low art forms... which occurred at precisely the same moment that photography in general was being celebrated for a similar permeability. A contextualized history of color photography would therefore demonstrate the conversations surrounding American color photography were never simple, never definitive.⁹⁴

Reasoning from the expanded purview of an historian of visual culture, Bussard asserts that a more accurate history of color photography would trace the impact the medium had "on American culture both inside and outside the art world,"⁹⁵ thus, its history isn't a story of the rise from advertisements to museum collections but rather an inclusive history; its place on magazine pages, in World's Fairs, and public venues such as New York's Grand Central Station are as critical to its meaning as its

⁹³ "In general, *Color Rush* attempts to account for color photography between 1907 and 1981 by noting what could have been seen during that time. In a few select instances, we have been able to secure the same images that appeared in important exhibitions, such as Beaumont Newhall's *Photography, 1839-1937* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1937." Lisa Hostetler and Katherine Bussard, "Introduction," *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America* (New York: Aperture, 2013), viii.

⁹⁴ Bussard, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America," in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 2.

⁹⁵ Hostetler and Bussard, "Preface," in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, ix.

place on museum and gallery walls. As such, color photography's history, like photography's history as a whole, isn't to be understood as simply a rise to the realm of "fine art" but rather a cultural phenomenon whose visual prominence within society spanned a full range of viewing experiences.

Bussard goes on to outline the many venues of exhibition and publication, high and low, where color photography was visible to public audiences from 1907 forward. While other histories have commented on the rejection of color photography by the institutions of fine art, Bussard reframes the events surrounding the arrival of the autochromes in the United States to better reflect the initial moments of the technology's publicity. In October 1907, the same month the autochrome became available on the American market, Alfred Stieglitz heralded the process in his undeniably "high art" publication *Camera Work*: "Color photography is an accomplished fact. The seemingly everlasting question whether color would ever be within the reach of the photographer has been definitively answered."⁹⁶ And while others have focused on Steiglitz's eventual rejection of the autochrome (for reasons of cost, fragility and difficulty of reproduction as well as personal expression), the fact remains that Stieglitz repeatedly showed his and Steichen's autochromes at 291 in 1907 and 1908; and published three in the April 1908 issue of *Camera Work*. For Bussard, this indicates early institutional support for color art photography:

Stieglitz's exhibition and publication of Steichen's autochromes is instructive, as it establishes early support by artists for color photography and overturns the longstanding perception that early color photography was exclusively tethered to mass media and consumer culture. Thus, the relatively high culture journal *Camera Work* reproduced

⁹⁶ Bussard, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America," in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 2.

color photographs years before the more popular “low culture” periodical *National Geographic*, which published an autochrome in 1914 and one of the earliest examples of the color photo-essay in 1916... These two distinct acceptances of the earliest automatic color process indicate a range of purpose and circulation that color photography enjoyed from the start.⁹⁷

By the 1920s, the autochrome faded from popularity as new, more easily reproducible processes came into being, which spread the visibility of color photography, particularly in magazines.⁹⁸ Condé Nast’s support of color processes was largely responsible for this rise. They employed Anton Breuhl and Fernand Bourge and a team of engravers and printers who worked together to develop “a lush and meticulous means of reproducing color photography in magazines, putting an end to unnatural colors, hard outlines, and unexciting effects.”⁹⁹ In 1934, Condé Nast produced *Color Sells*, a seventy-two-page promotional catalog featuring its best images, which lured not only businesses to color photography’s advertising power, but museums to the medium’s visual power.¹⁰⁰ As Bussard notes: “the craft of a Breuhl-Bourges photograph, the intensity of its colors, is also precisely what prompted curator Beaumont Newhall to include two of them in MoMA’s seminal 1937 exhibition *Photography 1839-1937*, the first survey of the history of photography.” Here again, was a moment of connection between the worlds of “high” and “low” color photography, one consistent with MoMA’s early embrace of design and

⁹⁷ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 2-3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ “Condé Nast claimed both to have launched “the new art of color photography” on the pages of its magazines and to have contributed the most important development in publishing and printing. See “The Launching of a New Art,” in *Color Sells*, ed. Anton Breuhl and Fernand Bourges (New York, Conde Nast Publications, 1935), n.p.” from footnote. *Ibid.*, 3.

visual culture.¹⁰¹

The 1930s was a time of accelerated technological development in color photography. Kodak introduced Kodachrome, its first commercially successful amateur color film in 1935—a 16 mm movie film. In the following year, 8 mm movie film and 35 mm color slide film were debuted. The research director for Kodachrome heralded these developments as the key to helping people “realize how wonderfully colored the world is,” allowing even non-artists to recognize the “subtle colors that occur in everyday scenes.”¹⁰² With Kodachrome, Dr. C.E. Kenneth Mees “realized as everyone will soon realize, that it is only in color that we can make any adequate representation of the world about us.”¹⁰³

With this statement, Kodak marketed Kodachrome to prospective customers as a new tool with potential in three areas: the ability to capture fleeting personal moments, an increased potential for actualizing artistic aspirations, and the ability to achieve an accurate representation of the world around them with naturalistic colors. Capturing moments had long been part of Kodak’s advertising campaigns, but now the artistic possibilities and lifelike qualities of documenting these scenarios in color were underscored and publicized in *Fortune Magazine*, *National Geographic*, *The New Yorker*, and in event spaces such as the Eastman Kodak building at the New York World’s Fair in 1939. Kodak’s exhibition was “The Great Hall of Color,” and featured a continuous slide

¹⁰¹ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 3.

¹⁰² Dr. C.E. Kenneth Mees, quoted from “Home Color Movies May be Made Without Camera Filters,” *Science News Letter*, April 20, 1935. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

show of 35 mm color slides across a 2 hundred foot long screen powered by eleven separate slide projectors. This ““kaleidoscopic procession” included Kodachrome images of leisure, travel, animals, and still-lifes, and it was accompanied by a sound recording of commentary and music. The enormous public display foreshadowed not only future Kodak efforts, but also arts’ slide shows of the 1970s.”¹⁰⁴

The rise in color’s use and accessibility did not go unnoticed by institutions. In 1937, color photos were shown on the walls of the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where Beaumont Newhall included color images in his show *Photography 1839-1937*. In addition to autochromes by Steichen and color advertisements by Bruehl and Bourge, the show included experimental color work by contemporary photographers such as Moholy-Nagy.¹⁰⁵ By the mid-1930s *New York Daily News* had committed a section of its Sunday news to color photos, and in 1937 *The Milwaukee Journal* printed its first candid color news photograph. The popular magazine *National Geographic* publically endorsed Kodachrome.¹⁰⁶ Alongside Kodachrome’s ascendancy in amongst publications, color motion pictures rose to popularity. Between Kodachrome and Technicolor, by World War II, “color photography’s multifaceted mass consumption was completely assured.”¹⁰⁷

Soon, manuals on color photography began appearing on the market. Ivan Dimitri’s *Kodachrome and How to Use It*, which was aimed at amateurs, was published

¹⁰⁴ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

in 1940, along with by Paul Outerbridge's *Photographing in Color*, which was geared at a range of users from amateur to professional. Each text provided insights on medium use to a growing audience of interested users.¹⁰⁸ By 1941 *Life* magazine joined *National Geographic*, *Vogue*, *Harpers Bazaar*, and a number of other photographic magazines that printed color covers or pages.¹⁰⁹

In 1942 Kodak introduced Kodacolor negative film, specifically created to yield multiple prints, and started making prints for customers from Kodachrome slides. Their marketing campaign, Bussard indicates, advanced color as an important affective prompt: "This wartime debut could not have been more striking, and Kodak made the most of it in advertisements featuring a soldier's handholding color photographic keepsakes, and capitalizing on the notion that a color snapshot provided even greater domestic and emotional comfort to those in foreign combat zones."¹¹⁰

Alongside these technological developments and further circulation of color images in the public sphere, museums, including New York's MoMA, continued exhibiting color photography throughout the war years, in documentary, vernacular and artistic formats—Eliot Porter, for example, was featured as the museum's first monographic color photo exhibition. "By World War II," Bussard writes, "color photography was in flux, presented in myriad ways on both the museum walls and magazine pages" alike.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Bussard, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America," in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

In 1950, MoMA presented the first survey of color photography in the United States, an exhibition titled *Color Photography* featuring over 300 works by eighty-five photographers. True to his origins in magazine culture, curator Edward Steichen's show was inclusive, covering the medium's many forms: from backlit autochromes to color prints, transparencies, and reproductions. Prints by both photojournalists and experimental art photographers were included; abstractions hung alongside painterly still-lives and aerial photographs. Established "fine art" photographers such as Harry Callaghan appeared alongside magazine spreads signaling "color photography as a mass medium" and "captures the tenor of color photography at the moment."¹¹²

In the press release for the exhibition, Steichen showed his eagerness for color to be fully integrated into photographic aesthetics:

Is [color photography] a new medium for the artist or is it a means of supplementing or elaborating the recognized attainments of black and white photography?... In any attempt to evaluate the present status of color photography, one must recognize that color was introduced into films as well as into stills after they had been established and fully accepted as black and white...today's new photography medium, is, unfortunately, being handicapped by the same black and white precedent. ...Color has been an integral part of all other visual arts from the beginning.¹¹³

Steichen recognized that because color was late in coming to photography, the field was in the unique position to determine how color was to impact or supplement the medium, and to what effect. The fact that Steichen included color work by established artists such

¹¹² Bussard, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America," in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 5-6. In a later press release, the museum also noted that this exhibition had presented "the complete range of color photography." Museum of Modern Art, "'Experimental Photography in Color' to Be Discussed by Edward Steichen," news release, New York City, New York, February 9, 1957. http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/2154/releases/MOMA_1957_0012.pdf?2010, 1.

¹¹³ Bussard, "Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America," in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 6.

as Ansel Adams and Walker Evans alongside images from *LIFE* magazine and microscopic color images of amoeba, a real “diversity of styles, intentions, and outlet,” made it unsurprising that Steichen would present the questions around the medium in this way. Clearly, as Bussard points out, he believed that “a better understanding of color photography could *only* be accomplished through such a rich and wide-ranging presentation.”¹¹⁴

Bussard’s understanding of color photography’s history revolves primarily around activities in New York City— America’s “most active photographic city” through the time of Steichen’s exhibition.¹¹⁵ While the Art Institute of Chicago, the George Eastman House, etc. all regularly mounted photographic exhibitions, a handful of which celebrated the arrival and accomplishments of color photography, she insists that “to understand the state of photography historically, one has to begin with New York and MoMA for the most concentrated and consistent embrace of the medium.”¹¹⁶ New York also produced two of the nation’s most widely circulating newspapers: *New York Daily Mirror* and the *New York Times*. The *Times* had a column dedicated to photography as early as 1938— offering reviews, exhibition listings, and lecture announcements, which eventually expanded to include in-depth, art historically oriented reviews.¹¹⁷

Five days after Steichen’s *Color Photography* show opened, Kodak’s advertising

¹¹⁴ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Even as the “most active photographic city,” Bussard notes there were still few sites to see original photographs. Exhibitions “by the membership-based cooperative of the Photo League from 1936 to 1951 and the few commercial galleries sporadically showing photography in these years, MoMA stood alone with its dedicated exhibitions and study room for viewing photographs from the collection.” *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

campaign “Colorama” was unveiled in New York’s Grand Central Station. Colorama was a larger than life color photography presentation featuring huge, 18’x 16’ backlit transparencies, effectively “photographic billboards that...advertised photography.”¹¹⁸

Bussard interprets these as the advent of a new polarization of color photography:

The nearly simultaneous opening of Steichen’s *Color Photography* and the debut of the Colorama heralded the dominant themes of discussions surrounding color photography in the 1950s: the characterization of color’s “proper” artistic aesthetic and the explosion of color’s proficient deployment and widespread consumption. These two themes evolved into an increasingly oppositional relationship. Steichen’s exhibition had offered more questions than answers, photographers soon began parsing those questions themselves in order to analyze and criticize what different color photographs communicated.¹¹⁹

Questions regarding the “truthfulness” of color photography rose, along with the place that filters played in creating and manipulating color.¹²⁰ Increasingly, the close visual proximity of high and low photographic practices became a point of contention. Comments such as those by Eliot Elisofon, a photography teacher and prominent photojournalist who shot the first color cover for *Life* magazine, pointed to the fact world had become saturated in color; current color technologies allowed amateur color photographers to point and shoot with little consideration of the aesthetic composition of their snapshots, while the market had been flooded with color images in the form of calendars, postcards, and of course media and advertisements.¹²¹ Bussard singles out

¹¹⁸ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 7. For more information on Colorama, please see: The Kodak Colorama, accessed November 7, 2015, <http://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/features/coloramas/colorama.html>. Or Alison Nordstöm and Peggy Roalf, *Colorama: The World's Largest Photographs* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2004).

¹¹⁹ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 7.

¹²⁰ Elisofon would later publish a version of these opinions, “Where does originality begin and reporting end?...I believe in color selection and color control. I believe that the photographer has the privilege and the right to interpret his subject.” *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²¹ Eliot Elisofon summarized the debate surrounding color photography in the following statement: “Most people are happy enough to make color photographs simply as a record. They give little or no thought to

Elisofon for his perceptive assessment of the moment, stating that he “not only captured the extent of color photography’s use and popularity at the time” but accurately attributed power of color photography’s status to exhibiting institutions and publications, the arbiters of color photography as art in the face of triviality.”¹²² Elisofon realized that as color photography rose in popularity for amateurs and artists alike, further designations would need to be made as to what qualified as an image for the art world and what qualified as an image for the masses.¹²³

To deal with these questions, many artists started emphasizing the craft of color photography. Critic Max Kozloff pointed out that for most photographers operating at the time, “a goal of optimum personal control was inbred into their minds, and reached, perhaps, its apogee in the razor sharp edges and clinically adjusted gradations of Ansel Adams.”¹²⁴ Adams, who had made color photographs and participated in projects such as Colorama, published an article in 1956 titled “Color Photography as a Creative Medium.” In this text, he stated his belief that the medium was still too young to use without caution: “We must remain objective and critical, plead for greater opportunity for control, and constantly remind ourselves that the qualities of art are achieved in spite of

technique or esthetics; they make snapshots... without ever thinking that such photographs, handled creatively might result in material worthy of an exhibition or of reproduction... We have been flooded with calendars and postcards in which color has not portrayed nature faithfully, much less interpreted it. The plethora of uniform, clean, well-exposed pictures with bright blue deviations have been due mostly to the accidents of nature. “Get the sun over your left shoulder, set the exposure for 1/50th at F5.6, push the button, and the lab does the rest.” From this advice has come a stream of snapshots that are not unpleasant to look at but cannot be termed art.” Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 8.

¹²² Ibid., 8.

¹²³ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

conditions and media—never because of them.”¹²⁵ For Bussard, Adams’ approach risked reducing photographic value to mere craft. The field, she asserts, “...risked quickly devolving into personal opinion about how a color print stands up to the ‘happy blend of perception and realization’ or ‘the authority of more solid images in black and white’ in a culture that was becoming increasingly saturated with color photography.”¹²⁶

By 1964, when the New York World’s Fair opened with an emphasis on spectacle, technology, and mass consumption, Kodak held a photo competition themed “The World and Its People” which “demonstrated a new openness to submissions by professionals and amateurs alike, as well as a shift from black and white to color.”¹²⁷ The jurors for this show also reflected a range of associations and understandings of photography: they included an editor for the *Saturday Review*, a President Emeritus of the Royal Photographic Society, the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the illustrations editor of *National Geographic*. Such a range of expertise and professional priorities represents a group that was not only actively interacting with color photography in their daily lives, but an understanding of photography’s full range of uses that echoed Steichen’s readiness for its inclusion across all its visible platforms. The World’s Fair Pavilion showed color engaged under a full range of contexts as well—from billboard to

¹²⁵ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 9.

¹²⁶ “By the 1960s, almost every cover of *Life* magazine was a color photograph, its issues and those of other magazines were full of color spreads, and movies and television programs were increasingly filmed in color.” *Ibid.*, 9.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

museum, snapshot to dye transfer, the “fluidity of Steichen’s inclusion” permeated these other public venues, showing the full extent of color photography’s influence.¹²⁸

It is this “prevalence and pervasiveness,” Bussard argues that “allowed for, and perhaps even encouraged, flexibility and experimentation among artists.”¹²⁹ Like Kevin Moore, Bussard claims that in the critical community color became a focus that at once masked and enabled media experimentation:

color became an umbrella of sorts, sheltering a range of photographic behaviors, involving new types of subject matter and new forms of photographic expression. Banal, artificial, pointless, kitsch, commercial, and other milder pejorative terms such as beautiful, romantic...used to describe a range of photographs that were, in fact, some of the most challenging and prescient images of their day.”¹³⁰

This “all-inclusive artistic deployment of color photography in the 1970s” first offered by Moore, she argues, “represents a historical transition, wherein the fluidity and complexity that had once ranged across high- and low- culture uses of color photography were now fully realized in artistic practices.”¹³¹

In May 1976, *Photographs by William Eggleston*, curated by John Szarkowski, opened at MoMA. The show was heralded as a “historic breakthrough,” the first serious exhibition of color photography at MoMA, despite MoMA’s earlier shows of the work of

¹²⁸ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 9.

¹²⁹ Aspects of the medium such as the slide show brought new elements of presentation. “Darsie Alexander articulated that, while a slide was an image, a slide show was an event, calculated by the arts and experienced by viewers “Magnification, speed of delivery, and sequence become variables of the medium; artists can manipulate and tweak them at any stage of the process. This flexibility generated widespread experimentation with the process itself, resulting in works that could just as easily reside in a live theater as in an art gallery—a blurring of lines that artists welcomed.” *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Eliot Porter, Ernst Haas, Marie Cosindas, Helen Levitt, etc.¹³² Bussard points out that thanks to these earlier “examples of color photography’s ascendancy in the art market, color photography achieved unprecedented prominence in 1976 and 1977.”¹³³ With this, Bussard goes on to make one of the most provocative claims of her essay. She notes, in New York, galleries such as Witkin (opened in 1969), LIGHT (1971), and special showings of color photography at establishments such as the Leo Castelli Gallery “laid the groundwork” for color photography’s widespread visibility in museums and galleries as the decade continued, particularly in 1976 and 1977.¹³⁴ She attributes the timing of this “rush” as one of many reasons Eggleston’s MoMA exhibition was both a “lightning rod and the embodiment of contemporary concerns.”¹³⁵

This leads to one of the most important statements of Bussard’s argument:

The Eggleston exhibition has for too long been the convenient emblem of a far more sweeping, historicizing, and elaborate moment in color photography’s history. It should instead be understood as one of many separate instances in which artistic practice embraced the hybridity that had long characterized color photography.”¹³⁶

My thesis steps forward from this assertion: that the 1976 Eggleston exhibition has been the center of attention for far too long for the wrong reasons. Chapters Two and Three of this project will focus on the exhibition and review of color photography in the years

¹³² ““Historic breakthrough” is Hilton Kramer’s phrase, though he used it in the context of Eggleston’s exhibition only to express disappointment.” Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 11.

¹³³ “Bill Jorden, writing in *Afterimage* about the near simultaneous opening of exhibitions devoted to color photography in 1977, said: “I felt like I was watching that marvelous transition in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy, after being swirled through a colossal tornado, wakes up in a Technicolor land that is definitely not dust-bowl Kansas.”” Ibid., 13.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 13.

prior to the “Eggleston moment” and in communities outside of New York City as a means of further contextualizing the extent to which color was being used and appreciated by artistic communities and critical viewers.

Certainly, it was with the Eggleston exhibition that the mythic “color controversy” rose. Bussard cogently lays out the points of the debate: “Critics posed challenges to and expressed worries about color photography as an artistic medium. Szarkowski’s proposal that Eggleston’s photographs represent the acceptance of the world *in color* prompted anxiety that it might ‘lead to barren ground’ where photography would cease to have emotional and meaningful content. When it came to content, what was more appealing: the subject itself, or the way it was photographed?”¹³⁷ Gallery exhibitions were actively mixing color photography by artists who were known for work in other media with a growing group of “known” or established fine art color photographers, alongside popular *National Geographic* photographs, complicating understandings of the medium, and critics expressed “dismay over a dissolution of boundaries between high and low art forms with regard to color photography [yet] nevertheless acknowledged that neither artistic practice nor the modalities of display had an interest in maintaining those boundaries.”¹³⁸

By 1981, Sally Eauclaire’s *New Color Photography* was published, becoming “the single most concerted response to the expansiveness of the late 1970s and the debates it intensified.”¹³⁹ Bussard, like Thornton, notes that Eauclaire’s text focuses on

¹³⁷ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 13.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

artists who specifically rose to prominence via the “arbitrators of dates” within museum and gallery system—“a noticeable change from Steichen’s survey efforts of an earlier moment, in which artists were featured for their prominence in publications and media.”

¹⁴⁰ Bussard notes that Eauclaire’s only argument for resolving the close proximity of “vernacular photography” and the common snapshot, was the basis of intention. ¹⁴¹ This line of thinking advocates “for an isolationist understanding of 1970s color photography” separating a generation of photographers from the commercial, vernacular, and basic visual materials of visual culture to which they bear physical resemblance and historic relation. ¹⁴²

According to Bussard’s understanding a “more accurate and less defensive summation of 1970s color photography” can be found in a 1981 *Newsweek* article on contemporary color photography: “Color, now, is simply a means to an artistic end.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁴ Artists from other media and backgrounds (painting, performance, ect.) came to color photography as a tool, a medium that could fill a gap in their practice. There was no need to separate their photography from other practices or remove it from conversations with visually similar work from other high or low sources in the “isolated and insular...[way] *The New Color Photography* suggested. Instead it retained much of the fluidity, hybridity, and complexity that had been associated with it since the early decades of the

¹⁴⁰ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 14.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15

century.”¹⁴⁵

In his review of *The New Color Photography*, critic Gene Thornton commented that the color work of *National Geographic*, *Vogue*, *Life*, and artists such as Edward Steichen, Paul Outerbridge, and Nikolas Muray were “not to be mentioned in the same breath as Eggleston.”¹⁴⁶ Bussard and Hostetler’s exhibition sought to rectify this, hoping to restore contemporaneous conversations surrounding color photography—from the moment it became available as a mass medium to the moment when it no longer seemed an unusual choice for artists—allowing for a:

contextualized history of color photography [which] revels in the connections between Steichen and Callahan, Adams and Kodak, Eliot Porter and John Pfahl, Victor Keppler and Laurie Simmons, *National Geographic* and Ed Ruscha’s *Nine Swimming Pools*, or between the Kodachrome projections at the New York World’s Fair and Goldin’s performance of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* slide show.¹⁴⁷

I agree wholeheartedly with this reconsideration of color photography’s history. I

agree that color photography, like photography as a whole, is a medium marked by its fluidity—by its ability to be seen throughout and connect with a myriad of high and low sources. I agree that separating color photographs from high or low sources based on their perceived cultural value provides only a partial understanding of the object’s history. And knowing that color photography had been used by artists and exhibited in by “fine art” institutions for years prior to the 1976 Eggleston MoMA exhibition, I too question its status as the “defining moment” of the medium’s history. I believe Bussard

¹⁴⁵ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 15.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ “Approaching color photography in this manner, it becomes possible to chart the emergence and growth of an art market for photography including color, as much as photography’s centrality to art movements of the 1960s and ‘70s.” *Ibid.*, 15.

does an excellent job rallying for a very necessary reconsideration of the way color photography's history is told. However, while I am in agreement with her consensus that the Eggleston was just one of many events marking the "rush to color," I do believe the dialogue that developed surrounding Eggleston's MoMA show had an undeniable impact which has not been properly explored. By following the Eggleston MoMA show, as it traveled, it can be seen the specific vocabularies established by Szarkowski and the show's critics spread and took roots. So while we may not agree with these "isolated and insular" conceptions of color that made their way into all but the most recent histories of American color photography, it is important to recognize these shifts in conversation and understanding did take hold throughout the country.

Contemporaneously with Bussard and Hosteler's *Color Rush, Color! American Photography Transformed* ran at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas (October 5, 2013–January 5, 2014) and traveled to the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, Tennessee (January 19 through March 23, 2014).¹⁴⁸ The exhibition was organized by the Senior Curator of Photographs at the Amon Carter Museum, John Rohrbach, who wrote the main texts for the accompanying catalogue. Unlike *New Color, Starburst*, or *Color Rush, Color! American Photography Transformed* examined the history of color photography in America in its entirety—from earliest attempts in 1851 to the present, illustrated with "seventy-five key works."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ "Color! American Photography Transformed," Amon Carter Museum of American Art, accessed August 12, 2015, <http://www.cartermuseum.org/exhibitions/color-american-photography-transformed>.

¹⁴⁹ "The present" being 2010. "Color! American Photography Transformed," Amon Carter Museum of American Art, accessed August 12, 2015, <http://www.cartermuseum.org/exhibitions/color-american-photography-transformed>.

Whereas *Color Rush* sought to offer an expanded history of color photography by offering an approach most commonly associated with visual culture, *Color!* assumed a more traditional aesthetic approach to the subject, looking at color's role in the "transformation" of photography: "Transforming photography from record to creation rooted in record saved the medium from itself, making it, at last, a full equal with painting. Color, this book argues, was essential to this transformation."¹⁵⁰ Rohrbach's goal was to recount the history of color photography in America with a focus on "what color brings to photography rather than on either the technical achievement of color photography or artist biography."¹⁵¹ To achieve this, he isolates three main topics: the relationships between color photography and human sight; the tensions between color photography and black and white photography, and color photography's connections to artwork in other media. All of these revolve around photography's "core achievement and challenge": the ways that the "optical mechanics" of photography are currently "reflecting the world."¹⁵² Rohrbach makes the unprecedented point that it is photography's "visceral connection to sight"—the way it determines how we see in the present and how we recall the past—that has shaped our current understanding of color photography's history. For Rohrbach, "If black-and-white photographs deliver unparalleled detail, color photographs convey immediacy, at least when their hues

¹⁵⁰ John Rohrbach, "Introduction," in *Color! American Photography Transformed* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁵¹ Rohrbach, "Introduction," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 5. The catalog also features a short essay by prominent conservator of photography, Sylvie Penichon, on color photography's technological history which does analyze the physical develop of the medium. Sylvie Pénichon, "From Potatoes to Pixels: A Short Technical History of Color Photography," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 287-302.

¹⁵² Rohrbach, "Introduction," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 5.

approximate what we expect to see.”¹⁵³

By beginning his analysis in the nineteenth century, Rohrbach is able to make an even more astute comment on why many evaluations of color photography place the medium only in the present or recent past. He notes that color was a sought after component of photography since the medium's invention, yet its technologies proved difficult to develop, “the medium’s holy grail—it’s last step to perfection.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps disingenuously, he points out that since “human sight has always conveyed the world’s colors, our photographically driven memories suggest that the nineteenth century was essentially brown and the first half of the twentieth century was largely gray...”¹⁵⁵ Then, when color processes were initially developed in the 1850s, the technology did not yet allow for naturalistic portrayal. Rather, the surviving images “tell us that the world became garish, projecting screaming reds and blues so solid that clear skies seem to jump forward as geometrical facets.”¹⁵⁶ So, he concludes, “color brought photography in closer alignment with human sight and yet paradoxically away from the medium's descriptive roots.”¹⁵⁷ As a result of increasingly naturalistic color technologies, “we have taught ourselves that good color marks the here and now, while bad color, or no color at all, means looking into the past. These memories, have taught us to think of color photography as a recent phenomenon.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Rohrbach, “Introduction,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁶ “Although we accept those saturated worlds as good enough, the hues all too often have now faded, taking on cases of pale magenta or cyan.” *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

The chapters of *Color!* break down the development of color photography—its technologies, its use by artists, exhibition by institutions, and circulation through publications and educational programming—in a way that is meant to complicate this understanding of the medium. Chapter One, “Inventing Color: 1851-1936,” looks the initial attempts to produce feasible color technologies up until the advent of Kodachrome. It describes the first photographers to produce color works in the nineteenth century (“not very good ones, but ones that truly and directly rendered the world’s colors”), recounting the efforts of Levi Hill, Thomas Young, Hermann von Helmholtz, and Louis Arthur Ducos du Hauron, in a “nationalist-tinged race to produce a commercially viable system for making color photographs,” that culminated in the introduction of the autochrome in 1907.¹⁵⁹

Whereas Bussard framed Steiglitz’s initial support of autochromes (he exhibited them at the 291 Gallery and published them in *Camera Work*) as a clear indicator of support for color photography in the world of “high art” and evidence against the idea that early color photography was “tethered to mass media,” Rohrbach describes the initial bold praise of the autochrome as a moment of fascination with the potential of color that, after use and initial explorations, was ultimately rejected by high art circles. Autochromes presented difficulties that quickly led Stieglitz and many of his circle to discontinue their use in favor of black-and-white. They were one-of-a-kind plates that were difficult to reproduce, difficult to exhibit, offered limited control over the exact rendering of color and faded with exposure to light. Ultimately, color changed the entire conception of

¹⁵⁹ Rohrbach, “Introduction,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 5.

photography in a way that Stieglitz was not ready to evaluate.¹⁶⁰ While Edward Steichen, Karl Struss, Arnold Genthe, and Laura Gilpin continued to use color technologies, others, like Paul Strand, vilified them, establishing two camps within the small art photography community.¹⁶¹ As commercial photography had no such vocal critics of color, its rise in advertising and marketing continued more visibly and with greater ease.¹⁶²

In 1936, Kodachrome was introduced as a viable commercial alternative to color film technology that had been developed since the autochrome. As Rohrbach's text suggests, "Defining Color: 1936-1970," became a period of attempting to better understand how color impacted image production. While "the allure of color remained unbated" during this period and "more photographers were taking it up each year, often with great finesse and creative expertise," Rohrbach asserts that there was still very much a "struggle to understand what color delivered":

... for much of this time, artists and critics alike focused on the dichotomy of close description versus abstraction. For many of them, straight depiction of the world undercut one of the key tenets of what made photographs artful, while abstraction seemed merely to project ideas already addressed in a more fulfilling fashion through painting.¹⁶³

Where Bussard's account emphasizes the instances in which early color photography appeared on museum walls (for example Eliot Porter's solo show at MoMA) Rohrbach characterizes this period as a time when "support was begrudging and the work was

¹⁶⁰ "Yet Stieglitz quit using the process not for these reasons but because color changed his conception of photography in ways that he neither expected nor was ready to explore." Rohrbach, "Introduction," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 6. More details on this topic can be found on: Rohrbach, "Inventing Color Photography," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 23.

¹⁶¹ Quoting Paul Strand in the June 1917 edition of *Camera Work*. Rohrbach, "Inventing Color Photography," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 25.

¹⁶² Also, commercial abilities to cover costs of color printing.

¹⁶³ Rohrbach, "Introduction," in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 6.

framed as an offshoot of the main course of art-photographic practice.”¹⁶⁴

Color Photography, the large-scale exhibition curated by Edward Steichen for MoMA in 1950, featured 342 color prints, tear sheets, and transparencies by eighty-five artists, and explicitly attempted to “evaluate the status of color photography as a creative medium.” Yet the exhibition was received as a failure at the time because the sheer volume and hodgepodge of styles, techniques, methods of display could not establish a cohesive understanding of the medium.¹⁶⁵ Even Steichen had to admit that the exhibition “asks more questions than it answers.”¹⁶⁶ For Rohrbach, this time period ultimately failed to bring greater understanding of color photography’s artistic contribution, and, in his words, “until photographers could figure out how integrate color into black-and-white trends, color photography stubbornly remained a secondary tool, acceptable mainly for commercial work and hobby play.”¹⁶⁷

Like most other accounts, Rohrbach agrees that color photography finally rose to the status of fine art in the 1970s. Chapter Three of *Color!*, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” argues that it was pushed in that direction by popular culture: by the early 1970s, color had become common in the pages of magazines, and on television and movie screens, and was being actively used by amateurs and young artists to the point where “critics

¹⁶⁴ Rohrbach, “Introduction,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 6.

¹⁶⁵ Museum of Modern Art, “Museum’s First Exhibition of All Color Photography to Be on View May 10 Through June 25,” news release, New York City, New York, May 4, 1950, http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/1432/releases/MOMA_1950_0041_1950-05-04_500504-36.pdf?2010. For more information on Rohrbach’s interpretation of this exhibition, please see Rohrbach, “Defining Color: 1936-1970,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 85-86.

¹⁶⁶ According to Rohrbach, this exhibition prompted Steichen to back off future plans for exhibitions of color advertising and fashion photography. *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁶⁷ Rohrbach, “Introduction,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 6.

started realizing that it would only be a matter of time before the medium would gain wide museum acceptance. The question now had become under what terms would color find that critical embrace.”¹⁶⁸ But for all the color exhibitions that began popping up, Rohrbach asserts that “color photography remained a stepchild in the museum world.”¹⁶⁹ Museums did not dedicate their prime spaces to shows of color photography, and prominent critics such as A.D. Coleman tended to disparage color images as mere sensual pleasure: “Of all the color photographs I see—and it’s a lot if you include reproductions as well as original prints—very few achieve anything for me beyond a momentary gratification of the retinal synapses.”¹⁷⁰ Color photography was understood as unsuitable for visualizing scenes of trauma and loss, such as war, despite the fact that color had become the standard for television broadcasts of the Vietnam War.¹⁷¹

However, a call for the reconsideration of color was emerging. In his January 1975 *Artforum* article, Max Kozloff summarized the major question: if society expected cinematic films to be in color, why didn’t they expect the same of photography

¹⁶⁸ As Chapter Three of *Color!*, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” roughly to the corresponds to the time period that is the focus of this thesis, the time periods discussed in Eauclaire and Moore’s texts and, and the area of Bussard’s and Hostetler’s texts I am hoping to expand upon, it will receive the most attention in this analysis. The final chapter of *Color!*, “Interrogating Color: 1990-2010,” looks at recent use of color. Rohrbach, in agreement with Moore, Bussard, and Hostetler, states that “by the early 1990s, color had become so absorbed into fine art photography that use of color materials was no longer a point of critical discussion; it was taken for granted.” During this time, photographers were actively using color photography in conversations with medium’s vocabularies and understandings of color (painting, installation art, etc.), with new digital technologies offering a new ability and ease to enhance or manipulate color. Rohrbach, “Introduction,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 6-7.

¹⁶⁹ Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 153.

¹⁷⁰ A.D. Coleman, “I Have a Blind Spot About Color Photographs.”

¹⁷¹ In the words of David Douglas Duncan: “To this day I’ve never made a combat picture in color—ever. And I never will. It violates too many of the human decencies and the great privacy of the battlefield... I can take the mood down to something so terrible that you don’t realize the work isn’t in color. It is color in your heart but not in your eye.” Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 147.

exhibitions? He claimed that the “museums’ slow acceptance of color was due to a general negligence in embracing careful looking” because examples of fine color photography existed: in the work of Eliot Porter, and more contemporarily Neal Slavin, Stephen Shore, and Joel Meyerowitz.¹⁷²

Rohrbach cites Szarkowski’s presentation of Eggleston’s color photographs at the MoMA in 1976 as that moment of recognition, noting that it is now “universally viewed by historians as the marker of color photography’s artist and critical acceptance.”¹⁷³ Eggleston’s images were not “traditionally beautiful” or “visually challenging...at first glance. But the very existence of the show made it clear that color had finally gained a place within the artistic pantheon, and that straightforward looking at the world was the accepted path.”¹⁷⁴

Prior to the Eggleston exhibition, Szarkowski had overseen or curated three solo exhibitions of color photography: Ernst Haas (1962), Marie Cosindas (1966), and Helen Levitt (1972). Besides this, he had included color in included in a handful of group and

¹⁷² Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 153.

¹⁷³ “Yet this chapter makes it clear that even Szarkowski did not fully understand Eggleston’s achievement. By embracing color photography that was naturalistic yet forceful, where color competed with subject for attention, he inadvertently set in play the demise of photography in the traditional sense. When, later that decade, the fine art photography world absorbed semiotic appreciations of cultural meaning, the transition was completed. Eggleston’s acceptance of color’s active unpredictability, in tandem with semiotics, transformed photography from a tool for describing the world into an opportunity to blend description with cultural assertion; in other words, it became a means for shaping new worlds

This shift fundamentally undercut photographers’ and critics’ longstanding location of photography’s core in its unique ability to record light and physical detail with unparalleled exactitude. While we generally think of color as brining added truth and immediacy to this foundational core, color photography actually freed the medium from its subservience to verisimilitude. Visceral connection to the world remains today the key to photography’s graphic power, but now imaginative creation is equally important. The last part of chapter 3 traces this momentous shift as it cut away the boundaries between photography and other arts, bringing new artists into the field who had little interest in photography’s traditions and who were more interested in using the medium not to record the world but to reflect ideas about the world.” Rohrbach, “Introduction,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

thematic shows. However, Rohrbach points out, “he had largely ignored the medium in his two major explications of the art of photography, *The Photographer’s Eye* (1966) and *Looking at Photographs* (1973).¹⁷⁵ This is evidence, Rohrbach concludes, that Szarkowski saw black-and-white photography as “clearly superior,” in spite of the fact that he had already, seven years before, purchased one of Eggleston’s drugstore prints.¹⁷⁶ Still, he concedes, when showcasing Eggleston’s work, Szarkowski placed it in the prime first floor galleries at MoMA, and had the museum publish its first monograph on color photography.¹⁷⁷ For years, Rohrbach argues, “Szarkowski was not yet ready to accept color photography...[because] he could not find work that embraced the same urban and vernacular subjects and intellectualized self-consciousness about photography sight that provided the foundations for his favorite photographers working in black-and-white.”¹⁷⁸ With Eggleston, he appeared to have solved that problem and was ready to make his case for color photography: “mirroring Alfred Stieglitz’s ebullient celebration of Paul Strand sixty years before, the curator called Eggleston’s work “perfect” and a clear answer to the complicated problem of color.”¹⁷⁹

As described by Rohrbach, two characteristics drew Szarkowski to Eggleston’s work: his “snapshot-inflected engagement with contemporary life” and his “sophisticated

¹⁷⁵ Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 154.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷⁷ “For the first time, Szarkowski was asking the museum to give over its prime first floor galleries to a color photographer. He was also pushing MoMA to publish a book—and it would be no simple production. He made sure that this hardcover, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, was elaborately designed to draw attention to itself, with a textured black exterior suggestive of an old snapshot camera; bright green text pages; forty-eight finely printed color plates; and a graphically strong cover graced by a photograph of a tricycle standing in the driveway of a suburban home.” *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷⁸ Rohrbach, “Defining Color: 1936-1970,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 98.

¹⁷⁹ Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 156.

use of color.”¹⁸⁰ Of these two aspects, it is the “snapshot-inflected engagement with contemporary life” that I would like to focus on because I believe it offers an interesting explanation as to why Eggleston’s MoMA show has come to be known as the universal marker of color photography’s crossover into the realm of fine art. Szarkowski heralded of Eggleston’s work as the “perfect” example of color photography. This analysis was harshly criticized in the moment, but has since been accepted and propagated throughout numerous histories of color. Why? The initial backlash of this show came from critics who had “been fighting a rearguard action against Szarkowski and his appreciation for a snapshot-inflected way of looking at the world since he had published *The Photographer’s Eye*.”¹⁸¹ They weren’t against color photography, per se, but rather Szarkowski’s entire analysis of the main issues for fine art photography; they were against the mechanical elements of “the thing itself,” “the detail,” “the frame,” “time,” and “vantage point” that Szarkowski identified as key and instead “placed photography’s artistic core within a framework of uplift.”¹⁸² Szarkowski saw Eggleston’s work as “only nominally about describing the world. Rather, the artist’s intent was, as it continues to be today, to explore and trumpet color photography’s peculiar way of reflecting the world—a point analogous to what Szarkowski found so appealing to the work of the black-and-white photographer’s he was championing, like Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. In

¹⁸⁰ Which still remained “too organized to be snapshots. Every detail is key to each image, just like a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz...” Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 155-156.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 156-157.

short, Eggleston had solved for Szarkowski the longstanding conundrum of how to integrate color into ongoing conversations of black-and-white.”¹⁸³

Eggleston’s images, while in color, visually related to the style and general spirit of the artists Szarkowski had already identified as exemplary. While Eggleston’s work was not immediately embraced by audiences of the MoMA show, Szarkowski’s focused analysis of what constituted a successful fine art color print offered a clearly defined style that fit into a history of photography in general that was already being constructed and propagated by the institution. With this in mind, it becomes clear that Steichen’s attempts to elevate color photography into fine art failed because he offered a too broad selection of options that offered no obvious connection to the style and format of photographs already established within the canon. Szarkowski’s vision succeeded because it fit into an existing narrative and set of rules (of his own devising) regarding what constituted fine art photography, rendering them, in the end, more easily consumable.

Each of these publications has offered a number of contributions to the study of color photography in the United States, but each falls short. Eauclaire provided the first overview of color photographic practices of the 1970s, but largely echoed points made by Szarkowski, the only the artists who rose to fame during that time via “high-art” institutions, and differentiated New Color from “low-art” practices in a manner that was narrow-minded. Moore’s text offered a reconsideration of the time period Eauclaire addressed, with insights as to relationship of historic events to the development of color photo’s use by artists and collection and exhibition by fine art institutions, however failed

¹⁸³ Rohrbach, “Using Color: 1970-1990,” in *Color! American Photography Transformed*, 156-157.

to provide. Bussard's text sought to provide a necessary expanded history of color photography which gives credit to presentations of color photography in "low" sources as having an undeniable impact on the understanding of color photography in American art and culture as a whole, as well as reframing exhibitions in "high" institutions and publications, such as Steichen's *All Color Photographs* at MoMA and Stieglitz autochromes at 291 and in *Camera Work*, as events that speak to the "high" associations long before the Eggleston exhibition at MoMA in 1976. What Bussard fails to speak to is the reasons why these moments have largely been deemed failures or inconsequential up till this point. This is problematic because these narratives have been told and retold ad nauseum and thus are now a part of the discourse surrounding color, regardless of whether they fit her conception of color photography's. Rohrbach's text traces the most expanded time frame of color photography's history in America, from the 1850s to 2010, offering a fuller description of the negative reactions to color photography in "high" art circles as it developed which Bussard chooses not to indulge, and, in a consequential way spoke to the reasons (besides color) that Eggleston's work was so harshly criticized initially and how his work related to the photography related to the work by other photographers Szarkowski was championing at the time.

However, Rohrbach's text, like all of the texts discussed in this introduction, focused on New York's exhibition and review of color photography in the 1970s as emblematic of the medium's understanding in America. Though New York was one of the primary areas of activity for photographic exhibition and review, a place where West Coast and East Coast practices could be seen together, my research has found that the

attitudes of critics and institutions in New York surrounding color did not match those of people in other parts of the country, especially prior to 1976 and the MoMA Eggleston exhibition. This thesis will examine the framework of exhibition and review of color photography of William Christenberry's color photography in and around Washington D.C. and John Divola's photographic practice in Southern California in comparison to William Eggleston's in New York City, as a means of bringing to light the reasons why a New York narrative should not stand in for conceptions of the medium throughout America.

Chapter 1: William Eggleston and New York City

The pictures looked so simple a lot of people didn't notice the color and form were worked out, that content came and went where it ought to—that they were more than casual pictures.
—William Eggleston¹⁸⁴

William Eggleston was born into southern affluence in 1939. His early years were shaped by freedom to travel and the leisure to pursue the arts—and higher education in general—as he pleased, which was mostly in fits and starts. In 1957, during a stint at Vanderbilt University, a friend introduced Eggleston to photography, and he began photographing without training, in a nearly arbitrary manner, “whatever was there wherever I happened to be. For any reason.”¹⁸⁵ While he received formal artistic training in other media, Eggleston’s photographic practice was largely self-taught.

Later, at the University of Mississippi, Eggleston became aware of the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans. “Photography,” he remembers, “wasn’t even born yet...If you were lucky enough to have a photographic book, it was probably a compilation from *Life Magazine*.”¹⁸⁶ Cartier-Bresson’s *Decisive Moment* had an incredible impact on Eggleston, as these images were “so full of content and so brilliantly organized...” and “sought to reduce the happenings in front of the camera to an essential moment that constituted a representative high point in the picture.”¹⁸⁷ Yet it wasn’t

¹⁸⁴ Kristine McKenna, “In Conversation with William Eggleston,” in *William Eggleston, for Now* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2010), 83.

¹⁸⁵ Sean O’Hagan. “Out of the Ordinary,” *The London Observer*. July 25, 2004.

¹⁸⁶ Stanley Booth, “Triumph of the Quotidian,” in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2008), 265.

¹⁸⁷ Quotes from “An Interview with William Eggleston,” interview by Charles Hagan, *Aperture*, Summer 1989. Eggleston states on numerous occasions that his opportunities to view art photography early in his career were few, but impactful. He specifically recalls “a photographer friend of mine at Ole Miss... named Eugene Fischer bought a book of Magnum work with some Cartier-Bresson pictures that were real fucking art, period. You didn’t think a camera made the picture. Sure didn’t think of somebody taking the picture at

merely Cartier-Bresson's photographic techniques that drew Eggleston to him; it was Cartier-Bresson's understanding of painting and study of artists working outside the realm of photography that Eggleston admired: "Cartier-Bresson was a key figure in my development, since I was so interested in the theory of painting, and his photographs, I though, reflected that more than other people's. Most photographs were about photography, I thought... Bresson was not the only one; he just stuck me as obviously having studied great artists."¹⁸⁸ What is interesting about this is that, at least in these early years, Eggleston's practice lay utterly outside any discourse attempting to shape photography as medium-specific. In fact he was studying painting with Tom Young, an abstract expressionist from New York who had worked in the same circles as Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock.¹⁸⁹ Eggleston began to apply lessons from contemporary abstract painting to photography, developing the formal characteristics of his work. Recalling the mythic tale of Kandinsky's first abstract painting, Eggleston claims to value photographs when "I can turn them upside and they're still interesting to me as pictures. If you turn a picture that is not organized upside down it won't work."¹⁹⁰

a certain shutter speed with a certain film." Thomas Weski, "I Can't Fly, but I Can Make Experiments," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Ute Eskildsen, "A Conversation with William Eggleston," in *William Eggleston* (Göteborg [Sweden]: Hasselblad Center).

¹⁸⁹ Eggleston is quoted as saying "I was there for five years studying painting, and the painter I liked the most during that period was Franz Kline. I also liked De Kooning and Pollock. Abstract Expressionism was the dominant thing when I was coming of age as an artist, and I went to New York and look at a lot of that stuff. I was painting abstraction s myself at the time, and although most people don't know this, I've never stopped painting." Later in the conversation, Eggleston states "paintings and drawings, to me, in a way explain how the photographs are put together...the reasons I have shown or published them is that I've always thought they'd be distracting." McKenna, "In Conversation with William Eggleston," in *William Eggleston, For Now*, 81-83.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Weski, "I Can't Fly, but I Can Make Experiments," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 3.

By the mid-1960s, Eggleston was in search of subjects to photograph that were both meaningful and beautiful. After admiring Cartier-Bresson's work for so long, he believed the only place that these images could be found was Paris. He and his wife spent almost a year living in Paris and traveling extensively throughout Europe, but Eggleston returned to Memphis without having taken a single photo. In discussing the predicament of lack of suitable subject matter with Tom Young, Eggleston complained, "I don't particularly like what's around me." It was Young who suggested that that might be a "good basis for taking photos."¹⁹¹ Eggleston took this advice to heart. Instead of searching for the international beauty he saw in Cartier-Bresson's work, he went in search of his own "foreign landscapes": the shopping centers and malls that had started cropping up all over the land which had previously been cotton fields and family farms.¹⁹²

At the same time Eggleston became interested in photographing vernacular subjects, he befriended a man who managed a lab which developed snapshots. The process fascinated Eggleston, partly because it was unschooled and unpredictable:

...it was refreshing to see raw prints made by people who didn't pretend to be serious photographers. I didn't know what to expect to come out of the processing machine. It was fun to be surprised at these pictures made by strangers in strange places—I don't know where they were made. They were probably pictures people took on their vacations and they were usually taken with pretty crude equipment like box cameras and so forth.

¹⁹¹ Thomas Weski, "I Can't Fly, but I Can Make Experiments," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 4.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 4. Eggleston was looking for the kind of beauty that he saw in Cartier Bresson's images. But Eggleston says: "there came a point—must've had to do with pulling up roots and coming to Memphis—I had to face the fact that what I could do was go into foreign landscapes. What was new back then was shopping centers, and I took pictures of them." Instead of searching for the literal foreign landscapes as he had in his ventures abroad, Eggleston looked to his everyday surroundings to find subjects which felt foreign. Stanley Booth, "William Eggleston," *Salon*, September 7, 1999, accessed March 13, 2016, <http://www.salon.com/1999/09/07/eggleston/>.

They were small prints, but they were beautiful.¹⁹³

He watched thousands of images come through the processing lab; two images on a ribbon a few inches wide on a continuous roll of paper every minute—a seemingly endless stream of another’s memories. He recalled: “We might see twelve or fifteen pictures that two people made on their first trip after having been married, and they forgot to have them developed. And years later they sent them over and here I was looking at them.”¹⁹⁴

Viewing prints in this lab was “one of the most exciting and unforgettable experiences” Eggleston recalls from his early introduction to color photography; it was extremely educational in terms of exposing him to the endless seriality and low quality of laboratory printing.¹⁹⁵ The unassuming images impacted Eggleston’s photographic approach. He “figured if amateurs working with cheap cameras could do this, I could use good cameras and really come up with something. I’d already become proficient in black

¹⁹³ "Irony Is Far From Me," *Leica World*, accessed March 17, 2016, http://www.egglestontrust.com/leica_2002.html.

¹⁹⁴ In a phone conversation with Anna Karrer Kivlan for her M.A. thesis, Eggleston discussed how viewing amateur photographs in a lab influenced the making of artistic photography: “I had a close friend who worked there, not an artist, he managed a certain color lab, produced endless amounts of people’s snapshots, loved to see them come off the machine. He gave me a great many ideas. But this fellow was not an artist at all. He just managed this lab ... they would develop a lot of rolls that people had taken many years back, on a honeymoon and were so beautiful, almost kind of grainy, but the prints were beautiful-little tiny-small prints...I would drop in and watch what was coming out.” Anna Karrer Kivlan, *An Eye for Vulgarly: How MoMA Saw Color Through Wild Bill’s Lens*, Master’s thesis, Dept. of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007, 15.

¹⁹⁵ In a phone conversation with Anna Karrer Kivlan for her MA thesis, Eggleston discussed how viewing amateur photographs in a lab influenced the making of artistic photography: “I had a close friend who worked there, not an artist, he managed a certain color lab, produced endless amounts of people’s snapshots, loved to see them come off the machine. He gave me a great many ideas. But this fellow was not an artist at all. He just managed this lab ... they would develop a lot of rolls that people had taken many years back, on a honeymoon and were so beautiful, almost kind of grainy, but the prints were beautiful-little tiny-small prints...I would drop in and watch what was coming out.” Karrer Kivlan, “*An eye for vulgarity: how MoMA saw color through Wild Bill’s lens*,” 15.

and white, I was a good technician, and I had a natural talent for organizing color—not putting all the reds in one corner, or instance.”¹⁹⁶ He recalls being “particularly struck by a picture of a guy who worked for a grocery store, pushing a shopping cart in the late-afternoon sun—that one really stuck in my mind. I started daydreaming about taking a particular kind of picture.”¹⁹⁷

After frustratingly experimenting with color films, Eggleston went on to make that grocery store image. The movement from black and white photography to color was not the simplistic transition he envisioned. Eggleston “assumed I could do in color what I could do in black and white, and got a swift, harsh lesson. All bones bared. But it had to be. Then one night I stayed up figuring out what I was gonna do the next day which was go to Montesi’s, the big supermarket on Madison Avenue in Memphis. It seemed a good place to try things out. I had this new exposure system in mind, of overexposing the film so all the colors would be there. And by God, it all worked. Just overnight. The first frame, I remember was a guy pushing grocery carts. Some kind of pimply, freckle-faced guy in the late sunlight. Pretty fine picture actually.”¹⁹⁸ (Fig. 1) With this, Eggleston established his signature mode: the snapshot look, achieved by “applying intelligent painting theory to color photography.”¹⁹⁹

The one other interaction which is oft cited as inspiring Eggleston’s foray into

¹⁹⁶ McKenna, “In conversation with William Eggleston,” in *William Eggleston, For Now*, 81-82.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

¹⁹⁸ Booth, “William Eggleston,” *Salon*, September 7, 2009.

<http://www.salon.com/1999/09/07/eggleston/singleton/>.

¹⁹⁹ Eggleston directly claims he was “applying intelligent painting theory to color photography. In a later interviews on his movement from black and white to color, he simplified the moment, saying: “When I switched from black and white to color, the only thing that changed was the film.” Booth, “Triumph of the Quotidian,” in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 267.

color was his friendship with William Christenberry. The two met in Memphis, Tennessee in the mid-sixties, when Eggleston's wife was taking courses at Memphis State University and Christenberry was teaching there.²⁰⁰ The two became fast friends in the rather isolated artistic community, discussing photography, sharing advice, and participating in one another's projects.²⁰¹ Since 1958, Christenberry had been taking small, Brownie snapshots as references for his paintings. Much more attention will be given to Christenberry's use of color photography in the following chapter, but it is important to note his work in relationship to Eggleston. Eggleston was a vocal admirer of Christenberry's photographs and they served as one of the earliest examples of color photographs being used within an artistic context, rather than commercial or amateur.²⁰² He began pursuing color photography almost exclusively as an artistic practice, justifying the practice with an almost naive recourse to realism: "The world is in color. And there's nothing we can do about that."²⁰³

By 1967, Eggleston had reached a point where he was wanted his images to be

²⁰⁰ "She happened to take a few course at Memphis State, so I happened to go over there and meet a few people. When I got to Memphis I couldn't find anybody—maybe you will recall, in the world of graphic arts there didn't seem to be any kind of father figure or teacher figure at all. You remember the crowd we were in—Jean Morrison, Bill Christenberry—almost without exception, but Christenberry, from other fields than art. Photography wasn't even born yet. If you were lucky enough to have a photographic book, it was probably a compilation from *Life* magazine. A friend of mine bought *The Decisive Moment*, and I took it from hi because I discovered how good it was." Booth, "Triumph of the Quotidian," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 265.

²⁰¹ Both Eggleston and his wife participated in happenings organized by Christenberry. In 1966, Eggleston attended a Ku Klux Klan rally with Christenberry, shooting and printing *Jefferson Davis Park, Memphis, Tennessee*, 1966. Adam Welch, "Chronology," *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2008), 271.

²⁰² Weski, "I Can't Fly, but I can Make Experiments," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 5-6.

²⁰³ Eskildsen, "A Conversation with William Eggleston," in *William Eggleston*.

known to the public.²⁰⁴ He made an appointment with director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, John Szarkowski, to have his work reviewed. As Eggleston describes it, “I had a lot of prints, mostly black-and-white, some color. I had dropped my pictures off, and when I came back a couple of days later, he told me he’d never seen anything like them before.”²⁰⁵ That initial meeting sparked future plans for an exhibition of Eggleston’s work. Szarkowski encouraged Eggleston to patient and to continue exploring color, particularly dye transfer printing. Upon Eggleston’s return to Memphis, he took up Kodachrome color slide film as a more stable alternative to the color negative material he had been working with and awaited Szarkowski’s call.²⁰⁶

Szarkowski assumed directorship of the MoMA photography department in 1962, succeeding Edward Steichen. Prior to the Eggleston exhibition in 1976, Szarkowski mounted a handful of single-artist based color exhibitions: an Ernst Haas exhibition in 1962, followed by small show of Marie Cosinda’s color Polaroids in 1966, and a slideshow of Helen Levitt’s color work in 1974. Of the three, the Ernst Haas show, *Ernst Haas: Color Photographs*, was the largest—eighty prints total intended to provide a full understanding of ten years of Haas’s explorations of color photography.²⁰⁷ It has been

²⁰⁴“I was very impatient. I wanted to get my work out into the world and he encouraged me to be patient.” Mark Holborn, “Introduction,” in *William Eggleston: Ancient and Modern* (New York: Random House, 1992), 16.

²⁰⁵ Weski, “I Can’t Fly, But I Can Make Experiments,” *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 8

²⁰⁶ Eggleston is quoted, “John encouraged me all the time to photograph in color. I would have done it anyway, but it helped.” Thomas Weski, “I Can’t Fly, But I Can Make Experiments,” *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 8-9.

²⁰⁷Museum of Modern Art, “Ernst Haas-Color Photography, A Ten Year Retrospective Review,” news release, New York City, New York, August 4, 1962,

said, that Szarkowski wanted to give Eggleston upon that first meeting, but since *Ernst Haas: Color Photographs* had been so poorly received by the public and critics that he thought it was best to wait till he had become more established in his role as Director, Eggleston had made more dye transfer prints, and, most importantly, till the public was ready for show of color photography to mount another exhibition of that size.²⁰⁸

However, further analysis of the Haas show reveals it was not so much the outside criticism that marked the Haas exhibition with disapproval, but rather Szarkowski himself. A “Camera Notes” article chronicling a presentation titled “Abstractions in Color” given by Steichen prior to this Haas exhibition in 1962 reveals that an enthusiastic “overflow audience” filled the MoMA auditorium to see color works by Haas and others discussed by the curator.²⁰⁹ Not only was the presentation punctuated by “frequent appreciative applause from the audience” reacting to the color images they saw, but the critic reviewing the event stated that “it was on the whole a revealing evening, and demonstration of the imaginative potential of the abstract approach for photographers and the surprising amount of activity in the field.”²¹⁰ Thus, in the months leading up to the Haas show, there a population interested in color imagery, eager to learn more and see more.

In addition to this, critical response at the time seemed largely positive. In Jacob

https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3043/releases/MOMA_1962_0102_99.pdf?2010.

²⁰⁸ Kivlan, *An Eye for Vulgarly: How MoMA Saw Color Through Wild Bill's Lens*, 12-13.

²⁰⁹The presentation featured images by Ernst Haas, as well as Jim Davis, Wynn Bullock, Scott Hyde, and Francis Thompson, as well as a number of other lesser known photographers. "Camera Notes: Abstractions in Color Presented by Steichen," x22.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x22.

Deschin's review of the exhibition for the *New York Times*, he opens his review by calling it a "beautiful display" of "Haas' ten-year involvement with color experimentally."²¹¹ Deschin reveals this show was Szarkowski's directorial debut—his first exhibition for the department. Deschin makes no reference to the fact that the show was scheduled by Steichen and executed by Szarkowski, but rather says "this new team in the museum's history of photographic exhibits is off to an excellent start, for the show is a milestone in color photography's development as an artistic medium and an impressive contribution to its appreciation by the general public."²¹² He even highlights the show is possibly the "first to indicate on a full scale the enormous potentials of the color medium when it is used imaginatively and with ability by such a high-level teaming up of photographer and printer."²¹³ All in all, a glowing review of the presentation overall, the prints individually, and a wholehearted acceptance of color photography on museum walls.

Szarkowski's one comment on Haas's work though, repeated throughout the press materials and the reviews, was simply: "The color in color photography has often seemed an irrelevant decorative screen between the viewer and the fact of the fact of the picture. Ernst Haas has resolved this conflict by making the color sensation itself the subject matter of his work. No photographer has worked more successfully to express the sheer physical joy of seeing."²¹⁴ As discussed in Phillip Prodger's essay for *Ernst Haas: Color*

²¹¹ Jacob Deschin, "Color in Motion: Ernst Haas Shows Work of Decade at Museum," *New York Times*, September 2, 1962, 75.

²¹² Deschin, "Color in Motion: Ernst Haas Shows Work of Decade at Museum," 75.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹⁴ Museum of Modern Art, "Ernst Haas-Color Photography, A Ten Year Retrospective Review," news release, New York City, New York, August 4, 1962,

Corrections, this statement by Szarkowski was nothing short of “damning in its faint praise.”²¹⁵ With no discussion of composition, subject matter, or “formal sophistication,” the exhibition was advertised with no sense of what Haas’s color work actually looked like. What Haas photographed, how he photographed, and the high quality printing all referenced by Deschin as captivating characteristics of the exhibition are ignored by Szarkowski. Szarkowski drains Haas’s images any content or significance beyond their “personal experience of color.”²¹⁶

With that reconception of the Haas exhibition in mind, I would argue Szarkowski waited almost a decade to give Eggleston his solo show as a means of distancing himself from any remnants of Steichen’s conceptions of color photography which he had inexplicably been tied to. As put by Prodger: “Szarkowski had a different agenda. It was not that he did not approve of Haas and other similarly expressive photographers, only that he preferred to move the conversation in another direction,”²¹⁷ towards artists using photography as a “new pictorial language”, “as a picture-making system,” with color as a formal quality within that system.²¹⁸

Szarkowski’s words set the tone for future critics understanding of Haas and

https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3043/releases/MOMA_1962_0102_99.pdf?2010.

²¹⁵ Phillip Prodger, “Ernst Haas—Another History of Color,” in *Ernst Haas : Color Correction / William A. Ewing ; Essay by Phillip Prodger*. (Göttingen: Göttingen : Steidl, 2011., 2011).

²¹⁶ Prodger, “Ernst Haas—Another History of Color,” in *Ernst Haas : Color Correction*.

²¹⁷ “Photographs should not look like paintings in his view. They should like photographs. The best example of this posture was Szarkowski’s advocacy of William Eggleston, whom he helped make famous. . . . Whereas Haas was concerned with personal expression, Eggleston is concerned with vernacular tradition. Its cousins are not painting, but the ruthless onslaught of the snapshot, documentary, and advertising imagery that Haas helped created as a commercial photographer.” Ibid.

²¹⁸ Weski, “I Can’t Fly, But I Can Make Experiments,” in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 8.

similar color photography.²¹⁹ Sally Eauclaire's *New Color Photography*, for example, highlighted Haas as a photographer embodying the "problematic precedents" that faced color photography, a member of the class of "popular photographers" who seek only to "dazzle us with pyrotechnics and ingenious improvisations;" an artist with "preference for transformation over truth, for drama over restraint."²²⁰ Critic Max Kozloff described Haas's efforts as "not the sensations, but the sensationalizing of color."²²¹ What is clear from Szarkowski's introduction to Eggleston's exhibition catalog, that he spent that time refining his criteria for judgment of color photography—a set of criteria that would set the standard for the MoMA collection, and as seen by Kozloff and Eauclaire, trickled down to critics, historians, institutions across the United States for years to come.

Prior to the 1976 MoMA exhibition, the only exhibition Eggleston was featured in that was explicitly "about" color was "Color Photography: Inventors and Innovators 1859s-1975" at the Yale University. It was an exhibition that sought to establish the technological development of color photography, but also recognized the artistic interest in color since its invention, with descriptions and direct quotations from artists regarding their experience with color photography. As one early historian of the medium pointed out:

The history of color photography...is largely a story of processes born before their time and processes that should never been born at all. As a field, it has been "the happy hunting ground of the crook and the crank" and the novelty-seeker, a circumstance which, when compounded with the problems involved in making an image that does not gradually disappear if exposed to light, leaves a majority of people with the impression of a too-tricky, expensive business, best left

²¹⁹ "Descriptions like Szarkowski's mattered, because they impeded deeper appreciation of Haas's work." Prodger, "Ernst Haas—Another History of Color," in *Ernst Haas : Color Correction*.

²²⁰ Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography*, 10.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

alone.²²²

Other writers cited in the Yale catalog confirm the issues that kept color photography out of the art world: it was expensive, difficult to control, and it had low, even “vulgar” associations that made institutions wary.²²³

While the Yale exhibition acknowledged the difficulties that many color photographers faced, Eggleston’s color photographs, from the time they entered circulation among the upper circles of museums, galleries, and funding institutions were continually met with praise and recognition. In 1970, still six years before *Photographs by William Eggleston*, Eggleston was introduced to Walter Hopp, the then director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art by his friend, William Christenberry. Hopp looked at Eggleston’s prints, just as Szarkowski had three years prior and was equally impressed: “By the time I went through the prints a second time, I believed them to be the finest work in color photography I’d seen.”²²⁴ Hopp began planning an exhibition of

²²² Laura Geringer, *Color Photography: Inventors and Innovators, 1850-1975*, Yale University Art Gallery, 11 November to 11 January (New Haven: Gallery, 1975).

²²³ On these topics photographer Syl Labrot’s stated in *The Invention of Color Photography*, an autobiography that was to be published: “In the museums the displays of artistic photography are almost wholly monochrome. . . It is as though the existence of color photography is still in some doubt in the upper aesthetic levels. I once suggested to a museum curator that, in a technical sense, there is no such thing as color film. It is all black and white film which is used with filters, dyed, separated, layered in precolored tricolor sheets. . . he thought about this for a moment and then his face lit up, he nodded and agreed. The idea had for him a seductive virtue.”

Herbert Matter said, “Doomed by its all-embracing usefulness and the expense involved, (color photography) has been too often forced into a one-sided entirely commercial field. . .” Walker Evans, in an interview with *Yale Alumni Magazine* said, “I’m in a stage right now that has to do with color. . . I don’t think the doors open to falsehood through color are any greater than they are through the manipulation of prints in black and white. I’ve not taken up that little SX-70 camera. . . and become interested in it. I’m feeling wildly with it. But a year ago I would have said that color is vulgar and should never be tried under any circumstances. It’s a paradox that I’m associated with it.” And Brassai: “I have always opposed color in photography, but at the same time I discovered America I discovered color. I’ve done something different, something distinctive with it, I hope. . .” Geringer, *Color Photography: Inventors and Innovators, 1850-1975*, Yale University Art Gallery, 11 November to 11 January.

²²⁴ Weski, “I Can’t Fly, But I Can Make Experiments,” in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video*, 10.

Eggleston's photographs at the National Museum of American Art, but dropped the project once he learned of Szarkowski's plans for the artist, believing a show through the MoMA had the potential to "spring him on the world."²²⁵ Hopps and Eggleston instead became friends and colleagues; they took a number of trips together; Hopps continually advised Eggleston and publicized his work, writing the introductory texts for a number of his future projects.²²⁶

As the decade moved forward, others took notice of Eggleston's color work. In 1974, he was appointed lecturer in Visual and Environmental Studies at the Carpenter Center of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.²²⁷ This position was the result of letters of introduction from director Richard Leacock and John Szarkowski to director of Harvard's film study center, Robert Gardner. That same year, Eggleston was selected as recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Photography²²⁸ and for his first solo show of photography at the Jefferson Place Gallery in Washington D.C.²²⁹

This exhibition was reviewed, quite positively, by critic Benjamin Forgey for the *Washington Star News*. Forgey places Eggleston's shooting style firmly within the photographic tradition, offering comparisons to Walker Evans: "just as Walker Evans

²²⁵Walter Hopps wrote introductory texts for Los Alamos and Eggleston's Hassleblad Award monograph. Welch, "Chronology," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 271.

²²⁶Weski, "I Can't Fly, But I Can Make Experiments," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 10.

²²⁷Welch, "Chronology," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 272.

²²⁸Museum of Modern Art, "Color Photographs by William Eggleston," news release, New York, New York, May 25, 1976, http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared//pdfs/docs/press_archives/5391/releases/MOMA_1976_0051_40.pdf.

²²⁹Welch, "Chronology," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008*, 273.

usually makes his photographs head on... William Eggleston... seems to see things obliquely.”²³⁰ His subject matter and shooting styles were not viewed as banal or boring as New York critics would later identify him, but rather “a poignant example of vernacular simplicity somehow transformed by the harmonious classicism of the artist’s vision.”²³¹ Forgey acknowledges issues with previous color photography saying: “Color photography is frequently distracting, but not in Eggleston’s case. This is not so much a matter of printing (though the dye-transfer prints are very good) but of vision. The color adds an important note to Eggleston’s sense of redolence, decadence, and abnormality.”²³²

Incidentally, the prints featured in this exhibition were ones originally expected by curators of the Art Now festival at John. F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts which had taken place a few weeks prior. When a portfolio of black and white portraits by Eggleston arrived instead, a staff member had them removed from the exhibition after opening night, a fact that Forgey, who also reviewed Art Now, found infuriating, stating “I think the removal of good works by a good artist was a harsh and unwise action.”²³³ However, the actions of the Art Now staff indicate the extent to which Eggleston’s color photograph in particular, were desired at the time.

In 1975, the waves of institutional support for Eggleston’s work kept coming. He was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Photographic Fellowship. Harry

²³⁰ Benjamin Forgey, "Eggleston: Through the Lens Obliquely," *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1974, C-2.

²³¹ Forgey, "Eggleston: Through the Lens Obliquely," C-2.

²³² *Ibid.*, C-2.

²³³ The black and white prints rejected by Art Now were retrieved by the Jefferson Place gallery and put on view with the Eggleston’s color works in that first solo show. Benjamin Forgey, "Art Now's Photo Imbroglios," *The Washington Star-News*, June 12, 1974, B-7.

Lunn, an art dealer renowned for establishing an art market for photography, funded the production of Eggleston's first portfolio of dye transfer prints, *14 Pictures*.²³⁴ The Carpenter Center hosted an exhibition of *14 Pictures*, becoming Eggleston's second solo exhibition of color work in less than two years.

During this time, preparations for Eggleston's big "launch" at the Museum of Modern Art started moving forward. The show and the accompanying catalog were supported by grants from Vivitar Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts.²³⁵ *William Eggleston's Guide* was the first catalogue produced by the Museum of Modern Art in New York focused on color photography, and the seminal monograph on Eggleston. The *Guide* was richly designed with gold lettering, a textured black cover made of material "suggestive of an old snapshot camera," with an eye catching color image of a tricycle in a suburban setting on the front, followed by mint green text pages, and forty-eight finely printed color plates. (Fig. 2) Together the artist and curator examined over 350 of Eggleston's color slides to choose 75 to print for exhibition and 48 to appear in the *Guide*.²³⁶

As noted earlier, it is in the introduction to the *Guide* that Szarkowski lays out the prescriptive terms of color photography, and establishes Eggleston as emblematic of

²³⁴ Details according to the William Eggleston trust and "Finding Aid for the Harry Lunn Papers, 1855-1999," Online Archives of California, section goes here, accessed February 10, 2016, http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8571cr8/entire_text/.

²³⁵ Museum of Modern Art, "Color Photographs by William Eggleston," news release, New York, New York, May 25, 1976, http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared//pdfs/docs/press_archives/5391/releases/MOMA_1976_0051_40.pdf.

²³⁶ Statistics from Booth, "William Eggleston," *Salon*, September 7, 2009. An annotated copy of *William Eggleston's Guide* shows that fourteen of the forty-eight images in the *Guide* were not in the exhibition. Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1133.1, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

excellence in the field. Szarkowski's text first works to dispel the idea that Eggleston's images are merely reflections of the place and culture portrayed. While Eggleston himself resisted the idea of using site locations (or titles of any kind) to accompany the photographs, as a means of embodying the "guide" style of the book, Szarkowski captioned the images with names of the Southern environs depicted: Tallahatchie, Louisiana, Sumner, Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee, etc.²³⁷ Szarkowski opens his introduction to the *Guide* by stating that he never visited the places described in Eggleston's photographs prior to writing the text.²³⁸ This was a deliberate decision on his part, based on the belief that visiting the sites would "color" his interpretations—to visit a place we have first seen described in a photograph, he thought, is to fit reality into the form of the image—and vice versa.²³⁹ By choosing not to visit these sites, Szarkowski claimed his ability to maintain adequate distance from the subject matter that would allow him to evaluate the photographs as art objects rather than veristic, documentary descriptions, thus establishing credibility for a critique that focused on form and color alone.

This is not to say that Szarkowski didn't acknowledge the biographical dimension of Eggleston's images—drawing attention to the way the photographs depict Eggleston's

²³⁷ "I never thought that titles were of any help." "Irony Is Far From Me," *Leica World*, http://www.egglestontrust.com/leica_2002.html.

Further, in a letter to Maria Morris from Harry Lunn Jr. on October 20, 1975, he stated: "Thank you for the Eggleston List. When I talked to him finally on Thursday, he indicated that he did not regard the designations as titles but rather as identifications so your idea of using "untitled" with the descriptions in parents is the best, I think." MoMA Exhibition Records, 1133.16, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

²³⁸ John Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 5.

²³⁹ Szarkowski claims in fact that he has "visited other places described by works of art and [has] observed that the poem or picture is likely to seem a faithful document if we get to know it first and the unedited reality afterwards." Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide*, 5.

home, family, and friends, he floated the idea that “one might say [they are] about his identity.”²⁴⁰ But he does so only to dismiss the personal element as incidental to the ultimate worth of the images, placing Eggleston in the “Degas position”: just as French painter, sculptor, and printmaker Edgar Degas claimed his work had nothing to do with ballet dancers, Eggleston claimed that his everyday subject matter was not a commentary on the contemporary American culture. Rather, and this is important to the Szarkowski’s justification for drawing the images into the museum, these images of places and people were vehicles for exploring the photographic medium. According to Szarkowski, artists who claim that their subject matter is insignificant do so because it allows them to avoid questions that would simplify their work. Straightforward answers as to how an artist’s “work answers to life and what part to art, and... where the boundary between them lie” would relieve the work of any mystery and obviate the viewer’s unique experience of the art.²⁴¹ Taking the “Degas position” benefits both the viewer and the critic of photography because it forces the focus onto photographic form, regardless of subject matter.

Szarkowski understands a photograph as the “container and vehicle of all its meanings,” and argues that by understanding and viewing pictures *as photographs* (rather than transparent windows onto their subjects), we can achieve a deeper appreciation for their significance.²⁴² The action of taking a photograph, he claims, is “a system of visual editing” in which one frames “a portion of one’s cone of vision, while standing in the right place at the right time.”²⁴³ With infinite possibilities for image making, no two

²⁴⁰ Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 6.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6.

photographs are identical and even images taken at random with a point-and-shoot camera can be interesting because they describe the relationships of people within the constraints of time and place.²⁴⁴ For Szarkowski, what elevates photography from the simple action of point-and-shoot to the status of fine art is the “intelligence” of the artist.

Szarkowski repeatedly refers to an artist’s “intelligence” but does not clearly define it. *Intelligence* relates to his idea that a photographer is presented with infinite conceptions of reality and by taking a photo the photographer captures a singular moment. The image a photographer chooses to capture is based on both “tradition and intuition—knowledge and ego.”²⁴⁵ The intelligent artist takes into account the work of earlier artists (s/he maintains an awareness of the established canon) while maintaining and making visually evident their own photographic mannerisms and instincts.²⁴⁶

Szarkowski extends this idea of an artist’s “intelligence” by pointedly differentiating between the “gifted” and the “original” photographer. *Gifted* photographers “learn from the successes of their predecessors, quickly acquire the ability to recognize and anticipate certain aspects of subject matter, situation, perspective, quality of light that produce effective pictures.”²⁴⁷ *Original* photographers, on the other hand, “enlarge this shared sense of possibilities by discovering new patterns of facts that will serve as metaphors for their intentions.” It is due to the few “exceptional” (another term for original) artists that the tradition of photography has been “formed and reformed” with a “new vocabulary based on the specific, the fragmentary, elliptical,

²⁴⁴ Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 6.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

ephemeral, and provisional.”²⁴⁸ It is through the *original* artists that new traditions arise and our conceptions of what “in the world is meaningful and our understanding of how the meaningful can be described.”²⁴⁹ And it is through *original* photographers that new techniques can develop into new forms of expression.

In Szarkowski’s telling of the medium’s history, when color photography was first invented, it was believed that color would enhance the naturalism of the image. But photographers soon realized they could not translate their shooting techniques from black and white photography to color, just as the quotes from Eggleston’s own experience reveal. Photographers understood that black and white photography was used to create compositions that “looked good, and seemed to mean something as pictures.”²⁵⁰ But what was the purpose of color photography? Color shifted the basic patterns and syntax of photography from value to hue forcing a complete reevaluation of technique.

Accordingly, the few photographers who did attempt to work in color fall out into two categories of “failure:” those who made black and white photos in color film and those whose pictures were based solely on color relationships.²⁵¹ The first category implies that the color was superfluous, as the compositions would have been valid autonomously, in black and white. The second category indicates failure through complete disregard for subject matter, an element distinctive of the medium; here subjects were not chosen based on the merits of their form or composition but simply on

²⁴⁸ Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 8.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

the pleasing relationships of their color.²⁵² “Most color photography, in short,” Szarkowski states bluntly, “has been either formless or pretty.”²⁵³ He describes these artists as incapable of grasping the elements of form, subject, and color simultaneously, preventing any of them from being wholly successful.

However, according to Szarkowski’s account, artists began working in color with more confidence by the early 1960s. Looking at the use of color in film, television, painting, and advertisement, photographers were able to see that color was not a separate issue to deal with in photographs but a valid part of the visual experience.²⁵⁴ Eggleston, he notes, is one of the few photographers who successfully photographed in a manner in which you could “see simultaneously both the blue and the sky,” thus capturing form and content in addition to color.²⁵⁵

Many of these “successful” color photos, Szarkowski admits, resemble family snapshots: images of everyday life taken by amateurs. But these diverge from snapshot form in their “intelligence, imagination, intensity, precision, and coherence.”²⁵⁶ Eggleston’s work consistently uses commonplace and everyday objects and beings: family, suburban neighborhoods, even oven interiors. The subject matter appears “as hermetic as a family album,” private and abstruse. Rather than understanding these elements as amateur, Szarkowski interprets them as “romantic” due to their “preoccupation with the private experience.”²⁵⁷

²⁵² Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 8.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

Previous romantic photography, he argues, “tended to mean the adoption and adaptation of large public issues, social or philosophical, for private artistic ends,” and these ideas were conveyed through stylistically heavy special effects: “glints and shadows, dramatic simplicities, familiar symbols, and idiosyncratic technique.”²⁵⁸ The “romantic” aspects of Eggleston’s work do not come from such dramatic effects. Rather, in his photographs, the viewer engages with the realm of the private and personal portrayed in a manner that can only be described as austere. And why are these images engaging? Szarkowski describes a curious phenomenon surrounding Eggleston’s work in which people who otherwise may have trouble looking at the color slides of friends and family, may find they take a deeper interest in photos of similar subject matter by Eggleston. This is not because they identify themselves as representatives of the human condition, or because the characters are any more interesting than their own kin. Rather, it is because these images are “simply present: clearly realized, precisely fixed, themselves, in the service of no extraneous roles.”²⁵⁹ We do not need to know who they are or where the image was taken because their presence clearly formulated in the image itself.

This apparent simplicity of presentation becomes more interesting when Szarkowski fuses it to visual complexity. Szarkowski relates an anecdote in which, upon seeing a selection of Eggleston’s photos in 1972, the art historian and Museum of Modern Art director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. commented that each of the photographer’s

²⁵⁸ Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 11.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

images had a central “circular core” from which the rest of the composition radiates.²⁶⁰

Eggleston’s response to this comment was that, yes, in fact the centrality of his compositions was based on the confederate flag.²⁶¹ (Fig. 3) Szarkowski believes this statement was made to again, “frustrate rational analysis” of his work. Nevertheless, Szarkowski admits, there is indeed a centrality to Eggleston’s work. This format “fixes the subject as sharply as if it were recalled it from eidetic memory,” and it is this, in part, that gives his images the appearance of familiarity.²⁶²

This sharpness is dependent on color. Szarkowski says that if Eggleston’s color photos were reduced to monochrome, they would become static and bland.²⁶³ Though many of the compositions would maintain their strong sense of line and light, without the element of color the actuality of experience that the photos provide would be lost. Eggleston himself once said that he wanted to shoot in color because we see the world in color. In order to capture the exact colors of the world he saw or wanted to emphasize, Eggleston used a process known as dye transfer printing.²⁶⁴ What the dye transfer process allowed Eggleston though was the freedom to directly decide the formulation of colors. The ability to control color allowed him to direct the viewer’s focus on certain elements

²⁶⁰ Alfred J. Barr was the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, working from 1932-1940. Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 11.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶⁴ Invented by Kodak, the process employs four plates containing four separate colors: magenta, yellow, cyan, and black to produce a printed photo. Each of the plates was engraved with a halftone image and coated with ink for transfer. The process, discontinued by Kodak in the 1990s, was difficult, expensive, and required hours if not days of work by a trained specialist. Karrer Kivlen, *An eye for vulgarity: how MoMA saw color through Wild Bill’s lens*, 16.

of the composition and succinctly capture the vibrancy of life as he envisioned it.²⁶⁵

While Szarkowski makes many valid comments about how Eggleston's photos formally engage the viewer, his critique leaves something to be desired. One of the biggest claims in the *Guide* is that Eggleston's images should not be linked to a larger social and cultural context. According to Szarkowski they are images concerned with photography alone, and they use scenes from life as means of expressing that. According to this reading, these photos are not about friends, family, or South. As photographs, their "form and content are indistinguishable—which is to say that the pictures mean precisely what they appear to mean."²⁶⁶ Attempting to translate these images to words is not only impossible, but unnecessary. You do not need to know what the exact circumstances of the subject to understand their significance as photographs.

This is a perfectly interesting theory; however, Szarkowski does not provide any details on how this is actually possible in the photographic medium. As he himself described, one of the keys to being an *intelligent* or *original* photographer, rather than simply a *gifted* photographer, is to be a master a system of visual editing, someone capable of framing a subset of their cone of vision while "standing in the right place at the right time."²⁶⁷ How can the editorial decisions of framing, and the inclusion and exclusion of a "right" time and place be seen without any link to a social, cultural, or political context? When an artist makes claims, even in jest, that the centrality of their

²⁶⁵ "Producing the first dye transfer prints of a subject cost around \$1000; subsequent prints of the same image were less costly." Weski, "I Can't Fly, But I Can Make Experiments," in *William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video*, 19.

²⁶⁶ Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide*, 12

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

compositions bears a relationship to the confederate flag, how can that statement be sapped of all its political connotations in favor of formality that invokes familiarity? Even basic choices, such as “not putting all the reds in one corner”²⁶⁸ are active processes of exclusion and inclusion, all of which is informed by the photographer’s aesthetic, social, political, cultural values.

Regardless of these unanswered questions, the point remains that Szarkowski holds Eggleston up as one of the few in the pantheon of “intelligent” photographers. He closes his introduction with the statement: “As pictures, however, these seem to me perfect: irreducible surrogates for the experience they pretend to record, visual analogues for the quality of one life, collectively a paradigm of a private view, a view one would have though ineffable, described here with clarity, fullness, and elegance.”²⁶⁹ Eggleston’s ability to “see simultaneously both the blue and the sky” earned him the status of, in Szarkowski’s words, perfection.²⁷⁰

Despite the exalted status with which Szarkowski introduced Eggleston’s work, the public and critics were perplexed and hesitant to even refer to the photographs as art. The earliest reviews of Eggleston’s work are legendary for their harsh criticism. One such review was written by Owen Edwards for the *Village Voice*, in response to Eggleston’s 1977 exhibition of work at the Castelli Gallery. The review is notable because Edwards claims he went to the Castelli show in hopes of altering his original impressions of Eggleston’s work, formed at the 1976 MoMA show.²⁷¹ His initial reactions to

²⁶⁸ McKenna, “In conversation with William Eggleston,” in *William Eggleston, For Now*, 81-82.

²⁶⁹ Szarkowski, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, 14.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁷¹ Owen Edwards, “William Eggleston’s New Clothes,” *Village Voice*, December 12, 1977, 87.

Eggleston's work were so negative he did not even write a review for the show out of fear he "might be reacting to the hype [...] and partly because I suspected I had missed something, some crucial nuance that every else saw clearly."²⁷²

Alas, Edwards's early impressions of Eggleston's work were simply reconfirmed at the Castelli show. Eggleston's photos appeared to Edwards as "little more than glossy pretension" and made him feel as if he was being tricked. By this, he meant the curators and institutions organizing Eggleston's shows were simply playing a "little game to see how much of nothing could be used to fill the void in awareness of color photography before somebody noticed."

Edwards also saw Eggleston's work as the regurgitation of previous photographic ideas and imagery: "[the] only difference is he's got it dressed up in an ektachrome party frock." Instead of establishing new visual symbols that could properly convey contemporary ideas, his photos were "clones" of the everyday "ugly America style" that was prominent in art photography in the 1950s and 60s.²⁷³ To make successful color photography, Edwards argued, an artist must be aware of how viewers accept color, how colors interact when a camera frames them, and how those elements come together to create subjects and visual symbols. In order for Eggleston's work to succeed in showing "us that color is a part of our everyday experience—a random, often wonderful kaleidoscope, most of which we miss through simple carelessness—then he owes the idea a representation dramatic enough to make us pay attention."²⁷⁴ For Edwards, Eggleston's

²⁷² Edwards, "William Eggleston's New Clothes," 87.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁷⁴ Edwards specifically states that the color photographer must "understand how colors we accept as commonplace (or for that matter, extraordinary) will coexist in the forced intimacy of the camera's frame.

inability to grasp a dramatic representation caused his work to fail. Edwards saw Eggleston's work as a hollow attempt at the sidelong glance and snapshot styles of Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander, but this style, he claimed, "demands far more talent than Eggleston possesses."²⁷⁵ Failure to produce compelling imagery and an "inconsistent and unsure"²⁷⁶ use of color rendered Eggleston's photos nothing more than "contrived artlessness."²⁷⁷

Overall, Edwards understood Eggleston as a "created star."²⁷⁸ While dozens of other artists working at the time were making better images, because the MoMA chose him for such a prominent exhibition he became the poster-boy for color photography.²⁷⁹ Giving voice to the general complaint of a public flummoxed by postwar art, Edwards claimed that Eggleston's position was "the vestige of an elitism born out the presumption of a few autocratic souls to intimidate an audience with empty, arcane, gibberish, both verbal and visual, and out of the willingness of an unsure public to be duped."²⁸⁰ The article ends on a hopeful note: Edwards believes that people will ultimately rise against

But even when the problem is dealt with imaginatively, the play of colors alone is seldom enough to make a picture memorable. As in black-and-white photography imagery is the vital element in color work, no matter how alluring the chromatic dance. Photography is intrinsically metaphoric-it shows us not things as they are, but things as the photographer wants us to see them." Edwards, "William Eggleston's New Clothes," 87.

²⁷⁵Ibid., 87

²⁷⁶ Edwards not only sees "Eggleston's color seems inconsistent and unsure" but with a "casual disregard for his subjects, he shifts from evocative composition to garish, strobe-lit surrealism to the kind of washed out weariness usually seen in demo prints left too long in shop window." Ibid., 87.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 87.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 87.

²⁷⁹ Eggleston was "brought onstage to satisfy the specific needs of others, both aesthetic and financial. His first show, carefully edited by skilled artistic entrepreneurs, though hardly a milestone, at least had an identifiable point of view. But in the current show, such judicious handling is absent and the result is a hodgepodge without a sensibility strong enough to glue it all together. Even if the color were phenomenal, it would not be enough to maintain a reputation based largely on presumption." Ibid., 87.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 87.

the curators and institutions that have formed these shows and banish the “Egglestons” of the art world.²⁸¹

An earlier review by Hilton Kramer, a prominent critic for the New York Times, focused specifically on the 1976 MoMA exhibition and brought Szarkowski’s own words to attack the photographs: “Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring certainly.”²⁸² To Kramer, the MoMA’s press department built the exhibition up to be a monumental portrayal of the potential for color photography as a form of fine art, but failed because the images were not masterpieces as Szarkowski claimed. Eggleston is too infatuated with the “unremarkable.” The “trucks, cars, tricycles . . . suburban houses and dreary landscapes” that populate his images along with his friends and family “appear in these pictures as dismal figures inhabiting a commonplace world of little visual interest.”²⁸³ While Szarkowski presented Eggleston’s use of color as nothing short of extraordinary, Kramer considers Eggleston’s color usage as lackluster and commonplace as his subject matter, varying from “obviously pretty” to “obviously austere,” with the general color tonalities of a postcard.²⁸⁴

Kramer entirely dismisses the formal quality of Eggleston’s work. He claims that

²⁸¹ “The Eggleston’s are going to be put out. People not only know what they like, they know something about photography. The message in pictures may be as cabalistic as a Druid curse—great photography is never completely stripped of mystery—but the eye must be gifted enough to express it clearly. The audience owes the photographer nothing.” Edwards, “William Eggleston’s New Clothes,” 87.

²⁸² Hilton Kramer, “Art: Focus on Photo Shows,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1976, 62.

²⁸³ Kramer, “Art: Focus on Photo Shows,” 62.

²⁸⁴ In Kramer’s words, the color of Eggleston’s photos, while “alleged to lend a special distinction to these pictures is, to my eye at least, similarly commonplace. It varies from being obviously pretty (a bright blue pickup truck seen through the growth of wisteria in bloom) to being obviously austere (the gray-black-off-white tones of the interior of a household oven). Mostly it is postcard bright, in the outdoor daylight pictures, or ponderously atmospheric, in the interior shots.” *Ibid.*, 62.

the centrality of Eggleston's subject matter is not a "remarkable esthetic feat."²⁸⁵ Like Edwards, he sees Eggleston's photos as a copy of what came before him: the use of the "snapshot chic" style of the post Diane Arbus, anti-formalist esthetic.²⁸⁶ Instead of paving a new "intelligent" path for photography, Kramer sees Eggleston's work as the propagation of styles considered "à la mode" and his use of color as nothing special. Kramer ends the review stating that the show, for "purely negative reasons... has to be seen to be believed."²⁸⁷ Like Owens, Kramer's review seeks outward affirmation, encouraging a public to see the work, recognize its faults as he has, and rise up with their expression of distaste for it.

Similar statements popped up many of the other reviews. *The New Yorker* commented: "Color film provided the snapshooter with what he lacked and had been limping along without, since color photography is always interesting to look at, whereas black-and-white is interesting only under special conditions... The traditional separation by color of the serious photographer from the frivolous snapshooter represents the recognition on both sides that one medium is hard and the other easy—that one requires art and the other doesn't... His pictures look insignificant, dull, even tacky, on the wall. The Eggleston photographs made a particularly poor showing in exhibition. They look inartistic, unmodern, out of place in an art museum; an atmosphere of slouching dejection

²⁸⁵ Kramer specifically has issues with Szarkowski and his curatorial comments on Eggleston, and states "There is no great formal intelligence at work in these pictures, either. Mr. Szarkowski makes much of the fact that Mr. Eggleston places most of his subjects plunk down in the center of his pictorial space or just off center as if it were some remarkable esthetic feat. It is not." Kramer, "Art: Focus on Photo Shows," 62.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

and tentativeness hung over them...²⁸⁸ *Camera 35* asked viewers to stop looking to the MoMA photography department for guidance in understanding contemporary photography practices: “Szarkowski seems committed to a quality of ugliness...most of the recent shows at the Modern are just that—showy...better suited for a circus tent than a museum wall...Essentially, this Eggleston exhibit demonstrates that we can no longer look to the MoMA for photographic direction. It has become a vehicle of ego consciousness instead of a barometer of *all* that is going on in photography.”²⁸⁹ Overall, it was a seemingly never ending onslaught of criticism.

Yet the photographic community was not completely disenchanted with the exhibition as many color histories have implied. Cornell Capa, photographer and director of the International Center of Photography at the time, sent a letter to Szarkowski regarding the exhibition stating: I’m sorry I was not able to come to the opening of the Eggleston exhibit...I stopped by to see it last night and found it to be a strong, unflattering, unromantic statement on American life. The fact that it was in color seemed to complicate Hilton’s attitude in reacting to what he saw. I feel that your showing this work was a significant and courageous act.”²⁹⁰ Clement Greenberg, the renowned art critic, sent a thank you note to Szarkowski for sending him a copy of the *Guide* which

²⁸⁸Janet Malcolm, “Photography: Color,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 1977, 107- 108.

²⁸⁹ “This is particularly regrettable since so many organizations such as the National Endowment for the arts and Ponder & Best have sought guidance as to where they should provide much-needed support. In this particular case they were unashamedly suckered.” Michael Edelson, “East: MoMA Shows Her Colors,” *Camera 35*, October 1976, from MoMA Exhibition Records, 1133.14, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

²⁹⁰ “Letter from Executive Director of the International Center of Photography,” Cornell Capa to John Szarkowski, June 4, 1976, from MoMA Exhibition Records, 1133.9, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

stated: “The pictures are eye-opening, & so too is your essay. Once again I’m made to realize that anything is possible in art—not that I hadn’t thought good color photography was possible, but it had begun to seem improbably except by accident...I’d seen many accidentally good color photos...but because they were accidental they didn’t “accumulate.” Eggleston’s do, & accidental is the last thing I’d call them.”²⁹¹

One of the aspects of Eggleston’s 1976 MoMa show that is mentioned in single lines of press releases and timelines, but never really expanded on is that *Color Photographs by William Eggleston* traveled. As a traveling exhibition, this show spread Szarkowski’s conception of color photography, and along with it, the color controversy initially surrounded it in New York, the first venue of the tour. In New York and elsewhere, the show was publicized as an exhibition explicitly about color—with Eggleston highlighted as “one of the most accomplished photographers now working in color.”²⁹² While the exhibition and Szarkowski’s text focused on Eggleston, the press release stated the following: “Unlike most of their predecessors, whose color work has been either formless or too pretty, a new generation of young photographers has begun to use color in a confident spirit of freedom and naturalness. In their work the role of color is more than simply descriptive or decorative, and assumes a central place in the definition of the picture's content. These photographers work not as if color were a separate problem to be resolved in isolation, "but rather as though the world itself existed

²⁹¹ "Postcard," Clement Greenberg to John Szarkowski, July 6, 1976 from MoMA Exhibition Records, 1133.22, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

²⁹² Museum of Modern Art, "Color Photographs by William Eggleston," news release, New York, New York, May 25, 1976, http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared//pdfs/docs/press_archives/5391/releases/MOMA_1976_0051_40.pdf.

in color, as though the blue and the sky were one thing.”²⁹³ Thus, while Eggleston was raised up as a singular champion of the medium, his efforts were meant to reflect that of a “new generation” of artists. With this suggestion of a color movement afoot attached to its mission, the show traveled to the Seattle Art Museum, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery Dickson Art Center at UCLA, FOB Gallery, Reed College, and the Art Gallery at the University of Maryland College Park.

At its first venue, Seattle, the exhibition maintained its original title, *Color Photographs by William Eggleston*, (although some subsequent venues would eliminate “color” from its title”) and was on view from September 30 - October 31, 1976.²⁹⁴ In her review, “Photographers lack snap at Modern Art Pavilion,” Deloris Tarzan provided brief descriptions of the handful of shows happening simultaneously at the Seattle Art Museum’s Modern Art Pavilion.²⁹⁵ As the title of the review suggests, the venue’s photography installations in particular left something to be desired. Of the three photographers exhibited, Eggleston’s review is by far the most in-depth and the harshest. Though Eggleston was the most highly renowned photographer showing she is quick to

²⁹³ Museum of Modern Art, “Color Photographs by William Eggleston,” news release, May 25, 1976, http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5391/releases/MOMA_1976_0051_40.pdf.

²⁹⁴ It should be noted that that according to Seattle Art Museum records, the exhibition was in fact titled *Color Photographs by William Eggleston*. Though the title oscillates in current texts, timelines, and even MoMA press releases between *Color Photographs by William Eggleston* and simply *Photographs by William Eggleston*. Seattle Art Museum University of Washington Special Collections, “Inventory,” accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.lib.washington.edu/static/public/specialcollections/findingaids/2636-011.pdf>, 3.

²⁹⁵ Located at the Seattle Center. The shows described included: a sculpture show by Denis Ashbaugh, photography shows by William Eggleston, Christopher Makos, and Philip Tsiaras, and a collection of 25 Northwest jewelers and silversmiths at the Seattle Art Museum Modern Art Pavilion. Deloris Tarzan, “Photographers Lack Snap at Modern Art Pavilion,” *The Seattle Times*, October 24, 1976, B 19.

question his high status.²⁹⁶ For Tarzan, the content of Eggleston's color photographs are "no more interesting than a stranger's family album, documenting people and places of surpassing dullness" and while "photos are noteworthy for their excellent composition, clarity and fine attention to detail" they are "at base, dull."²⁹⁷

The review gives special attention to Szarkowski's role and voice in this exhibition. In addition to selecting the prints for this exhibition, she comments on his *Guide* text, stating that "Szarkowski's introduction to the show's catalog emerges as a fascinating essay on color photography without making a particularly strong case for Eggleston."²⁹⁸ For Tarzan, Szarkowski's claim that color photography up to that point had been either "formless or pretty" appeared valid and justified, while his assertion that Eggleston's images were "perfect" failed to accurately describe his photography. The final line of her review of Eggleston reads, "De gustibus non est disputandum;" in matters of taste, there can be no disputes.²⁹⁹

When the show next appeared at the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, Dickson Art Center at UCLA in 1977, it reviewed for the *Los Angeles Times* by Carol Schwalberg.³⁰⁰ Her review begins with a question posed by a member of the public attending Eggleston's exhibition at Wight Gallery: "What are these pictures doing in a museum?"³⁰¹ She goes

²⁹⁶ "Eggleston has the greatest reputation, having been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in photography in 1974, and in 1975 a National Endowment for the Arts. His exhibition is made possible by grants from the N.E.A. and Vivitar, Inc." Tarzan, "Photographers lack snap at Modern art Pavilion," B 19.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, B 19.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, B 19.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, B 19.

³⁰⁰ Carol Schwalberg, "Photography Review: Deceptive Professional," *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1977, F4.

³⁰¹ Schwalberg, "Photography Review: Deceptive Professional," F4.

on to compare Eggleston's work with that of Jackson Pollock, stating that "what Pollock's drip canvases once did for painting, William Eggleston's work now does for photography: It allows the unaccomplished to jeer: 'I can do better than that.'"³⁰² Schwalberg admits that Eggleston's show received confused, if not outright negative, reviews in Los Angeles, but she sees the root of the distaste in a subject matter and shooting style akin to family snapshots. However, she claimed that the fact that his images "provoke fear and grumbling" and cause viewers to ask the question, "Is color photography to be taken seriously?" is precisely what indicates the high quality of Eggleston's work.³⁰³ His nontraditional subject matter (cemeteries, shoes under the bed, a jingle of wires snaking out of a ceiling light fixture) and nontraditional framing of traditional subject matter (interiors shot from bizarre angles, including distracting element that likely should have been cropped), all work toward a better realism: "Eggleston goes beyond the arrangement of attractive shapes within a rectangle to limn a South pockmarked with warts."³⁰⁴

Beyond this subject matter, Schwalberg praises Eggleston's ability to meld color with meaning, primarily by denigrating previous color photography. Echoing ideas set down by Szarkowski, she writes:

...Eggleston's work welds color and meaning. In the past, serious photographers chose to make their comment about society in stark black-and-white. Color was considered a photographic cosmetic. Shoot a slum in Kodachrome and the pretty colors undercut its sluminess. Shoot the same slum in black-and-white and the sluminess came through intact.

No matter how sensitive or gifted the color photographer, content ran

³⁰² Schwalberg, "Photography Review: Deceptive Professional," F4.

³⁰³ Ibid., F4.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., F4.

second to form. The viewer was seduced by the emulsion, never stimulated by an idea. Black-and-white was for thought and color for sensation. Accordingly, museum and gallery directors excluded most color. William Eggleston has changed all that.”³⁰⁵

After years of apparent deficiency in the field of color photography, Eggleston appeared on the scene as the answer to all the medium’s questions, his importance reinforced by the fact that his work had been validated by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the fact that “no less an authority than John Szarkowski” has referred to his work as “perfect.”³⁰⁶ With this, Schwalberg’s review propagates the idea that, while the public may not understand or even like the work in this exhibition, has been supported by an institution and persons more knowledgeable on the topic. With this seal of approval, Eggleston’s work fills a previously glaring gap within the canon.

The last West Coast venue for this exhibition was the Faculty Office Building gallery at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. In celebration of the opening for this leg of the exhibition, Szarkowski visited the college to give a talk titled “The Content of Photographs,” and led a discussion on Eggleston’s photography the following day in the gallery.³⁰⁷

In reviewing the Portland leg of the exhibition, critic David Featherstone drew attention to a fact that had not yet been mentioned in Eggleston discussions: exhibitions of photography, color or otherwise, were not the norm. He said, “Although photographic exhibitions are appearing more and more frequently in museums and galleries in the

³⁰⁵ Schwalberg, “Photography Review: Deceptive Professional,” F4.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., F4.

³⁰⁷ Definitive opening date for this leg of the exhibition could not be identified, but the show was up through through May 1, 1977. Beth Fagan, "'Sawdust Fest,' Prison Artwork on Weekend Bill," *The Oregonian*, April 15, 1977, C7.

Portland area, most of the work comes from local or relatively unknown photographers, and has represented the relatively safe, established approaches to image-making. Rarely has there been an exhibition which raised significant questions about the nature or direction of the medium.”³⁰⁸

He goes on to express excitement that Eggleston’s work was on view in the area, commenting that the community welcomed the opportunity to gain exposure to a photographer not only with a national reputation, but to have the chance to see firsthand “a group of images which have generated a reasonable amount of controversy.”³⁰⁹ From there, he goes on to describe the responses to Eggleston’s work when it first showed: “The controversy in New York centered around the validity of the Museum’s supposed blessing of color photography and the choice of Eggleston’s work to make that announcement.”

Like the many other reviewers, Featherstone describes Eggleston’s subject matter and shooting style as problematic. But then he goes on to do something not even Szarkowski did successfully in his text: he attempts to describe how color successfully plays into meaning in Eggleston’s work. He notes that “many of those people writing about photography have a tendency to refer to “the problem of color in photography,” as if the color were something which could be removed from the image and dealt with separately. There is no question that color is a viable creative medium, but it is important to consider the color as an inextricable part of the photographic image.”³¹⁰ Just as

³⁰⁸ David Featherstone, "William Eggleston's Photographs: A Sense of Something Yet to Happen," *Oregonian Northwest Magazine*, April 17, 1977, 13.

³⁰⁹ Featherstone, "William Eggleston’s Photographs: A sense of something yet to happen,” 13.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

Szarkowski claimed the successful color photographer must have the ability to see simultaneously the “blue and the sky,” critics must considering color photography attempt the same synthesis.³¹¹ But to this the reviewers added an unprecedented affective gloss that would have been anathema to Szarkowski. In color photography, Featherstone claimed, “Not only is the visual shape of the image dependent on the colored patterns, but the viewer’s emotional response is affected by the overall hue of the prints.”³¹² Eggleston’s use of the dye transfer printing process allows him to control the saturation within the photograph and therefore control the image’s emotional impact, folding this into the meaning of the image.³¹³

This is not to say the Featherstone was a fan of Eggleston’s work or thought that audiences would react positively to it. He claims: “This is, in many ways an imperfect show...few of the 40 photographs here will be remembered for long.”³¹⁴ For Featherstone the importance of the show lay in its focus on color photography, a medium

³¹¹ Featherstone, “William Eggleston’s Photographs: A sense of something yet to happen,” 13.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹³ To expand: “The effect of color on the meaning of the images is most obvious in several of Eggleston’s interior photographs, such as the one of a room with shelves of china. An open doorway leads to other rooms, each room successively bathed in a stronger warm yellow light. It is unimportant here that the predominant color is not what one would see standing in the room. The warmth of the yellow light defines the photograph’s meaning.

The importance of color-content is also apparent in the photograph made outdoors of three children standing on a road at dusk. There is a slightly alarmed expression on the children’s faces, an alarm which accentuated by the relationship between the purple sky and the greenish-yellow light reflecting off the road around them. The atmosphere is enhanced by the reddish tinge of the flesh tones.

The majority of Eggleston’s photographs, however, are those in which the influence of color is more subtle. They appear to be more ordinary because their color is closer to that of our expected perceptions of the colors. While some of these images are among the least successful in the show, there are some poignant images among them. In one photograph, a white man in a black suit and red tie and a black man wearing a white servant’s jacket are standing in a parklike woods. Behind them is a white car, with another figure barely visible inside. The stance of the two men, combined with the cold gray light which bathes the whole image, creates an emotionally charged image. Like many other Eggleston photographs, the final content is the implication of subsequent action.” *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

which had largely been ignored by institutions.³¹⁵ Thus his most definitive statement is: “the importance of the images lies in the delineation of an idea about image-making which has not yet been fully realized;” the questions raised about the medium here “are more stimulating than the aesthetic confirmation received from seeing established masterpieces.”³¹⁶

Featherstone’s comments are astute: the real significance of the Eggleston’s exhibition was the way it stimulated dialogue surrounding color photography as a medium. Many histories of color photography have cited William Eggleston’s 1976 MoMA show as moment that color photography became “accepted” as a form of fine art. By finally making it into the most prized galleries of the most prominent institutions, color photography had “arrived.” The critical backlash that followed the exhibition is often understood as emblematic of the “controversy of color,” showing an American public that was not ready or willing to see a medium with such “low” associations grace gallery walls. However, as the exhibition and reception of color photography by Ernst Haas’s and Eggleston’s prior to the 1976 MoMA show convey, color was not, in fact, the controversy. In reality, it was Szarkowski’s clearly articulated, largely publicized critical statement on what fine art color photography *should* that was the root of the show’s condemnation. Critics exclamations were largely reactions against Szarkowski’s designations of Eggleston’s color photographs as “perfect” despite their basic (if not boring) snapshot appearance. As the exhibition traveled, Szarkowski’s understanding of

³¹⁵ “Even though viable color technologies have been available since the 1930s, it is only recently that museums and galleries have paid much attention to color photography.” Featherstone, “William Eggleston’s Photographs: A sense of something yet to happen,” 13.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

color photography traveled, the harsh New York critiques traveled, and the conversation slowly evolved from a conversation of is Eggleston's color photography any good to what constitutes fine art color photography? These conversations resulted in a severe delineation between color and other photographic practices in the years that directly followed the Eggleston exhibition, as the next chapter will illustrate. Chapter Two will look at the photographic career of Eggleston's friend, William Christenberry. As an artist who started taking and exhibiting color photographs years before Eggleston, his career offers significant insight into shifting understandings in how color photography and its place within photography as a whole.

Chapter 2: William Christenberry and Washington D.C.

But in time, the photographs began to be something on their own.

—William Christenberry³¹⁷

However, the exhibition and reception of color photography is a much more complex story than the Szarkowski's narrative would lead one to believe. William Christenberry's work, produced and received in Washington D.C., provides insight into an alternative reception of color photography, one that took hold in art institutions in a Southern metropolitan region of the United States. Through analysis of the creation, exhibition, and reception of Christenberry's photography, it becomes visibly apparent that color photography was not controversial prior to the MoMA's 1976 Eggleston exhibition. In fact, it is only in the wake of the Eggleston MoMA show that critical analysis of Christenberry's work focuses on color as anything more than a passing detail. Thus, his career offers a fascinating illustration of the extent to which discourse of color photography was reshaped in response to Szarkowski's claims regarding the medium.

Born November 5, 1936 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, William Christenberry, Jr. spent his formative years in a particularly small "postage stamp" of the American South.³¹⁸ His immediate family lived in the town of Tuscaloosa for a majority of his life; but he spent the summer months in the more rural areas of Hale County, where his parents' families

³¹⁷ "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Merry Foresta, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, March 3-31, 2010, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-william-christenberry-15884>.

³¹⁸ "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it..." "William Faulkner, The Art of Fiction No. 12," interview by Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel, *Paris Review*, Spring 1956, accessed February 26, 2-16, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4954/the-art-of-fiction-no-12-william-faulkner>.

had lived for generations.³¹⁹ For all its important cultural landmarks, historically Hale County has been one of the poorest areas in the state.³²⁰ The Christenberrys were a lower-middle class family, and Christenberry, Jr. was raised believing in the value of hard work and the necessity of “toiling,” as he has put it, to make ends meet; from an early age he helped his father with his truck route and worked odd jobs, including running a paper route for the Birmingham News. One day when he was fourteen years old, while opening a bundle of tightly wrapped papers with a set wire cutters, Christenberry was struck in the eye. The impact of the wire destroyed his lens and a misdiagnosis by a local doctor almost cost him his entire eyeball.

The injury required a series of surgeries. In addition to interrupting his depth perception, the accident reduced the sight in his injured eye to light and color alone. “There’s no edge to any form,” he explained in a recent interview, “it’s like looking at late, late, late, late Monet. ... I see beautiful colors and lots of light, but there’s no shape to it.”³²¹ That is to say, before receiving any formal artistic training, Christenberry’s vision had been broken down into distinct components: light and color in one eye, line and a self-manufactured sense of depth in the other.

³¹⁹J. Richard. Gruber, *William Christenberry: The Early Years, 1954-1968* (Augusta, GA: Morris Museum of Art, 1996), 7-8. William Christenberry and Susanne Lange, *William Christenberry: Working from Memory: Collected Stories* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 13.

³²⁰ Gruber, *William Christenberry: The Early Years, 1954-1968*, 2. A fact which came to national attention during the Great Depression, the early years of Christenberry’s childhood, but still holds true today, with 26.6% of the population in Hale County falling below the poverty line according to 2009-2013 U.S. census data. “Quick Facts: United States,” United States Census Bureau, accessed May 27, 2016, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/01065.html>.

³²¹ Neely Tucker, “After a Lifetime of Capturing What Was, Christenberry Faces What Is,” *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/after-a-lifetime-of-capturing-what-was-christenberry-faces-what-is/2015/06/05/66d755e8-0092-11e5-833c-a2de05b6b2a4_story.html.

Oddly, given his disability, Christenberry knew from an early age that he wanted to pursue art.³²² While neither his parents nor his grandparents were able to afford college, Christenberry received a small settlement from the Birmingham News for his eye injury that made it a possibility for him.³²³ He enrolled at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa in 1954, where he took courses in a progressive program that addressed creative production across the arts – not only painting but literature, poetry and prose, particularly the work of American writers of the Deep South.

This connection between Southern writing and the visual arts came at a formative moment in Christenberry's artistic development. While he entered the program at University of Alabama immersed in the ethos of Abstract Expressionism, he soon began to question the "nonobjective element."³²⁴ Southern writers discussed the land and its history in a way that made it feel like rich subject matter, and representing the Southern landscape seemed a viable alternative to pure abstraction.³²⁵

It was photography that would give Christenberry access to that landscape. And with only a few exceptions, photography had not yet made it into the fine arts curriculum:

³²² "I've always wanted to be an artist...I didn't know anything else, never talked about being anything other than an artist...And I always received encouragement from my mother and father. I'll never forget that, and I'll always be grateful for that." "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-william-christenberry-11839>, 6-7.

³²³ The settlement was for approximately \$3,200 plus surgery fees. Christenberry, Jr. also worked part-time jobs and continued living in his grandmother's house close to campus. Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 5-6.

³²⁴ "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Merry Foresta, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, March 3-31, 2010.

³²⁵ Christenberry also notes that, "I took a lot of classes in sculpture, which I would like to talk about too, but I majored in painting. And the reason for that is that very few people were interested in sculpture at that time—that is, as something to pursue, to have a major in." "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 9.

“The major was painting in those days. It was not photography at all. I don't mean that in a demeaning way to photography; it's just the way it was. But the desire came—I had a desire, as I say, to come to grips with that landscape in which I grew up, the positive and the negative, the dark and light.”³²⁶

The transportability of the camera, allowing him to travel into the landscape, and the ease of drugstore printing made photography an obvious choice technologically; it allowed him to move from a physical interaction with a site back to the studio quickly and seamlessly. Plus the camera's seeming “objectivity,” its inability to edit details within the frame selected by the artist,³²⁷ ensured Christenberry the ability to capture both “the positive and negative” of his subjects. So Christenberry set out to explore the areas of Alabama surrounding Tuscaloosa, armed with a Brownie camera that had been gifted to him as a child.³²⁸ Without any training in the medium, photography became a new, informal means for Christenberry to approach an old, familiar subject, a new “lens” for re-examining his home territory, so to speak.

The camera was simple: a point and shoot with only a shutter release; no focusing or aperture controls.³²⁹ Christenberry loaded it with 127 color film that could be purchased at any drugstore, a practical decision since he was using the photographs as a tool to support his naturalistic paintings: “...I wanted to reference the landscape and things in the landscape, mostly the vernacular architecture, in my painting... Back in the

³²⁶ "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Merry Foresta, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, March 3-31, 2010.

³²⁷ Which, to be clear, is a system of editing in and of itself.

³²⁸ "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Merry Foresta, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, March 3-31, 2010.

³²⁹ As Christenberry has pointed out, there were several types of Brownie cameras available at this time. “The other one is called Brownie Hawkeye, but this is the Brownie Holiday, and you just had a little shutter release.” Ibid.

studio it was the color reference, the memory jog that was important to my paintings.”³³⁰

His small drug store color prints were initially meant to serve as simply aides-memoires.³³¹ As part of the preparatory process for his paintings, his photographs were never critiqued or considered as finished products in and of themselves. Instead, they were tacked up on the walls of his studio, never intended for public consumption.

Christenberry stayed at Alabama for his M.A. and maintained his focus in painting, but with an emphasis on color broadened by contact with the artist Melville Price.³³² Price introduced him to the art and literature of the Dada and Surrealist movements, and encouraged him to read James Agee, effectively giving him “permission” to turn away from nonobjectivity and toward realism.³³³

The visual manifestation of this new working process can be seen in

³³⁰ “The pictures were processed at the local drugstore in Tuscaloosa and printed on fiber-based paper, which has held up remarkably well. It is my nature to take reasonably good care of whatever I do, and I stored the negatives in a cool dark closet. I can still print from the Brownie negatives from the 1960s, and many will be reproduced in the new Aperture book. I also dry-mounted those little 3 x 5-inch drugstore processed snapshots onto pieces of mat board with a three-inch border, which was fortunate because it gave them support. I would tack the mat board up on the wall next to this huge piece of canvas, so that I could use it as a reference for the colors and forms. They were not photo-realism paintings, but expressionistic paintings that look somewhat like a combination of Chaim Soutine and Willem de Kooning in the same painting.” Robert Hirsh, “The Muse of Time & Place,” *Afterimage*, November/December 2005, 31.

³³¹ “Oral History Interview with William Christenberry,” interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 13.

³³² Price really shook him up, challenging his use of light and colors. Price would visit his studio and say things like, “I told you to change the palette. I’m sick of seeing that lavender and those pinks and those sky blues. I want to see some colors on there that you don’t like,” prompting Christenberry to incorporate darker grays, ochre, browns into his work—drawing his critical attention towards his use of color more than ever. Gruber, *William Christenberry: The Early Years, 1954-1968*, 24.

³³³ “I’ll never forget one day, over a cup of coffee near the Art Department where we’d always go for coffee and doughnuts, or whatever; and I said, ‘Tell me, what younger American writers are you particularly interested in?’ And one name really struck home real fast, and that was James Agee. Now, this had to be, of course, 1958; Agee died in 1955. And I remembered then that I had read an Agee short story in that modern short story class... It was a very interesting story; called “A Mother’s Tale.” So I was able to begin to link up the name Agee with a previous experience.” “Oral History Interview with William Christenberry,” interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 9-10.

Christenberry's *Tenant House* images.³³⁴ Exploring the architectural sites of his youth, such as the empty tenant house, Christenberry would snap a picture (typically centered within the frame), have it developed in a local lab, then display the Brownie snapshot in his studio for reference while he painted. (Fig. 4) The painting would reflect the site, in color and subject and general format, but maintain the painterly, active brushstroke quality of the Abstract Expressionist environment in which he was educated. (Fig. 5) Often, a single photograph would serve as the visual material for multiple paintings.

The turn away from painting would take much longer. Christenberry stayed on as faculty at University of Alabama, where he taught drawing. By 1960, with the help of his photographs, he had begun painting the vernacular architecture for which he would become famous, starting with the *Tenant House* series. It was around then that he encountered Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for the first time, and, at least initially, was stirred not so much by Evans' photographs as by Agee's words: "what Agee was...doing in writing or with words is what I wanted to try to do with paint," he claimed.³³⁵ Yet as Christenberry spent more time with the book, and found a version with extended pictures, Evans' themes and imagery worked their way into his consciousness and his practice. Knowing that a few of the structures and people from Evans's photos still survived, Christenberry went on the road to revisit and re-

³³⁴ "This prevails in my work to this day. Although everybody else was painting non-objectively, I made *Tenant House #1* [1960]. Not only was it pivotal in my painting, but my photographic work too." Fix footnote. Hirsh, "The Muse of Time & Place," 31.

³³⁵ "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 10-11.

photograph them.³³⁶ (Fig. 6) (Fig. 7.) While Christenberry claims that this reconstruction of the creative process of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was nothing more than a “sort of a curiosity;” the process of tracing Evans and Agee’s footsteps hints at Christenberry’s dawning realization that photography had the potential to construct an artistic project; that it was not merely the handmaid of painting but a stand-alone creative technology.³³⁷ “In time,” Christenberry would acknowledge, “the photographs began to be something on their own.”³³⁸

By 1961, Christenberry had moved himself and his budding multimedia practice (which by then included sculpture as well as painting) to New York, where he held a number of odd jobs to support himself.³³⁹ He rented a studio, but for the first time since he began at the University of Alabama he wasn't taking or teaching any classes; he wasn't painting; he wasn't making sculptures; and he wasn't taking any photographs. While he spent much of his free time visiting museums, going to the theater, seeing art films, attending arts events, Christenberry recalls the New York months as the only time he wasn't actively making things.³⁴⁰ Yet even though New York was not necessarily

³³⁶ “I was particularly taken by Agee’s words, but some of the photographs were astounding to me because I know the people in them. Some of them had worked occasionally for my Grandparents Smith. When I showed the book to my grandmother, Mama Smith, she said, “Oh, yes, that’s Mr. So-and-So,” and called their names. I became completely fascinated by this book and started to re-trace Agee’s and Evans’ steps, photography again what subjects of theirs I could find. It was fascinating to me. What they had done meshed so completely with my feelings about that landscape and those people.” Christenberry and Lange, *Working from Memory*, 13

³³⁷ “Well, actually, some of the things that Evans had photographed on that trip he and Agee made in '36 still stood. But that was only sort of a curiosity. I never—there may be a photograph or two where that—a photograph of that structure, that old tenant house, but it was never an intention to replicate, in any shape, form or fashion, what they had done.” “Oral History Interview with William Christenberry,” interview by Merry Foresta, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, March 3-31, 2010.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Hirsh, “The Muse of Time & Place,” 30.

³⁴⁰ Christenberry discusses his love of visiting everything from the Old Masters to the Egyptian collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and attending a happening on the Lower East in the

conducive to creating new work, it was a place where he could internally begin a catalog of others' work—for old masters weren't just something to learn about in books and contemporary artwork wasn't just something being reviewed in magazines.

New York City also gave him the opportunity to meet some of the artists he admired in person. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* still ran deep in Christenberry's mind, and Christenberry knew Evans was not only still alive but living in New York City but working as senior editor at Fortune magazine. Within a few months he and Evans had met, sparking a long friendship.³⁴¹ Evans found him a job as a file clerk at Time-Life, refiling the black and white photographs that would come back from writers and researchers, and eventually expressed interest in Christenberry's photographs, encouraging him to "take them seriously."³⁴² "At the time," Christenberry recalled, "I was about as interested in photography as I was about as I was in physics—zero. But that's how it began."³⁴³

Christenberry cites Evans as the first person to whom he showed his snapshots.³⁴⁴

studio of Claes Oldenberg. "Oral History Interview with William Christenberry," interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 31-32.

³⁴¹ "So, he was so nice to me and we sat there and talked, and he seemed genuinely interest in what I knew about "...Praise Famous Men"—that I actually knew some of the families he had photographed and that Agee had written about. For they had come to Alabama, Agee and Evans, on that assignment for Fortune in 1936, the year I was born—actually they came in the summer and I was born in the fall of '36... And here I was, I don't mean this in an egotistical way but just in a factual way, I had found those people, had found some of the places he had photographed, been able to match up buildings by knotholes...all of that, like piecing together detective things. So I was full of that and genuinely excited about it." Ibid., 26.

³⁴² Ibid., 28-29.

³⁴³ Hirsh, "The Muse of Time & Place," 31.

³⁴⁴ "I only had about 35, maybe 50, of those original little snapshots. Before I left Alabama to go to New York, I had—I don't know, for some reason I disliked the little white snapshot border and I would meticulously trim off, with a straight-edge and a single-edge razor blade, cut that white little border off, and dry-mount those little color snapshots larger pieces of mat-board. You know, like 11 x 15. And that was a blessing in disguise because it gave them a little bit more substance and kept them from getting lost. And that's what Walker Evans saw and encouraged me to take seriously." "Oral History Interview with

The fact that he recalls that moment as “how it began” (*it* being the serious consideration of photography as a medium with potential for artistic expression and exhibition to a wider audience) indicates the low status photography still had in the institutions of art in or outside of New York. To consider photographic practice as a worthwhile artistic pursuit—particularly casual color photography—required mentorship and encouragement from outside the museum and gallery system. Christenberry had that support in Evans, who singled out the painter's color sense as distinctive, but Christenberry still wasn't ready to put painting and sculpture behind him: “He [Evans] said, ‘There’s something about the way you look at things, where you stand, and your sense of color that’s very important.’... Still I can’t honestly say that sunk in. Because who was really interested in photography as a serious thing?”³⁴⁵

In 1962, Christenberry moved back south, this time to Memphis, Tennessee, where he took a job teaching drawing and painting at Memphis State University.³⁴⁶ Once outside of New York City and back in an academic setting, Christenberry started making artwork again. It was in Memphis that Christenberry met William Eggleston, and the two became fast friends; the two shared a common interest in vernacular images of the South: Eggleston’s colored by a dislike for the buildings and culture developing around him and Christenberry’s informed by a desire to record familiar structures before it fades from

William Christenberry," interview by Buck Pennington, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, January 17, 1983, 34.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 34.

³⁴⁶ Known today as the University of Memphis. He also had had to go through another series of treatments on to keep his injured eye from drifting, which were incredibly expensive in the city, and knew there was a good likelihood he was going to need more. Ibid., 32

existence, “a vehicle to record, to preserve some of the things that are bygone.”³⁴⁷

Their meeting was prior to Eggleston’s exhibition and MoMA and prior to meeting John Szarkowski. Just as Christenberry had an impact on Eggleston, prompting him to think more seriously about color, Christenberry was affected by Eggleston’s consideration of photography as an artistic medium: “I think his interest in photography increased my interest in photography, because I continued to make those snapshots for a number of years.”³⁴⁸ While it is often stated that Christenberry only photographed his home territory of Alabama, he did indeed make photographs in Memphis. (Fig. 8) Two of these images, including *Dean’s Beauty Salon, Memphis, Tennessee* (1972) and *Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee* (1971), would be exhibited in his first solo photography show at the Corcoran in 1973.³⁴⁹

In 1968, Christenberry moved to Washington D.C. for a position at the Corcoran

³⁴⁷ “My work is often confused with being nostalgic. The work is not nostalgic for something gone or passing, or in the process of change, but I am fascinated with how things do change and with vernacular architecture. I call it the “architecture of my childhood”: the dogtrot or breezeway house, country stores...there are so few left. I have fond memories but I would like to say that nostalgia is not the main thing. You can wallow, if you know what I mean. Let me also emphasize that the camera was not my main means of expression at that time, nor is it today. It’s mostly been painting or sculpture but photography became a vehicle to record, to preserve some of the things that are bygone. Even in the last twenty years I’m hard pressed to find subject matter that interests me.” “An Interview with William Christenberry,” interview by Ben Sloat, Big, Red & Shiny, December 1, 2008, <http://bigredandshiny.org/5183/an-interview-with-william-christenberry/>.

³⁴⁸ The quotes from this article are from an interview date much earlier than the article. Ferris conducted this interview with Christenberry in 1983, as part of a film *Painting in the South* which accompanied an exhibition, “Painting in the South: 1564-1980” at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. William Ferris, “Those Little Color Snapshots: William Christenberry,” *Southern Cultures* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 64-65.

³⁴⁹ Reviews of this exhibition did not address the Memphis images explicitly and I could not identify any sources containing a confirmable prints of *Dean’s Beauty Salon, Memphis, Tennessee* (1972) and *Beale Street, Memphis, Tennessee* (1971). For examples of chromogenic reproductions from this body of work, please see: *Beale Street*, negative about 1963 - 1964; print 1979, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, by William Christenberry, <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/133965/william-christenberry-beale-street-american-negative-about-1963-1964-print-1979/>.

College of Art and Design. During his first few years in D.C. he essentially stopped painting; instead he worked primarily in sculpture, and this is the medium for which he became known in D.C.³⁵⁰ In 1971, he had his second solo show at the Henri II Gallery: thirteen constructions built primarily of wood panels and glowing neon tubes. They were received with praise for Christenberry's restrained use of new materials. The show was described by Benjamin Forgey as, "the kind of show that can make looking at art in Washington an exhilarating experience... The work he has shown always has possessed a certain intrinsic character that is difficult to describe—clean and craftsmanlike, inventive in its use of new materials, self-contained and not showy."³⁵¹ Forgey also drew attention to a certain regionalism he was reading in the work, one that seemed at once rural and metropolitan: "The peculiar air of this work, its particular quality and strangeness consists of being able to occupy several worlds at the same time. It exists successfully as pure art, intriguing, precise arrangements of lines and forms and colors in space, and yet it possesses latent echoes of the pine forest of the South and the neon lights of a rainy night on city streets."³⁵²

A year later Christenberry's drawings and sculptures were featured in a number of group shows, for example the Second Annual Exhibition of Washington Artists, and a

³⁵⁰ His first solo show in Washington D.C. took place at the Henry Gallery in 1970, with group shows at the Henri Gallery and the Corcoran Gallery of Art that same year. For reviews of these exhibitions, please see: Paul Richard, "Christenberry's 'Change Coalitions'" *The Washington Post*, February 28, 1970, C6; Frank Getlein, "Corcoran Show an Exciting Language Blurrer," *The Sunday Star* (Washington D.C.), October 11, 1970, C3; and Paul Richard, "Neither Somber, Nor Sacred," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1970, B16.

³⁵¹ Benjamin Forgey, "In the Galleries: Month of Sculpture," *The Sunday Star* (Washington D.C.), December 19, 1971, B-4.

³⁵² Forgey, "In the Galleries: Month of Sculpture," B-4.

solo show the University of Maryland library.³⁵³ Favorable reviews began to appear in Washington D.C. area papers, but not of the work in photography, which wouldn't come to light for another two years. His reputation in the district for a distinct style of sculpture, drawing, and even painting (though he wasn't showing his paintings at the time) was growing, but his photographic work remained virtually unknown.

Yet his photographic practice had not stopped; in fact it had gained greater exposure and garnered more attention from the artist as an independent practice. For Christenberry, part of the benefit of moving to Washington D.C. was that the location made Alabama accessible.³⁵⁴ While he had made photographs of "The District," they were not typical of his practice, and he began making an annual pilgrimage back to Hale County, Alabama, where he reconnected with the landscape that fed most of his subject matter. Then, in 1973, Christenberry was given three solo photography shows: the first at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which traveled to the Baltimore Gallery of Art; the second at Jefferson Place Gallery;³⁵⁵ and the third at the Octagon House, located in the American Institute for Architects.³⁵⁶ In each of them, the work was framed—by the artist himself and

³⁵³ For reviews see: Barbara Gold, "Art Notes: A Baker's Dozen Worth Seeing," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 15, 1972, 70; Jo Ann Lewis, "Fresh Cream at the Phillips," *The Washington Star-News*, November 26, 1972., 7; and Benjamin Forgey, "Phillips Annual Show: Let's Give It Two Cheers," *The Sunday Star* (Washington D.C.), December 3, 1972, 1.

³⁵⁴ David Tannous, "Capital Art: In the Major Leagues?," *Art in America*, July/August 1978, 78-79.

³⁵⁵ For review of this exhibition, please see: Paul Richard, "Rectangles of Color That Contain Vast Spaces: Galleries," *The Washington Post*, April 24, 1973, B7. This review is not discussed here because it quotes heavily from Walker Evans's analysis of William Christenberry's photography which is noted at length in the following paragraphs.

³⁵⁶ In addition to these three solo shows of photographic work, Christenberry participated in a group show at the Jefferson Place Gallery in Washington D.C. titled "Six Washington Photographers." Jane Livingston and William Christenberry, *William Christenberry: Color Photographs, December 21, 1978-February 11, 1979* (Washington D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1979).

by the institutions who showed them—as having set the trajectory of color photography. Soon, that judgment would be echoed by the critics and public who viewed them.

The shift in attention came with *William Christenberry: Photographs (April 13 Through May 27, 1973)*, at the Corcoran Gallery, Christenberry's first solo photographic exhibition and effectively, the public unveiling of his work in the medium.³⁵⁷ The show featured fifty-one images of rural Alabama (and two of Memphis, Tennessee), photographed between 1964-1972, ranging in subject matter from gravesites to country storefronts.³⁵⁸ Despite his by now large collection of photographs, many of which had been mounted, sorted, and cared for over the years, Christenberry himself still did not conceive of his photographs “as art or as serious photographs”; they were merely references for paintings.³⁵⁹ It was at the urging of Walter Hopps, who had been director/curator of the Corcoran until 1972, when he left to curate the Venice Biennale, that Christenberry mounted the show. Hopps, who by then already had a well established

³⁵⁷ According to Nina Felshin's essay in the pamphlet for this exhibition, a small collection of Christenberry's color photographs were included in a small group show at Dupont Center in Spring 1971 Joe Cameron and John Gossage. These artists were introduced Christenberry's photographs by curator, Walter Hopps. Nina Felshin, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973* (Washington D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1973), National Gallery of Art, Gallery Archives.

³⁵⁸ “This special vision of William Christenberry is on view currently in two rooms at the Corcoran: some 50 images out of the 250 he has taken all told in Alabama. Benjamin Forgey, “Photographs of Childhood,” *The Evening Star and Daily News* (Washington D.C.), April 30, 1973, D4.

³⁵⁹ Christenberry said: “As I said, they were references for paintings. I never thought of them as art or as serious photographs until later, when I met Walker Evans in New York and he asked to see some of the little snapshots. But that didn't change the way I looked at things or what I looked at.”

In response to a question from Robert Hirsch regarding how his 127 film was processed and cared for, Christenberry responded, “The pictures were processed at the local drugstore in Tuscaloosa and printed on fiber-based paper, which has held up remarkably well. It is my nature to take reasonably good care of whatever I do, and I stored the negatives in a cool dark closet. I can still print from the Brownie negatives from the 1960s, and many will be reproduced in the new Aperture book. I also dry-mounted those little 3 x 5-inch drugstore processed snapshots onto pieces of mat board with a three-inch border, which was fortunate because it gave them support. I would tack the mat board up on the wall next to this huge piece of canvas, so that I could use it as a reference for the colors and forms.” Hirsch, “The Muse of Time and Place,” 30.

reputation as a "gonzo museum director—elusive, unpredictable, outlandish in his range, jagged in his vision, heedless of rules"—a reputation that, importantly, had been developed outside New York—was responsible for having introduced Pop and Conceptual Art to Southern California in advance of their New York reception.³⁶⁰ His criteria for judgment was formed in the crucible of the experimental and the unprecedented, and the snapshot quality of Christenberry's photographs would have had instant appeal to him, familiar as he was with the pop photography coming out of Warhol's Factory. Color as well would have drawn him to the images; their proximity to commercial art, their inattention to fine printing and even their marginal status as support images for painting would have struck him as exciting, radical departures from the conventions of fine art photography. Hopps saw the photographs in D.C., "at 3 a.m. one morning early in 1969," a "fortuitous discovery" that eventually lead to the exhibition of the snapshots just after Hopps' departure from the museum.³⁶¹

In his opening remarks for this exhibition, Corcoran director Roy Slade introduced Christenberry as an artist of "growing reputation in Washington and beyond."³⁶² Slade emphasized the spontaneous, unpolished nature of the work, pointing out that as an artist and teacher who had always worked across a variety of media (painting, drawing sculpture), Christenberry saw photography as a more "personal"

³⁶⁰ Yvonne Shinhoster Lamb, "Walter Hopps; Curator Of 20th-Century Art," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A55497-2005Mar21.html>, B06.

³⁶¹ Felshin, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*.

³⁶² Roy Slade, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*.

endeavor, “the camera [used] as a vehicle to explore and develop his own vision” rather than as a formal output for exhibition.³⁶³

Slade’s own interest in these photographs was as a “fellow artist and a close friend;” and, as if uncertain whether he wanted to fully commit to the images as art, he extended special thanks to Walter Hopps and Gene Baro (both previous directors of the Corcoran Gallery of Art) for their “support of the artist and the exhibition.”³⁶⁴ In introducing this exhibition and its significance, his emphasis was always on validating the work as art—he never once framed it as an exhibition of “color photography” specifically. Rather, he cites the support of Walker Evans, “a major American artist” as proof of the validity of Christenberry’s photographic work.³⁶⁵

The pamphlet’s main essay, written by curator Nina Felshin, further examines myth of the movement of Christenberry’s photography from private to public, pointing out that Christenberry “did not consider them “art” and probably would not to this day if others, most importantly Walker Evans and Walter Hopps, had not tried to convince him otherwise. “I was much more caught up in the subject matter than the aesthetics of photography,” he recalls. “There was no thought when I first started making them that I was making art and that they would be seen.”³⁶⁶ Following Christenberry’s lead, Felshin

³⁶³ Slade, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*.

³⁶⁴ Walter Hopps was Director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art from 1970-1972, and Gene Baro was interim director for a period of time between Hopps and Slade. Quote from: Slade, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*.

³⁶⁵ Slade, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*

³⁶⁶ “The current exhibition is the artist’s first one-man museum presentation. Interestingly, it is not an exhibition of the sculpture, for which he is best known, but his photographs, the product of relatively private activity for more than ten years” Felshin, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*.

focused on the subject matter—the work's affiliations with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and the connection to the south. There is no mention of color, the printing process, or even any discussion of the specific photographs exhibited, though a full checklist of the 51 works is provided, again, without reference to the fact that they were color images. In fact three of the images reproduced in the pamphlet are black and white reproductions; the only hint that the show was an exhibition of color photography is the color reproduction of *31 Cent Gasoline Sign, Near Greensboro, Ala. 1964*. (Fig. 9)

But two words from Walker Evans' endorsement in the pamphlet hint at the association of color with amateurism and snapshot photography:

The fact that William Christenberry is not fully a professional photographer is of some importance in any comment on his current phenomenal exhibition. The look and feel of the work would not be the same were he more professional. Christenberry is a sculptor and an art teacher. What he has done with breathtaking candor, ease, charm and a perfect instinct is to take a cheap “instamatic” box camera, something of this sort from the drug store, and to trust his eye and his intuition, and to push the button at some hidden inner command. Will you claim that anyone can do this with similar results? Not if you know anything about art, vision, talent; *about color*; about seeing and the eye.

I need not proclaim the distinction in these unpretentious pictures. They will be spotted by the many experts who follow photography in all its turns—and they will probably be mishandled in one way or another, as usual, though, to indulge myself in the truly sensual pleasure of savoring these things in their quiet honesty, subtlety, and restrained strength and their refreshing purity. There is something enlightening about them, as ranged here; they seem to write a new little social and architectural history about one regional America (the deep South). In addition to that, each one is a poem.³⁶⁷

Effectively, Evans' claim is that while color photographs are essentially *popular*—made with a basic commercial process by an “amateur”—Christenberry has a special insight that allows him to feel out and create unique artistic works. Unlike Szarkowski, Evans doesn't focus on color when he elevates Christenberry's work; it is merely one element of the

³⁶⁷Italicization mine. Walker Evans, *William Christenberry: Photographs, April 13 Through May 27, 1973*.

overall success of his vernacular photographic style. By framing this exhibition in such a way, Slade, Felshin, and Evans were creating an environment of reception for color photography in Washington D.C. in which color wasn't an issue; it was simply a feature of this particular kind of artistic practice.

This is reflected as well in the way critics received the show. Benjamin Forgey, a Washington D.C. based architecture and art critic, wrote two reviews of the Corcoran exhibition, one for *The Washington Star* and a second for *Art in America*. Both reviews follow essentially the same format of the exhibition pamphlet, first focusing on the fact that up till this point, the range of Christenberry's work across media was unknown; then affiliating his photographic project with Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The conclusion was that though Christenberry's photography started as research on the Evans and Agee project (that is, as the photographic equivalent of a study or preliminary sketch), it soon morphed into a project of "Christenberry's own vision."³⁶⁸

For Christenberry this was a specifically photographic vision: "I wanted in my work to express something I felt about Alabama, about that area in particular, but I didn't know how. Agee made it clear that it could be done; I don't know yet if it can be done in painting and sculpture."³⁶⁹ Here, then, is the reason that photography came to the forefront in Christenberry's practice: painting and sculpture could not adequately communicate the vernacular landscape. The photographic works filled a gap that other

³⁶⁸ Benjamin Forgey, "Washington D.C.: William Christenberry at the Corcoran Gallery and Jefferson Place," *Art in America*, May/June 1973, 112.

³⁶⁹ Forgey, "Photographs of Childhood," D4.

mediums couldn't approach.³⁷⁰ Forgey seems particularly sensitive to this, and delves further into a topic Walker Evans merely touched upon: the commonplace technology of Christenberry's photographic practice. Where Evans implied that Christenberry's achievement was to have produced accomplished images with limited tools, Forgey locates Christenberry's use of instamatic tools and drug store processing at the center of his practice, as a means of creating unpretentious pictures. Importantly, here we have the first real nod to color: "These are drugstore prints, and the color seems just right; that is, genuine—something that is hardly ever true no matter the money, equipment and knowledge used to get the color print."³⁷¹ Color correctness, an issue that had ostensibly kept photographers away from the medium, in this context, signified the authenticity of heartfelt sentiment. That is, regardless how much money, time, and energy they pumped into printing processes, artists and amateurs alike had difficulty getting the response that they desired from color film. By claiming that Christenberry's colors were "just right; that is, genuine," Forgey suggests that Christenberry's genius lay shifting the subject matter to match the tone of the processing flaws. Effectively, Christenberry embraced color incorrectness as a signifier of the guileless authenticity of the vernacular.

³⁷⁰ "The scope of William Christenberry's work has been slow to emerge for several reasons. The artist rightly believed that a lot of his work, if shown prematurely, would have been overlooked or misunderstood. Then, too, the relationship between various parts of his work was probably less clear to Christenberry himself than it is today... A long period of serious thinking followed the *Through Box* exhibition. Christenberry was questioning in particular the potential slickness of good craftsmanship, and he hasn't made a sculpture for a year. Also perhaps, the sculpture may have seemed to indirect a statement for his new concerns. Directness is one of the major virtues of his photographs." Forgey, "Washington, D. C.: William Christenberry at the Corcoran Gallery and Jefferson Place," 112.

³⁷¹ Forgey, "Photographs of Childhood," D4.

This understanding of the “genuine,” a peculiar form of postwar primitivism, is furthered by other statements Forgey makes on the photographs. In the *Art in America* review he adds, “The fact that Christenberry is not a professional photographer accounts for something important in the work—the consistent frontality, perhaps, the intimacy, and above all the directness of the image—the way it is allowed to speak for itself in all its openness and complexity. Artlessness here makes the art, as intended.”³⁷² And to finalize that thought, “Exhibiting the photographs at this time is important to Christenberry’s art, I think. Compared to them, for instance, the drawings, for all their intelligence, complexity and skill, seem cold and removed, and it is this distance that Christenberry wants most to avoid.”³⁷³

This same exhibition traveled to the Baltimore Museum of Art, where it was reviewed by a handful of additional critics. Lincoln Johnson, for example, repeats a number of now established narratives recounting Christenberry’s artlessness; that the work was greatly impacted and interconnected with Walker Evans’s work in American South during the Great Depression. Where Johnson sees Christenberry’s work splitting from Evans’ is their unambiguous sentiment:

Christenberry’s pictures generally exhibit a pervasive softness, tenderness and open affection. The work is intimate in feeling and scale and look at first very much like anybody’s casual snapshots.

Christenberry doesn’t pretend to be a professional photographer and his pictures demonstrate what subtleties of expression can be achieved by a person with unpretentious equipment and, I assume, ordinary commercial processing—and, of course, with a good eye and sympathy for the subject.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Forgey. “Washington, D. C.: William Christenberry at the Corcoran Gallery and Jefferson Place,” 112.

³⁷³ Forgey, “Photographs of Childhood,” D4.

³⁷⁴ Lincoln Johnson, “Two Ways of Viewing America,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 22, 1973, B1.

Again, the images are admired for their heartfelt amateurism. If color plays a role in this, it is so well fused with the notion of the vernacular that it doesn't even earn a mention in the analysis of the show.

Another critic, Barbara Gold, highlighted the Baltimore exhibition twice; first in a review specifically focused on the show, and second in her year-end analysis of the 1973 exhibitions. The initial review is critical but positive, identifying the images on view as "special sorts of pictures—not slick, not professional, but highly personal":

This is where the artist grew up. This is the land he knows. This is what is in his blood, and all the romanticism of the kind of down-home feeling implied in those last few sentences comes through in these little snapshots. They are just that—snapshots. Carefully composed. Skillfully selected. Snapshots nonetheless. That, too, is part of their charm. Christenberry matches the tough reality of what he sees with an unpretentious technique reflecting that reality in a most telling way.³⁷⁵

Again, these pictures are identified as personal snapshots: 'not originally intended for exhibition;' taken simply because Christenberry was "caught up in the subject matter," a fact Gold sees as "part of their charm." She goes on, "Christenberry's pictures are anybody's pictures—but just a little bit better...These are the pictures you take to remember."³⁷⁶ The images, she claims, show what Southern towns look like when experienced via the back road, on "a slow tourist trip" or as when a person explores the lesser-taken paths of home territory.³⁷⁷

Gold attributes part of the photographic success of these works to Christenberry's background in sculpture: "Christenberrys have the added knowingness of an eye accustomed to making sculptural decisions, to seeing mass and void, light and solid, and

³⁷⁵ Barbara Gold, "Art Notes: Shooting Shotgun Shacks," *The Baltimore Sun*, November 25, 1973, 66.

³⁷⁶ Gold, "Art notes: Shooting Shotgun Shacks," 66.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66

then balancing or contrasting them. They have the added sensitivity to color of someone who has also studied to be a draftsman, who uses drawing as an integral part of his aesthetic.”³⁷⁸ He provides a specific sense of place, and captures the essence of the sort of romanticized vernacular architecture associated with remembered places; “bittersweet ...monuments to something past”:

The photo comes close enough to give detail and stays far enough away to give an idea of city sidewalk setting and construction. Each has personality...Christenberry has somehow captured the endless decay of the buildings he selects and the particular qualities of individual structures. His buildings will sit in their fields forever—unpainted, uninsulated, cold. And yet, for some, these shacks are home. Each has a personality, and the pictures convey that, too.³⁷⁹

Yet Gold is careful to establish Christenberry’s artistic validity by invoking skill. While these “snapshots” imply facility is at the center of Christenberry’s practice—photography is simple to shoot, easy to print, straightforward to consume—“close examination reveals it is not.”³⁸⁰ Specific images, for example the church in Cypress, were “taken at just the right time of day, at just the right wintry moment of clarity with just the right amount of color intensity.”³⁸¹ Clearly, color as a photographic element offered further evidence of Christenberry’s artistic skill.³⁸²

This particular review is telling as well for what it does not include. For example when Gold compares Christenberry’s work to the Diane Arbus retrospective curated by John Szarkowski running at the same time at the museum, differences in subject matter,

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁷⁹ Gold, “Art notes: Shooting Shotgun Shacks,” 66.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 66.

³⁸¹ Please note this exact print from this exhibition could not be identified. Christenberry visited and photographed the church at cypress multiple times over his career making it difficult to identify this print.

³⁸² Ibid., 66.

geographical context and personality are cited, but there is no mention of the most obvious technical difference between the two: the use of color as opposed to black and white.³⁸³

These receptions of Christenberry's work indicate a more casual acceptance of color photography as an aesthetic quality inseparable from the overall signification of the work. In fact, more than anything, Gold draws attention to how photography in general, not simply color photography, was often sidelined at large institutions, claiming that back at the Corcoran Gallery, "there wasn't really any time for 51 little pictures. The Baltimore Museum is performing a real service by giving these sensitive snapshots another chance."³⁸⁴

As the decade moved forward, Christenberry continued showing sculpture and early painting, and in 1975, his photography again drew attention in a group exhibition titled *14 American Photographers*.³⁸⁵ Organized by Renato Danese, curator of exhibitions at Baltimore Museum of Art, in cooperation with John Gossage, a Washington D.C. photographer, the show was supported by a National Endowment for the Arts and

³⁸³ Ibid., 66.

³⁸⁴ Gold, "Art notes: Shooting Shotgun Shacks," 66.

³⁸⁵ Renato Danese and John R. Gossage, *14 American Photographers: Walker Evans, Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Paul Caponigro, William Christenberry, Linda Connor, Cosmos, Robert Cumming, William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, John R. Gossage, Gary Hallman, Tod Papageorge, Garry Winogrand*: (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1975). The reality of an uptick of interest, and moreover ability, to collect from 1974 forward was reflected in a financial article on the Corcoran written by Paul Richards. In 1971, only a small selection drawings damaged in exhibition were purchased. In 1973, one photograph by Emmett Gowin was purchased. But since 1974, the recently appointed director, Roy Slade, stated that there has been a revived focus on acquiring works for the collection, with a focus on local artists. It is interesting to note how many of the new acquisitions were photographs: Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, William Christenberry, Neil Maurer, etc., and furthermore that there appears to be no preference towards black and white as the true "fine art;" black and white and color photographers are being collected comparably at the time. Paul Richard, "What Is Past Is Prologue: The Corcoran Builds on 'Bedrock'" *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1973, K1-K9.

travelled across the United States.³⁸⁶ Its aim was to “examine the condition of ‘straight photography’ in the 1970s.” Barbara Gold’s article on the show again discusses the relevance of Walker Evans to 70s photography, reviewing the various ways of seeing and understanding photographs, yet there is no mention of color, and no differentiation between the photographers working in color and those working in black and white; no hierarchy of artistic interpretation.³⁸⁷ The photographs were treated evenly; the use of color was unremarkable with regard to aesthetic value. Similarly, Benjamin Forgey elides color in his review of the show, which focuses on the problem of “straight photography,” which he finally defines as “a set of attitudes, a visual and moral honesty on the part of the individual photographer, that can produce extreme varied personal results” located somewhere between “artiness” and “visual facts.”³⁸⁸ Again, color’s role in supporting authenticity goes unmentioned—remarkable, given that its reputation for inaccuracy should hamper the artist’s ability to shoot “straight.”³⁸⁹

In 1976 though, the discourse surrounding color photography seemed to turn on its head. There was much more than simply a “starburst of color photographic production and exhibition. This is a moment when the radically different way of talking about and considering color photography rose to the surface, its relationship to black-and-white photography was questioned, and its standing within the medium as a whole shifted. It

³⁸⁶ “Museum Slates Photography Exhibit,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1975, C8.

³⁸⁷ Barbara Gold, “Art Notes: Looking for a Way of Looking,” *The Baltimore Sun*, February 2, 1975. D10.

³⁸⁸ Benjamin Forgey, “Straight Puzzling It Out,” *The Washington Star-News*, February 7, 1975. F1-F3.

³⁸⁹ The one mention of color at all is in regard to the worked featured in the show by William Eggleston, “incredibly strange, even frightening images excerpted from the ordinary (justifying the claim that “in all likelihood” they are “the most successful color photographs ever made.” Forgey, “Straight Puzzling It Out,” F3.

would seem that this change in attitude is not indirectly related to the fact that 1976 was the year of Eggleston's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But rather than point to the way that exhibition elevated color photography to the status of "fine art," I would like to argue that the exhibition and the critiques that followed it created an environment of hostility towards color photography that had not previously existed; the so called "controversy of color" that was ignited in New York and spread across the country.

In Washington D.C., William Christenberry's photography had been favorably reviewed and vetted by none other than Walker Evans, but it wasn't until 1976 that Virginia Zabriskie, owner of Zabriskie Gallery in New York City, visited D.C. and offered Christenberry a solo show, his first exhibition in New York.³⁹⁰ The opened December 19, 1976 and ran through January 8, 1977, roughly half a year after the Eggleston show at MoMA.³⁹¹ And who was the first critic to remark on Christenberry's New York City debut? None other than Hilton Kramer, the critic who, scoffing at Szarkowski, referred to Eggleston's photography as "perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly."

His review focuses on a few other exhibitions opening at the time, but ends with Christenberry:

"This show is a problem. William Christenberry is a photographer who also likes to construct realistic, three-dimensional models of some of the undistinguished, wayside buildings he photographs in the South. These structures he is pleased to call "sculpture," though it is unlikely anyone less would mistake them as examples of that art. The three examples in the current show are certainly without any sculptural interest.

³⁹⁰ Hirsh, "The Muse of Time and Place: An Interview with William Christenberry," 30.

³⁹¹ The most exact opening date I could secure was the week of December 19, 1976.

The photographs are more interesting, but not without a problem of their own. They are small color photographs taken with a brownie camera. The subjects are details of anonymous native architecture and gravesites in the South. As a subject matter for black-and-white photographic prints, this humble detritus has long been a staple, not to say a cliché, of the profession.

Mr. Christenberry got a small new purchase on it by concentrating on the “found” color, which is often very beautiful indeed, but the formal eye he brings to his pictures is not quite equal to their chromatic substance. Basically his pictures are of two kinds: in the one, a window, doorway, or other rectangular detail is placed smack in the center of the rectangle of the print; in the other, the subject is placed, picture postcard style, at a discreet distance. Both result in a rather mannered, to precious style.”³⁹²

Obviously for Kramer, the show was a failure as a New York City debut for the artist, a failure to create sculpture that could remotely be considered fine art, and a failure to create successful color photography.³⁹³ Of these failures, the photography quickly became the most complicated. Kramer found Christenberry’s rural Southern subjects tired, playing on overused illustrations of black and white photographers that came before him. He implies that were these photographs black and white, as opposed to color, they would fail to stand out on any account. The fact that color, and “beautiful” color moreover, invigorated his subject matter—adding something new and unexpected—would seem to imply some form of success with the medium. This is not the case. The few points Christenberry gained in terms of visual interest with the use of color photography are lost because “the formal eye he brings to his pictures is not quite equal to their chromatic substance.”³⁹⁴ Reworded in Szarkowski’s language, Christenberry could not “see both the blue and the sky”: he had failed to work with color and subject simultaneously to create a cohesive image.

³⁹² Hilton Kramer, “Art: Feininger’s Visionary Style,” *New York Times*, December 24, 1976, 50.

³⁹³ Christenberry’s inclination to make sculpture was the result of a conversation with Walter Hopps.

³⁹⁴ Kramer, “Art: Feininger’s Visionary Style,” 50.

The reviews that circulated in *ARTnews* and *Artforum* in the following months echoed Kramer's dissatisfaction with Christenberry's Zabriski exhibition.³⁹⁵ There appeared to be a general level of confusion as to how to approach Christenberry's work, and questions as to whether or not elements of it could even be considered art. But David Tannous's review, which appeared approximately half a year later in *Art in America*, struck a slightly different tone. Tannous acknowledged the negative feedback, pointed out the descriptive inaccuracies of previous reviews, and discussed the possible causes of the general "aura of puzzlement [that] seemed to attach itself to the show," but claimed that Christenberry's simple, straightforward treatment of the subject matter resulted in a "timeless quality" coalesced with an unapologetic "artlessness."³⁹⁶ This combination was particularly challenging to viewers:

...it is just the lack of a clearly defined point of view, or obvious indication of the artist's intent, that caused misinterpretation. The photos and sculpture alike elude familiar categories. They are technically too adroit (and artistically too sophisticated) to be primitive, yet too simple and ingenuous to fall within the perimeters of regional funk or Southern surrealism. Lacking the built-in social commentary or slick finish of Pop, yet

³⁹⁵ Peter Frank, "William Christenberry (Zabriskie)," *ARTnews*, March 1977, 144.

Judith Lopes Cardozo's review began, "Of all artists, the photographer has potential for the strongest or the weakest "morality" regarding truth. If photography is a three-step process—choice of subject, activation of camera mechanism and birth of the print—it merely modulates reality, allowing it to pass directly from the dimension of the actual to the realm of t art. Fundamentally, it is a change in key." By attempting to exhibit his photography alongside his sculpture (that was "constructed with the compulsive precision and detailing of a first-year architecture student"), Lopes Cardozo sees Christenberry as, attempting to "span the shortest distance between two points by following a straight path..." Through the simple, seeming straightforward manner of portraying his subjects in three dimensions and two, he "aims to transmit a reality with "immorality," without undue distortion," a goal further emphasized through the absence of figures in the photographs. Thus for Lopes Cardozo, Christenberry's biggest weakness is not sticking to the color, the "snapshot" shooting style, "family photo album-like" prints, but the "loss" of information in the transmission or the translation to sculpture. Please note, there were a number of inaccuracies in Lopes Cardozo's description of Christenberry's Zabriskie exhibition including the size of the photographs (images were 3 x 5 inch, not 3 x 3 inch, and three sculptures, not two). Judith Lopes Cardozo, "Reviews: William Christenberry, Zabriskie Gallery; Lucas Samaras, Pace Gallery," *Artforum*, March 1977, 68-70.

³⁹⁶ "These are not idealized models, or pristine visions of the buildings as they once were or should be. Rather, like the photographs, they present an image of things as they are, apparently with editing or comment..." Tannous clarifies that there were 70+ Brownie photographs, and three sculptures that 3 and 4 feet and extend laterally some 5 to 6 feet." Tannous, "Reviews: William Christenberry at Zabriskie," 97-98.

too complex to satisfy a Minimal esthetic, they are almost irritatingly ambiguous. Christenberry gives nothing away: he suppresses evidence of his thought as much as the mark of his hand. It would be a mistake, though, to confuse this reticence with a lack of vision. The unpretentious subjects and their uninflected presentation are as much the products of the artist's choice as any work pronouncedly more exotic or personalized.³⁹⁷

These images were perplexing because they conveyed a sense of factuality, yet the viewer maintained knowledge that they were constructed according to the specific vision of an individual. The act of exhibition monumentalized the photographs and sculptures, but this was at odds with cheap drugstore printing and hand hewn materiality.³⁹⁸

Interestingly, none of the critiques specifically take issue with the fact that Christenberry's images are color. Like the critiques of Eggleston's New York MoMA show, in which critics raged over the fact that "boring" and "banal" artwork was being heralded as "perfection," the discontent surrounding Christenberry's work was with seeing objects of low culture displayed as fine art with little explanation.

This problem with the low has become something of a cliché in explaining the issues with color photography, and reflect a widely perpetuated myth that color photography was considered either high or low up until the 1970s. The reviews of Christenberry's artwork reveal that this was an issue with the use of commercial materials in art as a whole, not confined to color alone.

When critical discussions of Christenberry's photography do focus on color,

³⁹⁷ Tannous, "Reviews: William Christenberry at Zabriskie," 97-98.

³⁹⁸ "Christenberry's self-effacing fixation on his low-key material gives it an almost paradoxical monumentality. In the photos, the dead-on stance, coupled with the absence of motion or activity (either expressed or implied), imparts gravity and consequence to even the most trivial of pictured objects. The sculptures, isolated on their extensive "yards" (which serve simultaneously as supporting bases), seem to exist outside of physical fact, offering the illusion of reality without an intervening medium. You are persuaded the experience is like "being there"; yet of course it is profoundly unlike it. At once more encompassing and less complete than actuality, the sculptures are the artist's idea of place made concrete." Tannous, "Reviews: William Christenberry at Zabriskie," 97-98.

comments remained positive. Christenberry's summer 1977 exhibition at Sander Gallery in Washington D.C., Alan Cohen focused on color directly in a way that reiterated and expanded upon a number of points Kramer made in his *Zabriskie* critique:

“Each photograph, whether brightly color or bleached muted pastel, whether hyperrealist or tending toward abstract is appropriately an object of postcard size... Curiously, if Christenberry's pictures are seen as black-and-white reproductions (in “14 American Photographers,” The Baltimore Museum of Art), time seems to have stood still in Hale County because his images could be confused with the 1930s Evans photographs. But color renders them unique and different. While they share subject matter, structure, clarity and intensity, color transforms cool objectivity into intimacy. Evans explained of Christenberry's work of the last decade that, “there is something enlightening about them.” There is indeed, something elusive and pure and enlightening about them.”³⁹⁹

With this, one of the main hindrances many historians have claimed kept color photography from being considered a legitimate open for artmaking, the veracity of color photography's color, is described as a non-issue. Color wasn't controversial, but rather essential for depicting the American present. The small scale Brownie snapshot format made any technological or conservation based variations and inaccuracies somehow fit the nature of the work. And again, it is reiterated if these works were in black and white, they would seem dated—they would appear no different that “cliché” shots of earlier photographers.

This makes it all the more interesting that in 1977, Christenberry moved from the Brownie snapshot format and drugstore printing to an 8 x 10 viewfinder camera and large scale, professional 20 x 24 inch printing. The switch to “fine art” shooting and printing technologies was prompted by the Christenberry's peers: Lee Friedlander, Nicholas

³⁹⁹ Alan Cohen, "Heroic and the Commonplace," *The Washington Star-News*, June 21, 1977, D1-D2.

Nixon and William Eggleston, who all urged him to explore the larger format.⁴⁰⁰ The fact that it was artists who encouraged Christenberry to change his photographic process is interesting, as if only now Christenberry was being taught by other practitioners about the time, thought, and effort that should go into creating a fine art photograph. Given that earlier critics had seen the scale and general format of Christenberry's snaps as crucial to their success as color photographs, it is clear that the desire for color photography to become more formalized (and lucrative) came from those established within the world of "fine art photography," and not from the viewing public.

Moving forward to 1978, the division between color and black and white photography on gallery walls became increasingly apparent. In August of that year, Benjamin Forgey reviewed an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art titled "I Shall Save One Land Unvisited," which focused on eleven Southern photographer's depictions of the Southern landscape. Despite the overall positive assessment, Forgey remarked on a few "curious" omissions, namely William Eggleston and William Christenberry.⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰⁰“One day, out of the blue, Lee Friedlander said to me that it would be interesting to see what I could do with a camera that produced a large negative, preferably 8 x 10. I said I never used anything like that. “You can learn, can’t you?,” he said. Shortly after that, I began working with a Deardorff view camera lent to me by a friend.” Hirsh, “The Muse of Time and Place,” 30.

Also: “Interesting point, I have made a trip back every year since ’68, without fail, sometimes if I had to give a lecture or talk, I might get to go back in the fall, or in the winter. Then in the seventies, ’77 I think, some of my photographer friends, Nick Nixon in particular, and to some degree Eggleston and Friedlander said: “Wouldn’t be interesting to see what Christenberry might do with a sophisticated camera!” So I had to learn on the job, never exposed a sheet of film before. I had a professional photographer load the film, slide in the holders, so I got lucky. And they were in focus! And they weren’t bad! When they were first exhibited, we had them printed onto 20” x 24” paper, that was considered a pretty big picture. Nowadays, we live in a day of big, big, big pictures, but I’m not being critical.” “An Interview with William Christenberry,” interview by Ben Sloat, Big, Red & Shiny, December 1, 2008, <http://bigredandshiny.org/5183/an-interview-with-william-christenberry/>.

⁴⁰¹ Review of “I Shall Save One Land Unvisited,” a show of 11 Southern photographers at the Corcoran gallery of art, organized Ray Kass of Virginia Polytechnic Institute (traveling to 14 sites after Corcoran) supported by NEA and a grant from Hanes: “The show also has some curious omissions: Clarence John Laughlin because he declined the invitation; William Eggleston and William Christenberry because

Forgey excused this oversight, however, because the curator chose not to include color photography. In rotations just a few years earlier, such a distinction between color photography and black and white photography on Corcoran walls was never explicitly made. In fact, institutions showed color photographs alongside black and white in thematic exhibitions a way that didn't "other" them as a subcategory photography for a number of years.⁴⁰²

Group exhibitions on color continued to include Christenberry's photography, gaining him notoriety as a color photographer. Alan Artner's review, "Art: Exciting Developments in Color Photography," for the *Chicago Tribune*, is exemplary.⁴⁰³

Although it was a review for an exhibition at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, Artner addressed the history of color, declaring that "the most exciting development in recent photographic history is the exploration of the expressive possibilities of color."⁴⁰⁴ Here Artner promotes Szarkowski's conception that prior to the 1970s, color technologies were being refined and artists were using them only as a means of recording information. Now

Williams excluded color photograph. Still, it is a fine, provocative exhibition." Benjamin Forgey, "Images of the South in a Mind-Tingling Show," *The Washington Star-News*, August 27, 1978, D-3

⁴⁰² For example: *The American Snapshot* (March 1-May 10, 1944) at MoMA featured a continuous projection of 48 Kodachromes and amateur color snapshot photographs, all purchase prize winners from Kodak competitions in its (source: Color Rush chronology 244) In 1948 in MoMA's featured color in its *In and Out of Focus: A Survey of Today's Photography* mural sized color transparencies by Weston and Adams (February 8-May 1, 1948) and *The Exact Instant* which reviewed 100 years of news photography. (Color Rush chronology 245). In MoMA's *Family of Man* installation (January 24-May 8, 1955), one room featured a large 6 x 8 foot color transparency. Color was used in and amongst a myriad of photographic artistic practices in International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, NY in the exhibition *60's Continuum* in 1971. In 1975, Stephen Shore's color work was featured in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* alongside black-and-white photographers without mention of medium differences.

⁴⁰³ Alan Artner, "Art: Exciting Developments in Color Photography," *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1978, C13.

⁴⁰⁴ Allan Frumkin Gallery, 620 N. Michigan Av. Artner, "Art: Exciting Developments in Color Photography," C13.

for the first time, he asserted, contemporary photographers were able to “ recognize color as an agent of transformation, then to liberate it from what was being representing, making color itself the “subject” of the picture...”⁴⁰⁵

The exhibition featured works by Patty Carroll, Joel Meyerowitz, Langdon Clay, and William Christenberry. Echoing earlier reviews of similar group exhibitions, Artner comments that the only thing uniting the photographers featured, besides their use of color photography, was their lack of adherence to any specific set of rules for what qualifies as a good color photograph. Regardless of their differences in style, subject matter, and printing methods, though, Artner’s conclusion is that these color images would not have had the same impact in black and white. Completely reversing previously held prejudices against the commercial overtones of color photography, he claims that color elevates subject matter that previously would have been considered “bad taste” or “vulgar” (in the words of Walker Evans), capturing, for example, “the peculiar resonances of neon lighting, and these physiologically heighten each image, bringing to the fore a nightmarish atmosphere that in reality is more felt than seen.”⁴⁰⁶ Within this affectively charged frame, William Christenberry’s small Brownie snapshots of Southern buildings became “gemlike” and “lyrical” images of rural architecture, whose “formal strategies are simple, but wonderfully evocative.”⁴⁰⁷ This is in direct contrast to the previous reception of Christenberry’s work, which gave no real energy to describing

⁴⁰⁵ Artner, “Art: Exciting Developments in Color Photography,” C13.

⁴⁰⁶ Black and photographs would reveal only the patios, swimming pools, and parking lots that are so commonly dismissed as examples of “bad taste.” But color film allows the artist to capture the peculiar resonances of neon lighting, and these physiologically heighten each image, bringing to the forefront a nightmarish atmosphere that in reality is more felt than seen.

⁴⁰⁷ Artner, “Art: Exciting Developments in Color Photography,” C13.

color as the defining feature of these works—Christenberry’s Southern background and the connection to Walker Evans were the principal elements of interest; color was merely a descriptive attribute that added to the overall effectiveness of the works.

The format and framing of Christenberry’s second solo exhibition of photography at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1978, *William Christenberry: Color Photographs*, illustrates the extent of the shifts in institutional consideration of color photography.⁴⁰⁸ The show featured only fifteen prints, all made from recent five-by-ten inch negatives and printed at the enlarged twenty-by-twenty four inch size with Ektacolor. The works were accompanied by an elegant catalog with five mounted c-prints and an essay by Jane Livingston that focused explicitly on the success of Christenberry’s photographs as color images.

Art Historian Kevin Moore has stated that a definitive signal of color photography’s successful assimilation into the fine art world was that after 1985, the word “color” vanished from exhibition titles.⁴⁰⁹ According to such logic, the title of Christenberry’s first Corcoran show makes a great deal of sense. But the shift in use of the word “color” is more subtle than that, and actually undergoes a distinct evolution in meaning that betrays the goals of organizing institutions and consequently, the status of color photography within the art world.

In studying exhibition histories, artist cvs, and timelines of color photography I

⁴⁰⁸ Livingston and Christenberry, *William Christenberry: Color Photographs, December 21, 1978-February 11, 1979*.

⁴⁰⁹ “Interestingly, although by 1985 color photographs had become the standard for art photography, both in photography proper and the larger realm of contemporary art, the designation “color” was generally dropped from exhibition and publication titles. Color had assimilated to the point that the distinction no longer had to be made.” Moore, *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980*, 10.

have come to find that prior to the 1976 Eggleston exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, exhibitions which featured the word “color” in the title typically fell in three categories: exhibitions on the history of color photographic technologies, exhibitions featuring color photographs by artists who had already established photographic careers using black and white technologies; and group shows featuring artists united by their use of color photography. For each of these categories, color makes sense as a descriptive term within the title because at their core, these shows are about color photography as a medium—about tracking its technological development, about displaying color as a new facet of an artist’s work, and about bringing artists using color photography to different ends together as a means of comparing methodologies.

However, with the 1976 Eggleston exhibition, you see the word color being used in a different way: to describe the work of an artist who established his professional career as a color photographer and who worked almost exclusively in color prior to the solo show. In that respect, the use of the term color in the exhibition title seems superfluous. Yes, these were displays of color photographs, but there was no reason to highlight that as something out of the ordinary or unexpected from an artist such as (for example) Eggleston. The deeper meaning of the use of the word surfaces in the press documents for the Eggleston show and in John Szarkowski’s introductory essay for the exhibition, which reveal that “color” has a new, very specific purpose: to signal Eggleston’s work as a rare example of successful fine art color photography. Following this precedent, when the word “color” is used in subsequent exhibition titles, it is deployed as a qualifying statement—an institutional seal of approval asserting that “this is

what a fine art color photograph looks like.” It is with this initial move that the “controversy of color” begins to fade from photographic exhibitions.

Which brings us back to the catalog text that accompanied *William Christenberry: Color Photographs*. Written by Jane Livingston, the essay first discusses Christenberry’s relationship with photography. She identifies his classical training as a painter and sculptor as having provided him with the skills necessary to work in color; his “chromatic sense, both in his painting and the sculpture, has always been exceedingly sophisticated; Christenberry is a natural colorist.”⁴¹⁰ Yet for all their sophistication, she continues, Christenberry’s early Brownie shots “cannot quite be seen within the ‘classical’ tradition of photography as conducted through Stieglitz, Weston, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans and the rest. They are so artlessly composed...that one is taken aback upon first seeing them.”⁴¹¹ Even in this “artlessness” early format, Livingston insists that these works were “always about color.”⁴¹² Because they were originally made as color references for works in other media and always printed in color, Livingston concludes that they are effectively *about* understanding and dissecting the visualization of color.

That said, shooting with a large eight by ten inch Deardorff viewfinder camera resulted in some “profound” differences in his images; the new size allowed for “a new complexity and even a certain conscious sophistication to enter into the works’

⁴¹⁰ Livingston and Christenberry, *William Christenberry, color photographs: December 21, 1978-February 11, 1979, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

esthetic.”⁴¹³ Livingston describes how Christenberry’s new, larger format allowed for expanded framing while continuing “to make images whose chief characteristic is clarity, both of design and palette.”⁴¹⁴ With the larger format, “the artist is allowing a new complexity and even a certain conscious sophistication to enter into the works’ esthetic... Their fascination now is their being works of art which make not a unified observation but a synthesis; they are at the same time carefully, abstractly conceived images, and forcefully depicted scenes of the American rural South.”⁴¹⁵ While none of same sites were featured in photographs in both Christenberry’s 1973 and 1978 Corcoran shows, his subjects had remained virtually the same: kudzu, vernacular architecture, gravesites, and signs. That is, Christenberry is effectively the same photographer, but his work has been elevated by an institutional discourse that has decided to accept color photography as fine art. What Livingston is saying is that these images are successful; these images are fine art color photographs because Christenberry has managed to use the larger shooting and printing formats appropriate to the standards of visual formalism Szarkowski sanctioned. The underlying subtext is: Christenberry is an artist who managed to see “both the blue and the sky.”⁴¹⁶

Once again, Forgey reviewed the show, delving into many of the issues at hand.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹³ “This exhibition consists of fifteen Ek74 prints executed by Dimension Color Labs, New York City, under the supervision of the artist and Caldecot Chubb...Photographs courtesy of Caldecot Chubb, New York City.” Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Livingston and Christenberry, *William Christenberry, color photographs: December 21, 1978-February 11, 1979, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Other notable review/circulation of Christenberry’s photographs in 1978 included: Forgey, Benjamin. Benjamin Forgey, "Roadside Glories: William Christenberry Finds an Expressionist Paradise in Hale County," *Aperture*, Winter 1978, 34-47.

⁴¹⁷ Benjamin Forgey, "Four Exhibits at the Corcoran," *The Washington Star-News*, December 31, 1978, D-3.

Reversing his own earlier understanding of Christenberry's use of color, he acknowledged that to enlarge imagery that had "long been associated with their scale and simplicity—photographs taken with a dime-store camera and printed via the drug store" might seem "perilous or even contradictory," with these images "the worry is pointless, for Christenberry's new photographs at the Corcoran, 17 by 22 inch Ektacolor enlargements from eight by 10 inch negatives (from a big camera Christenberry used for the first time in the summer of 1977), triumphantly meet the demands of increased size and scale."⁴¹⁸ Forgey goes on to say that some subjects even appear to be enhanced by the new, larger size and that the format has obviously impacted his shooting style. Even so, "the poetic nature of Christenberry's color and vision...remain constant."⁴¹⁹

And with this conclusion, an artist who began his career as a painter was brought into the fold of not just photographers, but color photographers. One thing that Christenberry's journey shows about color photography in America is that while it was ubiquitous to popular culture by the 1950s and 60s, photography as a medium (not even color photography specifically) still was not a part of fine art curriculums. Artists took up photography for a multitude of reasons, often without realizing it could be considered a major artistic practice worth exhibiting until they were prompted to do so by established

⁴¹⁸ "There is something extremely authentic and precious in those tiny image of a real world touched with tender comprehension and transformed by an authoritative aesthetic vision." Forgey, "Four Exhibits at the Corcoran," D-3.

⁴¹⁹ "It is interesting to see that the inherent monumentality of certain mundane images Christenberry had previously photographed with a small camera, such as the beautiful "Green Warehouse, Newbern, Ala.," is clearly enhanced in the larger size...It is even more interesting to see that Christenberry's notions of composition and subject matter seem to have broadened considerably, at least partially because of the challenges and possibilities of the large format camera. He has begun to think more in terms of diagonals and openness, for instance, as opposed to the locked frontality of so many of the earlier images; and he has expanded his range of subjects to include landscapes for the first time" Ibid., D-3.

members of the fine art community.

But most importantly, Christenberry's career dispels the idea that color photography was not being shown in high art institutions prior to 1976. In fact, in addition to being shown in large established institutions such as the Corcoran Gallery of art, color photography, at least in the South, was regularly exhibited in galleries that weren't specifically devoted to photography. Washington D.C. offered an environment that was receptive to exhibitions of color photography throughout the early 1970s without focusing specifically on color as something that could or should be considered problematic. Intellectual and physical separation of black and white and color photography was not expected practice in Washington D.C. for the first half of the 1970s.

In fact, negative critiques of Christenberry's photography and explicit focus on his photographs as "color photographs" did not occur till after the 1976 Eggleston show. The harsh critiques his work received in New York echoed many of the issues raised in the critiques of Eggleston's work. Likewise, the focus on Christenberry's use of color in exhibitions also followed the 1976 Eggleston show. These were concurrent with Christenberry's move away from vernacular or snapshot imagery to a large format camera and more professional printing and can be traced to Eggleston, who had himself been encouraged by John Szarkowski to work with larger, higher quality printing. Thus it was after the 1976 Eggleston show that color photography was being actively formalized and formulated as a "fine art" medium through focused discussions among artists, institutions, and critics as to what color photography could look like and should look like. The "controversy of color" Sally Eauclaire speaks of, a controversy that has been

propagated throughout recent histories of color photography, was not, after all, one inherent in the medium, but a debate created in the New York City Art scene and then spread to other artistic communities by way of traveling texts, exhibitions and critics.

Chapter 3: John Divola and Los Angeles

These photographs are not so much about this process as they are remnants from it.

—John Divola ⁴²⁰

Just as the landscape of American South shares few common characteristics with environs of Southern California, at first glance, the photography of John Divola (b. 1949) bears no striking resemblance to that of William Christenberry. In addition to their geographical distance, they are of different generations; a ten year age difference separates the artists. Yet closer analyses of their oeuvres and photographic practices reveals similar artistic instincts: a common use of home territories as subject matter, a fascination with the effect of entropy on sites over time, and an ability to capture a sense of human presence even in the absence of physical figures. Each cites Walker Evans as one of their primary inspirations.⁴²¹ And, most importantly to this thesis, both of these artists established their careers as “pioneers of color photography,” and they did so outside of New York City.⁴²² Divola's treatment of the medium, and its reception by institutions and critics in the distinctive artistic context of Los Angeles, offers an alternative history of color that the New York, Szarkowski and Eggleston-centric

⁴²⁰ John Divola, *Artist Statement, Zuma*, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.divola.com/>.

⁴²¹ However, Christenberry and Divola each took different lessons Walker Evans's work. Christenberry was taken by Evans's concentrated look at the South as a signal of its potential as viable subject matter for art making, as well (it could be argued) in his centrality in framing. Divola, on the other hand, was interested in Evans's ability to “appropriate the sensibilities” of his subjects, and finding a way to appropriate the aesthetics of objects with a “pre-existing kind of aesthetic content.” “Interview with John Divola,” interview by Kaycee Olsen, 2009, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.divola.com/>.

⁴²² Both artists were highlighted by Sally Eauclaire in her *New Color* exhibition, Kevin Moore in *Starburst*, and John Rohrbach in *Color! American Photography Transformed*. Divola's work was not featured in *Color Rush*. As *Color Rush*'s primary focus was building the exhibition landscape of New York City and the artists featured in their text are primarily artists with ties to New York galleries, museums, and/or nationally circulating publications it is not unsurprising that Divola was not included in their text.

accounts of the medium do not.

John Divola was born and raised in Southern California, living in Venice Beach till he was seven and his family moved to the west San Fernando Valley, an area he describes as “suburban, but rural suburban, at the time.”⁴²³ Divola received his B.A. from California State University, Northridge in 1971. He began his studies at CSU, Northridge with the intention of becoming a lawyer or an architect, but went on to declare an economics major, eventually changing course completely to study art and the humanities. This shift was, in part, a reaction to the tumultuous political climate of the time: “Vietnam...the draft...the hippie influence...The culture appeared insane, bankrupt. I had become alienated from the idea of taking a conventional place in society, and somehow that freed me up to pursue more basic interests. So I wound up reading philosophy, taking courses in experimental film, in photography.”⁴²⁴

After finishing at CSU, Northridge, Divola landed at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he earned both his MA (1973) and MFA (1974). He was naturally attracted to photography as a medium, having already learned the basic technical skills in high school. Thus, it should be explicitly noted that Divola is the first of the three artists discussed in this thesis to have received any formal photographic training. This is not unbelievable, considering the 1970s were precisely the moment when photography began

⁴²³ Divola and Tumlrir, “Interview with Jan Tumlrir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)*, Zuma, 134.

“My parents lived in Venice when I was born, my dad worked at Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica and when I was about seven we moved to the San Fernando Valley. “John Divola,” interview by Mark Durant, Saint Lucy, Interview via Skype on February 2, 2015, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://saint-lucy.com/conversations/john-divola/>.

⁴²⁴ Divola and Tumlrir, “Interview with Jan Tumlrir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)*, Zuma, 134.

being taught more widely as studio art, rather than a commercial vocation, and Southern California quickly became a hub for a particular type of photographic teaching, one that encouraged experimentation.⁴²⁵ Jerry McMillan, who taught photography at CSU Northridge in the 1960s as part of a degree in printmaking, summarized the prevailing philosophy: “If you a come here with a narrow mind and limited scope of what photography is then we are going to change that attitude a lot.”⁴²⁶ This attitude differed greatly from other parts of the country, particularly from Northern California, where the “straight approach of Adams and Weston [had] an inertia that made it difficult for new developments to occur.”⁴²⁷

One of the key figures in opening the academic context to exploration and experimentation with photography on the West Coast was Robert Heinecken, who founded the photography program at UCLA in 1962.⁴²⁸ His own photographic work,

⁴²⁵ Initially in Southern California, educational institutions were focused on “teaching photography to make a living,” such as the Art Center School of Design, which “remained an important institution for the instruction of photography until the early 1960s” in Los Angeles (moving to Pasadena in 1976) or the William Moretenson School of Photography in Laguna Beach was founded in 1932 and was open to 1955. Louise Katzman, “The Schooling of Photography: 1945-1959,” in *Photography in California, 1945-1980* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in Association with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 53.

As time progressed, photography began popping up in fine arts curriculums, often under the umbrella of printmaking departments such as University of California, Los Angeles, Indiana University and Florida State University, Tallahassee. Robert Sobieszek, “A Pasadena collection of Contemporary photography,” in *The Collectible Moment: Catalogue of Photographs in the Norton Simon Museum* (New Haven: Published for the Norton Simon Art Foundation by Yale University Press, 2006), 71.

In the 1960s, photo programs began popping up at smaller schools too: Orange Coast Mesa College, a two year community college; a four year program at California State University, Fullerton; California State University at Northridge, etc. Katzman, “Experiments in Lifestyles and Photography: 1960-1970,” in *Photography in California 1945-1980*, 52-53.

⁴²⁶ Katzman, “Experiments in Lifestyles and Photography: 1960-1970s,” in *Photography in California 1945-1980*, 53.

⁴²⁷ Katzman, “The Schooling of Photography: 1945-1959,” in *Photography in California 1945-1980*, 46.

⁴²⁸ “In schools, the most influential figure of the sixties was Robert Heinecken of UCLA, who had been a student of printmaking when he was first introduced to the medium by instructor Don Chipperfield. It was because of Chipperfield’s recommendation that Heinecken began teaching photography in the UCLA Extension division while he was still a graduate student. When the art division underwent changes in 1961,

often cameraless and for its incorporation of found media images, directed the organization of his photography program at the UCLA. While the basics of ASA metering, f-stops, and printing were still taught with the expectation of being mastered, multiyear creative programs were developed to which allowed time for material and creative exploration; they were meant “to suggest the infinite possibilities of photography as a visual language.”⁴²⁹ Students were encouraged to adapt and incorporated techniques from other mediums, particularly printmaking, into their photographic work. It was all, as curator Robert Sobieszek described it, “colorful, exciting, and new.”⁴³⁰

Divola has commented on the new freedoms of he experienced at UCLA, not all of which dealt strictly with material experimentation. At CSU, Northridge, he has noted that photography was explored insularly, photography only be discussed and considered in relation to photography.⁴³¹ However, at UCLA, “everyone was looking at Warhol, Rauschenberg and talking about Duchamp,” which lead to a gradual awareness “that photography could be part of the broader discourse of art.”⁴³²

Much in the same way that Christenberry became disenchanted with the programmatic dominance of Abstract Expressionism and took up photography as a means

Heinecken initiated photography into the fine arts curriculum. In 1962 the graduate program began.” Katzman, “Experiments in Lifestyles and Photography: 1960-1970,” in *Photography in California 1945-1980*, 50.

⁴²⁹ Sobieszek, “A Pasadena Collection of Contemporary Photography,” in *The Collectible Moment*, 71.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴³¹ “When I was studying photography at Cal State Northridge it was a very insular photographic world, and nothing was addressed outside of that realm. My teacher Ed Steivers was a student of Harry Callahan; Robert Frank came to our class and showed us work.” “John Divola,” interview by Mark Durant, Saint Lucy, Interview via Skype on February 2, 2015.

⁴³² “John Divola,” interview by Mark Durant, Saint Lucy, Interview via Skype on February 2, 2015.

of bringing concrete, familiar subject matter into his practice, Divola soon realized he was uninterested in the cameraless techniques being explored at UCLA:

I was taking courses with Robert Heineken, who was an exceptional instructor. However, at the time, nobody working with photography in the UCLA art department seemed particularly interested in using a camera. Everyone was doing gum prints and blueprints, and so was I initially, and I remember looking at this gum print I'd just made—it had this little fetus floating in the air along with elephants and so on, and I thought to myself, “Why should I care about any of these things?” I didn't have any answers for why I had chosen this iconography other than that it was vaguely fantastic. So I decided that I would start photographing my neighborhood, because at least it had an immediate connection to me.⁴³³

While his peers continued exploring the "object-quality" of the image, Divola turned to the familiar streets of the San Fernando Valley.⁴³⁴

The creativity that sprouted in Southern California in the 1960s and 70s was due in great part to the absence of an established gallery and museum system. Without a MoMA to act as a “’ruling’ authority,” disseminating a message of what photography *should* look like, an “extremely varied and aesthetically diverse creative environment” developed.⁴³⁵ As Divola put it: “Whatever you made it was not going to go into a white cube. I think if you are an artist in New York, often the universe looks like a series of

⁴³³ “Interview with Jan Tumlir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)*, Zuma, 134.

⁴³⁴ “I couldn't figure out what to do with the iconography so in desperation I decided to photograph the neighborhood where I lived. Photography does place you in a distanced relationship to your subject but I don't know if there was any conscious manifestation of that for me.” “John Divola,” interview by Mark Durant, Saint Lucy, Interview via Skype on February 2, 2015.

⁴³⁵ “Although much credit is due [to] Steichen for increasing the mass appeal of the medium, it would be twenty years before the public would come to appreciate photography as a fine art. No curator or museum director exercised a comparable force on the West Coast.” Katzman, “The Schooling of Photography: 1945-1959,” in *Photography in California, 1945-1980*, 53.

On a similar note: “The almost total lack of a pyramidal structure or hierarchy in the photographic community and the lack of support by local museums and critics [allowed] for an extremely varied and aesthetically diverse creative environment,” according to Jack Butler. “Individuals just worked on their work without concern for acceptance by a ‘ruling’ authority, i.e., John Szarkowski in New York. The dogmatic prejudice of straight photography towards alternative methods of working with the photograph did not exist here.” Charles Desmarais, *Proof--Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960-1980* (Laguna Beach: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1992), 16.

white cubes. And in Los Angeles at that time we did not have many white cubes to worry about.”⁴³⁶

Indeed, there was virtually no institutional exhibition network.⁴³⁷ While the ambitious and experimental Ferus Gallery, founded by curator Walter Hopps, artist Edward Kienholz, and poet Bob Alexander, had opened in 1957, as of 1960, there were only forty-one commercial galleries in the city, and that number included frame shops, art associations, and the small, self-promoting galleries that historian Charles Desmarais has described as “vanity outlets.”⁴³⁸ In 1965, that slowly began to change with the opening of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as an entity separate from the city’s history and science museums—it was the first independent art museum in the city. *Artforum* magazine, founded in 1962 in San Francisco, moved to Los Angeles in 1965. As editor John Coplans wrote, “There were no fake dreams, false promises or even pretensions in Los Angeles. The situation was aggressively bad—that was the challenge.”⁴³⁹

Divola grew up in this “situation,” but did not view it as restrictive or problematic. This separation from the world of white cubes allowed him to work “from a relatively uniformed perspective.”:

I don’t think I was in an art museum until I was 20 years old. There was no Museum of Contemporary Art and no contemporary art galleries to go to, so I am seeing everything in art magazines or as slides in class. I came to the perception that [the] primary component in art was the image, and that I did not have to

⁴³⁶ "John Divola," interview by Mark Durant, Saint Lucy, Interview via Skype on February 2, 2015.

⁴³⁷ “As late as 1950, despite desperate attempts to find a home for it in their adopted city, Louise and Walter Arensberg could find no Los Angeles institution prepared to accept their spectacular collection of Duchamps, Brancusi, Ernsts, Legers, Miro and other modern works.” Desmarais *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph 1960-1980*, 14.

⁴³⁸ By 1980, that number had risen to over 200 galleries, of a significantly “higher caliber,” many of which opened in the wake of the success of Ferus Gallery, founded by curator Walter Hopps, artist Edward Kienholz, and poet Bob Alexander. *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

worry about anything being an “original”. I was also in a context where nobody cared; there was nothing at stake. It was very liberating for me, I felt like I had great freedom.⁴⁴⁰

Many artists who relocated from the East to the West Coast welcomed this atmosphere. Eleanor Antin, an influential conceptual and performance artist, filmmaker, and installation artist who was born in New York City in 1935 and moved to San Diego in 1969, said she experience “an openness not found on the East Coast and a generosity of spirit. New York was always formulating the correct ways to work and think while back here we were always eager to be surprised and engaged in new ways.”⁴⁴¹ Gillian Brown, who came from the East Coast in 1977 to study at UCLA noted: “One of my first impressions of LA was that it had no cultural institutions (I was looking for Whitney, MoMA, etc.) A later impression was that this was freeing.”⁴⁴²

This “freedom” was also shaped by Southern California’s geographical and industrial characteristics. Geographically, Los Angeles formed what Carey McWilliams termed “an island on the land;” a place shaped and set apart by its unique “geographic, geological, industrial and social circumstances”⁴⁴³ Culturally, the dominance of the film industry opened the art practice to a wide range of possibilities, including those gleaned from the popular and the commercial. Ed Ruscha, who attended the program at the Chouinard Art Institute (now the California Institute of the Arts) and made Los Angeles

⁴⁴⁰John Divola," interview by Mark Durant, Saint Lucy, Interview via Skype on February 2, 2015.

⁴⁴¹ Desmarais *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph 1960-1980*, 15.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴⁴³ ““You can’t live for twenty summers on the hem of the Sierra Madre’s magnificent purple garment,” he quotes the painter and critic Antony Anderson as having written, “and still keep your Parisian ideals of seeing and doing. You are bound to start, sooner or later, new fashions of your own that are absolutely in keeping with your environment.” Ibid., 13.

his home in 1957, summarized the creative atmosphere: “LA possessed vulgar magic with no history except that of the movie industry...For me the ‘Hollywood state of mind’ was the single greatest influence of the Los Angeles environment.”⁴⁴⁴ Likewise, photographer Suda House attributes much of LA’s creative license to the film industry: “Concepts of what was ‘real’ vs. what was ‘illusion,’ the set-building—constructed for the camera—the sensibility, the glamour, the hype, the increasing nudity and sexual encounters depicted on film for the general viewing public—all contributed to this atmosphere of total freedom and experimentation.”⁴⁴⁵ The movie industry, it seems, effectively tied the camera to Hollywood’s “vulgar magic.” The association of lens-based media with a “lack of art world cachet” and “lack of pretension in the hierarchy of art materials...the fact that it had not been used before as a material for an object-oriented art making and could act subversively in that context” made photography an almost inevitable medium of experimentation and exploration for artists of Southern California.⁴⁴⁶ With the increased prominence of color in films and television, which saw a rise in the 1950s and was ubiquitous by the mid-1960s, it seems inevitable that color would be an active element of explorations for artist working with photography in Southern California.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁴⁵ Desmarais *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph 1960-1980*, 13.

⁴⁴⁶ “On the other hand, photography’s very lack of artworld cachet attracted artists like Edward Ruscha... “The fact that few ‘painter-fine-artists’ used photography in their work made it appealing,” said Ruscha (who, despite what he calls the “cruel beauty of black and white photographs, says he used the medium primarily as a necessary step in the process of making books). Ruppertsberg like the photograph’s “accessibility and lack of pretension in the hierarchy of art materials [and] the fact that it had not been used before as a material for an object-oriented art making work and could act subversively in that context.”” Ibid., 13.

⁴⁴⁷ Color television technologies were being explored as early as the 1940s and became commercially viable in the 1950s, the result of which being that color television technologies and programming had

Unlike New York, where museums started collecting, exhibiting, and forming departments around photography as early as the 1920s,⁴⁴⁸ Southern California was still establishing the institutional spaces and finding the curatorial voices that would bring its native photographers into the art scene well into the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Just outside Los Angeles, the Pasadena Art Museum had begun featuring photography exhibitions as early as 1941, although the shows were sporadic and often organized by outside institutions.⁴⁴⁹ Under curators such as Walter Hopps, PAM became a mecca for artists, art collectors, and the public interested in seeing contemporary art. Among its groundbreaking exhibitions were Robert Motherwell's first American retrospective, the first museum exhibition devoted to pop art, and the first Marcel Duchamp retrospective.⁴⁵⁰

PAM began showing photography with increasing regularity and significance from 1969 forward, following Fred Parker's employment as the first official curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photography.⁴⁵¹ As *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson

seized the market by the mid-1960s. Color films followed a similar timeline of market saturation. Technicolor, while difficult to use and expensive, sparked a desire for color films following the success of movies such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, both produced in 1939. Color film technologies continued developing and improving over the following decades with Kodak introducing Eastmancolor in 1950. The ease and comparable affordability of this one strip color negative process convinced most of Hollywood's studios. <http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/timeline-entry/1310/> and http://www.nfsa.gov.au/site_media/uploads/file/2010/09/09/NFSAJournal-Vol3-Nos2_3.pdf

⁴⁴⁸ MFA Boston cites their collection as "initiated in 1924 when Alfred Stieglitz donated 27 of his photographs," while the Museum of Modern Art in New York began collecting "modern photography" in 1930 and officially founded their department in 1940.

⁴⁴⁹ "Photography Exhibition History: 1941-2004," *The Collectible Moment*, 306.

⁴⁵⁰ 1962, 1962, and 1963 respectively. Sander, "The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum," in *The Collectible Moment*, 38.

⁴⁵¹ Prior to Parker, the position had been "Curator of Prints and Drawings." Parker asked specifically for "Photography" to be added to his title before accepting John Coplans employment offer in 1969. By 1972, his position evolved to become simply Curator of Photography. For a more in-depth history of the significance of the Pasadena Art Museum in the formation of the Southern California artistic community,

commented in 1971: “The Pasadena Art Museum is the main place hereabouts seriously responding to a big change in our attitude to photography.”⁴⁵² Parker made a concerted effort to build the photographic collection. As a painter turned photographer himself, he had befriended a number of California photographers during his time working at UC Davis, and had become familiar with many East Coast photographers as the result of a 1968 fellowship at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. These artists became a core network for seeking acquisitions and formulating exhibitions.⁴⁵³

Parker “cast his net far and wide to build the collection,” photographer Roger Cinnamond recalled, “Fred Parker was generous, open to allowing the photographic image to be in a state of transition, rather than tradition.”⁴⁵⁴ Hampered by a nearly nonexistent budget, he solicited gifts from artists on a large scale, and was positively rewarded in part because he seemed to recognize the expanded artistic possibilities of the medium:

I had addresses for several hundred photographers across the country. And every one of them was just waiting for some museum to just ask...just pay attention...just respect their efforts. I wasn't really surprised that my request did as well as it did. Pasadena, as I was portraying it, as I believed it was becoming, was something that they all wanted to be part

the fascinating formation of its photography collection, please see: Sander, “The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum,” in *The Collectible Moment*, 45.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 37.

⁴⁵³“Through acquisition and display at PAM, Parker presciently recognized the parallel alliances that bound all these artists and their work, although they were geographically separated and were not universally acknowledged as part of the photographic mainstream.” Sander, “The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum,” in *The Collectible Moment*, 19.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

38. “Jerry Burchard recalled: “The idea [of starting a photography department] was still pretty new, and though Fred asked us to donate prints, there seemed to be very little hesitation our part. I can even remember a certain group enthusiasm, to be part of a convoluted coup d'état in the art world. And so it was a bloodless revolution. Overnight, photography became acceptable on a broad scale. It was possible because the Pasadena [Art] Museum was truly modern in its concerns.” Ibid., 46.

of...⁴⁵⁵

Robert Heinecken assisted Parker, contributing his own work and soliciting photographs from his colleagues and students.⁴⁵⁶ At the same time Heinecken worked to establish additional exhibition spaces for photography. Academic institutions in Southern California (as well as around the country) became key locations for photography exhibitions, when few places outside of community galleries dared to exhibit the medium.⁴⁵⁷ Shows were often organized by photographers who were also faculty member at the schools. UCLA was part of this; Heinecken was a key figure in encouraging the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at UCLA, then the Wight Art Gallery to exhibit photography and establish a study collection.⁴⁵⁸

Photography programs in Southern California art schools created a burgeoning photographic community in area. In addition to providing teaching and exhibition spaces for photography, the teaching positions associated with these programs became an important source of financial support for art photographers.⁴⁵⁹ Encouraging their students

⁴⁵⁵As 60s went forward, artists were actively experimenting with silkscreen, collage, hand-painting, appropriated unconventional papers which Parker supported. “squelching creativity, the continued lack of interest on the part of collectors, galleries, and museums, as well as the lack of competition for such attention, had a liberating effect on the artists. “The medium,” as Don Worth has noted, “had not been ‘tainted’ by the commercial world.” Sander, “The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum,” in *The Collectible Moment*, 38-45.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁵⁷ These included: Contemporary Photographs UCLA Art Galleries 1968; Graphic/Photograph California State College, Fullerton, 1971; Light and Substance, Montgomery Art Gallery, Pomona College, 1973; Minor White, Robert Heinecken, Robert Cumming: Photography as Metaphor, Photograph as Object, Photograph as Document of Concept, Fine arts Gallery, California State University, Long Beach, 1973. *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁵⁹ Arthur Allman on the photography “boom” of the 1970s in Southern California: “It looked as if rewards being garnered were greater than they actually were. The number of people in California making more than \$10,000 a year selling photographs was a very small number.” Katzman, “The California Photography Boom and Decline: 1970-1980,” in *Photography in California 1945-1980*, 93.

away from commercial endeavors, the schools effectively created an audience that could bring an expanded appreciation of the medium into the Los Angeles community, an effort critical to widening the general viewing and buying audience.⁴⁶⁰ These programs also provided a basic support network for photographers who would otherwise be isolated.⁴⁶¹

One exhibition paradigmatic of photographic experimentation in Southern California and PAM's support of the contemporary photography community was Parker's show: *California Photographers, 1970*.⁴⁶² In the introductory text for the accompanying catalog, Parker stated: "Contemporary California Photography has hitherto lacked a strong overview... Thus the purpose of this exhibition is to survey the newly emerging generation of talented photographers within the state of California and expose some of the varied extensions of influences of their predecessors."⁴⁶³ The work for this show was

⁴⁶⁰Katzman, "Experiments in Lifestyles and Photography: 1960-1970," in *Photography in California 1945-1980*, 53.

⁴⁶¹ As Graham Howe noted in an interview: "My painting friends are surprised about how much cooperation there is between photographers here...there are jealousies among painters...[that] don't exist in photography. In photography we build our own support for survival." *Ibid.*, 53.

Confirm Citation! Sanders's *Collectible Moment* also mentions this. It was a tight knit photographic community-Heinecken, Robert Fichter, Todd Walker etc. would get together and have slide making parties, portfolio parties. A shared space to discuss their work. "All of these gatherings provided opportunities to exchange ideas about techniques, processes, and imagery as well as about teaching." Sander, "The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum," in *The Collectible Moment: Catalogue of Photographs in the Norton Simon Museum*, 46.

⁴⁶² The exhibition was a critical success. Art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, William Wilson, grouped his review of *California Photographers* with the concurrent Pasadena exhibition of work by Robert Raushenberg, referring to both as being "poetic exhaustion." Instead of commenting on the variety of technical approaches to photography, he focused on how, despite the "stricture against sentiment" that had run rampant for years "in the name of "good taste,"" this show proved that "the release of bottled-up emotion...need not result in bad art." William Wilson, "Pasadena Shows Are a Study in Poetic Exhaustion," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1970, R47.

⁴⁶³ Fred Parker, *California Photographers, 1970* (Davis: Memorial Union Art Gallery, University of California, 1970). The *Pasadena Star* commented on the "imagination and life" of the exhibition, with photographs being printed on a variety of surfaces, including cloth or three-dimensional plastic. Sander, "The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum," in *The Collectible Moment: Catalogue of Photographs in the Norton Simon Museum*, 51.

collected via artist submission and curatorial review, and the catalog featured one work by each of the seventy artists selected.⁴⁶⁴

While Parker acknowledged that all contemporary photography is tied in some way to the work of photographers who came before, the emphasis of the show was on risk-taking. These works, he asserted, were “considerably more experimental. Every phase of technical or visual manipulation that was held suspect, if not in total disrepute a few decades ago, is now freely being used.”⁴⁶⁵ What is most interesting about this exhibition is Parker’s rejection of “standards of quality” for photographic printing. Almost certainly with the rigidly didactic texts of the Northern California “f/64” school in mind, he wrote: “All too often haste and preconceived standards of quality have led judges or institutions of art to accept and thereby perpetuate the most insipid of visual statements. In this exhibition, I was not looking for the best photographs. I was looking for the most perceptive photographers,” calling forth “all that was new and vital in California photography.”⁴⁶⁶ With that, came materials and processes that pushed the very boundaries of what could be considered photographic, let alone fine art photography.

⁴⁶⁴ The exhibition featured expanded the selection of 136 pieces. The additional 66 works were supplementary pieces by the original 70 artists selected by Parker. Sander, “The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum,” in *The Collectible Moment: Catalogue of Photographs in the Norton Simon Museum*, 48.

⁴⁶⁵ “Unlike their predecessors who were strongly tied to a regional imagery, the work of younger photographers is more varied and considerably more experimental... “Although the younger contemporary California photographer is often regional in his initial approach, he is applying to the beauty an obvious awareness for such things as Ecology, Mysticism, or Surrealism. To the legacy of documentary vision, he is bringing further vitality through his awareness of Psychology, Sociology or Existential Philosophy. The Point Lobos of Weston is being expanded with psychedelic vision. Walt Disney is being frighteningly superimposed upon the Yosemite Valley of Adams. ..the photographs in this exhibition are in many ways like the handmade Mother’s day cards brought home from a second grade classroom; they have crudeness, spontaneity, nervousness—and are even rebellious—but like those tokens of love, they are also presented for enjoyment and approval.” Parker, “Introduction,” *California Photographers, 1970*.

⁴⁶⁶ Parker, “Introduction,” *California Photographers, 1970*.

Several artists have commented that Parker's "open approach to accepting new work" in this exhibition jumpstarted their careers.⁴⁶⁷ But even more importantly for this project, in recalling that exhibition, even in recent years, artists have noted how the show opened up institutional acceptance of previously overlooked technologies. Photographer Greg MacGregor commented that Parker not only "validated experimental sizes and large, grainy photographs" but "championed hand colored work and early color photography." Drawing attention to museal reluctance to invest in images that were notoriously unstable, he continued: "No one wanted to pick it [color] up, because it was well known that it wasn't going to last, but Fred didn't have any problems with putting it up and out there because it was new or fugitive."⁴⁶⁸ This observation was made 34 years after Parker's exhibition, and is remarkable because out of the 70 images shown, the catalog lists only three color prints and three prints with hand color—less than ten percent of the total works on display. Color had so little visibility in the already contracted world of photographic exhibition spaces in California that the handful of color prints in *California Photographers, 1970* had an intense and lasting impact on the artistic audiences.

Parker's memorable temerity with regard to color photography points to the real reason color wouldn't be widely used and exhibited in Southern California until the mid-1970s. It wasn't because of color's "low" associations with commercial or amateur photography. In fact, given the photographic and educational communities of the time,

⁴⁶⁷ Sander, "The Collectible Moment: Photography at the Pasadena Art Museum," in *The Collectible Moment: Catalogue of Photographs in the Norton Simon Museum*, 51.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

such characteristics would have had a certain “Pop” appeal. Rather, it was the legitimate fear of color photography’s fugitive nature that gave artists, museums and collectors pause. No one wanted to spend valuable time and money creating work that would quickly disappear from the page. As John Divola has testified, it wasn’t until well into the 1960s that color technologies would become readily available to artists, physically and financially. Even with the advancements that were being made in technologies and the promises of color’s new staying power, there was apprehension. Even then, Divola notes: “I have to say, I didn’t really understand *just how* fugitive the materials were when I was using them.”⁴⁶⁹ No institution dared to acquire work that would be unexhibitable within years. Given that Eastman House’s first colloquium on Collecting and Preservation of Color Photography wasn’t until 1975, it seems clear that very few institutions had any clue as to how color images might be stored without producing further damage. Having seen some of the horribly faded color images in other collections, it is not unreasonable that institutions would avoid taking on new preservation nightmares.⁴⁷⁰

Nevertheless, it seems that working with color had something of the rebel’s

⁴⁶⁹ “I have to say, I didn’t really understand just how fugitive the materials were when I was using them. Kodak used to have this slogan “Memories are Forever” and a bunch of mid-west portrait photographers sued them because people were coming back and say “hey, wait a minute.” And so they had to stop using that slogan... Very early on, as soon as I figured that out, I tried to switch to cibachrome which we were told was way, way more permanent. Turns out that wasn’t true either... I have some vintage prints here, but they’ll only be sold to an institution with cold storage because I can’t in good conscious sell something from that era to somebody that is going to stick it on their wall. 10 years later it is going to be worthless. I must tell people that contemporary c prints aren’t much better.” “Conversation Between John Divola and David Misrach,” interview by Douglas Fogle, Paris Photo, May 13, 2013, <http://www.parisphoto.com/losangeles/news/sound-and-vision-program-conversation-between-john-divola-and-richard-misrach>.

⁴⁷⁰ Even into the 1990s, the word of mouth policies of “don’t collect color photography” have been passed on at institutions such as the Huntington, whose benefactor, Henry Huntington, began collecting photography as early as 1916. Watts, “Why We have Not Collected Color Photography,” 5.

appeal to photographers like Divola, perhaps because of its capacity for institutional defiance. Richard Misrach, in conversation with his contemporary Divola, shared his retrospective assessment of the scene:

In the 1970s, when we both started working in color, most galleries wouldn't touch it because they knew that it was fugitive. But I think what a lot of us felt like was pushing the medium and stretching it and taking it where it could go. And sort of the consequences of course are that a lot of that early material was just not that stable and there have been problems with that...I think artist's first responsibility is to make interesting work or try to and not worry about the marketplace or the sale-ability of their work thirty or fifty years down the road...We would love it if that work was stable and could last for the ages. At the same time the 70s were kind of crazy, adventurous years.⁴⁷¹

It took artists willing to make color photographs without concern for their staying power and curators willing to exhibit work which did not fit institutional "standards of quality" to give color photography a place in the contemporary art worlds of California.

John Divola came to color photography in the mid-1970s when developing a series of projects centered on abandoned houses. When, rejecting the found media imagery that characterized Heineken's work, he brought the camera back into his photographic practice, his initial hope was to use it as a means of creating works that were stripped of personal bias. His thought was that if he photographed following "the conceit that I'd been dropped from outer space, that I would be completely objective. But of course I had no criteria for this objectivity, and I wound up being formal....Then at some point, I became interested in images of women watering their lawns; I gave up on

⁴⁷¹Fix footnote. Misrach "Now most people are working in color. Color materials have gotten better. There are still challenges with that permanence but it has radically transformed not just photography but the art world in general. Color photography has just absolutely been a revolutionary force." "Conversation Between John Divola and David Misrach," interview by Douglas Fogle, Paris Photo, May 13, 2013.

objectivity and totally dove into subjectivity.”⁴⁷² From that point, his photographic projects began to embrace their connection to himself—the figure behind the camera—as a means of implicating his physical experiences with the image—recording an interaction between himself, the setting, and the medium of photography:⁴⁷³

When I think of my photographs, I think of them as being involved with three elements: 1) Myself, my personality and my disposition at that particular place and time; 2) the nature of the medium and the way it translates information; 3) the nature of the place and the nature of the situation. And so all three of those elements interact—myself, the nature of the medium and the nature of the situation and place. And that interaction is manifest out as a photograph. So I don't feel like I have total control, but that all those elements exert themselves and that I am simply directing, in a certain sense, that interplay of elements.⁴⁷⁴

This process of interaction between self, site, and photography is, in certain ways, emblematic of the systems of education from which Divola's practice developed—a general ethos fostered at UCLA that encouraged stretching photographic practice beyond its conventional boundaries. But instead of fusing photography with mass media imagery, printmaking and collage, Divola worked with elements of conceptual art, performance, painting, and sculpture in developing the subject of the photograph. The result was his

⁴⁷² Divola and Tumlrir, “Interview with Jan Tumlrir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ), Zuma*, 134.

⁴⁷³ When asked by Dinah Porter, “Do you think of photography as a concrete way of dealing with ideas?” John Divola responded: “No, it's not that they are ideas, per se. I see art as a dialogue about experiences and the way you experience things. And primarily, what I am dealing with is visual experience... you go through life and you have responses to certain kinds of experiences, smells, looking at things, touching things, and you have certain kinds of responses. Some are very intense and some are less intense, and some bring you to a kind of immediate awareness of what's going on and a clarity of vision or a clarity of understanding the nature of things, and others are pretty much ignored and passed over. And as an artist, I think you can traffic in those kinds of ideas. You can take those experiences and make objects which give other people similar kinds of experiences...” “Dialog with John Divola by Dinah Porter,” interview by Dinah Porter and Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, John Divola, 1978, <http://www.divola.com/>.

⁴⁷⁴ “Dialog with John Divola by Dinah Porter,” interview by Dinah Porter and Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, John Divola, 1978.

signature process of “interacting” with his photographed spaces, clearly visible in the three series Divola completed in the 1970s: *Vandalism* (1973-1975) in which Divola entered abandoned houses and photographed his own markings on the sites; *Los Angeles Airport Noise Abatement Zone* (LAX NAZ) and *House Removal* (1975-1976), which features a zone of decommissioned houses bought by the Los Angeles International Airport to create a buffer against noise pollution (they were eventually torn down); and *Zuma* (1977-1978), a series of images set in an abandoned beachfront property that was being used by the fire department for fire-fighting practice. Divola returned to the sites of these series multiple times over the years he worked on the projects, recording changes over time, and this performance of return and repetition would become a particularly potent element of the images’ affective charge.

Each of the series interacts with abandoned houses in a different way, but all of them seemed to provide Divola with a working space: “...I didn’t have any money to rent a studio. Once I started working in abandoned houses—and I didn’t go in thinking “I’ll make this a studio”—it allowed me to think and act in a way that was somewhere between having a studio and being out in the world.”⁴⁷⁵ These spaces were “like a studio space already inscribed with a personality or character,” and he could play with their surfaces and textures, exploiting the movement of body and objects in the space in a way that allowed him to “engage with it in different ways.”⁴⁷⁶

The three series were interconnecting, each using the idea of being inside looking

⁴⁷⁵Divola and Tumlr, “Interview with Jan Tumlr, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ), Zuma*, 137.

⁴⁷⁶Divola and Tumlr, “Interview with Jan Tumlr, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ), Zuma*, 137.

out and outside looking in to achieve a variety of different effects; each manipulating patterns and textures in different ways. As Divola describes it:

In the *Vandalism* series there's occasionally a window, but very few; it's mainly dealing with corners, planes of interior walls, and other attributes of the interior spaces. The *Forced Entry* work is totally about the inside-outside because I'm photographing where somebody has literally broken in from the outside, so I'm photographing from the inside-out to the outside-in. And the *Zuma* work, from a formal point of view, is basically those two bodies of work synthesized with color. The interest in marking from the *Vandalism* work plus the inside-outside interest from the *Forced Entry* work basically adds up to *Zuma*—just add color and the ocean.⁴⁷⁷

While overall this is a thoughtful analysis of the interconnection of Divola's 1970s projects, the phrase "just add color and the ocean" belittles the impact of color in the *Zuma* photographs and gives the impression that *Zuma* was Divola's first foray into color processes. But Divola had already used color in his *Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)* series for the *House Removals* portions of the project. These were images Divola took before and after the demolition of homes in the noise abatement zone, and arranged as pairs, in a diptych format that invites comparison. In examining the pairs what becomes apparent is that Divola had no intention of creating "matching" sets. (Fig. 10) Camera placement, for example, and time of day are different for each shot. But it is color that plays the most important role in elevating the sense of inconsistency between the works. The incongruous differences between the blues in the skies, the greens of trees or grasses, and even the grays of the concrete cause the viewer to momentarily question whether the pictures are even of the same site. Only after piecing together contextual clues (a driveway entrance, the shape of a palm tree, a

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 137.

telephone pole) does the relationship of the images come together and the extent of the effect of the lost homes on the sense of space is realized. Divola's use of color plays on the viewer's sense of space and time, forcing a closer examination of the images as well as a realization of the power of color to completely recast the quality of the landscape. Reduced to black and white, these images would shed their visual confusion, and with it, the meaningful experience of the photographic objects.

The inconsistency of color and framing in *House Removals* can be understood as a paradigmatic instance of Divola's self-conscious attention to the photographer's hand in the process of picture making. Before Divola began working with color film and printing, this insistence on authorial presence was present in his use of paint. Stretching the work toward site-specificity, when describing Divola's *Vandalism* series, critic Andy Grundberg linked the marks to contemporary practice, arguing that they altered the perception of space much in the manner of "the materially transformative sculptural practice of Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark and others."⁴⁷⁸(Fig. 11) Keeping with the sculptural metaphor, Grundberg claimed that part of Divola's accomplishment was to have brought a sense of addition into photography, a medium which, by nature, is subtractive in its framing.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ "They were also violations of that most sacred of spaces: photographic space. Where Edward Weston had once agonized over moving a shell a few inches to make a better composition, Divola blew the convention of noninterference sky high." Andy Grunberg, "Los Angeles-John Divola at the Municipal Art Gallery," *Art in America*, November 1985.

⁴⁷⁹ "While most documentary photographs simply subtract information from a scene, Divola adds to it before that subtraction takes place." Mark Johnstone, "John Divola: Facts of the Imagination," *Exposure 19:1*, 1981, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.divola.com/>.

Yet even before the house removals project, Divola's work had found color at its center; in a sense, all of the 1970s series had been touched off by the color silver:

The work with abandoned houses arose out of two different sets of circumstances, the first being practical. I'd been driving around with a camera and I had just photographed some propane tanks, they were silver propane tanks and when I printed them, I just loved the way they looked. The silver of the tank and the silver of the paper, there was something going on there, and it occurred to me that I could paint anything silver and photograph it. So I started driving around looking for objects to paint silver, and of course you can't just paint anything in the world, because it belongs to somebody. That's how I ended up in the abandoned houses; I was looking for where to start painting things silver.⁴⁸⁰

The black, white, and silver paint fit with the black-and-white gelatin silver processing he was using for the series, melding seamlessly with the monochromatic gray scale of the photographs.⁴⁸¹ The difference between the color range Divola experienced (and, we assume, remembered) at the site of his intervention—his silvery marks standing out against the full range of local color in the scene—and the image in the developing tray must have been striking and satisfying. (Fig. 12)

Much as Christenberry did not see himself as a photographer and therefore found freedom within the medium, Divola was not a painter and thus took satisfaction in the use of what he referred to as “naïve” marks. “I knew that the painting I was doing was incredibly crude and clumsy and naïve,” he claimed in retrospect, “but being a photographer gave me a kind of license to have a distance from it. I could rationalize that

⁴⁸⁰ Divola and Tumlrir, “Interview with Jan Tumlrir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ)*, Zuma, 135.

⁴⁸¹ “I remember going to buy black, white, and silver paint so that to conform to the vocabulary of the black-and-white photography.” *Ibid.*, 137.

Fix footnote. “Although his act of painting may express an idea developed in and of itself, Divola chose to place the painting in the context of a straight photograph. This makes the painting a means toward a further expressive end, not a phenomenon to be considered only on its own terms. The acts of painted ‘vandalism’ might also raise moral or legal questions, but their primary value remains in signifying Divola’s involvement with the place he chose to photograph.” Johnstone, “John Divola: Facts of the Imagination.”

no matter what kind of mark I made, it was ok; I could still make an interesting photograph from a naïve mark.”⁴⁸² The marks of others also added to the work, adding an additional level of interaction to the work. Divola recalls that when he was shooting the *Vandalism* series, he painted a corner of a house and then found little aesthetic interest in it. When he returned to the building a couple of days later, he said, “somebody had kicked a hole in the wall.”

It was perfect! ...That was exactly what I was after. Those moments were the most exciting to me, certainly more so than if I had an idea about something to do and then simply did it and photographed it. There has to be some kind of intersection between the given character of the place, what’s gone on inside that place, and whatever marking I happened to add.”⁴⁸³

In no project is the intersection of abandoned houses, mark-making, and the embrace of interactions and changes from outside sources more visible in Divola’s 1970s work than in *Zuma*. Begun in 1977, this project resulted from the discovery of an abandoned house while on a jog at Zuma Beach with a friend. For these images, Divola repeatedly visited the beachfront property at dawn and dusk, attempting to capture the visual of the glowing sunrises and sunsets that filled the sky with colors. (Fig. 13) His spray paint marks, now expanded to blue and red in order to better exploit the color film he was using, are enhanced by the colors of the electric sky and ocean in the background. Besides the marks he made in the buildings, his own presence in the making of the photograph is signaled by the bright flash he used to capture magazines tossed in the air. The existence of outside actors, in this case the firefighters who were using the site as a

⁴⁸² Divola and Tumlrir, “Interview with Jan Tumlrir, May 2005,” in *John Divola: Three Acts: Vandalism, Los Angeles International Airport Noise Abatement Zone (LAX NAZ), Zuma*, 137.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 137.

practice facility, become visible through the increasing number of charred beams and disintegrating pieces of furniture that present themselves as the series progresses.

A majority of the color content of in *Zuma* is determined by natural and human interventions outside Divola's control (save for his own paint marks and film choices). In the "outside" component of *Zuma*, the hues of the skies act in accordance with the time of day and the pollutants and particles of the air. The color of the internal structure of the house is largely the result of fire-fighter's interventions at the site. Thus color becomes that "kicked hole in the wall" element of surprise in *Zuma*, regularly altering the "already inscribed...character" he sought to describe in the manner of Walker Evans, making the process of photographing the *Zuma* beach house an ongoing excavation of the architecture's evolving personality.

As with Christenberry, it is important to recognize that when this work was first shown at the Los Angeles Center for Photographic studies in 1978,⁴⁸⁴ reviews of the exhibition mention the word "color" only once, in the brief introductory statement.⁴⁸⁵ How color was used, and how the works were printed were aspects that were largely ignored in favor of describing the character of the house that Divola captured; his ability, for example, to "bring otherworldly beauty to stereotyped ugliness," and the manner in which he "adroitly deals with matter and space."⁴⁸⁶ Despite the fact that Eggleston's

⁴⁸⁴ The show was organized by Robert Glenn Ketchum, photographer, curator, and author, and "pioneer" of the Cibachrome color printing method in the early 1970s. "About Robert Glenn Ketchum," Robert Glenn Ketchum, accessed May 16, 2016, <http://www.robertglennketchum.com/>.

⁴⁸⁵ "John Divola and the fire department share artistic credit in John Divola's color photographs of a disintegrating Zuma Beach house, on view at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art." Suzanne Muchnic, "Art Review: Flare-Up of a Fixer-Upper," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1978, F9.

⁴⁸⁶ Muchnic, "Art Review: Flare-Up of a Fixer-Upper," F9.

exhibition had come through Southern California two years prior, the experimental, interdisciplinary conception of photography that held sway in Los Angeles, and the place of color within that, prevented Divola's work from being pigeon-holed merely as an exploration of color.

In the years that followed in the 1970s, *Zuma* was featured in four exhibitions that focused on color explicitly, but none of them were in Southern California.⁴⁸⁷ More often, Divola's images were grouped with photographers using a similar or complementary conceptual model.⁴⁸⁸ For example at Young Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, Divola's work was featured alongside his teacher Robert Heinecken, Ken Josephson, and John Pfahl. In his review of the exhibition, Alan Artner draws attention to the self-reflexivity of the work:

As the names might suggest, the photographs on view involve more than mere craftsmanlike image-making. Each of the photographers has a conceptual base that raises questions or prompts reflections about the medium. This can be a dreary undertaking, as so many other photographers continue to prove. But so much here is gratifyingly *visual* that al but the most abstruse navel-gazing is easy

⁴⁸⁷ These included: "Color Transformations" with JoAnn Callis at the University art Museum, Berkeley California in 1979; "Color: A Spectrum of Recent Photographic, Part 2 - The Romantic Vision and Beyond," at the Milwaukee Art Center, Wisconsin in 1979; "Recent Color Photography," Sewall Art Gallery, Rice University, Houston, Texas in 1980, "Fabwerke" (Colorworks), Kunsthau, Zurich, Switzerland in 1980. John Divola, *Master Resume, Part 1 (Grants & Exhibitions)*, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.divola.com/>.

⁴⁸⁸ Examples being: "Recent Landscape," at the California Museum of Photography, University of California at Riverside in Riverside, California in 1980; "The Imaginary Photo Museum," in Cologne, West Germany in 1980; "Aspects of the 70's," at the De Cordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts in 1980; Four Person Exhibition at Young Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, Illinois in 1980; "Photographic Surrealism," at The New Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio, Dayton Art Center, Dayton Ohio, and The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 1980; "Space In Two Dimensions," at The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas in 1979; "Attitudes: Photography in the 1970's," at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California in 1979; and "Divola, Henkle, Parker, Pfahl," at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York in 1979. Divola, *Master Resume, Part 1 (Grants & Exhibitions)*.

to take.⁴⁸⁹

Of the four photographers, three are working in color, but color is given no more than a nod, in the direction of process (Pfahl: c-prints, Divola: Ektacolor prints, Heinecken: Polaroid SX-70). Instead the review focuses on the questions each artist raises about the medium, and the success and appeal of the photographs both visually and conceptually. There are no questions as whether or not these objects are art, or whether or not they are successful specifically as “color photographs.”

John Divola did not incorporate color photography into his photographic practice until nearly a decade after William Eggleston had, and two decades after William Christenberry. His color works falls just inside the “starburst” of color activity that Kevin Moore identifies; the 1970s “rush to color” described by Bussard. The active, adventurous, experimental photographic community of Southern California, along with the region's lack of a “a highly evolved, highly stratified art world structure” meant that many artists who emerged from Los Angeles did so with little support, initially, “but they also had little to stop them from developing as they wished.”⁴⁹⁰ As time passed, an institutional system that valued and understood new and experimental methods developed alongside the artists. Within this context, color photography in Los Angeles, was greeted with seemingly little controversy, just as it was in Washington D.C. Though Divola started using color in the wake of the Eggleston show, his work was seldom, if ever classified as merely color photography in California venues. Instead, in the SoCal spirit

⁴⁸⁹ Alan Artner, "Art: Contemporary Photos That Touch a Conceptual Base," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 1980, C13.

⁴⁹⁰Desmarais *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph 1960-1980*, 15.

of photographic experimentation and overlap, he was grouped with “conceptual artists,” “performative artists,” and “representatively Californian” artists. Outside Szarkowski's sphere of influence, color photography in Los Angeles was neither problematic nor controversial. Rather, as *Newsweek* so aptly describe, the use of color photography in Southern California, more than any of the New York artists featured in the "rush to color," expressed the understanding of color as “simply a means to an artistic end.”⁴⁹¹

⁴⁹¹ Bussard, “Full Spectrum: Expanding the History of American Color Photography in America,” in *Color Rush: Seventy-five Years of Color Photography in America*, 15

Conclusion

If color was not the controversial medium New York narratives would lead one to believe, then why did it take so long for so many institutions to start collecting and exhibiting it regularly? Why were artists using it widely prior to the uptick seen in the 1960s? While there is no straightforward answer to this, issues of expense and particularly stability should not be taken lightly, as concern for image loss a concern echoed by artists, curators, and collectors alike.

If color was not the controversy, then what was the root of the uproar by New York critics in response to Eggleston's 1976 MoMA exhibition? Again, while I make no claims of having a complete answer to such a question, I believe Michael Edelson's words, offer insight: "we can no longer look to the MoMA for photographic direction. It has become a vehicle of ego consciousness instead of a barometer of *all* that is going on in photography."⁴⁹² Szarkowski's vision of photography in the museum context differed greatly than Edward Steichen's. The fact that there was turmoil in the wake of that transition is therefore unsurprising.

While this thesis cannot answer all the questions regarding color photography's rise, it is meant question the methodologies that have been used to describe its history thus far. If exhibition and review are meant to provide an understanding of its use and acceptance by institutions and the public, then a wider sampling must be taken than simply the voices of New York City.

⁴⁹² Edelson, "East: MoMA Shows Her Colors," *Camera* 35, October 1976, from MoMA Exhibition Records, 1133.14, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

Figures



Figure 1 William Eggleston, *Untitled, n.d.*, from *Los Alamos, 1965-68 and 1972-74*
[Source: <http://www.egglestontrust.com/>]

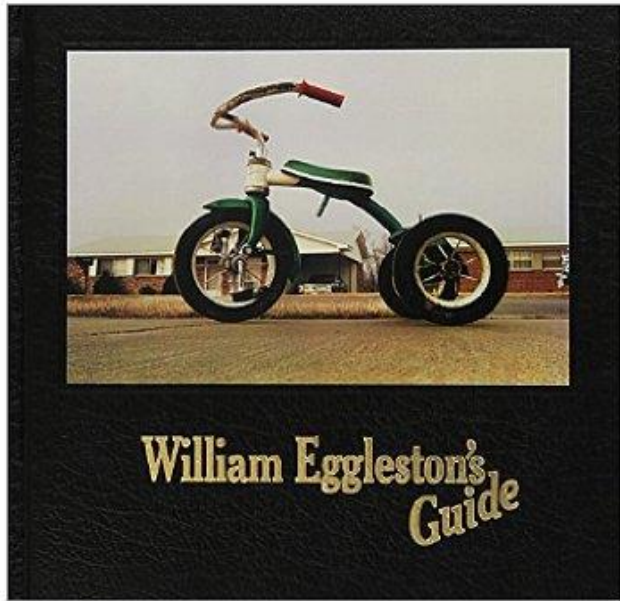


Figure 2 William Eggleston and John Szarkowski, cover of William Eggleston's Guide, 1976
[Source: <http://www.egglestontrust.com/>]

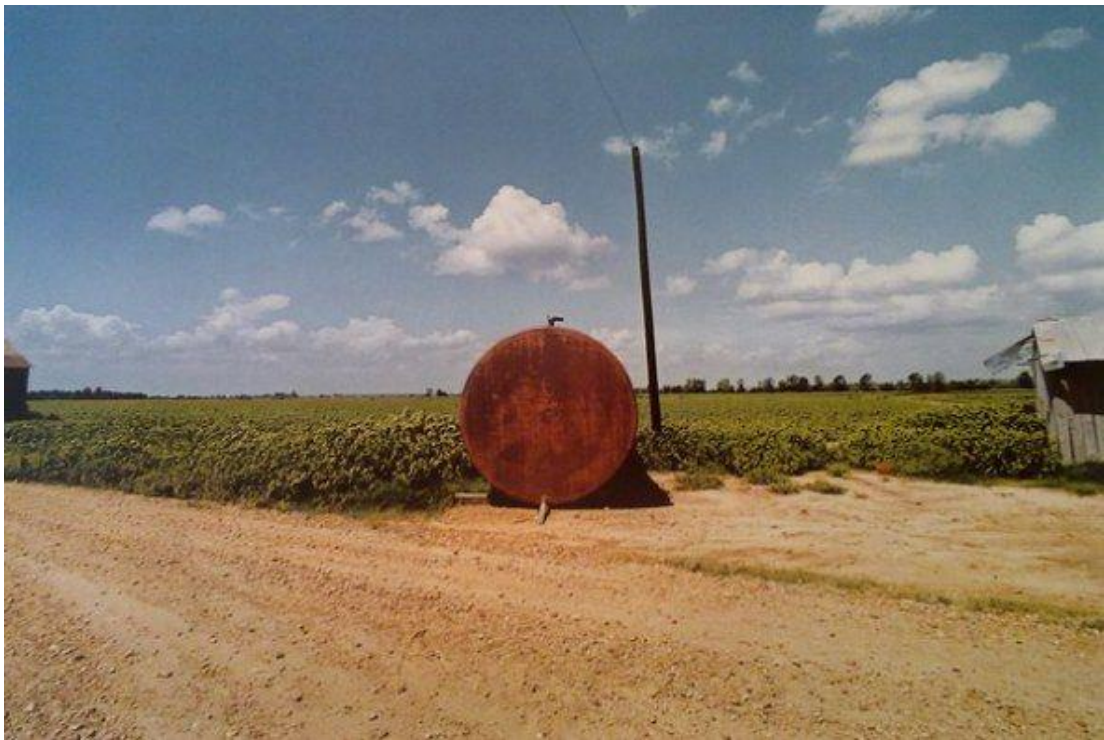


Figure 3 William Eggleston, Black Bayou, near Glendora, Mississippi, n.d., from *William Eggleston's Guide*, 1976
[Source: <http://www.egglestontrust.com/>]

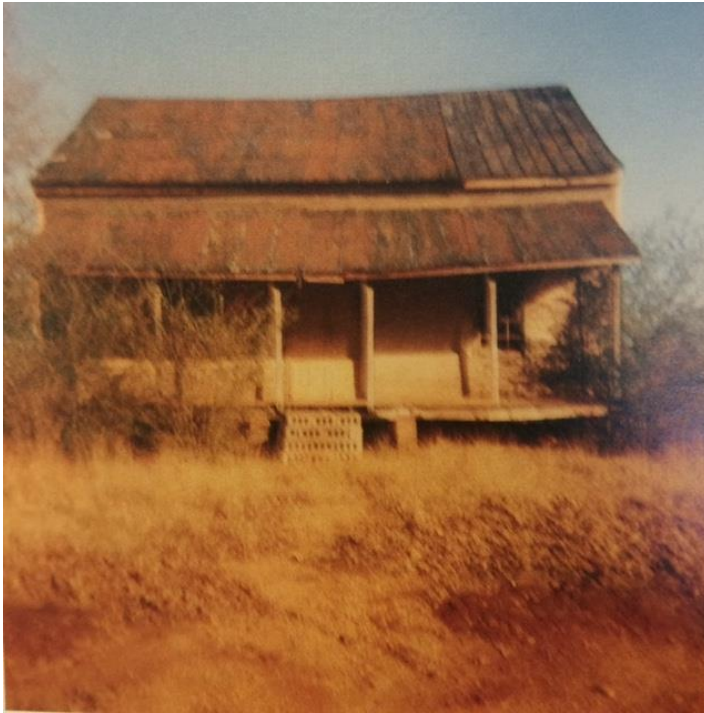


Figure 4 William Christenberry, *Tenant House, Havana, Alabama*, 1961, 3.23 x 3.23 in.
[Source: William Christenberry, *William Christenberry* (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre, 2013), 72.]



Figure 5 William Christenberry, *Tenant House*, 1960, Oil on Canvas, 72.5 x 85 in.
[Source: <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/>]



Figure 6 Walker Evans, *Elizabeth Tingle*, from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1936, no dimensions
[Source: Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960)]



Figure 7 William Christenberry, *Elisabeth Tingle at Tingle House on Mill's Hill, near Moundville, Alabama*, 1962, 9.22 x 6.102 in.

[Source: William Christenberry, *William Christenberry* (Madrid: Fundación Mapfre, 2013), 57.]
Handwritten on reverse: "Elisabeth Tingle took me to this house on Mill's Hill, Moundville. She posed for this picture in the same kitchen as in Walker Evans' photograph in 1936"



Figure 8 William Christenberry, *Double Cola Sign, Beale Street, Memphis, TN, 1966*, no dimensions
[Source: <http://www.jacksonfineart.com/>]



Fig. 9 William Christenberry, *31 Cent Gasoline Sign, near Greensboro, Alabama, 1964*, dimensions vary
[Source: <http://www.artic.edu/>]



Figure 10 John Divola, *House Removals, LAX D*, 1976, no dimensions
[Source: <http://www.divola.com/>]



Figure 11 John Divola, *Vandalism Series*, 1973-1975, no dimensions
[Source: <http://www.divola.com/>]



Figure 12 John Divola, *Vandalism* Series, 1973-1975, no dimensions
[Source: <http://www.divola.com/>]



Figure 13 John Divola, *Zuma #41*, 1977, no dimensions
[Source: <http://www.divola.com/>]



Figure 14 John Divola, *Zuma #4*, 1978, no dimensions
[Source: <http://www.divola.com/>]

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