Open Your Eyes

Scott Sternbach, *Humanities*

_Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence._

Minor White

Toward the end of the seventies, I had the good fortune to study at the New School for Social Research under Lisette Model, the great Viennese émigré photographer and master teacher. My memories of those classes are still vivid; it was there that I learned so much about being a photographer and a teacher. One day Model stood before a photograph I had submitted for art critique, an image of a woman in a doorway. “Almost, Scott,” she said. “You almost got it.” As she spoke, she struck her fist against her stomach; for Model, strong images had visceral force. Years later, teaching students how “to get it” is what I most want to accomplish in my own photography courses. To that end, we practice Model’s two fundamental aesthetic principles. First, a photographer must be fearless; second, the photograph must “strike the gut.”

While I was learning to be fearless at the New School, the photographs of Minor White, Model’s contemporary, were teaching me to be still. Model was a realist; her stark and energetic subjects immediately recognizable as human beings. The mystically inclined White was her stylistic opposite, his images cropped to “obliterate clues to size and geographic locale” (Rosenblum 519). Yet both taught me to see into my subject, to be present to and respectful of the world before my eyes, and to use the camera to detect the essence of what I see. Their influence continues in my pedagogy, which is rooted in transforming the act of seeing into photographic expression. The following discussion describes the four primary components of my Introduction to Photojournalism (HUN191) course: history and theory of photography, the field trip, instruction in technique, and the art critique, that moment when the work of the student photographer is presented to the class for commentary.

In all phases of instruction, my objective is to engage, in the words of Lee Shulman, “habits of mind, habits of hand, and habits of
heart” (52). This paper emphasizes the interdependence of the field trip and art critique as the signature pedagogy of my studio photography class. The final section of the paper is an analysis of student photographs taken during field trips as diverse as Newtown Creek, Coney Island, and Queens. The photographers went out into the world to capture their images, and they brought them back to the studio to share with a community of peers. Their work reflects the degree to which they were fearless and attuned, the degree to which they “got it.”

The Pedagogy of Photography
History, Theory, and Practice

Far from seeing photography as a potential rival to painting, Delacroix took a keen interest in the development of this new medium.

(Art Knowledge News)

Photographers, you will never become artists. All you are is mere copiers!

(Charles Baudelaire, qtd. in Le Brun 20)

The traditional pedagogies associated with teaching and assessing the quality of a photographic image have evolved since the end of the nineteenth century, when photography – embraced by Delacroix, decried by Baudelaire – won acceptance as a form of artistic expression. However, for the majority of photographers of the period, artistic expression meant altering the look of the image by texturing its surface to more closely imitate Impressionist painting. Peter Henry Emerson broke from the photography as painting trend in the belief that a photographer was an artist only when shooting in the naturalistic style. In his view, the photographic image was not to be manipulated to mimic painting; rather nature was to be captured through purely photographic means, for example, through selective use of focus and careful consideration of the time of day and quality of light.

In Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art, a revolutionary treatise on the pedagogy of photography published in 1890, Emerson states his intention to approach photography from an “artistic standpoint,” with as little written instruction in art as possible and “only
enough science to lead to a comprehension of the principles which we adduce for our arguments for naturalistic photography.” Trained in medicine, he abandoned it to pursue photography. Rejecting textbooks and the studio, Emerson took his inspiration and instruction from nature, the expression of individual feeling, and “practice alone”(8). These were the forces to shape photographic art. Quoting Keats in the frontispiece of his book, Emerson elevates photography to the realm of the high arts, and asserts his own identification with the Romantic aesthetic: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Is Emerson also imploring his students to seek a life of spiritual existence? Perhaps. But more important, his promotion of photography as a fine art in its own right opened the way for the Photo-Succession Movement founded by Alfred Stieglitz just a decade or so after Emerson published his book. During an intensely meditative period in his life and work, Stieglitz opened The Intimate Gallery in New York City, where, in 1925, he began to show images from his Equivalent Series² photographs of clouds taken near his summer home on Lake George (American). Reviewing 171 “exquisite examples” of Stieglitz’s work exhibited at Washington’s National Gallery, the art critic Andy Grunberg describes the Equivalent series as the “most radical demonstration of faith in the existence of a reality behind and beyond that offered by the world of appearances. They are intended to function evocatively, like music, and they express a desire to leave behind the physical world.” One need not respond quite as strongly as Grunberg to appreciate in Stieglitz a deeply personal inward exploration that transformed the possibilities of the photographic image. Shifting it away from the purely representational, Stieglitz moved photography toward the abstractions of modern art.

Stieglitz’s spiritual aesthetic, embodying and transcending nature, influenced a range of artists, among them Edward Steichen, Georgia O’Keefe, and Minor White. In 1945, just out of the army, and twenty years after Stieglitz introduced Equivalent, White studied at Columbia University under the acclaimed Meyer Schapiro, the extraordinarily gifted teacher and theorist of aesthetics famous for his inspired psychological readings of modern art. White also worked at MoMA, which brought him into contact with the photographers Harry Callahan, Paul Strand, and Stieglitz himself, whose evocative approach White
recognized as “a way of learning to use the camera in relation to the mind, heart, viscera and spirit of human beings.” Describing Stieglitz’s technique of “equivalence,” White defined it as favoring “an object or series of forms that, when photographed, would yield an image with specific suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state, or place within himself” (19).

The dictum of Stieglitz that the object is mood influenced White as artist, founder and editor of *Aperture*, and teacher, a career that he pursued across America until his death in 1976. Of the dozen or so schools of photography that sprung up between 1940 and 1960 in America, White was associated as a student or teacher with about half. White taught in photography workshops in Portland, Oregon, and, with Ansel Adams, established the country’s first department of fine arts photography at the California Institute of Fine Arts (renamed the San Francisco Art Institute in 1961), where he taught from 1946 to 1953. Returning east, he was in residence at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) for several years until joining the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he remained until his death (Coderre).

Along with his contemporary Lisette Model, White is considered among the great teachers of photography. Both are credited with inspiring a generation of photographers, despite teaching styles as polarized as their aesthetics. The photographer Jerry Rice describes these contrasts in a series of lively podcasts made for the New York Institute of Photography (NYIP). A student of White’s at RIT, Rice later studied at the New School under Model, whose protégés also included Diane Arbus and Larry Fink. Rice remembers the short, sophisticated Model, a speaker of three or four languages and formerly a music student of Arnold Schönberg, as capable of “reducing a student to tears,” during critique sessions: “Darling, you are beautiful, but your picture is terrible, really terrible” (NYIP, “Photography”). On the other hand, White was “tolerant of the world that was not his world… He did not say anything because he did not want to influence you. He wanted you to find out what it was about” (NYIP, “Jerry”).

A tall Minnesotan, White (“he always wore a spotless shirt, white, like his name”) approached the inner feelings of the student through meditation, yoga, and “Zone Buddhism,” a mashup of Ansel Adam’s photographic technique of controlling tones of light and dark and White’s own Zen tendencies. Poetic, Buddhist, gay, and avant-garde,
White stood out in Rochester. His students were, for the most part, straight, white, and male, many just back from the Korean War; a few were photojournalists. “Many times the students just sat in class in puzzlement,” remembers Rice. His conversation with NYIP Dean Chuck Delany is illuminating, for teachers especially, and is worth reading at length:

Jerry Rice: Except when he was teaching the zone system, he didn’t specifically say “These are the facts that you will learn, and here’s how you apply them…This is the conclusion that you should come up with.” He taught by showing you other pictures, his own and works of other great photographers. He’d ask you to explore your own psyche through photography. Many times you didn’t exactly, I mean, the students would sometimes sit there in class and turning and looking to each other in puzzlement as to what was the class all about, and not very many people had good answers to this. He was very much interested in Zen Buddhism and also a number of other mental studies, so to speak. And he was using that approach to try to have you look at photography and understand yourself through other people’s photographs and through your own photographs. …. For instance, he would put a photograph up on an easel, and he was a great believer in meditation. So we all meditated for about a half an hour. Nothing was being said. And he had us do it with our eyes closed and then we’d suddenly open our eyes and look at the picture, and then tell each other what we thought was there. I had never encountered teaching like this before. I mean it was very unstructured and very hard. …I know he had to write a lesson plan because the college required one, as they do of every faculty member. But any resemblance between the lesson plan and what went on there was purely coincidental. …I learned a lot from him, but I don’t think I could pinpoint this in terms of specifics.

Interviewer: How did he tell you, “Now it is time to open your eyes”? What did he say?
Rice: He’d just say, “Open your eyes.” That’s all. And the photograph would be on the easel, one photograph at a time. He would never show more than one photograph at a time. And he would keep it up for a certain period of time. When he felt that you had absorbed what could be there, he removed it...

Interviewer: So, you’d open your eyes and there’s a photograph there. Does he say anything?

Rice: No.

Interviewer: (Laughs) I want to teach like this.

Whether the Zen meditative awareness of White or Model’s “in your gut” confrontation, both styles are passionate, and both teachers were dedicated to encouraging the inner evolution of mindful and holistic photographers. As I show below, my teaching practice, influenced by Model and White, combines field trips with the traditions of art critique. Over time, I have discovered that the potential of the student photographer is best engaged by situations that call forth humility and respect, and require inquiry into the ways aesthetic meaning is made and expressed.

Seeing in the Field

I seek out places where it can happen more readily, such as deserts or mountains or solitary areas, or by myself with a seashell, and while I’m there get into states of mind where I’m more open than usual. I’m waiting, I’m listening. I go to those places and get myself ready through meditation. Through being quiet and willing to wait, I can begin to see the inner man and the essence of the subject in front of me. (Minor White, Photoquotes)

The Western Catskill Mountains of upstate New York lie only three hours away from Queens, but the gap in lifestyles, religious practices, beliefs, and terrain is far greater than a small distance in miles and time. About ten years ago, I began to take my Introduction to Photojournalism students to the western Catskills where small farms, threatened by the vast production of agri-business, fight to survive. I entered the world of the farming community in 1998 with Delaware County
In Transit, my series of photographs that documents the region, the work of farmers, their families, and their daily lives (Sternbach). Over time, my relationships with these Catskill residents have grown into trusting and respectful friendships that allow me to bring students to their farms to talk and photograph freely (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

After the students coordinate the travel logistics, we set out for the Catskills early in the morning. Upon arrival, they take the first steps in creating a group multimedia project that will depict the daily activity of a small family farm. Split into two groups, some students decide to focus on the farm’s human element, its owners, the workers, the deliverer of seed, the family and friends who drop by; others choose the environment as a subject - the trees, sheep, goats, and chickens, or the design of barns and local architecture. With the fundamentals of photojournalism in mind, students keep notes on their surroundings, asking questions and recording information and impressions in their journals and photographs, preparing to later share the significance of their observations. Here in the field, in the midst of a disappearing culture, students learn that the art of photography is more than snapping pictures.

Throughout the day, each student must make a number of decisions, and solve a variety of problems related to setting up the image. Removed from their comfort zones and in direct observation of the environment, aspiring photographers are required to select, frame, and shoot images that they will later edit, refine, and present in art critique for evaluation by their peers. As there are many ways to frame and expose an image, photographers need to learn to make decisions on the spot. Should they use a tripod? Where will the focus fall? How much distance should be between photographer and subject? Should the point of view come from the perspective of a worm or that of a bird? When will the shutter be depressed? How much light is needed to expose the image properly? Students must also consider how to engage with the subject and determine the interaction most appropriate to achieve the evocative moment. Should their approach be passive or aggressive, silent or chatty? Do they possess the fearless quality that allows a “stepping up” to the subject to make an image that “strikes the gut”? And can they practice the patience of Minor White, as they learn, methodically and slowly, to capture the subject’s most subtle and concrete detail?
Fig. 1 – Donna Champlin sharing thoughts with LaGuardia photography students
Delaware County, New York
2007 Scott Sternbach

Fig. 2 – Ana Colorado, LaGuardia photography student
Whiskey Hollow Road
Delaware County, New York
2007 Scott Sternbach
Fig. 3 – Donna Champlin
Dairy Farmer
Delaware County, New York
2004 Scott Sternbach
Fig. 4 – My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication.
Brooklyn, New York
2007 Jessica Hofmann
Fig. 5 – 127th Avenue and 172nd Street
St. Albans, New York 11434
Homero Campos

Fig. 6 – Scott Sternbach on Hermit Island
Antarctic Peninsula
2008 Homero Campos
Seeing the Subject

*The Large Format Camera as Contemplative Technique*

Minor White’s meditative use of the camera has inspired me to use the techniques of large format photography to teach students to be contemplative practitioners of their craft. Several characteristics distinguish large format photography, among them greater control of depth of field, especially important to portrait and landscape photography. To teach the importance of creating an intimate relation with subjects, in the Catskills I introduce the use of an old-fashioned large format or view camera, its leather bellows, dark cloth, wooden box, and ground glass drawing the photographer back to the first century of photographic art (Figure 6). Rather than looking through the viewfinder of the handheld small or medium format camera, my students step under the cloth and focus the subject upon the ground glass, a time-consuming process that renders a clear, sharp image viewed upside down and backwards. Composing the image in this way brings students closer to essential aesthetic elements of composition and form, key components of a strong image.

Unlike the fast “point and shoot” rhythm of digital cameras, the traditional large format camera must be set up and balanced on a tripod, and the film must be loaded into sheet film holders, steps that also slow down the act of picture taking. Finally, a smaller camera can be held in front of the eyes like a mask; the large format requires the photographer to step out from under the cloth to face the human figure or natural landscape. Although most students do not own a large format camera, learning to use it teaches them to be more attentive to what and how they see, behaviors that carry over into their smaller format landscape or portrait photography.

Seeing the Work

*The Art Critique*

The art critique session, like the large format camera, slows down the way photographers approach the image. Critique sessions explore the ways photographers think, devoting time for reflection upon the problems, solutions, and decisions related to practical, ethical, and aesthetic aspects of the image. For example, student photographers must decide which subjects to shoot and where to display the finished image; they must resolve technical problems; and they must learn to articulate aesthetic evaluations and ethical considerations in clear, concrete, and
Those who wish to pursue careers in photography will confront an extremely competitive field, as students in the senior level of college or, later, in graduate school, or as professional photographers. In any of these roles, they will be called upon to speak clearly and to write thoughtful papers, applications, and grant proposals; they will create web content and perhaps books. Finally, if the aspiring photographer wishes to gain the trust of subjects and professional colleagues, he or she will need to communicate thoughtfully in complex ways.

In my class, students practice communication skills through a series of low and high stakes writing assignments, oral presentations, and open critique. Prior to the critique sessions, students are introduced to a rubric that guides the process of critical review of the photographic image. When analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of their work and the work of their peers, students must refer to the rubric. Designed to complement experience in the field, critique sessions are usually divided into two parts, the first of which begins in silence, with fifteen minutes of journal writing that I read and comment upon later. During this time, students focus on their identities as photographers, assuming the photographer’s perspective, and reflecting upon any aspect of the art that comes to mind – personal projects, their lives as artists, career aspirations and challenges, and the work of peers.

Grounded in the traditions of the art critique, the second part of the session introduces and reinforces critical vocabulary, the application or questioning of aesthetic standards, and strengthens the orientation and expression of individual style. The room is darkened, except for a single spotlight over a table upon which student work has been laid out. The seemingly small adjustment of lowering lights and spotlighting work minimizes the usual classroom distractions and focuses observations. As students walk around the table to study the pictures, a volunteer chooses an image that he or she finds compelling or evocative and comments upon the photograph’s strengths and weaknesses.

Students quickly learn that evaluations of “nice,” “good,” and “I like it” are discouraged. The rubric facilitates class discussion about aesthetic choice of subject, technique, and location. Breaking the image into compositional elements, students discover the photograph’s power or problems. Assigning the photographs to genres, they learn to identify generic elements, and they learn that some images belong to many genres at once and others to none at all. In their commentary, students
distinguish among the textures of paper, as well as the tones – warm, neutral or cool – most appropriate to an image. Is the contrast sharp? Is the image well-exposed, well-framed, or is it flat or oddly placed? Is its composition classical or modern? Students consider the lighting of a photograph, its development process, and where an image might be used or exhibited. Students must arrive at the “why” of a picture, and they must ask about the feeling it expresses. Did the image “strike the gut”? By asking questions and listening to answers, students learn to identify the unique qualities that distinguish their own work from the work of their classmates, all as different from each other as, for example, the photographs of Walker Evans from those of Lisette Model, or Dorothea Lange’s from Minor White’s.

It is natural that students are sometimes hesitant to criticize the work of a peer or friend; often, for a long time, no one will say anything about an obvious weakness until I push them to do so. Finally, someone will say, “It’s out of focus!” Although students are initially not used to having conversations about images, over time, most learn to become more comfortable and more competent in applying aesthetic criteria. If they want to be photographers, they must learn to speak coherently about photographs.

Looking at Student Photographs
The student work discussed below was completed in three major stages – taking pictures in the field, developing the photograph in the studio, and presenting it in art critique. It is the combination and sustained practice of these stages that contribute to a student photographer’s sensitivity to the subject, technical skill, aesthetic choice, and ethical awareness. The images described here are a domestic interior near Newtown Creek, an iconic and historic ride in Coney Island, and an ordinary street in Queens. Each captures a world threatened by economic or environmental forces. These analyses of the photographs are presented as models of the kind of critique students learn to do in my classes.

“My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication,” Jessica Hofmann
Jessica Hofmann completed an assignment I introduced into the Introduction to Photojournalism class syllabus in Fall 2008. When prompted to create a photographic project based on the concept “Thinking Green in Black and White,” she immediately chose Newtown Creek as her
subject. Separating the borough of Queens from Brooklyn, Newtown Creek, was a self-sustaining environment that, before the industrial revolution, brought beauty and bounty to the region. Today Newtown Creek is an industrial wasteland of poisons contaminating the local aquifer and soil. Exploring the Creek, students confront the human practices that have resulted in the demise of a neighborhood and threaten the lives of those individuals who live nearby.

Jessica lived near Newtown Creek her entire life. For her field study, she wanted to reach out to local residents suffering from cancer, respiratory illness, and other physical difficulties, all possible consequences of the Creek’s polluted environment. Yet Jessica realized that for a subject she needed only her mother who suffers from lupus. The point of view of “My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication” is level with her mother, seated in a chair at what appears to be the kitchen table. Scattered in the foreground of the image are bottles of prescription medication, and yet there is the suggestion of hope in the diffuse backlighting that spreads over her mother’s hair, and the plants and trinkets dangling in the window. Between the window and Jessica’s mother is the family dog. The 35mm film, sharp and grainy at once, gives the image a cinematic feel. The casual presence of Jessica’s mother and the sympathetic point of view allow one to gaze comfortably into the everyday life of one resident of the Newtown Creek area, but the comfort is disrupted by the threat of sickness. The feeling of domestic intimacy, realized through the plants, dog, light, and above all, the calm presence of Jessica’s mother, is set off against the medication and the implied tragedy of lupus and its association with environmental disaster. It is an image that soothes and disturbs.

“My Mom with Her Daily Lupus Medication” illustrates Jessica’s reflections on her own personal involvement in the Newtown Creek environmental disaster. As she pushed forward on her field project, Jessica saw that she would be rewarded with a portfolio that passionately communicated her feelings. For six weeks, she toured the Creek with scientists, interviewed friends and others allegedly affected by the poisons deposited over many years. During critique sessions, peers made the frequent suggestion that she combine traditional documentary images with portraiture. In response, Jessica mixed together a heavy metal soundtrack, poems from a local artist, and family images that tell a very personal story.
Jessica’s project takes the viewer into a deeper understanding of the personal costs of social ignorance and greed. Her fieldwork had a powerful teaching effect on her peers. Long after she finished the class, I continue to show her work to students, as its impact is key to mindful critical thinking about their lives and the lives of those with whom we share this fragile planet. An example of fearlessness, Jessica confronted personal sadness, transforming the image of her mother’s illness into a social document that indicts the corporate destruction of life.

“Ring of Fire,” Dorje Lama
A Commercial Photography student from Nepal, Dorje decided to photograph the final season of the Coney Island Amusement Park before its transformation into a revitalized and expanded recreation and retail area, and housing complex. He had discovered the park, long considered the summer playground of the working class, when involved in a project about the Coney Island Polar Bear Club. Dorje writes:

The people in Coney Island are my biggest inspiration in this project. The first person in this documentary is David Winter. He has spent a major part of his life in Coney Island and has many memories here. This part of the project will be an intimate approach into the life of David and his attachment to Coney Island. ...I will leave it up to the viewer, my professor, and my classmates to judge my work. This is my attempt to reach the “depth of feeling,” that Eugene Smith refers to and I need to work more.

Dorje’s sensitivity to place and person are evident in “Ring of Fire,” a compelling pattern of circles and triangles that subtly leads the eye to the photograph’s key elements of David and the Coney Island Amusement Park. The image’s point of view is distant, allowing the photographer to capture both the “Ring of Fire” and David in a single shot. Edged in a decorative pattern of lights, the Ring forms a wide dark circle that encloses a pale sky and wispy clouds. David is below, alone and centered in the frame, his head bowed; American flags blow briskly in the breeze at the arching top of the ride. The Ring rises above his small figure in the aging amusement park as he walks toward the frame’s left edge. In the empty foreground, David appears unaware
that he is being photographed, his solitude made more apparent by
the broken fence between him and the Ring of Fire. The image defies
classification; it is an achievement of documentary, fine art, and graphic
excellence. The implied patriotism of the flags, the holiday spirit of
the festive lights, and the iconic status of the Ring of Fire all suggest a
cultural celebration of Coney Island and America. And yet the image is
also one of loss. The visual elements of distance, the contrasts of scale,
the enclosure of sky, and the black and white format present the viewer
with a melancholy awareness of the last vestiges of the Coney Island
Amusement Park before its demolition.

“Lost Dreams, 127th Avenue and 172nd Street, Saint Albans, NY
11434,” Homero Campos
In September and October, 2008, Homero Campos interned for me
on a month-long expedition to Antarctica funded by a grant from the
National Science Foundation Antarctic Writers and Artists Program. It
was as an educator and not as a photographer that I made the decision
to bring a student on a demanding field assignment to the pristine yet
remote Antarctic Archipelagos. Before our departure, I was often asked
by faculty and students about the qualities I looked for in an intern. I
knew that my companion had to be disciplined, prompt, clearly moti-
vated, and culturally sensitive; he also needed technical skill and physi-
cal strength. Most important, my intern had to be curious and receptive
to learning about a completely unfamiliar and daunting environment.
Born in Ecuador but eager to explore an island where temperatures
hovered at about 18 degrees, Homero possessed all of the necessary
qualities and more. Surrounded by scientists and support staff from all
over the world with whom he lived and worked, Homero learned to
pitch a tent, operate a Zodiac boat, cook in sub-freezing temperatures,
and maneuver the steep slopes of the Antarctic Peninsula while carrying
wooden tripods, film holders, lenses, light meters, and assorted cam-
eras. In the evenings, elephant seals barked and moaned throughout the
night and the Antarctic sky filled with constantly changing subtle col-
ors. In the mornings, we hiked along the glacier’s rim, where rocky cliffs
and hills rose and fell in a surreal landscape at the edge of the world.

In the late winter of 2009, just after returning from Antarctica, his
world-view expanded and with a deepened awareness of social issues,
Homero set out upon his first self-defined photography project, “Lost
Dreams,” a series of the facades of sixty foreclosed homes in eastern Queens:

My inspiration came after working with Scott in his “Antarctic Souls project. “ I wanted to take portraits, but ones in which no people were actually portrayed. The idea of “Lost Dreams” came from a profound childhood dream of having a house back in Ecuador. Seeing all these abandoned houses, I felt like someone else had lost their dream, too, and so I wanted to make portraits of them.

At first glance “127th Avenue and 172nd Street, Saint Albans, NY 11434” is as mundane as its caption. Further examination reveals the fine-grained, flawless detail of the photograph, its clear resolution the result of medium format black and white film. Rendered as a high contrast silver gelatin print, the photograph depicts a mid-20th century wood frame home in disrepair, the worn texture of the post WWII siding harks back to a time when this home represented the American Dream. To the right of the house, a plain white door, probably mass produced, stands out as a recent addition, perhaps to keep out vagrants seeking refuge. The weathered patchwork of siding boards and mismatched doors and windows create a story of past owners, and the struggles and successes of those who once lived there.

The stillness of this seemingly ordinary image conceals its power to move the eye and the imagination. The house is centered within the square frame on a late winter day; the trees are leafless and nothing human is in sight. The afternoon light is anti-dramatic, simple yet bleak. The central position of the home draws the eye to its facade, and the stark beauty of the trees pulls the eye upward, and then down to the houses at the right and left edges of the frame. Like a brush stroke, a white sidewalk slashes the bottom of the image, the eye following across until it is abruptly halted by the frame. The mundane creates mystery; stillness activates the eye. Searching the image for clues, the viewer becomes an investigator. The details, geometry, and textures are pleasing as design elements, but the photograph also presents documentary evidence that poses questions: Who, what, where, why, when? The elegant and non-didactic presentation of the subject frees viewers to find their own answers.
Conclusion
Field work and open critique strengthen curricula that recognize the value of integrating “habits of mind, habits of hand, and habits of heart.” The practice of combining field trips with art critique in photography class intensifies the act of seeing and teaches students how the world may be viewed and represented. Looking beyond their own subjective experiences to social realities in Newtown Creek, Coney Island, and Queens, Jessica, Dorje, and Homero documented familiar places in revealing ways. Their feelings influenced their choice of place, but as photographers, they captured objective images of their subjects. It is the delicate balance between self and subject that, as photographers, they must continue to respect.

It is important to stress that the students whose work has been discussed here looked into themselves and each other as creators. They used their eyes and technical skills to understand and express what they saw, and their images help us to see these places more clearly. Talking about pictures together week after week, testing interpretations and judgments, and improving their skills, photography students established the foundations of a critical vocabulary that, with disciplined work, will gradually develop into a firm understanding of the history, theory, and practice of photography.

Notes

2. “While we cannot describe its appearance (the equivalent), we can define its function. When a photograph functions as an Equivalent we can say that at that moment, and for that person the photograph acts as a symbol or plays the role of a metaphor for something that is beyond the subject photographed” (White 17).

Works Consulted


