

# CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA • TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721      NUMBER 7/8 SEPTEMBER 1978

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AARON SISKIND AND HIS CRITICS  
1946-1966

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

JACK WELPOTT: Aaron Siskind, Photographer, 1973

Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona  
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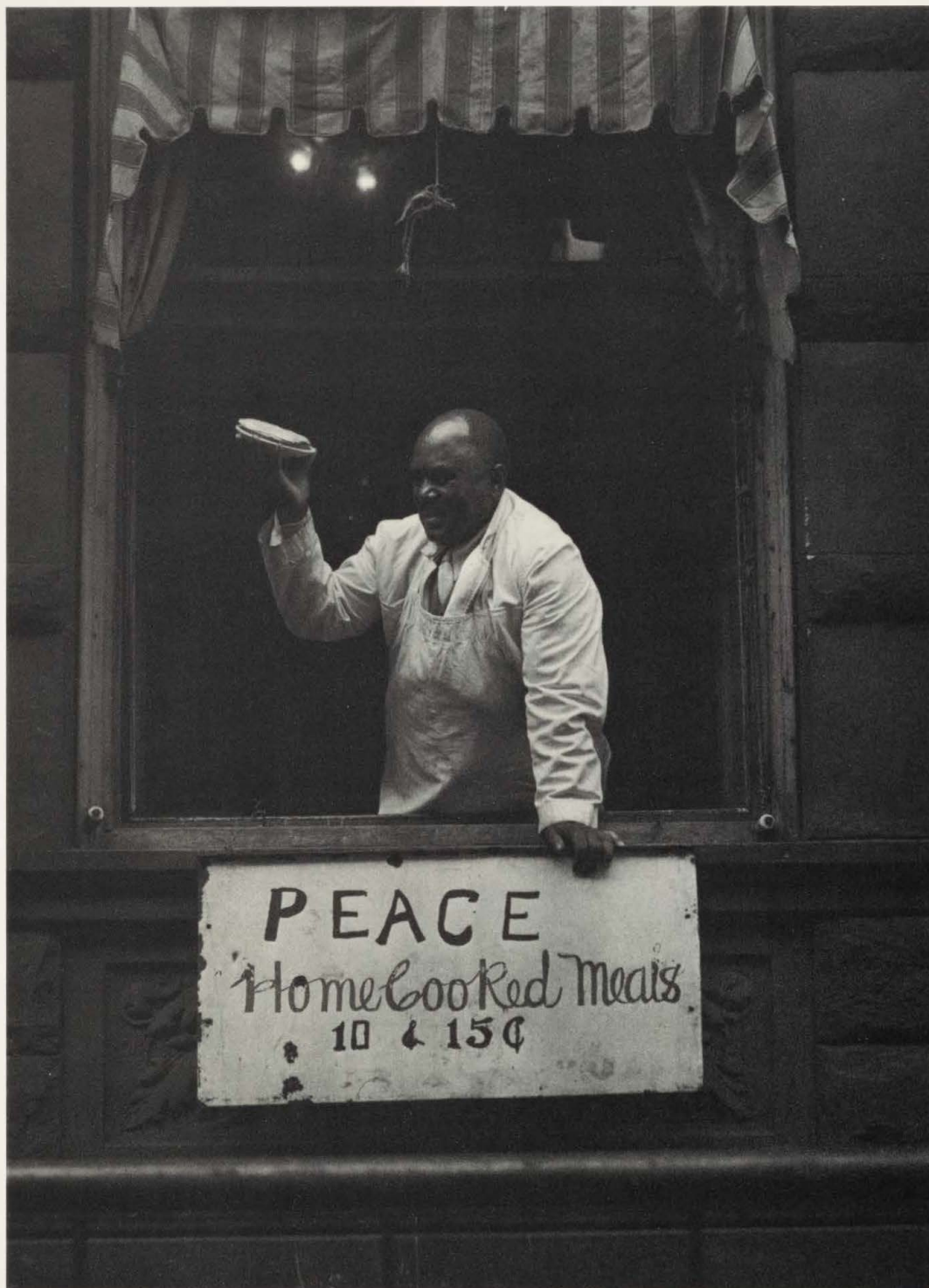
## INTRODUCTION

Carl Chiarenza's essay on "Siskind's Critics" is a perceptive, instructional and scholarly contribution to the literature which surrounds this great American artist. As a preface to Chiarenza's essay it is recommended that the reader refer to Henry Holmes Smith's essay "Critical Difficulties: Some Problems With Passing Judgement and Taking Issue" (*Afterimage*, Volume 6, Numbers 1 and 2, Summer, 1978) which dissects the love-hate relationship and consequent responsibilities between artists and critics. These two essays should serve to remind the reader of the inevitable role the critic plays in the theatre of history.

Carl Chiarenza is chairman of the Art History Department at Boston University where he teaches Approaches to the History of Photography, the History of Modern Art, and the History of Printmaking. He is also an accomplished photographer and received a National Endowment for the Arts Photographer's Fellowship in 1977. Chiarenza writes regularly on the history of photography and the aesthetic insights into Siskind's works, which he provides in the accompanying essay, reflect his skill as a historian and his understanding of the medium as a photographer.

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*Harlem Document* circa 1935

23.2 x 16.9 cm.

CCP Collection 76:063:030



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## SISKIND'S CRITICS

1946-1966

Carl Chiarenza, *Boston University*

Criticism has been an unusually important (perhaps crucial) aspect of developments in the art of the post-1945 period. Where photography (that is, artists using the photographic medium) fits into this criticism is embarrassingly difficult to define. While one can make a case for the embryonic appearance of serious photographic criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would be difficult to establish its existence for the twenty years following World War II. This is peculiar, knowing as we now do that those twenty years encompass a period when a number of major photographers were bringing their medium into the forefront of contemporary art, especially in the United States. While American painters were receiving regular attention in the press, American photographers were all but ignored.

Aaron Siskind was one of the major photographers whose career parallels that of many of the first generation Abstract Expressionist painters. Since about 1965, he has been increasingly receiving serious critical consideration.<sup>1</sup> Before that, however, the published material on Siskind, contained in the archives of the Center for Creative Photography, revealed a curious uncertainty about Siskind's work.

Where there was interest, there was usually misunderstanding. Rarely did a Siskind picture receive the scrutiny that was accorded even a minor painting of the period. What was published, however, may be enlightening, both about Siskind and the position of photography within the arts of the period.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, *Aaron Siskind, Photographer*, Rochester, 1965 (essays by Thomas B. Hess and Henry Holmes Smith); Arthur Bardo's review of same in *Artforum* V. 4, No. 5 (Jan., 1966); Carl Chiarenza "Terrors and Pleasures, the Life and Work of Aaron Siskind," unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1973; Carl Chiarenza, "Siskind's Homage to Kline (1972-1975)" in *Photographs by Aaron Siskind in Homage to Franz Kline*, Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, 1975 (reprinted in *Afterimage*, V. 3, N. 6, Dec. 1975); *Places: Aaron Siskind Photographs* (introduction by Thomas B. Hess), N.Y. 1976; Hilton Kramer, "Celebrating Formalism in Photography," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 1976, Section II; and Anne Tucker's forthcoming book on the Film and Photo League.

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It is clear in 1978 that the art world has, to some extent, come to accept Aaron Siskind as a major figure in the twentieth century. It is just as evident, however, that there is still no clear understanding of *why* he is a major figure. What is generally known and repeated encompasses but a few points: that he was a documentary photographer and member of the Photo League; that he changed direction in the mid-forties; that he became closely associated with the Abstract Expressionist painters; and that he taught, with Harry Callahan, at the Institute of Design, and the Rhode Island School of Design. With a few outstanding exceptions, serious investigation of single works, or groups of works, is non-existent.

When asked about Siskind's work, most people refer to stone fences, and walls with peeling paint and/or torn posters. They usually offer the word "abstraction" by way of explanation. They move quickly from the work to generalizations based on the assumption that his earlier "documentary vision" was converted by painters. This assumption is generally held by both those who think it is a shame that a talented "true" photographer was lured into imitations of painting, and those who feel that he found a way to break through the entrenched notion that photography was limited to a resemblance-laden representation of objects, events and persons.

This article<sup>2</sup> examines what was written about Siskind's photography between 1946 (the year following the publication of Siskind's first major public statement about his work) and 1966 (the year following his first major retrospective exhibition). Some of the reasons for surveying this material have been suggested above. This period represents the development of Siskind's major work; it is reasonable to be curious about the relationship between this development and the criticism which attended it. Who are the critics? What are their credentials? Their strengths? Their limitations? Have these critics understood Siskind's work? Have they helped us understand it? Can we apply the answers to these questions to the larger question of the relationship between criticism and photography during this period? Was criticism influential in positive or negative ways to photography's position in the art world at the time?

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at The University of New Mexico in 1976.

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One of the interesting aspects of this body of criticism (and some will want to say that much of what is included here is not criticism) is that it was written by a variety of writers: photo reporters, photographers, art (that is, painting) critics, and, at least in one case, a painter. The writers do not share a common background. Some have a knowledge of certain kinds of photography with little or no knowledge of art; some have a knowledge of art with little or no knowledge of photography; many feel that photography and art are mutually exclusive.

In 1945, in *Minicam Photography*, Siskind (who was then 42 years years old, and had been photographing for about 15 years) published a statement that was clearly inspired by a self-conscious reflection on his work of 1943–1944, in which he saw a “new departure” that was “curiously enough . . . an outgrowth of [his] documentary practice.”

For some reason or other there was in me the desire to see the world clean and fresh and alive, as primitive things are clean and fresh and alive. The so-called documentary picture left me wanting something.

It is a pretty uncomfortable feeling for a documentary photographer to find himself working without a plan. But the initial drive coupled with simple, precise working habits carried me along for a while. Then certain ideas began to emerge from the work, a predilection for certain kinds of objects, and for certain kinds of relationships. That carried me along further. . . .

As the saying goes, we see in terms of our education. We look at the world and see what we have learned to believe is there. . . .

But, as photographers, we must learn to relax our beliefs. Move on objects with your eye straight on, to the left, around on the right. Watch them grow large as you approach, group and regroup themselves as you shift your position. Relationships gradually emerge, and sometimes assert themselves with finality. And that's your picture.

What I have just described is an emotional experience. It is utterly personal: no one else can ever see quite what you have seen, and the picture that emerges is unique, never before made and never to be repeated. The picture — and this is fundamental — has the unity of an organism. . . .

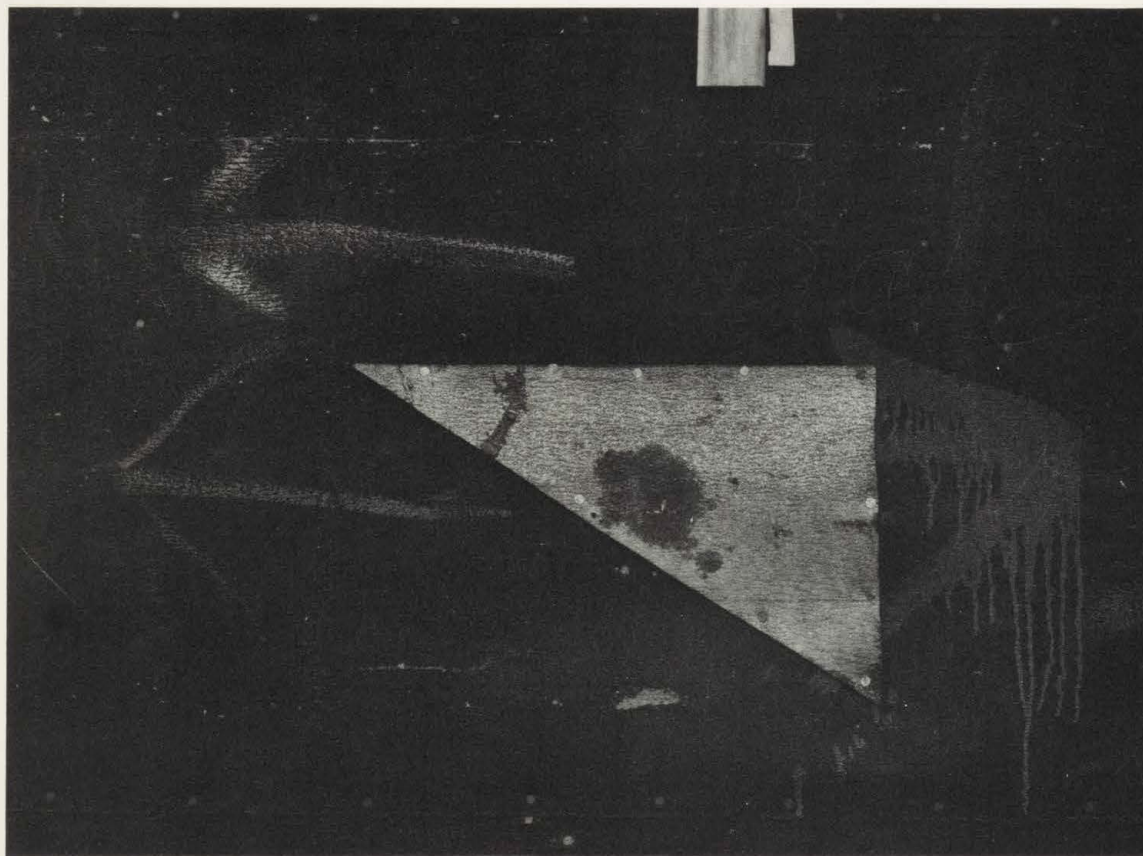
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*Harlem Document* circa 1936

24 x 19.2 cm.

CCP Collection 76:063:028



*Gloucester 1* 1944

25 x 33.7 cm.

CCP Collection  
76:063:013



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These thoughts and those which are quoted below could as easily have been expressed, at about the same time, by a handful of American painters going through similar “new departures.” About the meaning of these pictures, Siskind wrote:

Pressed for the meaning of these pictures, I should answer, obliquely, that they are informed with animism . . . Aesthetically, they pretend to the resolution of . . . sometimes fierce, sometimes gentle, but always conflicting forces. . . .

These photographs appear to be a representation of a deep need for order. Time and again “live” forms play their little part against a backdrop of strict rectangular space — a flat, unyielding space. They cannot escape back into the depth of perspective. The four edges of the rectangle are absolute bounds. . . .

The first person to make public note of the importance of what Siskind was doing and saying was Beaumont Newhall, who wrote an article entitled “Dual Focus” which was published in 1946 in *Art News*, a magazine that was soon to become a major forum for Abstract Expressionism. Newhall cited Siskind’s new work as evidence of the need for an examination of abstraction in photography in relation to abstraction in painting. He wrote:

The relation of photography to abstract art is close and challenging. The step from . . . macrophotographs which place emphasis on organic design to Aaron Siskind’s isolation and organization within a rectangle of such apparently ungrateful subjects as a shingle or marked-up tar paper is a close one. Siskind’s remark, ‘I regard the picture as a new object to be contemplated for its own meaning and its own beauty,’ is a point of view seldom expressed by photographers.

Siskind, however, was not a primary concern of Newhall’s essay, and it is likely that the brief reference to Siskind’s words and pictures went largely unnoticed.

Newhall’s suggestion for an examination of the relationship between abstraction in painting and photography did not soon materialize, but Siskind’s entry into the mainstream of New York’s avant-garde world of artists did. This happened long before his work received any serious criticism; indeed, it happened long before the work was understood, acknowl-

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*South Street #3 New York 1947*

18.5 x 23.9 cm.

On loan from artist.

*Chicago 1948*

22.7 x 34.3 cm.

On loan from artist.





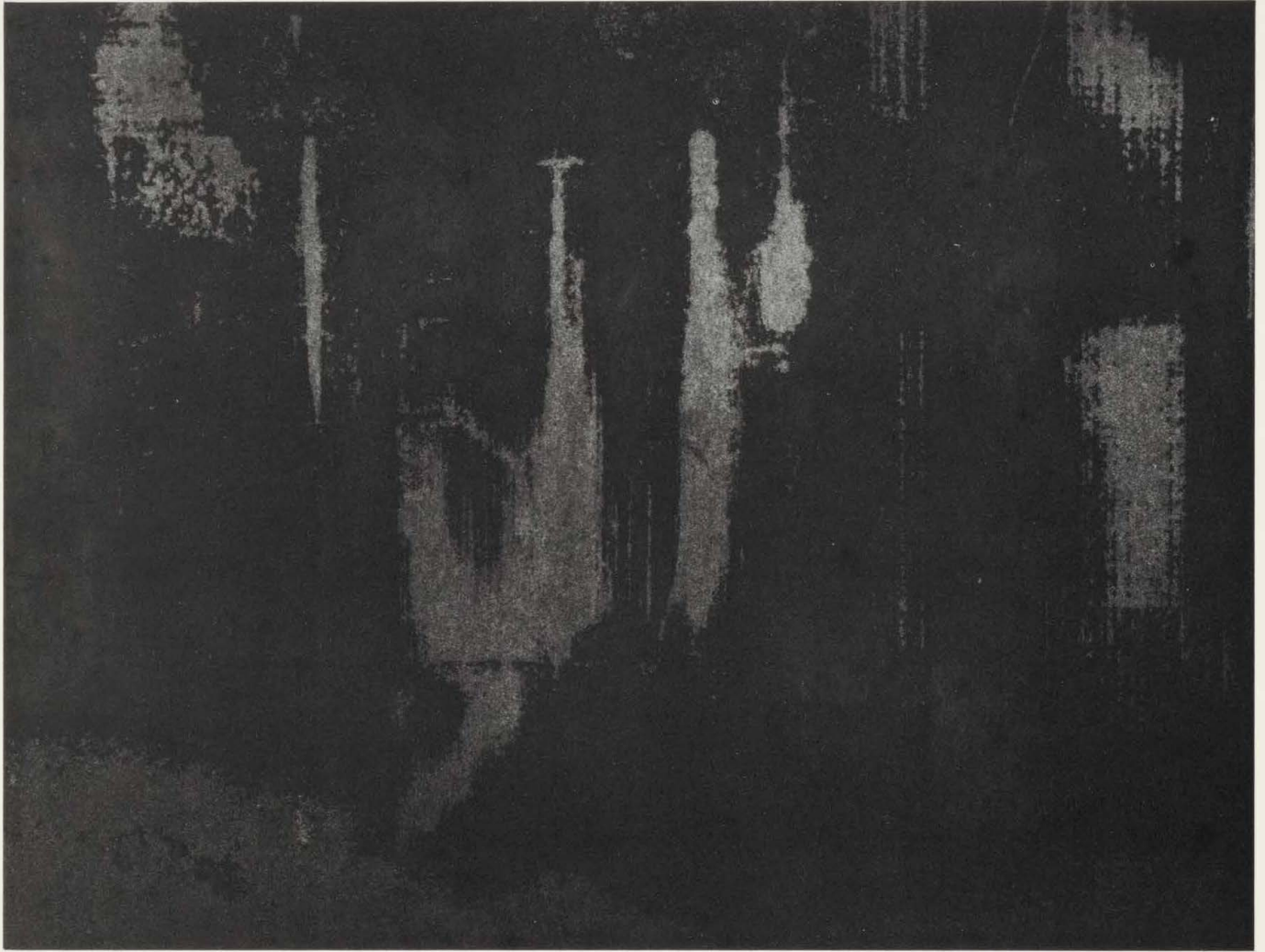
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edged, or even seriously noticed. Unlike the pictorialists of the early twentieth century, Siskind's work did not relate to past or academic styles in painting, nor did it attempt to emulate other media by hand or technical manipulation. And, most important, Siskind was alone. He was not part of a group or movement such as the Photo-Secession. And so it must have been with astonished surprise in April 1947 that both the photography and painting communities witnessed Siskind's first one-man exhibition at the Charles Egan Gallery, one of three galleries which would become intimately associated with the work of the Abstract Expressionists, and the gallery which was to give Franz Kline his first exhibition in 1950, three years later. The press release made it clear that this was the gallery's first exhibition of photographs. Egan mounted the show because he felt the work was important and that, in his words, "Siskind was an artist who happened to use a camera." The press did not respond. Later that year, however, the editors of *Mademoiselle* approached Siskind about doing an article on his work. Siskind, who knew one of the editors as a summer visitor to Martha's Vineyard, suggested another acquaintance, Hilda Love-man Wilson, one-time art critic for *Newsweek*, as the writer. The article appeared in December. Wilson, writing from information apparently obtained by interviewing Siskind, contrasted him with such photographers as Strand, Sheeler, and Weston, whom she said flirted briefly with Cubist abstraction but, she wrote that unlike Siskind,

these three photographers were essentially realists . . . Unlike the true abstractionists, they did not wish to create new entities or to convey any inner emotions of their own or of mankind. They soon returned altogether to the representational, believing they could retain in it an underlying abstract structure.

In trying to characterize what made Siskind's pictures different, Wilson quoted a passage from Thomas Hardy, who, coincidentally, was a major influence on Siskind in the 1920s when he was a student of English literature. The passage is entirely fitting:

Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. . . . I don't want to see the original realities — as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called 'abstract imaginings.'



*West Street 15* 1950

24.4 x 32.1 cm.

On loan from artist.



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One suspects that Siskind was behind much of the "criticism" contained in the Wilson article, yet even so, there is little in the way of an examination of the work.

A review of Siskind's second Egan exhibition (in 1948) appeared in *Photo Notes*, a publication of the Photo League. It was written by Elizabeth Timberman. While the Photo League's view of photography had broadened considerably since the 1930s when Siskind was a member, most Photo Leaguers maintained a social-documentary bias and were either confused by, or hostile to, the new work Siskind was showing. The tone of Timberman's review is, therefore, a surprise, for she was moved by the pictures. She knew her audience, however, and duly noted the absence of people in the pictures, and the fact that the pictures were not photograms, nor as she said "just abstractions." She called them austere but meaningful, and was proud to underline the fact that they were "straight" photographs.

While Timberman may not have been able to articulate what made these photographs "different" from other straight photographs, she was receptive to the feelings she experienced while viewing them and was able to convey that experience:

The key in which they are set is romantic, nostalgic, conveying a sense of loneliness. . . . A brooding emotion carrying a feeling of loss seems to have found its visual counterpart in these abandoned isolated fragments of still life. . . . the predominant mood is serious and sombre. . . . A process of association takes place. . . . The work seems always to be oscillating between the impersonal and the most personal, so that what is portrayed in sand and on walls and on the street is really the face of the artist.

The review is defensive and general, but nonetheless it begins to suggest a way of viewing the photographs.

In 1950, Siskind revised his *Minicam* statement of five years earlier. He called the new version his "Credo." While it offered little that was new in content, the language used and its emphasis of current art concepts underlined the depth of his involvement with the vanguard painters during the late 1940s. In this "Credo" he stated, "First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture."

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It is fitting, then, that the next major statement on Siskind was written by Elaine de Kooning, a painter and art critic. Her essay was distributed in mimeograph form to accompany Siskind's fourth exhibition at the Egan Gallery, in 1951. She called Siskind a painter's photographer because his public, she said, was composed largely of artists. She thus underlined the fact that Siskind was by this time quite removed from the photographic community, and suggested that painters were being stimulated by his work. She stated his work was more directly related to contemporary styles of painting than to contemporary photography. Indeed, that he rejected whole spheres of photographic possibilities in order to look for forms "as highly personal as any painter could invent." She said he influenced his subject, that he had an uncanny perception which he exploited "for the variety of ways an image can occur on a picture plane," reversing, she said, the natural photographic order of vision. Her point was, that like any other artist, he had developed what she called a "severe clarity of style" which made his pictures (she called them *objects*) "always poignantly recognizable as his."

Echoing the sense of de Kooning's essay but reminding her readers of Siskind's documentary background, Georgine Oeri, in *Graphics*, also in 1951, wrote that Siskind "has remained . . . a sort of documentary photographer, though now on a fundamentally different plane of vision . . . His creative talent consists in his ability to see the invisible in the visible. He has the gift . . . of transforming . . . banal and hackneyed things . . . by the force of his insight . . ." He photographs "his own vision . . . pictures . . . in which archetypal concepts take on shape and form, in which the human mind pins down its own spirits under the spell of magic signs . . . Siskind . . . explores the hand-writing of creation . . ."

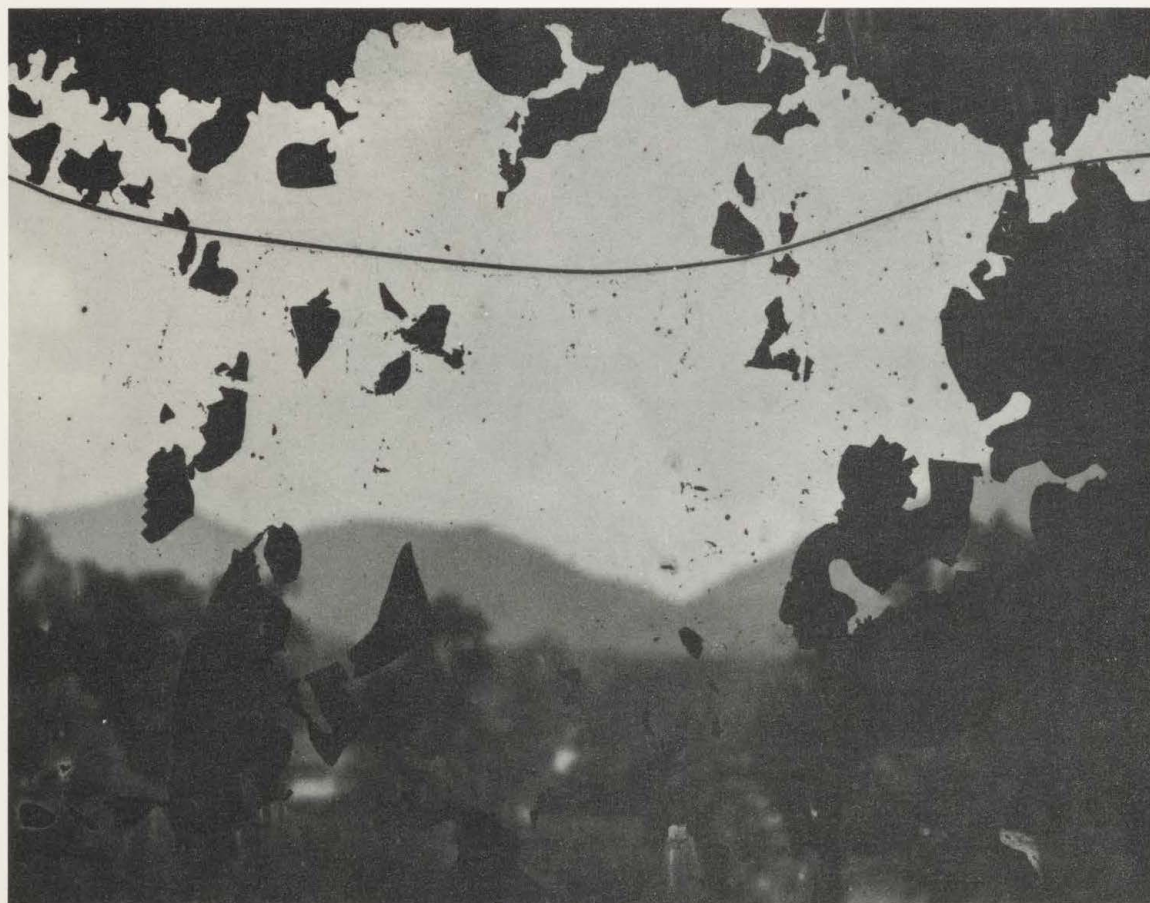
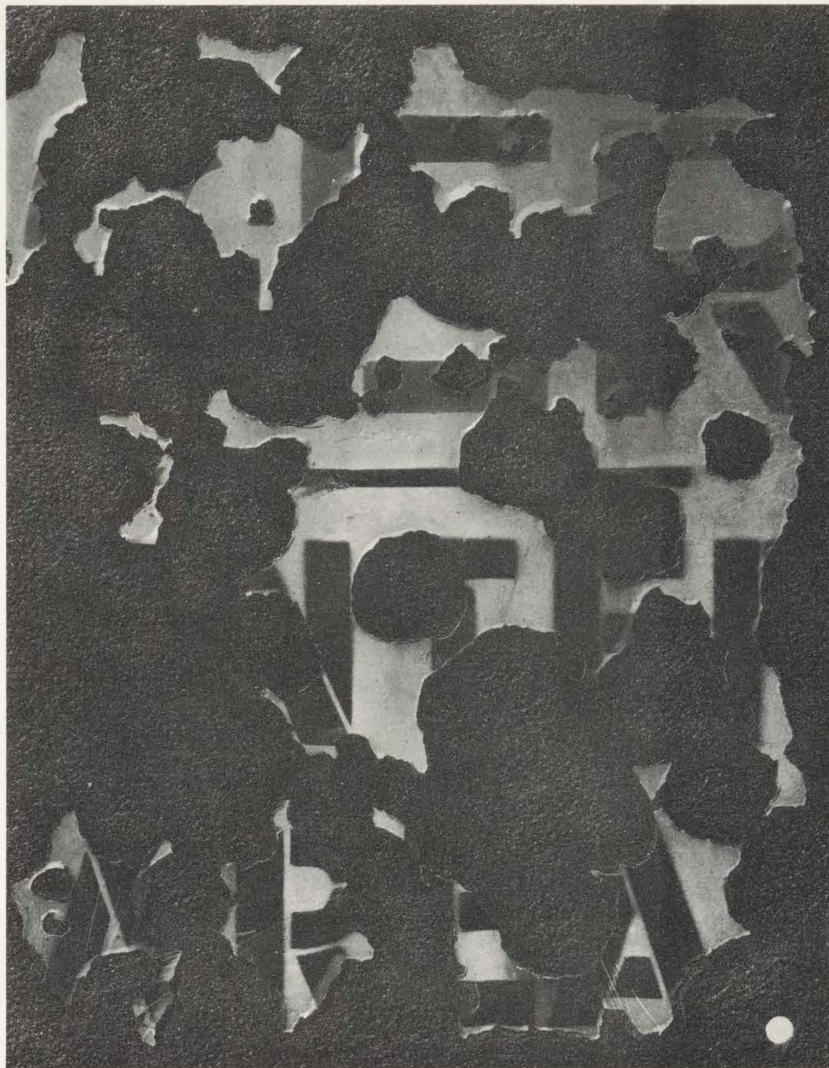
By 1951, at least five positive public statements had appeared. One was hidden in an article with broader concerns. Four of them were essays which centered on Siskind's work. All were written by friends of the artist. Of the statements, however, only two (and they were not the most informative) had anything close to a relatively large audience. Not one of the five was written by a major critic and not one attempted serious analysis of the pictures.

The New York photographic community was confused. Jacob Deschin, long time photo reporter for The New York Times, noted what he called

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*New York 6* 1951  
32 x 25.1 cm.  
On loan from artist.



*North Carolina 9* 1951  
26.4 x 33.4 cm.  
On loan from artist.

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Siskind's "new levels of confidence." But, in a review of the 1951 Egan Gallery exhibition, doubted the worth of that confidence. He wrote that Siskind "opposes a false orderliness to the impelling and inescapable 'change and disorder' of the living world." Is this approach, Deschin asked, "by itself enough to fill the life of a serious photographer?" Deschin didn't think so, especially, he wrote, "when one considers the fact that Mr. Siskind at one time was one of America's leading documentary photographers, in which role he was not only concerned about life but was effectively instrumental in leading others into similar directions of thinking and working photographically."

From another corner of the New York-based photographic press came similar discontent. Bruce Downes, editor of *Popular Photography*, found it useful to compare Siskind's Egan exhibition with one which demonstrated his own view of what photography should be: "Korea — the Impact of War," mounted in 1951 at the Museum of Modern Art. The war photographers, he wrote, were "involved with their violent and moving subject matter," while Siskind escaped "in the capricious designs of nature and decay." Then he quoted from Siskind's "Credo" which he called an "aesthetic explanation," required by Siskind's photography in order "to make itself clearly understood. . . . On the other hand," Downes wrote, "the photographs of Duncan, Mydans . . . need no explanations whatsoever." It is not difficult to comprehend how Downes defined photography. And if there is any doubt it is dispelled as we read further that Siskind's work is "a self-conscious effort to achieve art." This is stated as if he were saying that Siskind's work was a self-conscious effort to achieve war! After an emotion-filled paragraph about "tearless mothers" and "the anguished story of our time" in the war pictures, and a strained comparison of a Siskind picture and an Air Force aerial view of Korean terrain, he wrote, "So good a photographer ought not deliberately to stay his own growth. Siskind has the perceptive eye of the true photographer and it would be interesting if he removed the blinders that seem now to be keeping him behind a variety of obscure and obscuring walls."

The sense of these two reviews continues to be the norm for this branch of the photographic community throughout the period under discussion. Late in 1952, for example, Siskind was included in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "Diogenes with a Camera II" along with Ansel

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*Martha's Vineyard 111B 1954*

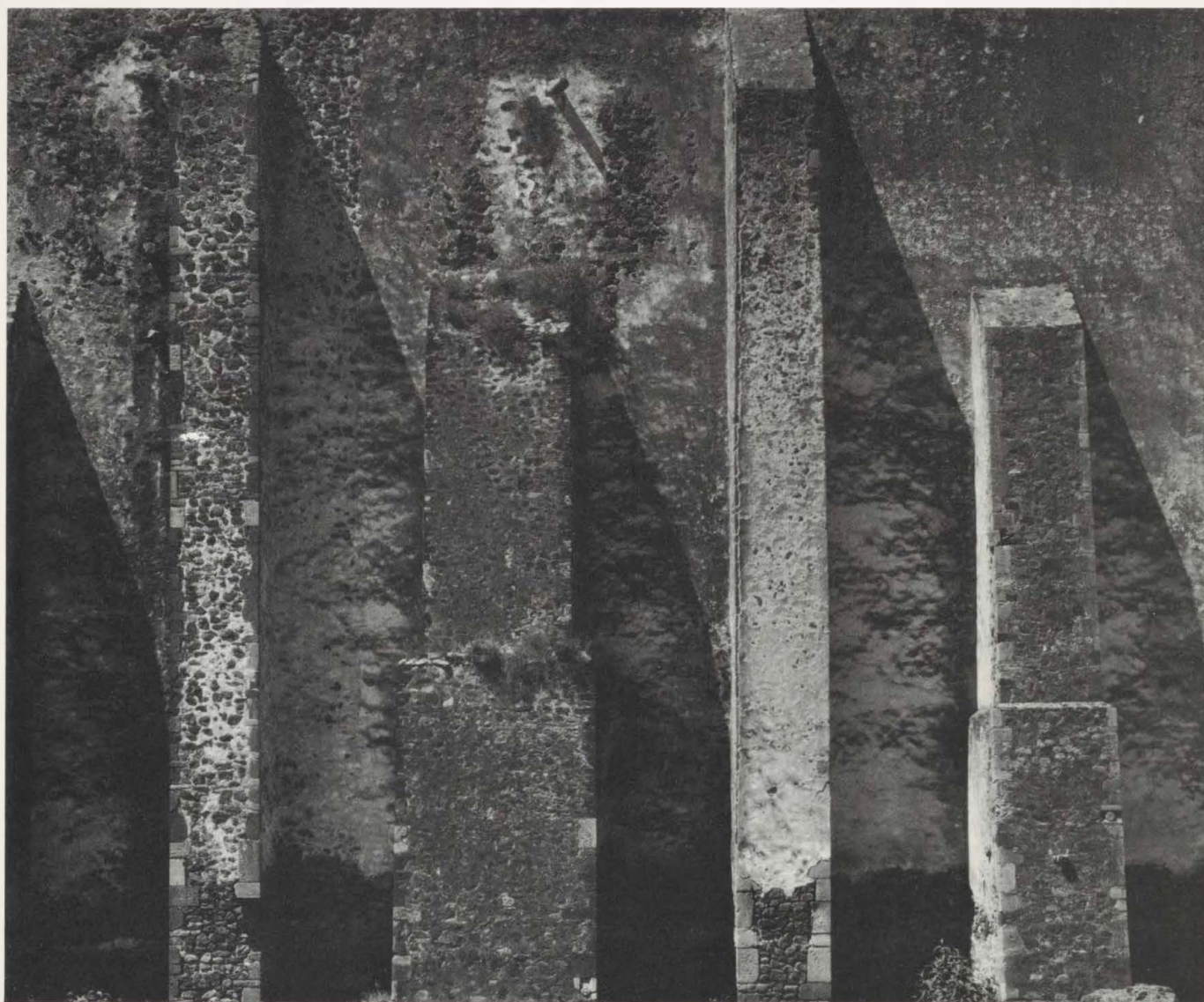
46.9 x 59.7 cm.

CCP Collection 76:064:001

*Alcoman, Mexico 1955*

34.6 x 42.1 cm.

CCP Collection 76:063:001



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Adams, Dorothea Lange, Tosh Matsumoto, and Todd Webb. In *The New York Times*, Deschin quoted from Siskind's "Credo" but, unlike Downes, he found it "as vague and subjective" as he found the photographs.

Dan Weiner, Photo Leaguer and photojournalist reviewed the same exhibition for *Infinity*, the journal of the American Society of Magazine Photographers. He praised Lange's humanity and contrasted it to what he called "Siskind's effacement of traces of humanity." By way of explanation, he wrote "Mr. Siskind takes some of the hieroglyphics and vestiges of man's activity and so manages to dehumanize through cropping and enlargement of segments that he has come close to creating new objects — a nether realm peopled by indefinable shapes and indiscriminate mish-mash." Of course, Siskind was not cropping and enlarging segments, but what is significant about these reviews is that they were all written by people who knew Siskind and respected his work as a social documentarian. They sincerely, even passionately, believed that photography's primary role was to depict the social scene. Thus they were honestly disturbed and confused by what Siskind was doing. Unable to understand — literally unable to *see* — his pictures, they were forced to lament "the change," forced to call his work vague and dehumanizing.

There was, however, another, smaller segment of the photographic community, just as passionately committed to photography as a vehicle for major art. Its public face was still largely unformed and weak. The most verbal and vocal member of that group was Minor White, who had voluntarily accepted the editorial torch left by Alfred Stieglitz in the first quarter of the century. In 1954, White was at the George Eastman House where he was involved with exhibitions and with the museum's journal, *Image*. He had been editing *Aperture*, a contemporary version of Stieglitz' *Camera-work*, since 1952. After mounting an exhibition of 65 prints by Siskind, White wrote a personal memo (apparently not intended for publication) summing up his thoughts about Siskind's work. It is revealing, both about the climate of concern, and about the way White's mind was operating at the time. He wrote:

Does he imitate contemporary abstract and non-objective paintings, is he strongly influenced by them? If so, then he is in the midst of a new pictorialism — meaning by that last term, photographs that try to do what painting does. Such abstractions are



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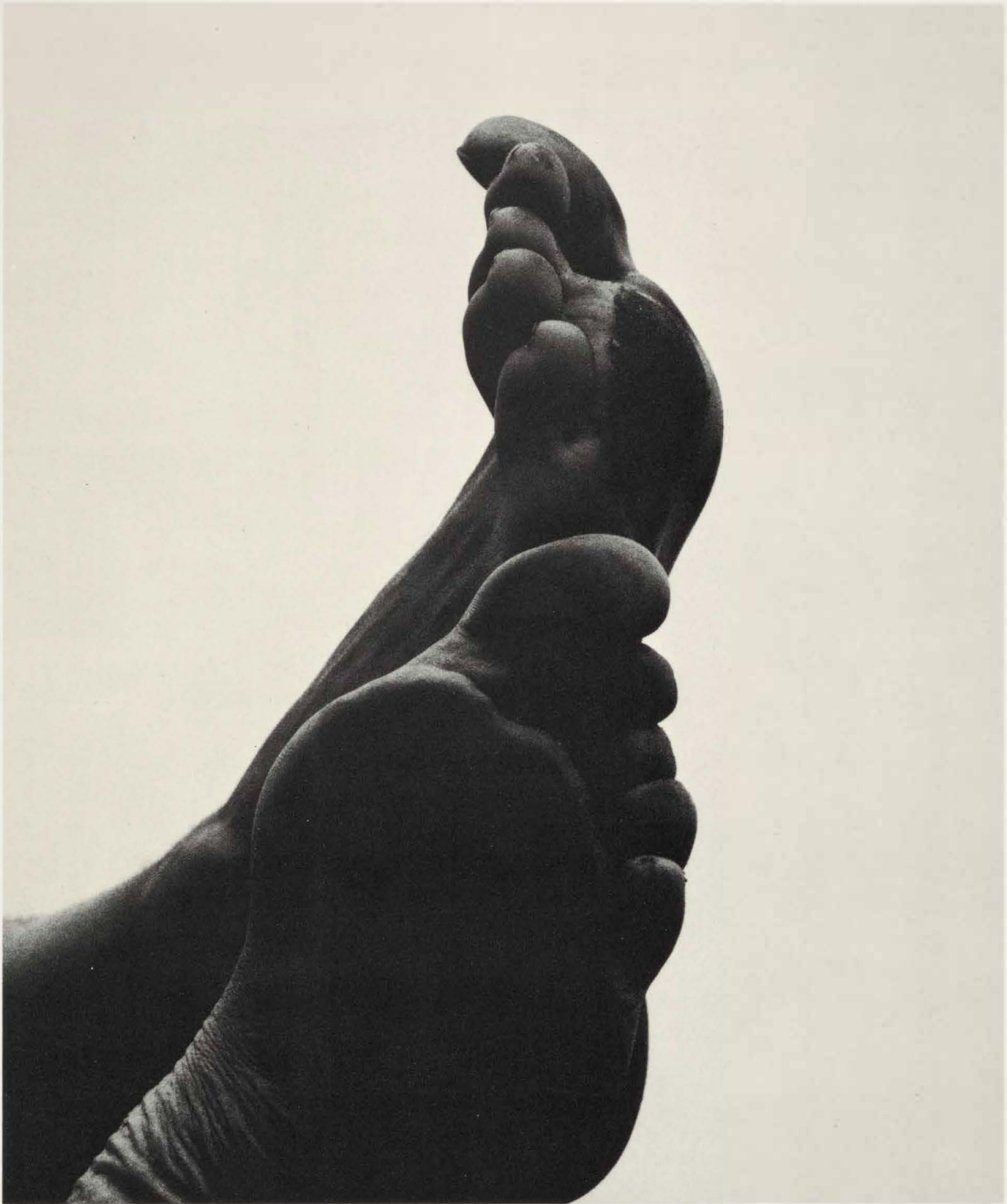
not at all new. Strand, and Weston did them years ago parallel to the wave of it in painting. And these seem lesser in power just as much as contemporary abstract painting is lesser.

On the other hand perhaps these images were found completely uninfluenced by modern art — though that is doubtful — or at least only slightly influenced; if so, then it does represent a power of perception that is acute.

Unfortunately, today's spectator will always see them for their resemblance to modern art, and invariably compare them with paintings. And still more unfortunately these Siskind photographs always, compared to similar paintings, give the feeling of incompleteness. These will provide ammunition for future critics and aestheticians to say, as some already have, that this is a Paul Klee without the life, or this is a Pollack [sic] without the vitality, etc.

This thoughtful rumination, though never published, underlines the uncertainty, the hesitation, the caution, with which all responses were made during the 1950s. It reveals the continuation and pervasiveness of photography's inferiority complex. It begs some questions: Should artists hold to accepted, one might say academic, lines, limits, etc.? Should artists not be influenced by their contemporaries? Can they avoid it? Is the work of a "modern" artist using photography not modern art? Do artists working in different media never share a common generational heritage, common philosophies? Significantly, it does not occur to White to ask if, perhaps, Siskind's vision influenced that of the painters. This glimpse into White's private thoughts provides an important revelation of the concerns of White, whose self-appointed task of formulating a theory of photography as art was at this time still in its infancy. Ironically, in this same year, Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, included Siskind (without discussion) in this book, *Masters of Modern Art*.

Peter Pollack, in late 1955, mounted a small exhibition of Siskind's work at the Art Institute of Chicago where he was then part-time curator of photographs. In writing about the work for a folded announcement, Pollack seemed as uncertain as White of how to talk about Siskind's relation to the now notorious abstract expressionist painters. "The difference," Pollack wrote, "between so many 'avant-garde' painters and Siskind as a



*Feet 133* 1958

29.1 x 24.4 cm.

On loan from artist.



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photographer is manifest in their work. . . . Siskind's picture is not something conceived in darkroom or studio. Always there is a foot-hold in reality." A strange and uncertain argument, but one which recalls the historically recurrent controversy between so-called "straight" and "manipulative" photographers. In the context of Pollack's statement, it may be no argument at all and might thus reveal all the more the dilemma over Siskind's work. As if out of frustration about how to convey his conviction about Siskind's work, Pollack concludes by writing that Siskind accomplished "what many of the non-objective painters have been trying to do and say, but not so successfully." (Again, it is uncertain what Pollack means by this.)

Indirectly, however, Pollack has implied a similarity of concern between Siskind and a diverse group of painters.<sup>3</sup> It is this similarity of concern that is avoided, overlooked, rationalized, criticized, or apologized for by most writers of the period, whatever their allegiance or background.

In 1958, four years after his personal memo, Minor White wrote an article intended to persuade the art public that photography was a major medium. In the article he made positive reference to Siskind's work. The essay, entitled "On the Strength of a Mirage," was published in *Art in America*, an elegant art publication that made an attempt to seriously discuss photography in the late 1950s. Here White skirted the earlier issue by writing:

To get from the tangible to the intangible (which mature artists in any medium claim as part of their task) a paradox of some kind has frequently been helpful . . . and the talisman paradox for unique photography is to work the 'mirror with a memory' as if it were a metamorphosing machine. . . . For instance, Aaron Siskind's *Pertaining to Change* is not difficult to identify as insignificant paint on something unimportant, but it can be considered as a manifestation of something else. . . . When watched, the various lines and spots will suddenly suggest faces almost as if they turned themselves into known shapes. . . . Observed repeatedly, if one can remember all the appearances, the succession of

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<sup>3</sup> Pollack did not add much in his commentary on Siskind in his book, *The Picture History of Photography* first published in 1958.

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transformations resembles a zoo or a portrait gallery. Sometimes this shifting from face to face and back again takes place rapidly; when the lines and spots metamorphose before our eyes the mirage slowly shimmers!

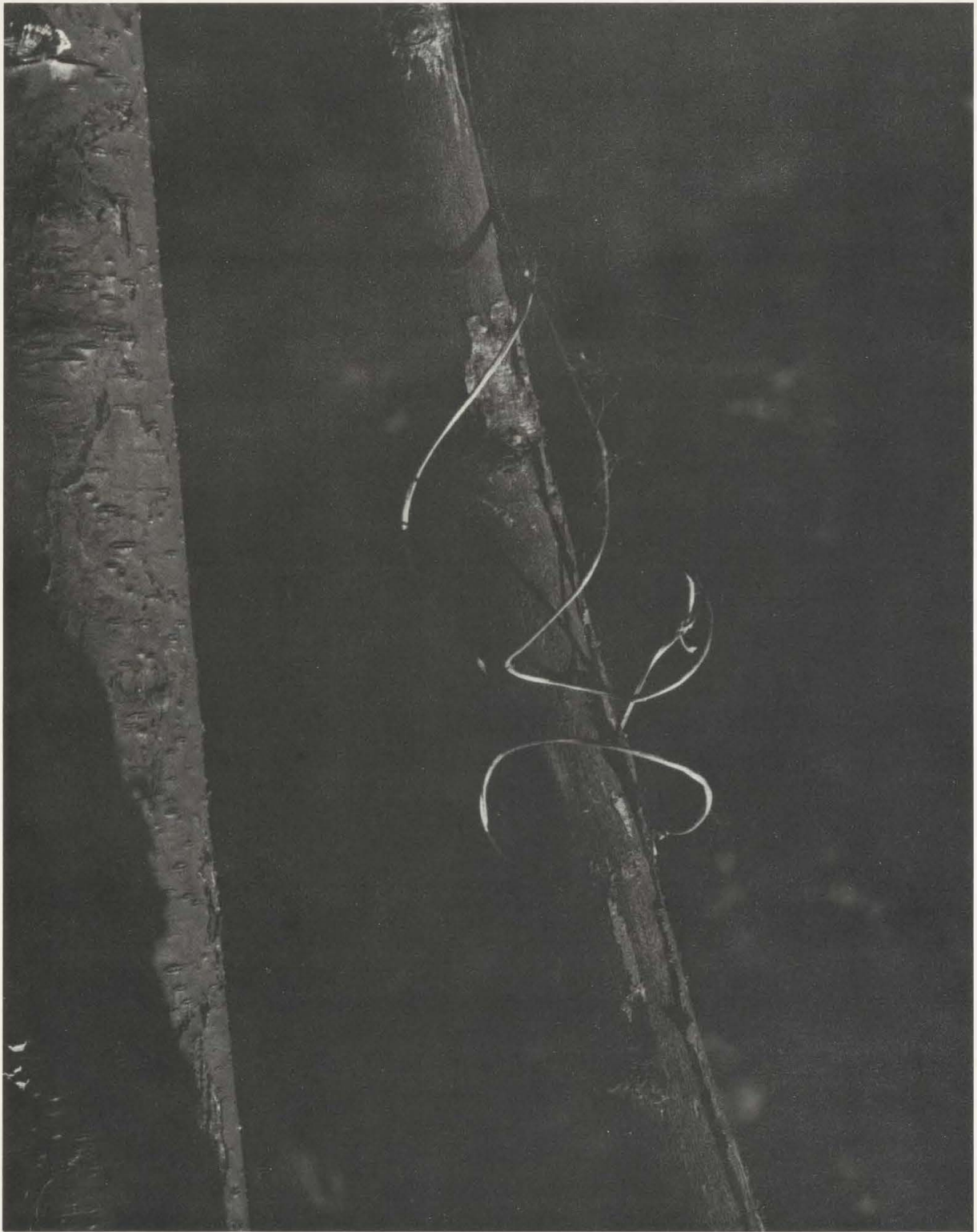
Minor White, as is well known, had gone to an esoteric platform from which he would attempt to convert whomever would listen to his arguments for the other-worldly qualities of what he here called “unique-photography.” (It is still difficult to estimate the relationship between the number of readers he won over and the number he alienated.) A simple but important point is made here, however, that a way into the meaning of Siskind’s work was to consider the content metaphorically.<sup>4</sup> Siskind himself had said this in 1945, and Elaine de Kooning had suggested it in 1951.

That there was so little serious response to photographs offered as art during this period caused many to think that perhaps a secret conspiracy to prohibit publication existed — at least outside of such very limited-audience and limited-subject publications as *Aperture*. Why did the art critics fail to respond? One who did respond may in his response suggest some of the reasons. Harold Rosenberg was one of the two major art critics to champion Abstract Expressionism.<sup>5</sup> He was an intimate friend of many of the painters. Indeed he was a member of their club, and it is very likely that this is where he and Siskind met and became friends. When Siskind (at age 56) decided to produce a book of his photographs in 1959, Ben Raeburn, publisher and mutual friend of Siskind and Rosenberg, asked

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<sup>4</sup> A year earlier, a lengthy experiment in “reading” Siskind photographs metaphorically was published under White’s editorship: “The Experience of Photographs” (Five Photographs by Siskind, Five Readings by Kurt Safranski, Henry Holmes Smith, Myron Martin, Walter Chappell, and Sam Tung Wu), *Aperture* V. 5, N. 3 (1957). It contains much more in the vein of White’s analysis of *Pertaining to Change* above. While not discussed in detail here, the reader will find it informative both in terms of Siskind’s growing position within this small circle of photographers and their followers, and in terms of the development of an insulated theory of photographic interpretation. See also, Henry Holmes Smith, “Image, Obscurity and Interpretation,” *Aperture*, V. 5, N. 4 (1957), and, Minor White and Walter Chappell “Some Methods for Experiencing Photographs,” *Aperture*, V. 5, N. 4 (1957). The year, 1957, can be marked as one of major recognition of Siskind by this small but vital segment of the photographic community in America.

<sup>5</sup> The other was Clement Greenberg, who, to my knowledge wrote only one major essay on photography, a review of the Edward Weston retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, “Camera’s Glass Eye,” *The Nation*, March 6, 1946. In it he clearly indicates his belief in the limitations of the medium, as suggested by the title of his review.



*Morton Arboretum 10* 1959

24.3 x 19.2 cm.

On loan from artist.



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Rosenberg to write an introduction. The essay, entitled, "Evidences," is another example of the groping uncertainty of photography criticism at the time. One may assume that Rosenberg was favorably disposed to Siskind's work. On the face of it this augers well, but as has already been suggested, this combination in itself did not lead to clarity. The primary reason seems to be that Rosenberg was as uncertain as others about what photography was, though he sensed that Siskind's work was somehow different from most of what he had seen. He made an attempt to show this within the essay by contrasting Siskind with photographers who, he wrote:

take it for granted that a "good" photo speaks for itself, a meaning being somehow guaranteed by the reality of the thing in the picture. This assumption of intrinsic significance is a fallacy that photography shares with its twins, the newspaper and naturalistic literature. The fact is that most photographs, however charged with the mood or story reference of the "frozen instant" simply stare back at you with the dumb stare of physical fact.

But what makes Siskind's work different? Rosenberg was faced with a dilemma he shared with the painters. They accepted Siskind, the man, as part of the intimate circle of New York artists and critics, but very few indeed could or would accept photography as a valid art form. A troubling paradox.

Rosenberg equated the reproductions in the book with the original photographs. This led him inevitably into more serious confusions, including the equation of the reproductions (or Siskind's photographs now equated with the reproductions) with reproductions of paintings. From this line of reasoning Rosenberg was forced to conclude:

Instead of scenes that seem like paintings, Siskind's pictures ARE paintings as they appear on the printed page. . . . They are reproductions, though reproductions which have no originals. Or, if you prefer, they are reproductions of "works" which came into being through the collaboration of anonymous men and nature. . . .

What part, we may wish to ask, did Siskind play in this process? Siskind, Rosenberg wrote, by combining in himself "the faculties of the artist and the connoisseur" made "these indifferent compositions . . . which were on display anywhere . . . part of our art culture." How? He "gathered them," wrote Rosenberg, "as evidences of the response of the physical

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world to the freshest assertions of art . . .” Rosenberg gets caught in a self-created labyrinth of language. It leads to contradictions. It reveals Rosenberg’s tortuous dialogue with himself over the question: “What is a Siskind photograph?” Rosenberg’s premise about the equivalence of photograph and reproduction traps him. The confusion between source, original, and reproduction (the transparency fallacy in the history of photography) overwhelms any possibility of clarity. Siskind’s often-expressed belief in the *objectness* of the photograph is completely overlooked. Every attempt by Rosenberg to find Siskind’s originality had to result in a series of convoluted qualifications. Indeed, qualification often led to contradiction. Rosenberg wrote, for example:

Though “ready-mades” and “found” art are today accepted as authentic works, no one could be so naïf as to imagine that the actual object from which Siskind drew his image could match the beauties he has brought to the print . . . In each of these photos it is the separate and unique making, as well as the inspired selecting, that we experience . . .

Curiously, however, he goes on to say, “As reproduction of works of art made by nobody and recorded by genius, these photos bring to photography an order of thought generally lacking in it.”

Rosenberg’s concluding paragraph simply reminds the reader of preceding contradictions and confusions:

People who believe that paintings ought to be like photographs believe that photographs can be like paintings. Siskind has not fooled himself into trying to make of his pictures the vocabulary of an artistic identity. . . . With the instinct of a master for the philosophic basis of his medium, he has comprehended the camera as an instrument turned outward to variety rather than as a tool for inscribing a signature. [Note that this is exactly opposite Elaine de Kooning’s view, and indeed seems contrary to an earlier statement in Rosenberg’s essay which reads “Siskind uses the camera to establish the continuity of contemporary visual understanding as well as his own personality . . .”] As a group and separately, his images evoke a commonly accessible world — though one which, unlike that of “boy and his dog,” has as its strict entrance requirement an educated sensibility. What this is, Siskind here demonstrates in practice, page by page.

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It is difficult to assess the impact of Rosenberg's essay. On the one hand the stature of the author conveyed a sense of importance to Siskind and his work. There was also the implication that serious criticism was being applied to photographic work by an acknowledged art critic. Evidence of this is in the fact that the essay was widely reprinted, excerpted, referred to.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, careful reading clearly reveals an ambiguity. Most reviewers of the book continued or expanded this ambiguity. The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* of London, for example, quoted and paraphrased Rosenberg at length, and seemed to be asking such questions as, Does Siskind imitate painting? Is his work art? Is it craft? The reviewer concluded that Siskind was an observer trained to recognize a magnificent accident when he saw one:

. . . . But is it, then, worth the time of a brilliant photographer merely to approximate by means of a flat derivative method an art that has dimensions of an altogether more affecting nature? It is not an easy question to answer. It is not accident that many of these photographs are of paint . . . But if Mr. Siskind is obsessed in his art by making the same kind of statement as does a reproduced painting, he is still trying to paint with light, not trying to provide a substitute for a painted picture. . . . These photographs . . . manage to create . . . a range of objects as close to, and as much a part of, everyday life as anything could be. This is plastic art, evolved for its own sake: "ready-made" like Duchamp's, as satisfying to the craftsman as skilled carpentry. Of course, Mr. Siskind has not "made" the objects he has photographed, he has simply trained himself to recognize them, much as Sir Alexander Fleming recognized the magnificent accident that produced penicillin.

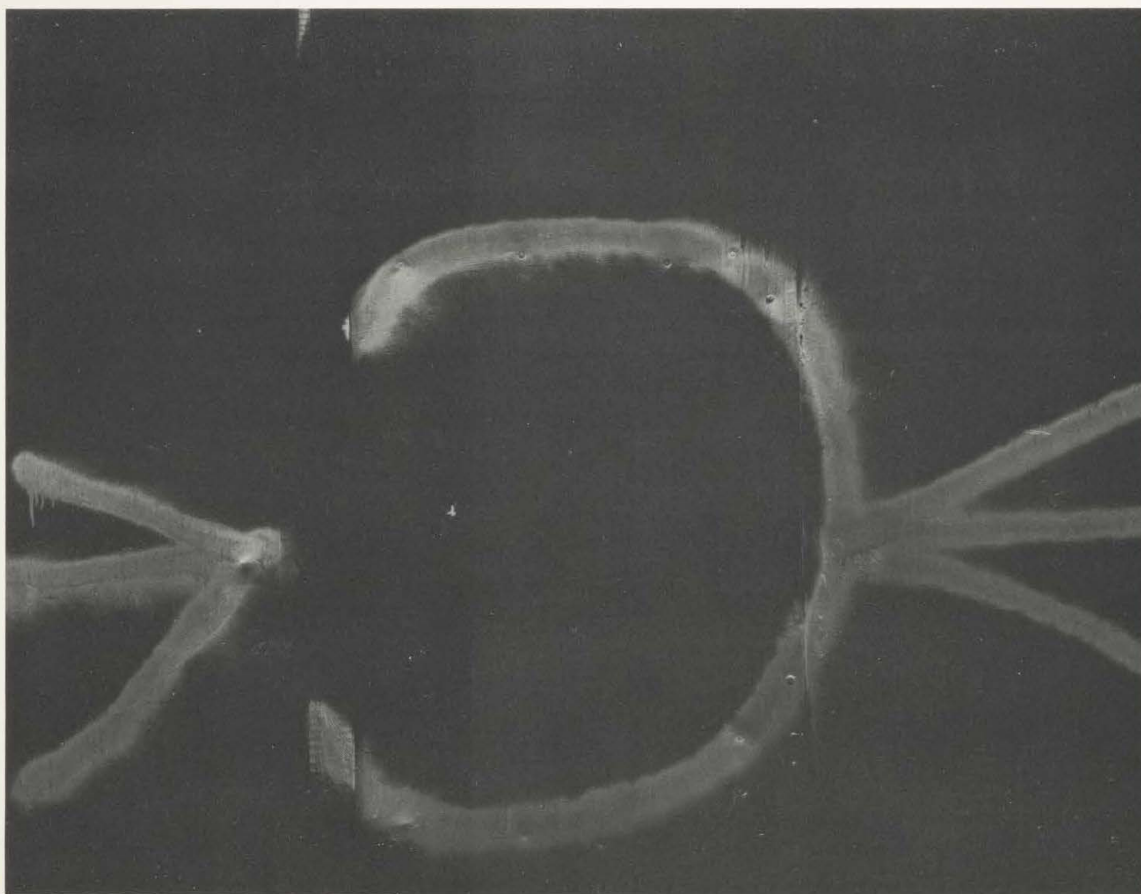
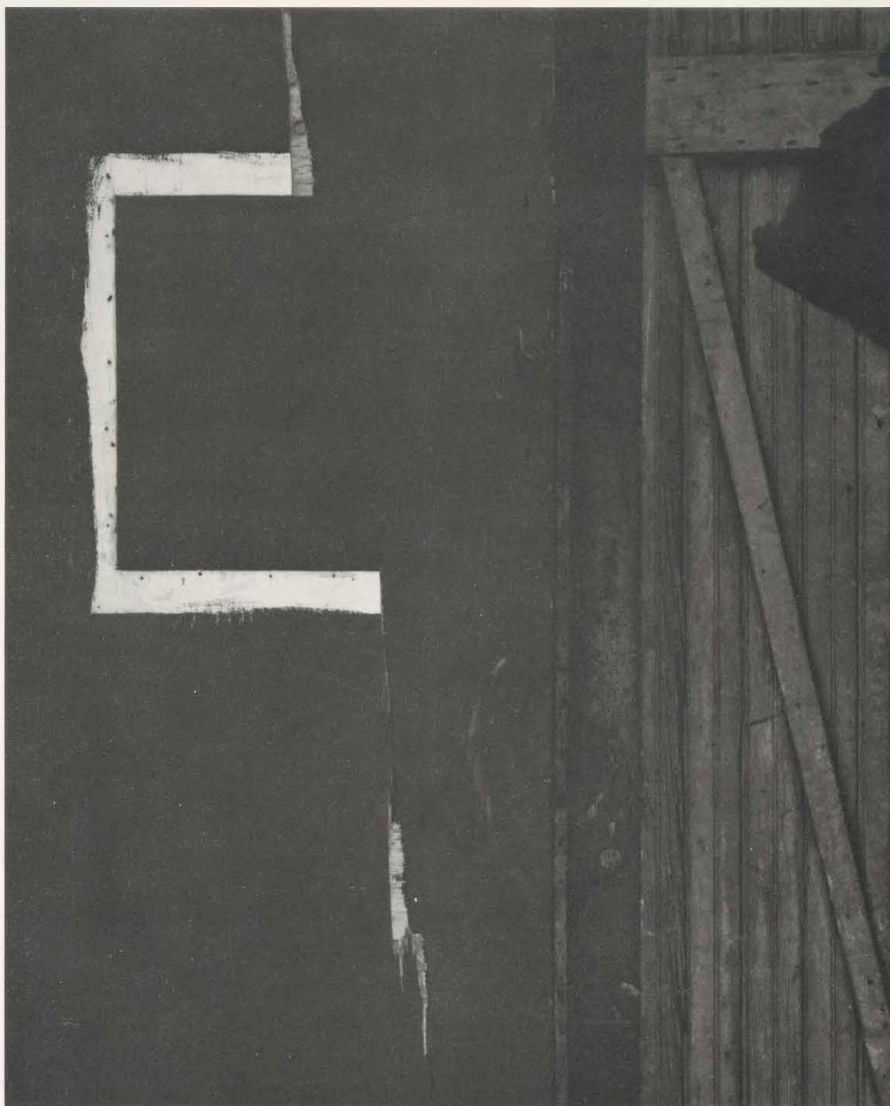
Some reviewers, Jacquelyn Balish and Arthur Siegel for example, simply avoided Rosenberg's introduction. Few took issue with it, two did; Minor White in *Aperture*, and Walter Chappell in *Image*. Minor White, whose personal memo of 1954 contained questions not unlike those in the *Times Literary Supplement*, answered them now with firm conviction. He wrote:

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<sup>6</sup> Curiously, but significantly perhaps, the book did not sell well. Under 3,000 were printed in 1959. Copies were still available in 1976.

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*Chicago 10* 1959  
23.9 x 19.1 cm.  
On loan from artist.



*Chicago 56* 1960  
35.3 x 45.4 cm.  
CCP Collection  
76:063:006



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The book is ammunition to the growing awareness that photography, camerawork, is a medium for those among humans that we loosely label 'artists.' [Note the use of the word "ammunition" here as opposed to its use in the 1954 memo.] As a mark of his assurance and power, Siskind . . . lets the photographs speak for themselves and at the same time speak for him, and leaves to others the weaving of the spell of words which do more to confuse than clarify.

Not avoiding the relationship of Siskind's work to that of the New York Painters, White wrote:

. . . Such photographs because they suggest the work of the non-objective or abstract painters, are often referred to as 'abstractions.' Yet, because photographs which perpetrate the hieroglyphics of accident and chance are made during a state of photographic selection instead of a mental condition of painterly organization, another name NOT from painting, should be applied . . . 'Equivalents' for photographs which stand for the significance of a man's life.

This reflects an attitude widely held in the twentieth-century photographic community emphasizing the distinction between photography and other media — an attitude born out of the sense of inferiority inflicted by nineteenth-century critics and painters, and one which paradoxically has strengthened that inferiority complex.

White then went on at length attacking Rosenberg's text, singling out Rosenberg's confusion of reproductions and originals, and the implications of his phrase, "collaboration of anonymous men and nature." "What Harold Rosenberg writes as an introduction," White said, "merely perpetrates [perpetuates?] the miasma of misconceptions which seem to rise up like steam around art critics whenever they are confronted with photographs." Concluding his lengthy critical analysis, White, as if motivated by Rosenberg's text, leaped to an unequivocal solution to his dilemma of 1954. Using some of the same words, but in a totally different order, he wrote:

When I gaze at Siskind's photographs, the originals of course . . . I find I am transported to the moment of seeing through

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Siskind's eyes. I am not transported to superficial resemblances to various contemporary painters. In fact I do not know a contemporary painter who makes as direct contact with vitality as Siskind does.

It is tempting to speculate on White's reversal. Was it out of frustration with art critics? Out of a sense of his personal mission to champion photographers working seriously as artists? Does it reflect thinking about his own photography and how it was viewed by critics? Or was it the result of continued exposure to, and understanding of, what Siskind was doing? However we answer these questions, White's review suggests a slowly increasing awareness of Siskind's work during the late 1950s.

Walter Chappell's review in *Image* provides a biographical glimpse of Siskind's life and work, sets him within the context of a half-dozen masters in the history of photography, and states of the book, "It is of the greatest importance that a book of Aaron Siskind's work is made available at this time, when confusion is most complex as to the role of photography as an art expression." Chappell wrote poetically but in a generalized fashion about some of the photographs and then launched into a very critical summary of Rosenberg's introduction, which concluded that, "Since these issues have nothing in common with the positive intentions of the artist, it seems distracting and even misleading to find them placed as an intellectual gateway leading into the wonderful expanse of Aaron Siskind's photography."

By the beginning of the sixties, Siskind's work may not have been completely understood, but he had become a respected master, at least within the small world of serious photography: regular exhibitions, increasing attention in the press, recognition as a major educator (with Harry Callahan at the Institute of Design) whose students were themselves beginning to fill the few developing teaching positions, and recognition from such younger photographers as Dave Heath, whose work was far removed from Siskind's in form. Heath paid public homage to Siskind in the preface of his book, *A Dialogue with Solitude*, published in 1961.

In the following year the directors of the two most prestigious photography collections in America made note of Siskind's position in letters of recommendation. Edward Steichen of the Museum of Modern Art wrote, "Siskind is one of the relatively few modern photographers who have made

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a definite and personal contribution to the art of photography. With the intelligent use of the realism of the photographic medium as a discipline, he has produced not only a series of great photographs, but has probably added a clarification to the concept of abstract expression in the arts.”<sup>7</sup> “Today,” wrote Beaumont Newhall of the George Eastman House, “I am even more convinced of Siskind’s importance as a photographic artist. . . . Siskind’s work has had such a tremendous influence among younger photographers that the fact that he was a pioneer in the exploration of what I might call ‘abstract realism’ has, I fear, been overlooked.”

Recognition came from other quarters as well. In 1963, his work was included in the book, *Collage* by Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh.<sup>8</sup> In the same year the publication of John Logan’s *Spring of the Thief* reminded another audience of Siskind’s lifelong intimacy with poetry and poets. Logan’s book included poems in direct homage to Siskind as well as poems inspired by individual Siskind photographs. Perhaps no critic understood as well as the poet that the personal experiential meaning of Siskind’s work (for Siskind) was to be found at the resonant place where illusion, allusion, and form came together in a single photograph. After Logan immersed himself in a Siskind photograph, *Chicago* 25, 1960, and came away to speak a poem, he spoke with full knowledge of Siskind the man and the artist, whether it was for several pages or with a handful of such words as,

The tip  
of a leaf  
is the wing of a bird  
pinned (stretched) to a board.

Poets have often been the most perceptive of art critics. But, unless they write criticism for a journal, we are unlikely to (and perhaps we shouldn’t) look to their poems for criticism.

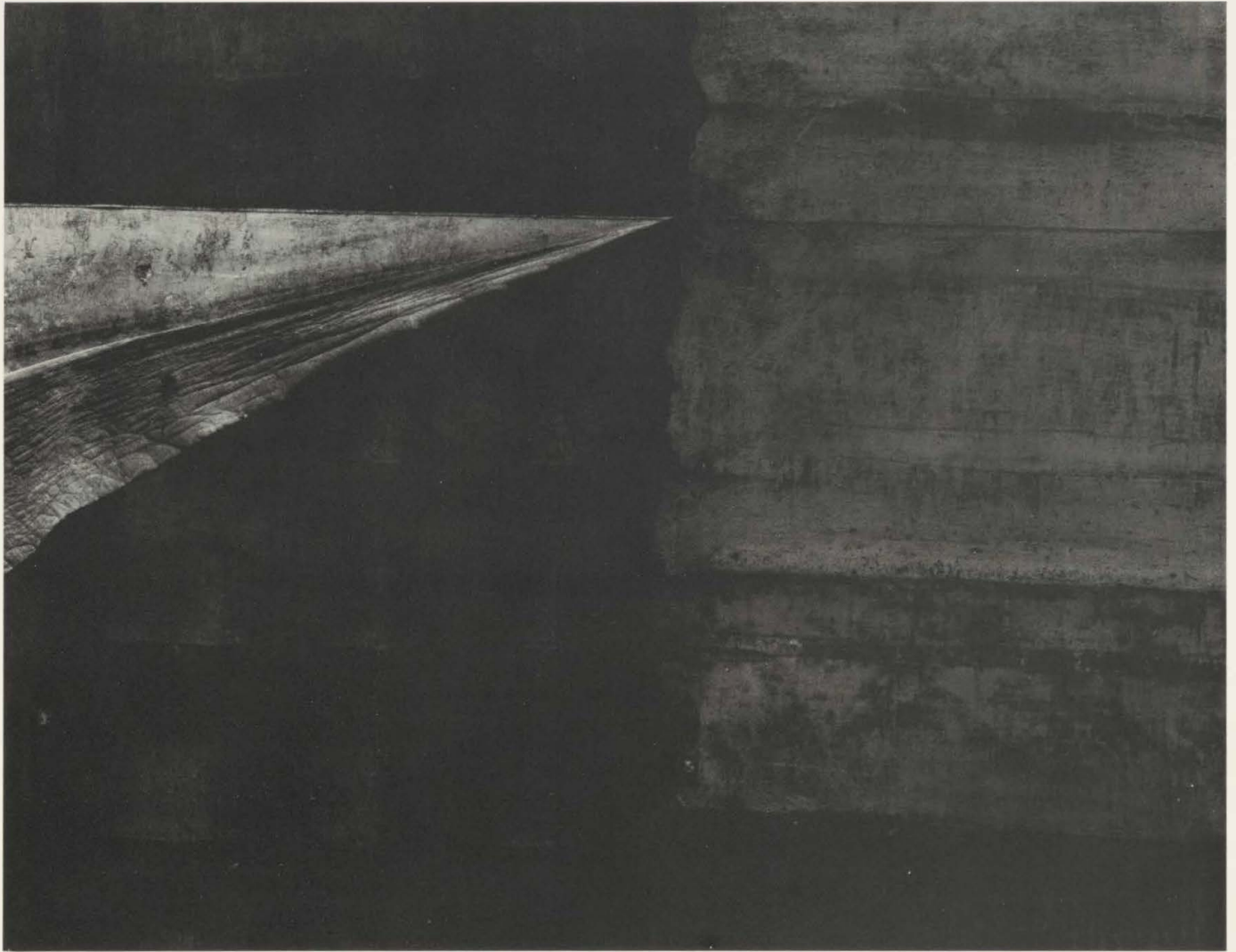
The major critical event of 1963 for Siskind, was the appearance of Thomas B. Hess’s “The Walls: Aaron Siskind’s Photography; a Cross-section,” in *Portfolio* (an annual publication of *Art News*). It appeared almost precisely on Siskind’s sixtieth birthday. Hess was the editor of *Art*

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<sup>7</sup> Printed by permission of Joanna T. Steichen.

<sup>8</sup> A second edition appeared in 1967.





*Chicago 25* 1960

23.8 x 30.5 cm.

CCP Collection 76:064:019

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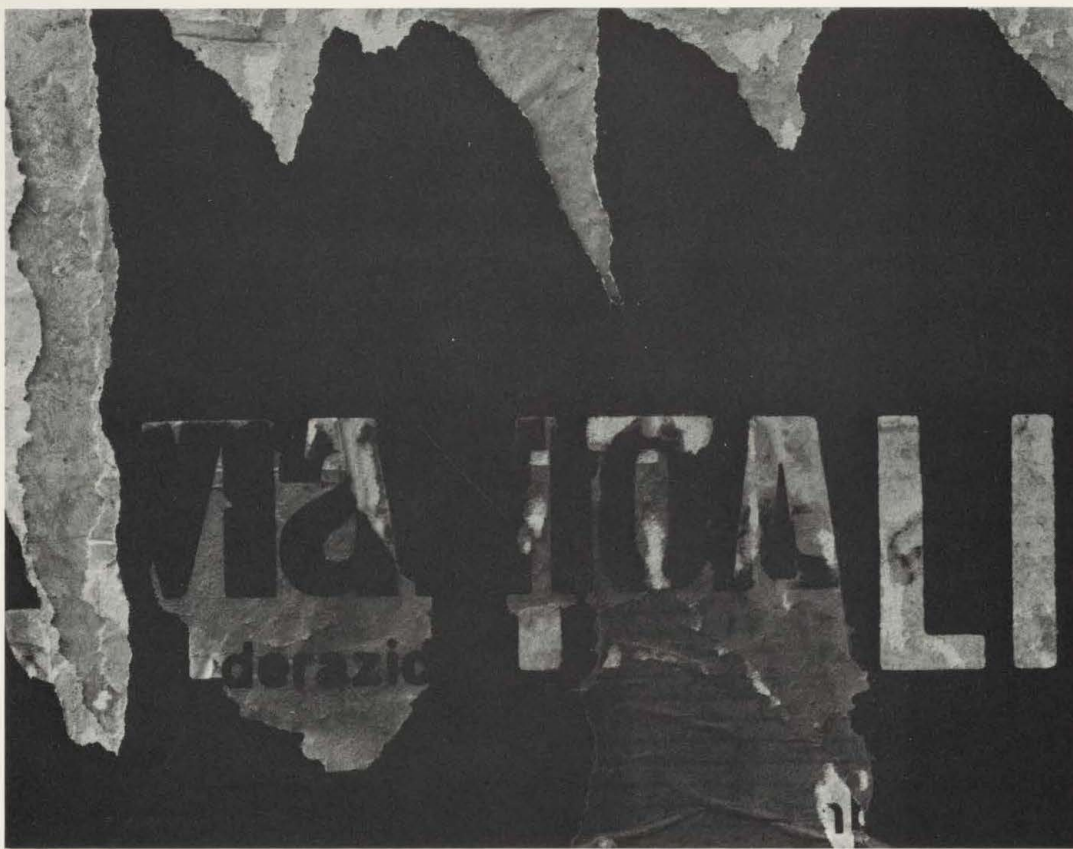
News and had long been an intimate of the New York artists, including Siskind. In this essay, Hess placed Siskind, critically and historically, within the New York avant-garde. At about the same time, Nathan Lyons, then associate director of George Eastman House, began planning a major retrospective exhibition to demonstrate, visually, the scope and importance of Siskind's career. That exhibition opened in the spring of 1965 and together with its catalog (*Aaron Siskind, Photographer*, Rochester, 1965) was the most complete presentation of Siskind's work to that time.<sup>9</sup> To address the unique and problematical position Siskind occupied, Lyons realized he needed to find writers for the catalog who were knowledgeable about the evolution of Abstract Expressionism and about the evolution of photography in the twentieth century. No one person could do that in 1964. Lyons asked Hess to write of Siskind from the point of view of the former, and Henry Holmes Smith to do so from the point of view of the latter. Smith was a teacher, writer, and photographer widely respected within the photographic community. Lyons, in his introduction, composed of judiciously chosen excerpts from critics<sup>10</sup> and from Siskind's own periodic statements, provided a frame of reference for the two critical essays.

Hess's essay was an only slightly revised version of what had appeared in *Portfolio*. Not only did Hess place Siskind within the New York School at its inception, he argued for Siskind's uniqueness as a photographer in that position. In effect, Hess said that Siskind was involved in the development of the New York School now known as Abstract Expressionism, that he remained a vital part of that school even though he had been living in Chicago since 1951. He said that major aspects of Siskind's approach, "the coarse, bristly texture of his imagination, his fascination with the rubble of urban living, his use of hazard and destruction as parts of the creative process, the sophisticated intellectual judgment," . . . were "all related intimately to the aims and preoccupations of vanguard American painters," and that had "long been appreciated by the artists' community." Hess went on to suggest Siskind's contribution to the movement by saying that Siskind

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<sup>9</sup> Brief comments on Siskind's work appeared in B. Newhall, *The History of Photography* (4th ed) 1964; V. D. Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph*, 1964; H. and A. Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography*, 1965; and J. Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, 1966.

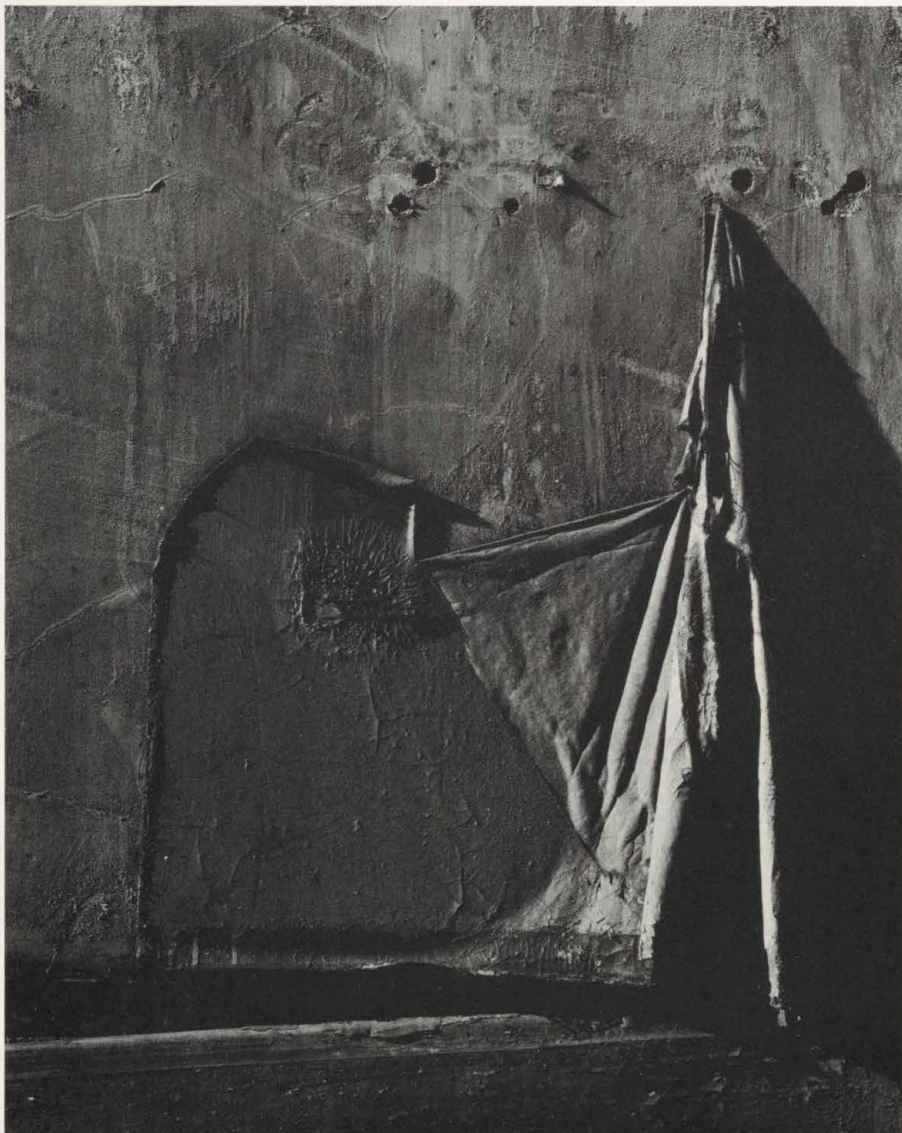
<sup>10</sup> In a way this article is an expansion of Lyons' introduction.



*Rome 49 1963*

24.9 x 31.8 cm.

On loan from artist.



*Chicago 1960*

30.6 x 23.9 cm.

CCP Collection 76:064:022



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made photography itself “prophesy many of the ‘looks’ that have evolved out of Abstract Expressionism.”

Hess’s major point, however, was that Siskind’s uniqueness was centered in the fact that he “pushed photography to a point where it engages one of the most complex and mysterious issues in modern art: the ethics and esthetics of the picture plane.” While we might now ask whether too much was made of the picture plane in modern art, or wonder why Siskind should be singled out as the one who established the flat plane in photography (Isn’t the flat plane obvious?, one might ask.), nevertheless it is significant that Siskind was indeed the only photographer whose work coincided in time, place, and effect with the work of the painters whose critics at least made this a major issue. We should remember that Siskind made a point of this in his statements of 1945 and 1950. Paradoxically, it also appears that the painters and critics used the flat plane concept, in part, as a foil to the photograph which was generally accepted as a perspectival window on the world. Though Hess doesn’t say this, it may well have contributed to his statement:

One point crucial to Siskind’s vision . . . generally has been overlooked, and it is more important than any coincidences of resemblance or echoes of ‘ideas in the air.’ Siskind has placed his medium for the first time in its history, in that ambiguous field where illusion and reality engage in endless transaction — the picture plane, the flat surface with its dynamic tensions and interrelations. . . . Thus the ‘real’ view which Siskind found in nature is transformed into a plane parallel to, and at an unknown ‘virtual’ distance behind, the glassy surface of the photographic print. Perspective, which is built-in [sic] the camera lens and which lures most photographers into *trompe-l’oeil*, is eliminated at a stroke, and scale is also thrown away. . . . (On the whole, Siskind makes little things loom big — just as memory of his images grows in your mind and you are astonished when you see them a second time; you had thought they were six feet wide, and you can hold them in your hand. This is one of the best proofs of the interior strength of his forms.)

While Hess’s explanation of the picture surface concept falls short of completion, he does convey a sense of Siskind’s independent and individual importance. He wrote that Siskind is an artist who creates “a place (an

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arena) where things happen — decomposition, recrudescence, melting, congealing, pushing, slipping, fighting, mumbling — and where he has perceived that instant of poise which is the picture.”

Unfortunately, Hess appears at this point to become suddenly less certain either of his beliefs or of how to state them. What follows is an ambivalent and equivocating discussion — something of a retreat. He wrote, for example, “The reason [Siskind] is so good is that he is constantly aware of how inevitable failure is. And here is the final paradox. As they fail as Art the pictures that Siskind allows to come to completion rejoin life as new bits and pieces of reality — the artist’s own reconstituted nature. Only through this sort of failure could Siskind triumph.”

In the next paragraph Hess wrote that Siskind’s pictures are “straight,” unmanipulated; that “their purity indicates their ethics;” that they have a profundity “of association and allusion, and the look of inevitability which are the signs of major art.” This is followed by a conclusion which continues a relatively positive tone but which leaves the reader slightly less than confident about Siskind as an artist. “Most photographers, longing for the Esthetic, end up with anonymous mementoes. Art is what Aaron Siskind threw away — and art is what he is stuck with.”

Henry Holmes Smith’s essay for the Eastman House exhibition catalog holds tightly to Siskind’s place in the history of photography. Smith does not equivocate and from his essay Siskind emerges as one of a handful of major figures in the medium’s history. At the outset, Smith asks, “What is *photography*’s debt to Siskind?” And he answers immediately with, “It is large and to a considerable extent unacknowledged; furthermore, many photographers remain unaware that, because of Siskind’s contribution, photography has finally completed its journey into the twentieth century.”

Having stated his conclusion, Smith proceeds to present evidence for his case. “The work of Stieglitz,” he wrote, “paved the way for Siskind’s, but it took an imagination of exceptional force to move from the Stieglitz sky pictures (his ‘equivalents’) to the remarkable visual figures of Siskind.” Smith then briefly recounts early 20th Century Pictorialism’s efforts to enter the art world, noting the reactions to that movement. As a result, he wrote:

two broad courses lay open for photographers. They could study the new art [e.g. Cubism] for structures that were adaptable to

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traditional photography and incorporate these into photographs made directly from nature. Or, by one of several combinations of photographic and non-photographic techniques, they could create a synthetic imagery . . . quite close in spirit to the new art, but a whole world away from traditional photography.

Noting experiments with abstraction by Strand, Coburn, Weston, Bruguere and Steichen as representative of the first course, Smith then looks at Dada, Bauhaus, and Surrealist photography, pointing particularly to the exploration of photomontage by Ernst, Heartfield, Grosz, and Moholy-Nagy as representative of the second course. While Smith admits that these might be distant antecedents, he says they are not directly related to what Siskind would do. One must look to Stieglitz, who, Smith wrote:

set out to revitalize traditional photography, and succeeded so well that he made it look more like a new style than an old one . . . but many photographers were also persuaded that a camera picture should look only like an object a camera has been pointed at. Stieglitz did not mean this; certainly his concern for contemporary esthetic theory and his concept of equivalents bear this out, but the impression held. . . .

Unfortunately an equally important problem remained without solution: what resources of allusion were available to traditional photography? . . . The makers of synthetic photo-pictures lacked almost all access to descriptive illusion as a unified effect, which was the great strength in traditional photography. They did have, however, an endless capacity and means for inventing allusion. The traditionalists . . . rejecting utterly the resources of the makers of synthetic photo-pictures commanded an inexhaustible supply of descriptive illusion. These two resources must be satisfactorily reconciled before photography could be used effectively as a twentieth century art. . . .

Smith wrote that Siskind joined what had appeared to be the conflicting attitudes of illusion and allusion into mutually supporting mechanisms of a single approach.

. . . Siskind found ways of alluding to a wide range of human experience. . . . By abandoning depiction in its usual form, Siskind thus gains all the powers of suggestion. In this way he can





*Rome: Arch of Constantine 10 1963*

33.2 x 24.4 cm.

On loan from artist.

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exploit the objects of parody and quotation as well as allusion that abound in the ragtagbobtail world of what has been worn out, lost, abandoned or misused. Here he found a host of emblems and symbols for twentieth century mankind. . . .

Smith concludes by noting that while there are many claims that can be justly made for others, "there is available at present [1965] no comparable body of work that has addressed these problems for so long with equal attention and competence and has produced new figures so rich and various." Siskind, wrote Smith, "has discovered some of the most important means by which traditional conventions of the camera are brought into harmony with the symbolic and pictorial needs of the present."

Smith's essay is the clearest and most clear-headed statement of what Siskind had accomplished. Unfortunately, in deferring to Hess, he makes only passing note of what he called the "impulse" Siskind shared with his painter friends of the 1940s. The idea of shared impulse is a crucial one. The most significant omission, however, is of a systematic discussion of Siskind's Photo-League work or the even more important personal work of the 1930s and early 1940s, where more evidence of Siskind's independent evolution is to be found. Finally, neither Hess nor Smith present an analysis of major pictures or groups as an indication of evolution or development during the twenty years of Siskind's mature style. Their evaluations, thus, remain generalized.

In July of 1966, critic Arthur Bardo used the Eastman House catalog as a vehicle for an essay on Siskind published in the then central avant-garde and formalist-oriented publication, *Artforum*.<sup>11</sup> Bardo's apparent background links him directly with Hess and almost not at all with Smith. Thus it is not surprising that the thrust of Bardo's discussion is toward Siskind's relationship to the painters. Like Hess, he points to the importance of the flat plane and scale for all artists of this period. But Bardo underlines the clearly documented, but rarely noted, fact that Siskind had confronted the flat plane concept by 1943, that Barnett Newman was aware of it and that Newman "denies any direct influence." For Siskind,

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<sup>11</sup> Bardo's essay appeared as a minor review in the back pages of the magazine.



*Games Theatre 59* 1965

26.6 x 33.1 cm.

On loan from artist.



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Bardo wrote, "It was not so much as the epochal discovery of the basic truth that this plane had its value, but as a limited fact selected for its utility as providing the ideally neutral ground on which he could impose his vision . . ." Bardo cautiously suggests the possibility of Siskind's precedence in aspects of 1950s abstraction, and wrote that whatever influences operated in the late 40s and early 50s were "further intuitions" along the same path. Had it been otherwise, he wrote, "there would have emerged a school of artists producing relatively indistinguishable works . . ." That was not the case. What they shared was an attitude. Bardo wrote:

They had become involved in a direct confrontation with the experiencing of reality and its expression. Their work no longer permitted the subterfuge of artist-subject relation. Siskind had reached this point earlier than most . . . The canvas or print became the 'arena' for a unitary and discrete event, just as Rosenberg 'metaphysically' described it.

Bardo's thoughts on scale reflect a slightly different perspective than Hess, while simultaneously underlining Hess's point about the monumentality of Siskind's forms. "The one enormously important factor in this period's art which could vitally have affected the course of photography, yet has somehow been neglected," wrote Bardo, "is scale." Saying that prohibitive cost may be the simple reason behind photography's continued "conservative character," he goes on to argue:

The importance that neglect of this factor has had can be ascertained by imagining a Still or a Kline painting of the size of a Siskind photograph. Or, better, of photographs the size of these paintings. The lack of appreciation of photography's importance as a potential vehicle for major expression, and photography's own continued insulation from the vital developments in art is in large part due to this neglect. This, even more than the spectre of Lessing's categories, is why photos remain in sub-sections of museums.

This observation is, of course, one which many photographers have made for themselves. Some *have* made monumental size prints (Steichen and Adams), others have constructed large photo-pictures using various experimental techniques (Siegel and Heineken), and most recently, Ave-

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don seems to have taken Bardo's indirect advice directly in the design of his 1976 Marlborough exhibition. The results of the latter, for better or worse, may indeed prove Bardo's point.

Siskind's feelings about print size have fluctuated. Before moving to Chicago in 1951, he rarely thought about it. A few years later, in response to a request for prints about five feet in the longest dimension, he contracted a professional printer who made some under Siskind's supervision. Siskind was unhappy with the results. Quality, not cost, was the factor. Siskind's work relies on subtle relationships between textures, tones, forms, and details. These are increasingly obliterated as the image is enlarged. As Siskind said, in an interview with Bardo four years later in 1970, "My only constraint is that I don't want the image to disintegrate, to become just display. I want to retain the concreteness of the thing."

While Bardo may be correct in implying that lack of attention to and appreciation for photography by collectors, curators, and critics, is due to size, it is possible to imagine that the misunderstanding of Siskind's work in relation to painting which we have seen in the writing of Rosenberg and others, would increase with size rather than decrease. In any case, size would seem to be a false premise for judgment of photography's importance, meaning, or validity as art. Bardo himself implies looking elsewhere when he wrote:

[Siskind's] works form discrete units of an infinite series. He utilized, as well, the single most obvious alternate method for imposing an arbitrary ordering: the limited series which forms a group (as in . . . "The Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation"). However recognizable the subject of the individual photo, whatever its customary connotations, these are brushed aside, altered to any degree the photographer desires and an entirely new set of references is established.

One may wish to argue here that Bardo dismisses customary connotations too easily. Siskind's selection is rarely, if ever, arbitrary. It is much too consistent for that to be true. One must point again to the need for a closer look at Siskind's early work for antecedents or sources of subjects, forms, references, even work in series. Indeed the importance of series to Siskind implies some concern for subject. Connotations may be altered;

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a new set of references may be established, but little is ever brushed aside. In a sense, Bardo seems to reveal an awareness of this when he writes:

The significance of the works is entirely determined by the referential field of the artist. The forms employed themselves may have generic references of importance but they are at least ambiguous. The burden of reference is born by the artist's personal configurations of symbol and not by some subject. While this carries implications of maximum human freedom and determinism, anyone other than the artist must be educated in some degree to his references for them to have significance.

Siskind has always implied, in one way or another, that his pictures can work on two levels, both of which have an emotional base for instituting communication. One relies on formal relationships of rhythm, tone, shape, gesture, line, and texture. The other joins "personal configurations of symbol" with objects selected from the world. The most successful work makes an interlocking structure of composite meaning of these two levels.

Bardo's conclusion recalls Henry Holmes Smith's sentiment that Siskind brought photography into the twentieth century. Bardo writes:

The masters who created this art [Abstract Expressionism] had both fulfilled traditional lines of development of twentieth-century art and produced formulations which transcended them and answered to the radically altered content of human consciousness and concepts of reality which developed since the war. The strength and scope of their formulations have provided the necessary 'principia' for subsequent development among painters and sculptors. Few photographers have ever confronted the problems Siskind dealt with, let alone been able to incorporate his solutions.

Bardo's essay certainly underlines Siskind's individuality within Abstract Expressionism. His argument for Siskind's independent evolution is strong and sound. But, while he suggests the importance of studying the pictures, particularly in series, he does not follow through with such an analysis. Again we are left with generalizations, though they are generalizations which make a significant contribution to understanding Siskind's position within Abstract Expressionism.

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*Arizpe, Mexico 18 1966*

26.2 x 33.6 cm.

On loan from artist.

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The time spanned by the writing surveyed here (1946-1966) was a time of barrier-breaking for photography. Most of the significant activity, such as Siskind's, was in a certain way underground; it was not within the view of the art critics, whose acceptable definitions of art did not provide them with a reason or a way to look at photographs other than as reproductions of other objects. Understanding this, perhaps what has been capsuled here, can be seen as remarkable. In comparison with what has happened since 1966, however, it tracks a sad story. Since 1970, photography's advances in every remote corner of the art world's considerable domain have been nothing short of revolutionary. The kind of critical response that Siskind began to receive at age sixty is not unusual for artists now in their early twenties. Every art magazine and many scholarly (historical) journals of art carry regular reviews and essays on photography. It is possible now to pick up Section II of the Sunday *New York Times* and find two or three major reviews of photography exhibitions on the Art page. Helen Gee, herself an important part of the "photographic underground" of the 1950s, spoke for many when she wrote in the February, 1977, issue of *Photograph*, "I think what photography needs is a body of criticism and that's just beginning to develop."

It is a measure of the strength and importance of Siskind's work that this twenty-year span of erratic and extremely uneven "criticism" does not seem to have been in any way vital to the artist, his work, his reputation, or his contemporaries. It would be difficult to state that it had no effect at all. It has probably contributed to the hazy acceptance of Siskind as a major artist. That research on Siskind is still to be done is clear. The work footnoted on page one has broken important ground in attempting to remove the haze that surrounds Siskind. Much more study of Siskind's contemporaries, their work and its critics is needed to fill in the picture. What has been highlighted here should indicate both the importance of the period, and the importance of the need for serious research into it.

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### *Acknowledgements*

The Center for Creative Photography is indebted to Dr. Carl Chiarenza of Boston University for his research, scholarship and contribution of the article for this issue, to Aaron Siskind for his patience and cooperation, and to Jack Welpott for the cover photograph.

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