

**AARON SISKIND:  
TOWARD A PERSONAL VISION  
1935-1955**

Edited by  
Deborah Martin Kao and  
Charles A. Meyer



*Cover photograph:*  
Morris Engel  
Portrait of Aaron Siskind (ca 1947)  
National Portrait Gallery/  
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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
PREFACE	5
Naomi Siskind	
FOREWORD	6
Charles Siskind	
INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A PERSONAL VISION	9
Charles Siskind	
PERSONAL VISION IN AARON SISKIND'S DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE	12
Elizabeth Martin	
THE FEATURE GROUP (1940)	26
Aaron Siskind	
TABERNACLE CITY: PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON SISKIND (1940)	32
Benjamin H. H. H. H.	
INTERVIEW WITH AARON SISKIND (1963)	40
Aaron Siskind	
THE DRAMA OF OBJECTS (1945)	50
Aaron Siskind	
MUSEUM FELLOWSHIP ESSAY (1945-46)	54
Aaron Siskind	
CREDO (1950)	56
Aaron Siskind	
THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF AARON SISKIND (1951)	58
Julia de Koning	
GUGGENHEIM ESSAY (1956)	60
Aaron Siskind	
LEARNING PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE INSTITUTE OF DESIGN (1956)	64
Harry C. H. H. H.	
INTERVIEW WITH AARON SISKIND (1977)	70
Charles Siskind	
CHRONOLOGY	80



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4

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Deborah Martin Kao  
Charles A. Meyer  
*Curators*



## PREFACE

Although Aaron Siskind's central position in American aesthetic photography has been examined in previous exhibitions and publications, this exhibition is the first to link his earlier documentary work with his later, purely aesthetic efforts, and to focus on Siskind's pivotal role as a teacher and pedagogical theorist in America. The educational focus of this exhibition and accompanying book, therefore, finds a particularly appropriate forum in a university teaching museum like ours.

Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Meyer organized this exhibition, the outgrowth of research on the curators' previous exhibition *The Photo League: A Progressive Era in American Photography* (Boston College Museum of Art, 1990), when they worked closely with Aaron Siskind. Deborah Martin Kao, an art historian who has published numerous articles on photographic history, formerly taught modern art and the history of photography in the Fine Arts Department at Boston College. She is now Assistant Curator of Prints for Photographs at the Harvard University Art Museums. Charles A. Meyer, an artist-photographer, is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Film and Photography in the Fine Arts Department at Boston College. For their professionalism, enthusiasm, and innovative scholarship, we thank them both. We also thank Carl Chiarenza, Fanny Knapp Allen Professor of Art History at the University of Rochester, for his insightful foreword to this book, and for his wise counsel and support throughout this endeavor. For the beautiful design of the book, we are indebted to Anne Callahan of Design Services at Boston College. We greatly

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Nancy Netzer  
*Director*  
Boston College Museum of Art

## FOREWORD

Carl Chiarenza

To follow the fresh eyes of a picture-maker and scholar digging collaboratively into the archives of a master photographer is a pleasure. Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Meyer, with intelligence and creativity, show us why Aaron Siskind was a significant artist/teacher. They show us and they explain for us, through primary sources and their own visual and verbal interpretations of evidence, why it is so important for us to understand Siskind as a practitioner who helped define what a photograph really is in the twentieth century.

This collaborative effort follows naturally from an earlier, broader Meyer and Martin Kao project, *The Photo League: A Progressive Era in American Photography*, which studied relations between theory and practice. The Siskind project focuses in on a key League member to study these relations with more depth. How do we trace the evolution of a personal vision? How do we interpret, reconstruct, the path and the growth beyond the path's edges?

One way is shown by this project's juxtaposition of a creative configuration of groups of pictures and ephemera from the first third of Siskind's career with an educated selection of significant statements and essays about his work and his teaching (by him and by others, often from the same years, e.g., essays by Siskind and Henry Beetle Hough, 1940; by Siskind and Elaine de Kooning, (1950/51), and two densely filled interviews (1963/1977). This inspired montaging of materials frames both the importance of, and the context for Siskind and his work.

Meyer thoughtfully points to Siskind's social documentary experience as a "straight" picturemaker and teacher in the Photo League as the foundation for his move to abstraction and to teaching at the Institute of Design. As he points out, *Toward a Personal Vision* is a case study (one artist revealing aspects of a trend). One of the ways in which Martin Kao follows this theme is in a close analysis of a single Siskind picture ("Lady Preacher") against which we can "test" other examples

Pointing to Siskind's early "remarkably independent challenge to the tenets of ... 'social realist' documentary photography..." and noting that he was very aware that every picture is a "self-consciously mediated image," Martin Kao shows how Siskind's original view "challenges recent critical assessments of his documentary pictures." As she says, it is ironic that she must "argue the point that Siskind deliberately cultivated the 'problematic' formalism that distinguishes the composition of many of his 1930s' documentary images, as part of a strategy to control the meaning of his pictures, and to confront the ease with which his and other Feature Group photographs were manipulated against their intended meaning by various agencies..." Current critics, she says, are doing the same thing: removing his work (and therefore its analysis) from its actual and meaningful cultural, historical, and personal contexts, contexts having to do with Harlem, the Bowery, etc., in the 1930s, with photography and the idea of documentary as theorized and practiced in the 1930s, and with Aaron Siskind (a first-generation American in his thirties teaching in the New York City public schools) in the 1930s.

Siskind understood, more than most who practiced or preached in the 1930s (or who do so in the 1990s), that every photograph reflects "the perceptions of the photographer" but can be misinterpreted or misused when placed in other (con)textual or political constructs.

While hard to define in words, Siskind's goal was indeed to produce pictures that expressed his personal vision, something he knew only to follow with drive and force and need and conviction and commitment. The importance of commitment, of regular devotion to process and production was also a corner stone of his teaching credo. It is what inspired his formation of the so-called "student independent" projects: work produced by students on their own initiative away from school. He taught by active example, by being a working, committed artist.

The exhibition and anthology are each and together revelatory "documents" that swell our understanding of key moments in Siskind's life and work. We can hear the sound of Aaron's voice and feel the structure and processes of his thinking and feeling, of his passions and beliefs as we read his writing or "listen" to the interviews. We can't miss the mixture of, if not the conflict between, ego and modesty — both subsumed, in life and here, by his generosity and largeness of spirit.

The record of Siskind's work, process, and thought is here put in context. The curators help us grasp that work, the whole of it, from within its own context rather than from fragmented bits placed into contexts constructed out of (or constructed for the discourse of) a current political polemic.

With great sensitivity toward the work, and with great feeling for their audience, the curators have constructed a stunning presentation of the development of Siskind's "personal vision" and of how that vision reflects much of the development of photography in the middle of the twentieth century.





Aaron Siskind  
*New York*

Gelatin silver print  
19 1/2 x 15 5/16 inches  
Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum  
Harvard University Art Museums  
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## INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A PERSONAL VISION

Charles A. Meyer

Much has been written about Aaron Siskind's seeming rejection of the documentary mode of working in favor of abstractions. Viewing Aaron Siskind's pictures as two separate bodies of work — suggesting that he left the documentary style abruptly to embrace his abstract style, or that the shift in subject matter reflects a change in his politics — does not take into consideration his intensive pursuit of a personal vision. One can more appropriately see the transition as a natural step in his developmental process, working instinctively while consciously searching for a personal vision. Although the change in subject matter was dramatic, his approach remained consistent: formal, direct, and straight. In an interview conducted by Jaromir Stephany recorded in 1963, Siskind maintained "...that although these are pictures which are called abstract in their shapes and they are abstracted from the natural setting...there is a real emotional contact with the thing itself, and a belief in the thing itself." This belief and approach represent a continuum rather than a radical shift in ideology and/or picture making concerns.

In contrast, little has been written concerning Siskind's pivotal role as an educator. The transformation of Siskind's photographic style between the years 1935 and 1955 corresponds to a dramatic shift in photographic education, from the loosely organized camera clubs to a recognized course of study at the university level. Siskind was active during this critical period in the history of American photography. His contribution as an educational theorist to the formation of a photographic curriculum has been overlooked due in large part to his personal success as artist/photographer. Throughout his career, Siskind maintained a dual involvement in photography — his pursuit of a personal vision, and his practice of a pedagogical model for the teaching of photography.

Born in New York City, Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) graduated from the College of the City of New York in





284 Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled* [Gloucester wall series]

Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled* [Gloucester wall series]

Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled* [Gloucester wall series]

Gelatin silver prints  
4 3/4 x 7 inches (each print)  
International Museum of Photography  
at George Eastman House

1926 with a Bachelor of Social Science Degree in English, and taught in the New York City public schools for the next 23 years. Starting in 1932 and for the next nine years (except for a short period in 1935-1936), Siskind's personal development as a photographer and later as a teacher was centered around an organization known first as the New York Workers Film and Photo League and then, beginning in 1936, as the New York Photo League. He was a key figure in the organization, serving as chairman of the exhibition committee and subsequently as organizer of the Feature Group. This proved to be an invaluable and formative period for Siskind, an opportunity to refine his vision as a picture maker and his skills as a group leader.

Under Siskind's direction, the Feature Group provided the core of the Photo League's commitment to the production of socially responsive "photo-documents," and signaled a major change in the way photography would be taught at the League. In an unpublished 1988 interview with Bonnie Yochelson, Siskind described the Feature Group's method: "...no one was working like us at the Photo League. I had ...a disciplined group. [They] had to work, take assignments, bring [the pictures] in and talk about them." Siskind expressed the same sentiment in his interview with Jaromir Stephany: "...we sort of trained ourselves. I devised exercises in realism and translating meaning into pictures by having simple exercises and then we made a few simple documents."

Siskind's "journeymen" worked to inform others by their involvement. This approach was Siskind's response to the more conventional method first practiced at the League, which at times was not well-disciplined. Under the Feature Group, pictures were centered around ongoing projects or series, and the group came together for critical self-evaluation. What the projects and the groups had in common was a commitment to foster social change and individual growth through picture stories,

contextualized into an historical framework. This method of forming working production groups for clarification was quickly adopted by other instructors in the League, including Sid Grossman and Paul Strand.

By the time the Photo League was dissolved in 1951, there had been a substantial growth in the popularity of the photographic medium. A growing number of teaching positions in photography were opening up in college art departments across the country. In 1951, Siskind joined the faculty of the Institute of Design in Chicago to teach Documentary Photography at the invitation of Harry Callahan. He quickly became involved in the program, combining the pedagogical approach he had developed while associated with the Feature Groups at the Photo League with aspects of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus based foundation curriculum already in place at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.

As early as 1943, Siskind had begun working with the flat plane, with geometrical settings, and had ceased to think of subject matter as the primary importance of his picture making. Yet his teaching practices continued to emphasize work in the documentary tradition. During Siskind's nineteen-year stay at the Institute of Design, his Feature Group approach became an important component of the curriculum. Following this approach, the last year of the curriculum was devoted to the planned project, both individual and group. According to Siskind, projects usually arose from "...an actual need and serv[ed] some social purpose."

*Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision 1935-1955*, departs from approaches previously taken to Siskind's career during this period. The focus on Aaron Siskind serves as an exceptional case study indicative of the trend in the field of fine art photography and photographic education. Between 1935 and 1955, Siskind's work underwent a fundamental shift from his documentary projects (content-oriented pictures) to his more mature

abstract work, which remains the hallmark of his contribution to expanding the possibilities of photographic picture making.

Because Siskind tended to work in series and because his teaching practices encouraged thematic and collective projects, the exhibition emphasizes serial imagery. The series, individual pictures, and study prints presented in this exhibition were chosen to highlight the continuity in the transformation of Siskind's vision, and are accompanied by wall text, ephemera, and historical documents to frame the context. The exhibition is divided into three sections: Early Documentary Work 1935-1941, Transitional Work 1942-1946, and Mature Work 1947-1955. These time periods coincide with major shifts in Siskind's personal life, and also represent the process he went through to clarify his vision and his way of working. The catalogue serves as an anthology providing documentation of important aspects of Aaron Siskind's career, with reference to Siskind's photographic projects, his writing on his work and teaching practices, and interviews. The title *Toward a Personal Vision* is derived from the one-page catalogue for the Feature Group exhibition, *Toward a Harlem Document*, installed at the New School for Social Research in 1939. For Siskind and the Feature Group this title referred to the concept of a project in process.

The catalyst for this exhibition stemmed from questions raised by a previous collaborative effort, *The Photo League: A Progressive Era in American Photography 1936-1951*, which examined the contributions of the organization and its members in forming an educational center for social documentary practices. The current exhibition represents a continuing investigation into this period of American Photography, and was motivated by a desire to explore not only Aaron Siskind the photographer, but also the relationship between theory and practice.





The lady Preacher is an evangelist; close followers of the Church, called Saints wear white. She finds a simple black robe more in keeping with ecclesiastical dignity. Her income may be \$15.00 to \$150.00 a week. Compositely, she is shrewd and unlettered; is unmarried or the wife of a preacher; if successful, she may ride in a Packard. There is no middle ground -- it is either the Packard or the subway.

Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled [Lady Preacher]*  
 Harlem Document  
 Feature Group Project  
 Photo League, New York City

Gelatin silver print and  
 typed text on wove paper mounted  
 on an original exhibition board  
 20 x 16 inches (board)  
 International Museum of Photography  
 at George Eastman House

## PERSONAL VISION IN AARON SISKIND'S DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

Deborah Martin Kao

*We learned a number of things about the form and continuity of a picture-story; but mostly, we came to see that the literal representation of a fact (or idea) can signify less than the fact or idea itself...that a picture or a series of pictures must be informed with such things as order, rhythm, emphasis... — qualities which result from the perception and feeling of the photographer, and are not necessarily — (or apparently) the property of the subject.<sup>1</sup>*

The passage above is excerpted from Aaron Siskind's short essay, "The Feature Group," which was printed in the June-July 1940 issue of *Photo Notes*, the journal of the New York Photo League.<sup>2</sup> In this piece Siskind summarized the working methods and didactic prescriptions of the advanced documentary class that he led in the production of socially progressive photo-series<sup>3</sup> from 1936 to 1940, as part of the Photo League School curriculum. Although Siskind did not invent the picture-story format nor the mechanisms through which reform movements used social documentary pictures, he experimented within this mode of photograph production at a time when its boundaries were in the process of being defined. In effect, Siskind presented a remarkably independent challenge to the tenets of what he would later call "social realist"<sup>4</sup> documentary photography as it was developed, practiced, and promoted in America during the Depression of the 1930s by his colleagues, the members and associates of the Photo League. Many of these photographers were active in the New Deal sponsored Works Progress Administration photographic projects, and in the fledgling mass-media picture-magazines (*Life*, *Look*, *Fortune*).<sup>5</sup> In distinction to the imperative of unfettered verism directed by the Photo League's manifesto,<sup>6</sup> and, in particular, as a challenge to Sid Grossman's method of teaching advanced documentary workshops at the Photo League School,<sup>7</sup> Siskind detected discontinuity in the relationship between the inherent meaning of the subject being photographed and the resulting photograph of the subject. Siskind postulated



Michael Carter's Statement  
Harlem Document  
Feature Group Project  
Photo League, New York City

Typed text and graphite on wove paper  
15 x 8 inches  
International Museum of Photography  
at George Eastman House

that a documentary photograph denotes a self-consciously mediated image, a photograph that corresponds to the perceptions of the photographer, but not "necessarily" or "apparently" the "literal representation" of the subject. That Siskind so emphasized the personal vision of the photographer as the primary index of authenticity in the construction of documentary photographs further suggests that embedded in Siskind's approach to documentary practice at the Photo League School lies the foundation for his mature expressionist credo, which privileged the photographer as a purveyor of a "very personal world."<sup>8</sup>

This view — that Siskind promoted a type of self-conscious relativism in documentary practice — also challenges recent critical assessments of his documentary pictures. Bulwarked by post-modern critical theories, various revisionist critics have inverted the traditional interpretation of "reform-based," or social documentary, photographic practices as servicing the dispossessed. Instead, they reveal what they perceive as the covert mechanisms by which seemingly well-intentioned social documentary photographs were employed as weapons by those empowered within liberal democratic bureaucracies, for the social control or the marginalization of the "Other."<sup>9</sup> For example, John Tagg builds on his reading of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in the introduction to *The Burden of Representation*, stating that the nature of social documentary evidence is tied to the history of liberal political power, and it therefore orchestrates an interested version of cultural "truth."<sup>10</sup> Later in his discussion of Berenice Abbott's social documentary pictures from the 1930s, Tagg tracks the discerning aesthetics of her pictures, which he views as "...the product of a complex process involving the motivated and selective employment of determinate *means of representation*."<sup>11</sup> Following along this paradigm, Siskind's social documentary photographs from the 1930s, in particular his images of blacks in Harlem, have been interpreted by other critics, including Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Diane Dillion, and Nicholas Natanson, as unwittingly reinforcing, rather than alleviat-

ing, class, racial, and gender disenfranchisement because their "aesthetized" formal compositions act to objectify and thereby victimize the subject.<sup>12</sup> Yet, at odds with the general drive of revisionist writing to unmask the concealed cultural "framing contexts" behind documentary production, the analyses of Siskind's work tend to target specific images extracted from the larger photo-series and the collaborative matrix of the Photo League Feature Group production.

It is therefore with ex post facto irony that I argue that Siskind deliberately cultivated the "problematic" formalism that distinguishes the composition of many of his 1930s documentary images, as part of a strategy to control the meaning of his pictures, and to confront the ease with which his and other Feature Group photographs were manipulated against their intended meaning by various agencies that regularly published Photo League pictures. He recounted his frustration with the purposeful misapplication of the Feature Group photographs in a 1988 interview with art historian Bonnie Yochelson.

*A number of times we would take a photo out of the file [the Feature Group's file of finished prints at the Photo League] for the Daily Worker or the Sunday Worker...and we'd tell them what the picture was and so forth, and then when they printed it, [they said] it was something else. I got really fed up with...political groups using [Photo League] pictures, and I began to doubt whether these pictures meant what they said, and whether they were just forcing pictures out of context sometimes.<sup>13</sup>*

Siskind, who described himself as a socialist in the 1930s, was particularly wary of the use of his photographs by organs of the Communist Party; he resigned from the New York Workers Film and Photo League in 1935 because of dictates he believed the Party put on image production.<sup>14</sup> Still, the corruption of the intended meaning in Siskind's Feature Group photographs occurred just as often when the images were reproduced by those with right-wing agendas. For example, three of Siskind's Feature Group photographs were used, against their liberal

reform intention, to illustrate an appallingly racist article on Harlem in the July 1939 issue of *Fortune* magazine. The *Fortune* essay depicted Harlem as a dangerous place filled with race riots, rape, corruption, gambling, and disease. The article enforced the then long-held racial stereotype of blacks as "spirited and emotional" people who would, given the opportunity, "invade" white neighborhoods or be easily swayed by radical ideologies into violent actions if not assuaged by marginal living provisions.<sup>15</sup> It was partly in response to such practices that Siskind and his students strove to make the meaning of their documentary photographs ever more unambiguous, erecting a clear conceptual framework for the production of their photo-series before making their photographs. In Siskind's words, "we made pictures to express a predetermined idea...(we discovered a relationship between the clarity of one's thought and feeling and the clarity of the picture-meaning)."<sup>16</sup> To generate their program, the Feature Group analyzed existing models of picture-stories in newspapers and periodicals, prepared detailed shooting scripts, mastered the technical skills that govern the aesthetics of photography (framing, lighting, focus, printing, cropping), wrote explanatory text to clarify the meaning of their photographs, and developed expository sequences for the controlled exhibition and publication of their photo-series.<sup>17</sup>

Among the documentary photo-series produced by Siskind's Feature Group, none was as fully realized, as sophisticated, or as successful as the Harlem Document. The Harlem Document was conceived by Michael Carter, a black sociologist, who proposed that a Photo League production unit collaborate with him in an extensive cultural analysis of black Harlem.<sup>18</sup> Between 1938 and 1940, Carter met regularly with Siskind and a handful of all white, mostly Jewish, Feature Group students [Lucy Ashjian, Harold Corsini, Morris Engel, Beatrice Koslofsky, Richard Lyon, Jack [Mendelson] Manning, and Sol [Prom] Fabricant]<sup>19</sup> to produce a "...socio-economic study of contemporary Harlem."<sup>20</sup> The Feature Group's weekly



## TOWARD A HARLEM DOCUMENT

meeting notes, work assignment sheets, vintage exhibition boards with captions, supplementary panels with text, and references and articles in *Photo Notes* all contribute to a reconstruction of the processes, methods, and issues involved in this most ambitious Feature Group production. An explication of the manner in which the Feature Group constructed documentary meaning in the Harlem Document is complicated by the racial dimension of the project. As a preface to this investigation, it should be noted that Siskind and his students also produced features on poor white neighborhoods, and that most Photo League members were first or second generation, working-class Jews, who themselves lived in New York tenements. The conditions of poverty and racism that black Harlemites experienced, while not analogous, were pertinent to the experiences of the photographers and their families. Since black Harlem had, in an earlier time, housed the poor Jewish quadrant, the Feature Group photographers were personally linked with the history of the place they photographed.

In a summary of the Harlem Document project, written in 1940, Carter delineated the Feature Group's reform-minded goals for the project's social impact: "If its effect on the conscience of the nation be commensurate with the time, skills, and money that went into its production, it should help to alleviate many depressing conditions."<sup>21</sup> The Harlem Document was realized in two finished forms: an exhibition and a now lost book maquette with text written by Carter. Once completed, the Harlem Document received more national attention than any other Photo League project, and won the praise of many, including Roy Stryker and Dorothea Lange, who saw it as a model documentary photo-series.<sup>22</sup> It was widely exhibited in New York under the titles "Toward a Harlem Document" and "Harlem Document," included in Ansel Adams' "Pageant of Photography" at the 1940 San Francisco World's Fair, and published in part in *Look* magazine. The Feature Group expressed the essential motivation behind their Harlem Document production — to expose the

problems caused in Harlem by "subtle Northern Racism" — in a one-page "catalogue" they printed for the installation of their work at the New York New School for Social Research in the spring of 1939.<sup>23</sup>

*In the past twenty years thousands of Negroes have trekked north to increase Manhattan's colored population from 60,000 in 1910 to 224,000 in 1930. Most of them have come to escape the outspoken racial hatred of the south only to encounter a subtle, but equally cruel racial intolerance in the North.... Concentrated in Harlem's 202 square blocks they make Harlem an international Negro metropolis. ... The white world discovered Harlem in the early 1920's.... writers exploited whatever exotic manifestations an impoverished race can demonstrate. In the general rush to visit Harlem 'hot spots' the real work-a-day Negro and his numerous problems were overlooked.*<sup>24</sup>

The Harlem Document focused on unfair labor and housing conditions using statistical data in conjunction with visual evidence. The Feature Group illustrated the depth of the housing problem in Harlem by documenting the condition of tenements, revealing the inadequacies of such government solutions as limited low-income housing, and examining the cultural and community impact of racially determined poverty — from scant health services to overwhelming religious belief. The magnitude of the problem led the Feature Group to divide the Harlem Document project into seven or eight related sections, or chapters, possibly including: labor, religion, health, housing, crime, recreation, society, and youth.<sup>25</sup> The following excerpt from Carter's text for the Feature Group's Harlem housing photographs registers the specificity of the Feature Group's vitriolic assault on the impact of racist actions by white tenement owners.

*Such squalor as that shown above is not isolated, but depressingly typical. A quarter of a million people live in 8,902 dwellings, half of which were built before 1901. Their safety and health are constantly imperiled by rotten plumbing, leaking roofs, sagging floor and stairs, and inadequate fire prevention — to say nothing of ubiquitous rats and other vermin.*



001 40 Aaron Siskind  
*Storefront Church Pulpit* (printed in 1990  
 [Full-frame print of "Lady Preacher"  
 with overprinted crop marks to indicate  
 Siskind's original presentation of the image]  
 Harlem Document Feature Group Project  
 Photo League, New York City

Gelatin silver print  
 14 x 11 inches  
 National Museum of American Art  
 Smithsonian Institution  
 Gift of the artist

A single block in Harlem Valley, where the poorest Negroes live, has 3,871 inhabitants. Comparable crowding would get the entire American population onto half of Manhattan Island. Harlem's scarcity of room has boosted rentals, which are 30 to 50 per cent higher than those for similar apartments in other parts of town. To help make ends meet, 40 per cent of the Negro families take in lodgers.

Landlords, mostly white and mostly absentee, charge what the traffic will bear, are generally indifferent to tenants' complaints about conditions because it is easier to pay a small fine for tenement violations than to invest in repairs.

The Negroes must pay and accept what they get. Even if they could afford to move (51 per cent of Negro families have incomes of less than \$837 a year), race prejudice blocks their migration to other neighborhoods. A solitary attempt to meet the problem is found in the Harlem River Houses, a federal project. But they accommodate only 1,900.<sup>26</sup>

Text like this typically accompanied photographs such as Siskind's portrait of a young black woman working in the interior of a run-down tenement kitchen, exhibited with the caption: "We've been asking the landlord to paint for two years." While this specific image might be read by a modern audience as picturing the "victimology" of poor blacks, the Feature Group often sought out photographs of civil protest to highlight the self-reliance of blacks in Harlem. For example, the group assigned photographers to cover organized rent-strikes to "...illustrate the militant spirit of Harlem tenants."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in accordance with their commitment to social action through intervention and education coordinated from within the community, the Feature Group consistently drew input from both the people of Harlem and officials who serviced Harlem's social and cultural institutions.<sup>28</sup> And some sections of the Harlem Document, such as the chapter on religion in Harlem, reveal aspects of black culture and business that were largely controlled by Harlemites.

An analysis of one of the extant exhibition boards from the religion section of the Feature Group's Harlem Document exhibition reveals a great deal about the



Feature Group's documentary intentions and working methods. The Board displays a photograph made by Siskind, and a caption, affixed below the photograph, written by Michael Carter.<sup>29</sup> The photograph depicts a half-length, profile portrait of an evangelical "Lady Preacher" at the altar of a so-called "storefront" church — that is, a sidewalk shop converted, at minimal expense, into a religious sanctuary.<sup>30</sup> Dressed in a black ecclesiastical robe, she faces toward the left while playing a tambourine, presumably to lead her congregation in song. In 1981 and again in 1990, the negative for this photograph was reprinted under Siskind's supervision for the publication and exhibition of his Harlem imagery.<sup>31</sup> A comparison of the original to the later presentations of this image reveals that Siskind purposely manipulated a specific reading for this photograph by radically cropping and realigning the negative when he made the print for the original Harlem Document exhibitions.<sup>32</sup> In the full-frame print, the "Lady Preacher" is virtually lost against the cluttered back wall of the church interior. The composition lacks a specific focal point. The skewed angle of view causes the room to appear to lurch toward the left edge of the picture. All manner of furniture, religious banners, and liturgical accouterments crowd the lower half of the photograph. There is a sense of claustrophobic dislocation in the image, which is exacerbated by compositional elements that dissect the picture plane. A balustrade cuts diagonally across the bottom of the photograph, separating the viewer from the altar; and a religious text, painted on a long sign-board in bold-faced letters, divides the upper quadrant of the photograph, below the ceiling. Because the text on the sign-board is cut off by the left edge of the photograph, it reads in a nonsensical manner: "OUT WHICH NO MAN SHALL SEE THE LORD."

In contrast, the cropped and realigned version of the photograph displayed on the Harlem Document exhibition board depicts a balanced and ordered composition in which the preacher becomes the focal point. Siskind achieved this transformation by rotating the easel approxi-

mately seven degrees counterclockwise when he printed the photograph, realigning the image along the vertical axis to correct the illusion that the room tilted to the left. He also cropped all but the most essential elements of the picture. For example, he simplified the composition by eliminating both the balustrade along the bottom edge and the corner of the room along the right edge of the picture. With these changes, the viewer appears to be in a space contiguous to the preacher, and in a participatory rather than a voyeuristic position relative to the scene. The preacher stands just left of center, framed by a large folk painting of Christ as the Good Shepherd (on the left) and a bold cross painted as if to emulate stained-glass on a window (on the right). The intersection of the prominent vertical band of the window's molding behind the preacher with the horizontal sign-board below the ceiling implies a cruciform shape that is reinforced by the painted window, biblical texts, and other liturgical embellishments. The various fragments of religious text, which look haphazardly scattered on banners and signs throughout the full-frame print of the scene, are, in the cropped picture, strategically framed to reinforce a cogent meaning. The text on the cloth that decorates the pulpit, neatly bordered by the cropped edges of the print at the lower right corner, reads "HOLINE[SS] UNTO THE LORD" while the text on the sign-board below the ceiling here almost appears to complete the phrase "WHICH NO MAN SHALL SEE."<sup>33</sup> Thus, by selectively cropping the image, Siskind created a symbolic formal composition that was not present in a print of the whole negative. If the full-frame print could be said to depict visual anarchy, then Siskind's presentation of the subject in the cropped variant displays order and connotes a symbolic message: that the lady preacher is a good shepherd — a spiritual guide, an empowered black woman, a leader in her community.

Siskind and his students sought such symbolic qualities when they constructed their documentary pictures, as is evident in numerous examples of the formal evaluations of photographs recorded in the weekly meeting notes of the

Feature Group. In the following critique, a photograph by Feature Group member Richard Lyon is rejected by the production unit because the intended symbolic dimension of its formal composition remained unrealized.

*We looked at a portrait Dick [Richard] Lyon had taken of Mr. Hubert at the Urban League. Mr. Hubert was sitting at his desk reading a Negro paper with a streamer headline about the anti-Lynch Law.... Also on the desk was a carved head of a young Negro, with an agonized expression. The point of the picture was to have been the contrast between the genial, smiling look of Mr. Hubert, the leader of a big political movement, and the tortured look of the statuette, representing the life of many Negroes. The point was lost, however, because the elements were not integrated. The statuette was at one end of the desk, and the big white patch of a window was between Mr. Hubert and the head. Furthermore, there was a deep shadow behind the head, which was blank, so that very little could be seen of it. Dick will retake the picture.*<sup>34</sup>

These types of statements by the Feature Group indicate that they preconceived the symbolic message of their documentary photographs, and that, for them, the enactment of the documentary moment could be a reproducible event.<sup>35</sup> The Feature Group also spoke of the metaphorical qualities of the subject when transformed by the photographer: "The world of physical objects has become animate with relationships: chair, house, shoe, the kitchen table, informed with the life of the people who know and use them."<sup>36</sup> Clearly, the Feature Group's litmus test for documentary authenticity was not measured by unadulterated photographic evidence, but rather by photographic evidence forged, often symbolically, to express a thesis that the group perceived to be truthful: "Aaron [Siskind] pointed out the important thing was...our [the Feature Group's] attitude toward that thesis...that even though we had a point to make, we were still able to present a well-rounded and undistorted view of Harlem."<sup>37</sup>

Siskind and his students reinforced what they called the "picture-meaning" by arranging their photographs in thematically linked sequences and assigning didactic

captions to them. The extant outline for the Harlem Document's chapter about religion in Harlem demonstrates how the group engaged a sociological approach that treated aspects of Harlem's religious life from its history to its present state, and from its buildings to its clergy, according to "sociological," "economic," "political," and "psychological" criteria. The chapter begins by situating religion in Harlem as the "...most important single controlling factor in in [sic] [the] life of [the] community. [With a] Greater percentage [sic] of active church members than in in [sic] similar communities."<sup>38</sup> Something of the Feature Group's broad understanding of the historic and social dimensions of the issue of religion in Harlem is also expressed in the group's weekly meeting notes in the Fall of 1938, at the time when the production unit began this phase of the Harlem Document.

*Aaron [Siskind] suggested that the great amount of churches could be shown by a picture of two churches side by side. Most of the churches had formerly been synagogues. ....[Michael] Carter said it was important to show traces of former Jewish occupation of Harlem because New York Negroes are articulate only about Jews, not any other race. Dick [Richard Lyon] said it was necessary to show that the church is an important social center. It could be done by a picture of a bulletin board in a Baptist church on which there were announcements of all sorts of varied activities. Carter said many people in Harlem mark the streets with religious slogans. We decided to take one of a sign such as "Believe ye and ye shall be saved," with people walking over it.*<sup>39</sup>

Siskind's "Lady Preacher" probably illustrated the section of the religion chapter on Harlem "Clergy," in which the Feature Group considered the "socio-economic strata," "attitude towards, labor, politics, religion," "physical appearance," and "excerpts from sermons"<sup>40</sup> from various denominations and economic strata of Harlem's clerics. Placing the "Lady Preacher" exhibition board within this context of the photo-series clarifies why its caption contains statistical evidence, with references to the income, schooling, and the marital status of a "composite" storefront church preacher

Because no installation photographs, checklists, or the book maquette survive to indicate the order of images and text in the Harlem Document, one can only speculate as to how the "Lady Preacher" contributed to what, in Siskind's words, were the "order, rhythm, [and] emphasis" of the larger "picture-story." When the thirteen Harlem Document photographs and their corresponding captions written by Carter were published in the May 21, 1940 issue of *Look* magazine, however, they were arranged thematically to mirror the installation of the Harlem Document exhibition and the chapter divisions of the book maquette, and the piece included a section on religion in Harlem that

3. Religion most important single controlling factor in life of community. Greater per centage of active church members here than in in similar communities.
  - a. Historical role of the church
  - b. its social and political accomplishments
  - c. evidence of its import seen in tremendous expenditures for churches.
  - d. religion not inseparable from physical structure
2. Multiplicity of church buildings and denominations:
  - a. Pentecostal Church
  - b. Divine
  - c. "recognized" Protestants
  - d. Catholics
  - e. spiritualists
  - f. voodoo et cetera..
1. Social Position of Negro Church:
  - a. Psychological, and physical factors dominating the selection of a church.
  - b. lower class church
    - a1. description of meeting
    - a2. age and sex difference in members
  - c. upper class church
    - c1. the physical structure
    - c2. the parishoners, their social, economic status and their physical appearance.
4. The Physical Structure
  - a. number and cost of buildings
  - b. incidental functions of organized church
  - c. real estate owned by.
  - d. payroll of church compared to income
5. The Clergy
  - a. socio-economic strata
  - b. their attitude towards, labor, politics, religion, etc.
  - c. excerpts from sermons
  - d. physical appearance of ministers important item in their selection by congregation
6. Conclusion
  - a. psychological reasons for the affinity between Negroes and Churches
  - b. current trends towards secularization
  - c. youth and the Church
7. Comments from The People

21

Original is typed text on wove paper  
11 x 8 1/2 inches  
Center for Creative Photography





tragic revue of the world's best black talent, produced by the WPA for whites.

[illegible]

M. T. MARLEN IS THE COMMODITY OF THE NEGRO WORLD

In its downy square body are 1 cm. hair-points, and brownish purple-red, which will in time turn blackish-ash, with less or more of brownish suffusion, and will be well polished, and shining. Night life (etc.) is well understood, but has been changed from the downy. Prolificates forms, more beautiful, common. To reach a uniform state in cultivation—growing in a dry or wet atmosphere, but at 100°—110°—120°—130°—140°—150°—160°—170°—180°—190°—200°—210°—220°—230°—240°—250°—260°—270°—280°—290°—300°—310°—320°—330°—340°—350°—360°—370°—380°—390°—400°—410°—420°—430°—440°—450°—460°—470°—480°—490°—500°—510°—520°—530°—540°—550°—560°—570°—580°—590°—600°—610°—620°—630°—640°—650°—660°—670°—680°—690°—700°—710°—720°—730°—740°—750°—760°—770°—780°—790°—800°—810°—820°—830°—840°—850°—860°—870°—880°—890°—900°—910°—920°—930°—940°—950°—960°—970°—980°—990°—1000°—1010°—1020°—1030°—1040°—1050°—1060°—1070°—1080°—1090°—1100°—1110°—1120°—1130°—1140°—1150°—1160°—1170°—1180°—1190°—1200°—1210°—1220°—1230°—1240°—1250°—1260°—1270°—1280°—1290°—1300°—1310°—1320°—1330°—1340°—1350°—1360°—1370°—1380°—1390°—1400°—1410°—1420°—1430°—1440°—1450°—1460°—1470°—1480°—1490°—1500°—1510°—1520°—1530°—1540°—1550°—1560°—1570°—1580°—1590°—1600°—1610°—1620°—1630°—1640°—1650°—1660°—1670°—1680°—1690°—1700°—1710°—1720°—1730°—1740°—1750°—1760°—1770°—1780°—1790°—1800°—1810°—1820°—1830°—1840°—1850°—1860°—1870°—1880°—1890°—1900°—1910°—1920°—1930°—1940°—1950°—1960°—1970°—1980°—1990°—2000°—2010°—2020°—2030°—2040°—2050°—2060°—2070°—2080°—2090°—2100°—2110°—2120°—2130°—2140°—2150°—2160°—2170°—2180°—2190°—2200°—2210°—2220°—2230°—2240°—2250°—2260°—2270°—2280°—2290°—2300°—2310°—2320°—2330°—2340°—2350°—2360°—2370°—2380°—2390°—2400°—2410°—2420°—2430°—2440°—2450°—2460°—2470°—2480°—2490°—2500°—2510°—2520°—2530°—2540°—2550°—2560°—2570°—2580°—2590°—2600°—2610°—2620°—2630°—2640°—2650°—2660°—2670°—2680°—2690°—2700°—2710°—2720°—2730°—2740°—2750°—2760°—2770°—2780°—2790°—2800°—2810°—2820°—2830°—2840°—2850°—2860°—2870°—2880°—2890°—2900°—2910°—2920°—2930°—2940°—2950°—2960°—2970°—2980°—2990°—3000°—3010°—3020°—3030°—3040°—3050°—3060°—3070°—3080°—3090°—3100°—3110°—3120°—3130°—3140°—3150°—3160°—3170°—3180°—3190°—3200°—3210°—3220°—3230°—3240°—3250°—3260°—3270°—3280°—3290°—3300°—3310°—3320°—3330°—3340°—3350°—3360°—3370°—3380°—3390°—3400°—3410°—3420°—3430°—3440°—3450°—3460°—3470°—3480°—3490°—3500°—3510°—3520°—3530°—3540°—3550°—3560°—3570°—3580°—3590°—3600°—3610°—3620°—3630°—3640°—3650°—3660°—3670°—3680°—3690°—3700°—3710°—3720°—3730°—3740°—3750°—3760°—3770°—3780°—3790°—3800°—3810°—3820°—3830°—3840°—3850°—3860°—3870°—3880°—3890°—3900°—3910°—3920°—3930°—3940°—3950°—3960°—3970°—3980°—3990°—4000°—4010°—4020°—4030°—4040°—4050°—4060°—4070°—4080°—4090°—4100°—4110°—4120°—4130°—4140°—4150°—4160°—4170°—4180°—4190°—4200°—4210°—4220°—4230°—4240°—4250°—4260°—4270°—4280°—4290°—4300°—4310°—4320°—4330°—4340°—4350°—4360°—4370°—4380°—4390°—4400°—4410°—4420°—4430°—4440°—4450°—4460°—4470°—4480°—4490°—4500°—4510°—4520°—4530°—4540°—4550°—4560°—4570°—4580°—4590°—4600°—4610°—4620°—4630°—4640°—4650°—4660°—4670°—4680°—4690°—4700°—4710°—4720°—4730°—4740°—4750°—4760°—4770°—4780°—4790°—4800°—4810°—4820°—4830°—4840°—4850°—4860°—4870°—4880°—4890°—4900°—4910°—4920°—4930°—4940°—4950°—4960°—4970°—4980°—4990°—5000°—5010°—5020°—5030°—5040°—5050°—5060°—5070°—5080°—5090°—5100°—5110°—5120°—5130°—5140°—5150°—5160°—5170°—5180°—5190°—5200°—5210°—5220°—5230°—5240°—5250°—5260°—5270°—5280°—5290°—5300°—5310°—5320°—5330°—5340°—5350°—5360°—5370°—5380°—5390°—5400°—5410°—5420°—5430°—5440°—5450°—5460°—5470°—5480°—5490°—5500°—5510°—5520°—5530°—5540°—5550°—5560°—5570°—5580°—5590°—5600°—5610°—5620°—5630°—5640°—5650°—5660°—5670°—5680°—5690°—5700°—5710°—5720°—5730°—5740°—5750°—5760°—5770°—5780°—5790°—5800°—5810°—5820°—5830°—5840°—5850°—5860°—5870°—5880°—5890°—5900°—5910°—5920°—5930°—5940°—5950°—5960°—5970°—5980°—5990°—6000°—6010°—6020°—6030°—6040°—6050°—6060°—6070°—6080°—6090°—6100°—6110°—6120°—6130°—6140°—6150°—6160°—6170°—6180°—6190°—6200°—6210°—6220°—6230°—6240°—6250°—6260°—6270°—6280°—6290°—6300°—6310°—6320°—6330°—6340°—6350°—6360°—6370°—6380°—6390°—6400°—6410°—6420°—6430°—6440°—6450°—6460°—6470°—6480°—6490°—6500°—6510°—6520°—6530°—6540°—6550°—6560°—6570°—6580°—6590°—6600°—6610°—6620°—6630°—6640°—6650°—6660°—6670°—6680°—6690°—6700°—6710°—6720°—6730°—6740°—6750°—6760°—6770°—6780°—6790°—6800°—6810°—6820°—6830°—6840°—6850°—6860°—6870°—6880°—6890°—6900°—6



"Harlem"

Fortune magazine July 1939)  
Includes three Harlem Document  
Photographs by Aaron Siskind  
Photo League, New York City

pages 78-79

14 x 22 inches page spread

featured the storefront churches. Siskind and the Feature Group controlled many of the decisions that governed the production of the *Look* photo-series: "Now we did give a group of the Harlem pictures to one of the first issues of *Look* magazine, and we liked the way we did it. We chose the pictures together....Mike [Michael Carter] wrote all the captions, he himself, and they were printed on a newsprint, very cheap, but so they could afford to be honest then."<sup>43</sup> Even so, when the Harlem Document was published in *Look* magazine under the title "244,000 Native Sons," *Look* effectively obscured the Feature Group's independent thesis by linking the project to the recent publication of Richard Wright's landmark book *Native Son*. And, while the editor's introduction to the picture-story credited Carter and the Photo League, the photographers were not given individual credit lines, as they had been promised.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, even with its limitations, if one looks beyond the editor's introduction and the misleadingly sensational headlines, the *Look* presentation of the Harlem Document suggests the form.

content, and meaning that the Feature Group intended for the larger Harlem Document production.<sup>45</sup>

The complexity of collaborative Feature Group productions, coupled with the quagmire surrounding the manner in which different framing contexts transformed the photographers' theses, remained ever-present challenges for the Feature Group's social documentary productions. It seems in retrospect that it was in reaction to these pressures that Siskind produced his highly personal independent photo-series concurrent with his Feature Group activities. For his independent work, Siskind chose to make photo-series largely devoid of people, but in which he imbued vernacular objects and structures with allegorical properties. Yet, in many ways Siskind expanded the lessons of the Feature Group in his independent projects, through his use of symbolic compositions and serial form.

In 1939 Siskind created a photo-series about the razing of the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York City, in which he intended that the physical destruction of the building act as a metaphor for other issues of destruction, both personal and cultural.<sup>46</sup> In order to illustrate the symbolic intention of the series, Siskind used the close-up fragment of sculpture, a woman's head, among the building's rubble, as the lead photograph for the series. He also experimented with purposefully printing the photographs too dark, to further elicit the mood of destruction.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in his extensive Tabernacle City series of 1939-40, Siskind documented the "folk-spirit," of a 19th century Methodist campground on Martha's Vineyard, by allowing details of weathered gingerbread ornament to evoke the essence of the place. Here again, the lead images set the symbolic tone for the series. The first board depicts a detail of the Tabernacle spire, and the second board displays two images: an old pew cut to wrap around a tree from a time before the Tabernacle structure was built, and a view of the art glass and steel vaults of the Tabernacle ceiling. These are followed by exhibition boards with text recounting the history

and current use of the retreat, and then by numerous single images of architectural details. These independent series underscore Siskind's increasing investment in the ability of photography to evoke symbolic personal meaning while still documenting the nature of the subject. Throughout his career, Siskind looked back on his method of working on the Feature Group projects, and at the symbolic dimension of these independent architectural series, as holding the keys to his future development.

Aaron Siskind organized his Feature Group production unit according to a progressive pedagogical model — as a workshop or laboratory — wherein he and his students explored the essence of documentary practice.

Siskind celebrated the interested nature of documentary work. His conviction that the perception of the photographer controlled the meaning of documentary pictures led him inward to the production of what he called "philosophical documents." Even so, Siskind's continued engagement of social documentary and architectural documentary series, in both his independent projects and in his later teaching curricula at the Institute of Design in Chicago,<sup>48</sup> attests to the enduring significance of documentary practice in the development of his personal vision. During an interview with photographer and educator Jaromir Stephany, in 1963, Siskind made a statement that might well stand as a refrain for this investigation, in which he invoked his understanding of the documentary mode to describe the authenticity of meaning in his abstract expressionist stone-wall pictures, made on Martha's Vineyard in the mid 1950s:

*...I began to feel the importance of how these rocks hovered over each other, touched each other, pushed against each other — or what I call contiguity. Then I felt I had gotten something that was unique. ...It was a document, you see, it was documentary. It was a document of my philosophy, a projection of my philosophy, and I was able to do it without distorting the rocks too much.<sup>49</sup>*

In the preparation of this essay I have benefited greatly from the probing mind, critical eye, and good humor of my colleague Charles A. Meyer. All of the primary research for this project was conducted as a collaborative endeavor. I also wish to thank Carl Chiarenza for his endless inspiration and guidance. His well-known work on Aaron Siskind stands as the foundation for this project.

Aaron Siskind, "The Feature Group," *Photo Notes* (June - July, 1940): 7

For an overview of the Photo League see *Photo Notes* (February 1938-Spring 1950), reprinted by the Visual Studies Workshop (1977), Nancy Newhall, *This is the Photo League* exhibition catalogue (New York: Photo League, 1948), Anne Tucker "Photographic Crossroads: The Photo League," *Journal* (National Gallery of Canada) a special supplement to *Afterimage* (6 April 1978), *Ovo Magazine* 10:40/41 (1981), *Creative Camera* 223 & 224 (July/August 1983), Louis Stettner, "Cezanne's Apples and the Photo League: A Memoir," *Aperture* 112 (Fall 1988): 14-35; Charles A. Meyer and Deborah Martin Kao, *The Photo League: A Progressive Era in American Photography 1936-1957*, exhibition brochure (Boston College Museum of Art, Fall 1990)

Documentary productions were also called "photo-documents," "picture-stones," and "features" by the Photo Leaguers. See *Photo Notes*, generally.

Summarizing the nature of his photographic work for a Guggenheim grant application in about 1956, Siskind wrote, "My photographic work over the past twelve years has been in three fields: documentary (social realism), architecture, art." Aaron Siskind, "Item 3: Accomplishments," typescript essay for a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant application (ca. 1956), Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

The membership, lectures, exhibitions, and activities of the New York Photo League were much more heterogeneous than is generally acknowledged. For example between 1936 and 1941 when Siskind was an active member of the Photo League, there were exhibitions of work as diverse as F.S.A. photographers (April-May 1939), Atget (Dec. 1939), Henri Cartier-Bresson (Sept. 1940), and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (June-July 1940). During this same period, guest lecturers included Beaumont Newhall (May 1938), Eliot Elisofon (Dec. 1938), Berenice Abbott (Sept. 1939), Roy Stryker (March 1940).

The August 1938 issue of *Photo Notes* published what amounted to the manifesto of the Photo League. "For a League of American Photographers" which emphasized the attitude that progressive documentary photography represented "truth." "Photography has tremendous social value. Upon the photographer rests the responsibility and duty of recording a true image of the world as it is today." And in a 1938 lecture delivered to a Photo League School workshop and printed in the 1938 school syllabus and reading booklet assembled by Sid Grossman, the journalist and critic Elizabeth McCausland confirmed the League's manifesto: "... a progressive photographer who believes himself to be blazing new trails in the unexplored regions of social art must be able to speak clearly and logically. He is — or should be — a serious worker, dealing in truth, setting forth truth in order that it may speak to many others and impel them to act on the basis of truth, whether for peace, for better housing, for civil liberties." Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," in Susan Dodge Peters, "Elizabeth McCausland on Photography," *Afterimage* (May 1985): 8.

"For instance, instead of beginning with a study of critical statements on documentary photography by eminent moderns (Strand, for instance) and a review of its traditions, (the procedure of Grossman's course in Documentary Photography) we concern ourselves with the problem of how an idea comes to life in a photograph, and the special characteristics of that life." Aaron Siskind, "The Feature Group," op. cit.

In 1938 the Photo League School Board (Lucy Ashjian, Director, Max Drucker, M.H. Nicholls, Sol Libsohn, Sid Grossman, Alvin Wolfson) assembled a "Syllabus & Readings" booklet for students enrolled in "Photo Technique" and "Documentary Photography Workshops." The readings included excerpts from the writings of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Berenice Abbott, Beaumont Newhall, Paul Strand, Elizabeth McCausland, and F.D. Klingender. In his syllabus for the "Workshop in Documentary Photography, Summer 1938," Grossman emphasizes the importance of historic models for students of documentary photography. "The class will learn something of the history of photography and of its development by people like, Hill, Atget, Stieglitz, Strand, Abbott and Weston. Students should learn to work with a complete awareness of the significance of these contributions." *Photography Syllabus & Reading List*, Photo League, 31 East 21st Street, New York (Summer-Fall 1938), collection of Anne Tucker.

Aaron Siskind, "Credo" (1950), typescript, Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson. My argument builds on Carl Chiarenza's contention that "It was the individual photographer's perception that Siskind cultivated in his own work and nurtured in the Feature Group." Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, in association with the Center for Creative Photography, 1982): 42.

See, for example, Martha Rosler, "in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1989); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography," in Lorne Falk and Barbara Fisher, eds., *The Event Horizon: Essays on Hope, Sexuality, Social Space, and Media(tion)* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1987), reprinted in Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

"[social documentary] was entirely bound up with a particular social strategy: a liberal, corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crisis through a limited programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restructuring the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and rescuing the threatened bonds of social consent." John Tagg, op. cit. 8.

Op. cit. 154-155.

In "Who is Speaking Thus?" Solomon-Godeau reproduces Siskind's "Man in Bed" from the Feature Group Series "The Most Crowded Block" (1940) as a general illustration within a paragraph that examines the nature of interested viewpoints in documentary photography. "Furthermore, if we consider the act of looking at photographs with respect to gender or the operations of the psyche — the complex acts of projection, voyeurism, investiture, fantasy, and desire that inform our looking — we are obliged to abandon the earlier, innocent belief that the documentary camera presents us with visual facts that were simply 'out there' and which we now, simply and disinterestedly, observe and register." Op. cit. 182. However, in an article that speaks extensively about the nature of documentary "framing contexts," she never examines the context of Siskind's image production. And in "The Armed Vision Disarmed," *Afterimage* 10 no. 6 (January 1983), reprinted in *Photography at the Dock*, op. cit. 79-82, she uses Siskind as a "periodic" example of the shift from social documentary to existential abstraction, characterizing his movement as an "abandonment" of Photo League ideals.

Diane Dillon's article, "Focusing on the Fragment: Asymmetries of Gender, Race, and Class in the Photographs of Aaron Siskind," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1990): 49-72, argues that "... Siskind's shift in subject matter and pictorial style in fact enabled him to engage in cultural criticism still more profoundly. In departing from a mode where the agenda of social reform served as the obvious referent of his imagery, he moved on to a more challenging style that allowed him to address the fundamental asymmetries of gender, race, and class in a more elemental way. Siskind's complex treatment of these themes in his abstract work can be seen as a continuation and expansion of his documentary practice." [49] Yet, she consistently extracts those images that can be read as exhibiting racial and sexual stereotypes out of context and without arguing where Siskind might have stood relative to these issues.

Even historians who place themselves opposite the critical concerns of the theory-laden revisionists, such as Nicholas Natanson in *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), who is sympathetic to the general aims of the Feature Group's Harlem Document, still use Siskind's Harlem pictures as a foil against which other, less formalistic works are elevated.

Bonnie Yochelson, "Interview with Aaron Siskind," unpublished taped interview with Siskind, conducted by Bonnie Yochelson for Charles Traub's photography class at the School for Visual Arts, New York City, February 1988. I am indebted to Bonnie Yochelson for sharing this excellent interview with me.

Chiarenza, op. cit. 17-24.

"Harlem," *Fortune* (July 1939): 78-79, 168-170. The essay concludes: "When a spinted and emotional people are already suffering more than their share of discrimination, it is doubly unwise to starve them."

Siskind, "The Feature Group," op. cit. 7.

Ibid.

Siskind recollected that Michael Carter also called himself Milton Smith, but he was unsure which of the names was a pseudonym. All of the surviving documents from the Feature Group refer to Michael or Mikel Carter. See L. Corbus Bezner, "Interview: Aaron Siskind," *History of Photography* 16:1 (Spring 1992): 29.

A number of other students were involved in the Harlem Document for short periods of time; this list represents the core group. In addition to writing the captions and other



text related to the Harlem Document, Carter participated in the critique of photographs, helped the group access Harlem institutions, and installed the Harlem Document exhibitions with Siskind. Carter also became active in the larger Photo League as editor of *Photo Notes* in the late 1930s.

<sup>20</sup> "Michael Carter's Statement," (Harlem Document), typescript, about 1940, Collection of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, accession number 85.1028.1

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See *Photo Notes*, op cit, 1938-1941, generally, for frequent mention of the Harlem Document and its related events, such as exhibitions, symposia, and publications.

<sup>23</sup> Feature Group Weekly Meeting Notes, April 26, 1939, typescript, Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, recorded that the New School installation included 56 pictures hung in double rows. The cost and text of the "catalogue" were also recorded: "The cost of printing a catalogue for the show will amount to about \$5 or \$6 dollars. We plan to mail about 50 or 100 copies to publishers, photographers, and organizations, so the cost might come to a little more. Carter will write a simple statement for the catalogue on the nature of our work."

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Siskind and Michael Carter, *Toward a Harlem Document*, one-page, exhibition catalogue, New School for Social Research, New York City, 1939. Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

<sup>25</sup> "Michael Carter's Statement," op cit, reports that there were seven chapters including "labor, religion, health, and housing." Anne Tucker states that there were eight chapters in the original Harlem Document book: "Crime, Religion, Labor, Health, Housing, Recreation, Society, and Youth" in "Aaron Siskind and the Photo League: A Partial History," *Afterimage* (May 1982): 4.

<sup>26</sup> "244,000 Native Sons," *Look*, May 21, 1940: 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> Feature Group Weekly Meeting Notes, January 31, 1939, typescript, Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

<sup>28</sup> See "Feature Group's 'Toward a Harlem Document'" (April 1939) 1-2, and "Symposium on Harlem Document," (June 1939): 1, *Photo Notes*, op cit. When exhibited in Harlem, a notebook was provided so that viewers from the community could record their assessment of the Harlem Document. An annotated version of these statements later appeared in *Photo Notes*. Also in conjunction with the exhibition of the Harlem Document, the Photo League sponsored a symposium on the social problems faced by the community in Harlem. The symposium presented lectures by clergy, health officials, housing experts, union leaders, and members of government relief agencies.

<sup>29</sup> Siskind saved many of the photographs made by the Feature Group students from the Harlem Document photo-series. In the late 1960s the prints and exhibition boards Siskind had saved were entered into the collection of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House. The "Lady Preacher" exhibition board is identified by accession number 69.070.96.

<sup>30</sup> *The WPA Guide to New York City, The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (New York: The Guilds Committee for Federal Writers' Publications, Inc., 1939, reprinted New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 264.

<sup>31</sup> *Harlem Document. Photographs, 1932-1940*, edited by Charles Traub, photographs by Aaron Siskind, foreword by Gordon Parks, with text from the Federal Writers Project edited by Ann Banks (Providence, R.I.: Matrix Publications, 1981), reprinted with a new introductory essay, "Harlem: A Document," by Marcia Battle as *Harlem Photographs 1932-1940: Aaron Siskind* (New Haven: Easter Press, 1990) for the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution in conjunction with a traveling exhibition of Siskind's Harlem pictures. For an excellent critique of this presentation of Siskind's Harlem Document, see Anne Tucker, "Aaron Siskind and the Photo League." Op cit., 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Chiarenza notes that Siskind rarely printed cropped versions of his negatives. Op cit. 33. However, many of Siskind's exhibition boards from his photo-series of the late thirties and early forties display images that have been cut to odd sizes, indicating that Siskind frequently chose to crop them for public presentation.

<sup>33</sup> The text is probably a reference to, or a variant of, John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12: "No man hath seen God at any time...," a passage that emphasizes the centrality of faith in Christian belief.

<sup>34</sup> Harlem Document, Feature Group Weekly Meeting Notes, Feb. 9, 1939, typescript, Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

<sup>35</sup> This attitude may have been driven as much by technology as desire, as the tripod-

mounted 9 x 12 cm. view camera Siskind used to make these documentary photographs virtually demanded the cooperation of the subject.

In this particular case, it indicates that the Feature Group was willing to look critically on even those individuals and institutions that had facilitated their goals. Mr. Hubert's contribution to the project is cited in Michael Carter's statement on the project. Hubert had helped the Feature Group gain entry into Harlem buildings and institutions, and he later spoke at the symposium held in conjunction with the Harlem Document exhibition.

<sup>36</sup> *Toward a Harlem Document*, op cit.

<sup>37</sup> Harlem Document, Feature Group Weekly Meeting Notes, September 20, 1940, typescript, Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, AZ.

<sup>38</sup> Harlem Document, Feature Group, "Outline Nov. 6" (ca. 1938) of the "Religion" section of the Harlem Document, typescript, Aaron Siskind Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

<sup>39</sup> Feature Group Weekly Meeting Notes, Oct. 6, 1938, printed in Anne Tucker, "Aaron Siskind," op cit. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Harlem Document Feature Group, "Outline, November 6," op cit.

<sup>41</sup> "244,000 Native Sons," op cit.

<sup>42</sup> Siskind paired the uncropped version of the "Lady Preacher" photograph with the full-frame image of the congregation singing in his *Harlem Document Photographs, 1932-1940*, op cit. The style of the balustrade and the bold-faced text on the wooden platform beneath the singers' feet correspond exactly to the balustrade and text style in the "Lady Preacher" photograph.

<sup>43</sup> Yochelson, op cit.

<sup>44</sup> *Photo Notes*, op cit., May 1940: 6. Reporting on the impending publication of the Harlem Document in *Look* magazine, Siskind announced that: "The running text is drawn from the notes which the Feature Group has kept. Individual credit lines are given to each member of the Feature Group who has pictures accepted."

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Natanson's contention that the religion section of the *Look* Harlem Document photo-series conforms to the stereotypical "ecstatic model" of black religiosity is based on his reading of selective images and his limited interpretation of the Feature Group project. His characterization of the Photo League style as representing fortuitous "documentary drama" also seems far removed from the actual practice of the group. Natanson, op cit. 166-167.

<sup>46</sup> Chiarenza, op cit. 30, sees this series as a metaphor for the break-up of Siskind's marriage because of his wife's debilitating schizophrenia.

<sup>47</sup> Jaromir Stephany, "Interview with Aaron Siskind," New York City, 1963. "and because I had this theme of destruction I printed them very dark. They were too dark, so that I was destroying the picture itself. But, I think it was a good thing that I did it because I was really concerned with relating the print quality to the idea, the tones to the idea..."

<sup>48</sup> Although his "art" photography dominated his mature style, Siskind continued to make documentary photographs throughout much of his career. He was hired to teach documentary photography at the Institute of Design, where he modeled the advanced projects after the Feature Group productions. In an essay written with Harry Callahan, "Learning Photography at the Institute of Design," *Aperture* 4, no. 4 (1956): 149, Siskind spoke of his design for the advanced productions: "The last year is devoted to the planned project, both by the individual and the group. These projects usually arise from an actual need and serve some social purpose. All the facets of the project: the interviewing and consultations and research, the outlining of a plan or acceptance of a script, the accommodation of "art" and objectivity to necessity and urgency—all these and many others may be, with proper guidance, a true testing ground of the young photographer's knowledge and spirit."

<sup>49</sup> Stephany, op cit.





180 Aaron Siskind  
*Father Divine Movement*  
Harlem Document  
Feature Group Project  
Photo League, New York City

Gelatin silver print  
11 x 7 3/4  
Boston College Museum of Art

## THE FEATURE GROUP (1940)

Aaron Siskind

Aaron Siskind joined the newly re-organized Photo League in 1936 under the organization that he would be following of advanced students at the Photo League School in the production of documentary photo-series with the League Group projects. Siskind was well equipped for such a challenge. In his mid thirties, he already had more years of teaching experience in the New York City Public Schools, and as a member of the earlier and more politically radical New York Workers Film and Photo League, he had grappled with the basic technical issues of documentary photography and with the production and exhibition of photo-series. From 1936 to 1940, Siskind's Photo League Feature Group produced such social documentary photo-series as: Portrait of a Tenement (1937), Dead End: The Bowery (1937-38), Port Avenue North and South (1937), The Harlem Document (1938-40), The Catholic Worker Movement: St Joseph's House (1940), Sixteenth Street: A Cross-section of New York (1940), and Lost Generation: The Plight of Youth Today (1940). Written after the longest lived and most successful Feature Group project, The Harlem Document, Siskind's essay "The Feature Group" sought to share with the broader Photo League audience aspects of his pedagogy and practice. The essay first appeared in the June-July (1940) issue of Photo Notes, the newsletter of the Photo League.

After the Harlem Document was completed, the Feature Group divided into three units, each unit with a task of its own. Sixteenth Street, Catholic Worker (St. Joseph's House), and the Lost Generation (the plight of youth today.) The long drawn-out work on Harlem left us with a larger and looser organization than is good for production, so a break-down was necessary as well as inevitable. Nevertheless, I hope that the review show of the work of the Feature Group which the Exhibition Committee is planning for the summer will be more than an obituary — that from it will emerge some useful ideas. I felt that from the beginning the first problem and necessity for any group was unity (in an aesthetic sense), that some common ground, some general understanding (agreement too presumptuous?) must be found for these five persons grouped about a table, looking at each other out of their separate, varied, mysterious selves — brought together here by a vague though single purpose (to make documentary features) and by private (and who knows what?) motives. That that unity could not be had through the logical, blanket acceptance of any general principles or ideas, but rather by the detailed exploration and experiment of minute implications, the special case. For instance, instead of beginning with a study of critical statements on

documentary photography by eminent moderns (Strand, for instance) and a review of its tradition (the procedure of [Sid] Grossman's course in Documentary Photography), we concern ourselves with the problem of how an idea comes to life in a photograph, and the special characteristics of that life. We start with the simplest ideas (related to documentary photography, of course) that we can think of, like: This man is in a hurry, this is a solid brick wall, delicious bread, what a conceited guy, he's completely engrossed in his book, etc. The simplest idea, because in examining the work we have done we can occasionally relate the ideas to the elements of the pictures and its total impact, and perhaps, in that way we can come to an agreement as to how and why it works — or doesn't. The method is experimental and has the virtue of:

1. Keeping our discussion compact and orderly.
2. Giving the words we are using specific meaning: there is always the limited reference.
3. Relating our machines and materials to what we have to do: the limited idea makes it possible for us to know (or find out) the reason for our failure or success.

Since the feature was our special concern, our first task was the examination of features that others had made. What makes them work? Feature picture-stories from a wide variety of publications (*Fortune*, *Life*, the *Sunday Supplement*, the daily newspaper) were examined, and written analyses made. These were discussed, revised and filed for back and cross reference. We learned a number of things about the form and continuity of a picture-story; but, mostly, we came to see that the literal representation of a fact (or idea) can signify less than the fact or idea itself (is altogether dull), that a picture or a series of pictures must be informed with such things as order, rhythm, emphasis, etc. etc. — qualities which result from the perception and feeling of the photographer, and are not necessarily (or apparently) the property

of the subject. How dull was the series on Wall Street in *Fortune*, the pictures all clichés of the men-at-work type, unrelated to each other and to the text only as illustration; and, by contrast, what a rush of movement in the story on the school for firemen rookies taken from one of our daily newspapers.

Working the other way we:

1. Made pictures to express a predetermined idea, and tried them out on the rest of the group to find out how and how far they worked (we discovered a relationship between the clarity of one's thought and feeling and the clarity of the picture-meaning);
2. Examined a set of pictures all using the same material and having the same general aim, working away from the literal toward a growing concentration of feeling, from a picture without a point of view (the literal picture) to one whose meaning is more specific, limited, definite;
3. Explored the relationship between print tone (depth, contrast, etc.) and subject, the possibilities and limitations in documentary work;
4. Made scripts for features: statement, outline and description of photos to show the control exercised by the statement;
5. and, finally, one of the scripts is chosen. (It is interesting to note that we chose the feature "closest to home" — *League in Action*) and we were on our way — makers of pictures!

The problems of this and each succeeding feature will be detailed in the notes for the summer show of the work of the Feature Group. Trying always, of course, to do what would be useful in itself, we never forget our chief aim, to develop photographers who could carry through a documentary job from plan to print.





"We've been asking the landlord to paint for two years."

1937-38

Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled*  
Harlem Document  
Feature Group Project  
Photo League, New York City

Gelatin silver print and typed text  
on wove paper mounted on original  
exhibition board  
20 x 16 inches (board)  
International Museum of Photography  
at George Eastman House

1997-1998 - BEST PRACTICE

Look magazine May 21, 1940

Photographs by Aaron Siskind and the  
Harlem Document Feature Group  
Captions by Michael Carter  
Photo League, New York City

pages 8-9, 10-11, 12-13  
13 12 x 21 inches each page spread



## HARLEM DELINQUENTS IN THE MAKING

The one generating a desire for betterment the other kill opportunity to fulfill the dream. As the Harlem youth matures and discovers his social plight he may accept it, or fight against it. To accept is to deeply humiliate; to fight is to struggle for the odds are against him.



**FIVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS:** These young Harlems say they face the highest incidence of these problems in the city.

Problem	Harlem	Other Areas
1. Lack of money	100%	90%
2. Lack of family	100%	90%
3. Lack of education	100%	90%
4. Lack of health	100%	90%
5. Lack of safety	100%	90%



**SAVE WHAT!** ... In these  
... like that, ...  
lack of recreational facilities drives ... to ...  
... at that ... on the right, ...  
... and ... breaking ...

10

POTIONS FOR THE BODY.  
PRAYERS FOR THE SOUL.

**ILLIUM'S DEATH RATE** From disease is about twice that of other parts of the city. The disease that thrives there takes 1,000 deaths a year. In other words, one death in 100 people is caused by disease. The need to attack the disease is pressing, according to the report.

However, the report also notes that the death rate is not the only factor in the community's health. The report also notes that the death rate is not the only factor in the community's health. The report also notes that the death rate is not the only factor in the community's health.

[illegible][illegible]

1

## HARLEM'S PEOPLE AT PLAY—A FEVERISH PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

[illegible]

HARRISON (AM).



HARLEM'S DANCE



CHEAPEST LIVING



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

HARLEM'S PEOPLE AT WORK—ON JOBS THAT KEEP THEM IN THEIR PLACE



1



# COTTAGE CITY

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* AARON SISKIND

Aaron Siskind

*Untitled*

Tabernacle City (also called Cottage City)

Photo League Exhibition Board

Gelatin silver print mounted on  
an original exhibition board  
(hand lettering in ink added later)  
20 x 16 inches (board)

International Museum of Photography  
at George Eastman House



# TABERNACLE CITY: PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON SISKIND (1940)

Henry Beetle Hough

Aaron Siskind produced the photo series *Tabernacle City* while residing in the cottage community during the summers he spent on Martha's Vineyard in 1939 and 1940. *Tabernacle City* is a collection of pictures of a Methodist Retreat called the Camp Meeting Association, which was founded in 1855 on the island of Martha's Vineyard. In addition to making, editing, and sequencing the photographs, Siskind also wrote the essays, *Folk Spirit* and *Architecture*, and the ways in which remnants of its earlier history were still visible in the seemingly idyllic architecture. Siskind exhibited *Tabernacle City* at the Photo League in New York City from January 1940 to January 1941, and at the Dukes County Historical Society, Edgartown, Massachusetts, the following summer. In the February 1941 issue of *Photo Notes*, Siskind revealed his intention for the photographs: "A study of the expression of a folk-spirit through architecture." Siskind and his friend Alex R. Siskind, an architect and designer, produced a four-page catalogue with two short essays to accompany the exhibition. The *Architecture* introduction was written by the celebrated Martha's Vineyard author and editor of *The Vineyard Gazette*, Henry Beetle Hough. Hough's essay presents a brief sketch of the history of Cottage City, which includes Siskind's commentary on framing his photo series in a cultural context. Later Siskind cited the *Tabernacle City* exhibition as a significant departure in the development of his personal vision. At the time, a publishing company, the Photo League, the Photo League felt that, in this meditative and formal series which had begun to introduce a community community, Siskind had abandoned the progressive social cause. Because of the time that passed collecting the exhibition of *Tabernacle City*, Siskind disbanded his *Feature Group* production of two hundred and twenty from the Photo League.

Once the Cottage City of America was advertised far and wide, and those who had not seen it in its August gaiety had missed an experience. That was in the seventies, and a resurgent American spirit was finding joy in singular little dwellings near the seashore, turreted and balconied, with jigsaw trim and all manner of delicate although not always subtle flourishes.

The old name has long disappeared, and taste and style have marched on through the decades, but the cottages still stand in the town of Oak Bluffs, on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, and they are more instead of less interesting with each year that passes. The community is a unique, even a priceless, study in Americana, and in the expression of a folk spirit through architecture.

Although it seemed to emerge suddenly, full blown, the cottage community had its period of germination. A little more than a century ago, a handful of Methodists drove into a tract of remote and deserted countryside at the rim of the island of Martha's Vineyard, and staked

out a camp meeting ground. The first camp meeting was held in 1835, and there was a single circle of rude tents around a preacher's stand built largely of driftwood. From their daily lives the campers brought a hardy and practical disposition, for most of them were from the whaling port of Edgartown. They slept in straw on the ground, and cooked their meals over open fires. But the significant thing, as it turned out afterward, was that they had a good time. Their communion with God and nature was rounded out with joy.

In subsequent summers, visitors began to come from afar to see or to participate in the Martha's Vineyard camp meeting, most of them middle class men and women belonging to Methodist churches in cities and towns near the Atlantic seaboard. What it all would have come to in ordinary course, no one can say, but the ending of the Civil War was marked by a quickening which soon elevated the camp ground into the rarefied atmosphere of a boom. Special trains and special steamers ran, and the August meeting was a national institution.

The impulse toward freedom found satisfaction in the delightfully informal life of the grove and camp ground where all ages and sexes mingled without restraint; the long suppression was thrown off in outbursts of hymn and prayer; and the urge for speculation found an outlet in the purchase of cottage lots. For tents had already acquired wooden floors and frameworks, and now they were to become cottages.

Visitors came early to enjoy the swimming and salt air, the sociability, the games of croquet. The holiday impulse could not be suppressed, and indeed there was no wish to suppress it. As one of the founders of the camp meeting said, "Religion never was designed to make pleasure less." Everyone must have a cottage, and the cottage was to be a summer home, embodying the spirit of the time and of the place.

Most of the owners were of moderate means, but the cottages would have been small in any case, for they

replaced tents and were inspired by tents. They had the same wide doors, and they huddled together closely, as the tents had huddled for protection against the elements and for sociability in the wilderness. But they also had Gothic windows and churchly railings, especially in the beginning.

The sources of most of the decorative designs and uses of material may be traced, but their combination and their application was wholly instinctive and spontaneous. The aspiration of the cottage owners, the spirit of their outdoor life in summer, the pleasure they enjoyed together, took this form because it was the one appropriate form for them to take. More and more ornamental the miniature houses became as one cottage vied another in the general manifestation of the time, but the religious influence was seldom wholly lost.

An entirely worldly summer resort development appeared just over the property line from the camp ground, and the cottages here were larger and more elaborate than most of those on the ground itself, but they usually lacked the spirit of the others. Occasionally some senator or business man or governor built a cottage embellished in some grand way to betoken the dignity of his position.

In recent years the cottage community has been much sought by artists, but they have usually stressed the more florid or obvious ornamentation, and the miniature spirit. The first serious study of the cottages is that represented in the photographs of Mr. Aaron Siskind. Taken over a long period of time and based upon close observation, these photographs are revealing. Their appeal to the sense of form and line excites fresh interest and can hardly fail to lead everyone interested in manifestations of folk spirit to see this American creation, this gesture of a vanished era, with altogether new eyes.



35



Sid Grossman  
*Installation photographs of*  
*Aaron Siskind's Tabernacle City exhibition*  
 at the Photo League, 31 East 21st Street,  
 New York City (January-February 1941)

Gelatin silver prints  
 7 3/4 x 9 5/8 inches (each print)  
 Private collection



1989-90

Aaron Siskind

*Untitled*

Tabernacle City (also called Cottage City)  
Photo League Exhibition Board

Gelatin silver prints mounted on an  
original exhibition board  
20 x 16 inches board

International Museum of Photography  
at George Eastman House





As well, Siskind's "Forest" series photographs scenes of the original "suburban" homes from the Photo League's installation, displayed in the original room and explanatory text. He also photographed and mounted photographic boards and signs for the exhibition and displayed them in the same room as the photographic exhibition boards of the Photo League's first exhibition at the Eastman House.

1932-1933

Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled*  
Tabenacle City (also called Cottage City)  
Photo League Exhibition Board

Gelatin silver prints mounted on an  
original exhibition board  
20 x 16 inches (board)  
International Museum of Photography  
at George Eastman House



Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled*  
 Tabernacle City (also called Cottage City)  
 Dukes County Historical Society  
 Exhibition Board

Gelatin silver prints mounted on  
 an original exhibition board  
 15 x 12 inches (board)  
 Dukes County Historical Society  
 Vineyard Museum





The photograph is a black and white print of a building facade. The upper portion features a decorative cornice with a repeating pattern of white, stylized, downward-pointing finials against a dark background. Below this, a large, dark, triangular shadow is cast onto a light-colored wall. To the right, a window with a dark frame and multiple panes is visible. The lower part of the image shows a dark, textured base, possibly a foundation or a lower wall section, with some vertical lines and a small, dark, rectangular object near the center.

(93-9-10) Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled*  
 Tabernacle City (also called Cottage City)  
 Dukes County Historical Society  
 Exhibition Board

Gelatin silver print mounted on an  
 original exhibition board  
 15 x 12 inches (board)  
 Dukes County Historical Society/  
 Vineyard Museum

# **The END of the CIVIC REPERTORY THEATRE**

**AARON SISKIND**



**1943** Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled*  
The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre

Gelatin silver print mounted  
on an original exhibition board,  
with hand lettering in ink  
20 x 16 inches (board)  
Aaron Siskind Foundation/  
Robert Mann Gallery



## INTERVIEW WITH AARON SISKIND (1963)

Jaromir Stephany

Jaromir Stephany conducted one of the earliest recorded interviews with Aaron Siskind in February of 1963 in New York City, while looking at slides of Siskind's work. At the time, Stephany was studying film and photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology with Beaumont Newhall and was working in the Technical Eastman House. Stephany became interested in producing an oral history for the Photo League but had trouble finding funding for his project. Nevertheless, he independently interviewed both Siskind and Waldo L. Loomis. Portions of the Siskind interview were used as voiceover for the 1967 film *The Photographers of Aaron Siskind* by Ronald Nameth. Stephany had first become acquainted with Siskind through Henry Harkins Smith in 1961 while he was pursuing an M.F.A. in photography at Indiana University. Stephany currently teaches at the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

41

of Aaron Siskind

**JS:** The first group here, the documentary series—if you just gave a very indefinite date so that we can...

**AS:** Actually, the documentary work didn't begin with the Photo League, but it took place all the time I was associated with it. I just began photography as an accident. Someone gave me a little camera. I used it one summer in Bermuda and it was very satisfying, so I traded it in and bought this Voigtlander Avis. I was teaching [elementary school in New York City] then, so I just worked once in a while, and by myself. I didn't know anybody who was interested in photography. I didn't bother to read anything about it. I just worked a little. But, I was interested in this sort of social documentation and I happened to wander into the [New York Workers Film and] Photo League once, and I saw some pictures and I liked them. They were very moving to me, and so I joined.

I worked with them for a while, and then after a year or two, I actually got an enlarger. They taught me how to enlarge. I remember one of the men there came and set me up. I remember another fellow went and helped me buy my first enlarging lens ...at first actually I used my Voigtlander Avis on a little box to enlarge with. I didn't bother very much. Then, after I was there a while — I wasn't very young as beginning photographers go, so I was fairly sophisticated — we began to do these documentary things, I left the [New York Workers Film and] Photo League after I was there for a few years. I left for certain personal reasons, ideology reasons. Later on, I rejoined on the condition that they would not involve me in any organizational work, that I would just be involved in what we call "production." I came back and organized a thing called the Feature Group. I got four or five people to join in. They were all beginners. Some of them have become quite well known since, like Morris Engel, who has done some beautiful movies, and [Harold] Corsini and Jack Manning, who is quite a top-notch magazine photographer, and there were a few other people. We sort of trained ourselves. I devised exercises in realism and translating meaning into pictures, and then we made a few simple documents. First, we made this Bowery study, called *Dead End*. The idea was easy. We just worked outdoors mostly, never inside or anything. And then we did another very nice thing — I think two of us did it. It was called *A Portrait of a Tenement*. We made the portrait really by just "coming on" to the building down the street. We got a contact with a family, then we moved up the stairs, and then we made a complete study of this little family, three people, sort of foreign born, living in a very clean, sparse sort of house. We did it very simply, photographing each room.

JS: Were you familiar with the work of the F.S.A. [Farm Security Administration] during this period?

AS: The F.S.A. work, I think, didn't begin to bloom until the late '30s, and we didn't know it. This early work was being done in the middle '30s, I would say. And also, we started the Harlem Document about the middle '30s, and started working. We knew documentary work of some sort, we knew the work that Berenice Abbott was doing in New York. And we had seen some of the pictures by Walker Evans. In fact, I had seen them even before I was interested in photography, in *Hound and Horn*. I don't remember the F.S.A. pictures at all, at that period. I don't know exactly when they started, but they weren't making them very public then.

JS: They were doing most of their work in 1936, '37.

AS: Then, this one was from a little document I wanted to make myself. I call it Broadway Ballyhoo. In other words, I wanted to just show the whole vulgarity of the Broadway scene. This one right here is from the Harlem Document, but this one here was from the Most Crowded Block in the World, as well as this one.

This one here, St. Joseph's House, is another small document that we started to make, but never finished. This is a house that the Catholic Workers' Movement runs as a kind of a settlement, and place where they live. Unfortunately, some of the people who were working with me then were too communist-oriented, so that they found very inimical to them the primitive communism of these people, because it was unrealistic, in their point of view, in terms of economic theory and so forth. It was like a throw-back to medieval times. So we never really finished this either. And, very few pictures came out of it.

But the whole documentary interest, as far as I was concerned, at that time began to get transferred to architectural material. For quite a few years, working weekends, I used to go out to Bucks County and I worked with an architectural historian [Charlotte Stryker Perry]. I made a fairly complete study of the development of architecture in Bucks County and the various styles, outside and inside — outdoors, interiors, things of that sort. It never was published because of text difficulty. Also, even before the Bucks County thing, I had gotten interested in a wonderful architecture community on Martha's Vineyard [Tabernacle City also called Cottage City], a community that isn't indigenous architecturally. It's not colonial in style. It was a community of small buildings around a tabernacle that originally were built to take the places of the tents that were used in this community. And so, these things were very simple houses except that they were ornamented with ...what do you call that tracery work, woodwork ... what's the name for it?

JS: Not gingerbread?

AS: Yes, gingerbread, that's right, but very excessive. I got very involved in that. I [would] go up to the Vineyard in the summers, summer after summer. Some of the pictures — this is just one interior — some of the pictures that I made with this actually go back to probably the middle '30s, even '34. And then, I probably worked on it for a period of seven or eight years. I took some pictures of the activity in the community, meetings in the tabernacle, the people singing, and the people sitting around on the porches — nothing much goes on there. And then, I finally had an exhibition at the Photo League of those things, and it was not very well received by my fellow members.

You see, the early things were purely documentary, factual in the sense that Walker Evans' are. They are like social documents, in which you are very conscious not of the thing as a picture, but of the thing as a scene, almost as you would see it. And then there was kind of an injection of a thing, which was probably natural to me, of an interesting formal element, and that's where the architecture came in. Everything was still very straight, but the formal elements were very accented. You can see that from this interior, how simple and formal the thing is. During the same period I got interested in ironwork around New York City. There, I was even more strongly interested in the formal values, except that everything is taken straight. It's simple, but the formal elements are even more greatly accented.

From then on, when you get into '43 and '44, there is a great change that takes place. This great change was a result not of any decision that I made — intellectual decision — and this is very important, what I am saying now. It was the result of a picture experience which almost, I would say, sort of surprised me as to its meaning to me ...and that's what changed the whole course of the thing.

During one of the years I was on the Vineyard — I think it was '43 probably — I did a whole batch of pictures. I didn't know why I was doing them. And then, when I examined them that year, it was revealed to me that I had made pictures that had a meaning very basic to my whole life. Now, the fact that you could take a picture in a pleasant way, without thinking too much, and then suddenly find that this reveals terrific meaning to you, and also that these pictures have a consistency of meaning to me, showed me that I had gotten at something very fundamental. So I decided to continue to work that way, because I was very stirred by it, by this whole business. I'm not dramatizing this one iota. This actually was so. It actually, as far as my feelings were concerned, was even more dramatic. In working in the documentary style, I was always trying to search and find out what kind of meaning you could get in a picture of that kind. I was beginning to feel that I wasn't getting it, as far as I was concerned. I felt that probably, I wasn't getting anything really personal, really powerful, really special. And I also, in examining it, found that I wasn't made for it, really, because my documentary pictures are very quiet and very formal. Look at how isolated these two people are, and how well placed they are. That's not right for that kind of picture. Look at these two boys, and these things. It's very formal. Look at these two men walking, and the way that whole thing is.

**JS: That's what struck me.**

AS: It's very strange, isn't it? And that's the way they are. It's simple enough, the formalism isn't pushing, but there is a strong tendency. That's probably why I got so much pleasure out of working in the architectural material, and went to a lot of trouble to do it. There's something even more important, as for photography, and photography as an art, that happened when I did these pictures in '43. I noticed that I was photographing objects in a setting. I noticed that always, in all the pictures I did. And I did this without consciously deciding it, although I laid some of these objects in places — something I don't do anymore, actually have never done since. I found that the total effect was a picture on a flat plane. I wiped out deep space. I had objects which were all organic looking objects, shapes, and these were in a geometrical setting, or flat. So what I found I was doing was, I was getting away from naturalistic space — and that was one of the ways I was getting away from it — and also that the objects themselves no longer functioned as objects. Although I would find a hunk of wood and put it there, it was no longer a piece of wood. It was still the wood, photographed sharp, but you felt it more as a shape. And this shape might suggest a bone shape, or it might suggest an animal shape. So, it became transformed from an object to a force, and this force was acting in a plane, in a setting that was no longer realistic. So, I didn't have to worry about the interference of any other

objects which would be real and would disturb it. So you see, I was operating on a plane of ideas. I was wiping out real space and somehow making you feel that the objects were forces so that there's a whole shift from description to idea, meaning.

And another thing that struck me was the similarity of these pictures, the fact that all these pictures contained a formal element and an organic element. And yet, the whole thing was surprising to me because it was sort of symbolic of the essential duality of our nature, which is something, of course, that I was very much concerned about. I was always concerned about it in my poetry, which I used to write. And so I struck something I thought was fundamental, and so I decided to give it a go — not quite that way. I decided to go back to another place and to work without preparing any program, not deciding what I was going to take, but just put myself into a certain place and look and make a picture as it came, and see what came out of it. I did that up in Gloucester.

I went to Gloucester instead of going back to the Vineyard because we had no gasoline then, it was during the war. So I went to Gloucester because I could get around on a bus. It turned out to be very fortunate, because it is a very rich place in material. And I just worked very systematically. Every morning I'd go out and shoot six pictures. I would take 12 sheets of film with me, and that was a very stirring experience, because I found that I would go out to some place. I would go out to a wall, or any place. I don't know how I would decide on the first place, but after you've decided on the first place, the second place is a continuation. You either go back or you don't go back, or you go next door to it. I would find a very interesting thing. I found that this was a very, very exhausting way of working. I would take these six pictures. Probably, on the average, I would work maybe two to three hours. I would move very, very little, you know, sometimes take the six pictures within an area of a block, or maybe within an area of a walk or within an area of one street. And when I got through, I was worn out. It was fantastic. I did nothing, and something was going on. The important thing about this is that although these are pictures of objects, these are pictures in which there was a terrific emotional involvement. There must have been.

When I think back, I think, well what evidence do I have of it? I have the remembrance of being tired, of being glad I was through. I have sort of comical evidences of terrific absorption. Like, I smoke all the time. I remember once a guy came up and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hey, bud, you're burning up." See, I was under the [focusing] cloth.

So there was terrific absorption, really being unconscious of anything else but the picture taking. These are good conditions for anybody to work under. I also know I was really involved with these things, because I found it was practically impossible for me to change the object which I had found. I was thinking about what evidence I had of that — I know I didn't change anything, but I tried to wonder why, and what was my feeling. I remember once kicking something out of my way that was on the walk, that I didn't want, and turning around as though to see whether anybody had seen me do it. Of course, that really is stupid, but there was this kind of belief in the thing itself.

And that's another thing, I think. Although these are pictures which are called abstract in their shapes and they are abstracted from the natural setting, there is a real emotional contact with the thing itself, and a belief in the thing itself. So I am not merely using these things as something, it's not an intellectual exercise.

Well, then these early rock pictures came out of an experience of photographing Pre-Colombian sculpture during the following winter [for Betty Parson's Wakefield Gallery.] I think I told you that the effect of that was so strong that when I went back, I saw all these images which I hadn't seen the previous summer, although I had walked all over these rocks, all the time, and



sat there and so forth. And suddenly, they were there. This, of course, is very important because it reminds me of the fact that every artist is influenced by art. This is very natural and this is very good and really important ...that art begets art and even the early documentary pictures probably were influenced by other pictures I had seen; here is definite evidence of it. Of course, I think I always have remained very true to my documentary training. Although these rocks are definitely images — there are heads and there are figures — they are also rocks. The rock is never destroyed.

45

This also points to another very important quality in all my work. You remember I talked to you about the early pictures that revealed the whole basic duality of man ...and (about) the duality that I felt in regard to the geometric and the organic. And here is another aspect of it, which points up the essential ambiguity of all my pictures. In the pictures, you have the object. But you have in the object, or superimposed on it, a thing I would call the image, which contains my idea. And these things are present at one and the same time and there is a business going on, and a conflict, a tension.

As a matter of fact, it was very rewarding to see how Tom Hess has just written a little introduction to this spread they're giving me in *Portfolio* magazine. In one paragraph there, he got it perfect, that's all. He saw that there is this ambiguity, this conflict, this tension that the object is there and yet it's not an object. It's something else. It has meaning, and the meaning is partly the object's meaning, but mostly my meaning. And whether that's good or bad, I don't know, but that's the essential nature of all the photographs that you'll see all the time. Sometimes the nature of the image is apparent, sometimes it isn't. Sometimes the object, also, is not recognizable as object, and that's not because the object may be distorted tonally a little bit. But it's not recognizable mostly because it is maybe out of context or because the experience of the viewer is limited — he has never seen an object like that.

But in most cases I found that some people recognize some of the objects, and some people recognize others. I think that depends upon their experience in life.

Well, maybe we'd better get another group of slides out. But remember, the original rock photographs [1944] were all like sculpture, and the sculpture was very related to what we would call primitive figure sculpture. Then, this rock here was done about five years later — then this rock picture is also sculpture. It's a part of a stone wall, and it looks like sculpture, but it's a kind of modern sculpture, you might say. It's almost as though a man had purposely taken some rocks and set them in a certain way to make a formal relationship, using the term formal with its basic meaning of form.

Now the last rock pictures finally become ...something that is very similar to the other pictures I've done. They are neither formal arrangements, nor are they pictorial, nor are they figures or anything of that sort. They represent an emotional involvement, or a resolution of a lot of feeling I have about life. And, as a matter of fact, finally — as I was working on them — I realized that the thing I was concerned about in them just came while I was working in '54. Like this one over here, I was concerned with this whole business of contiguity. The whole "realization" of the importance of how people feel in relation to each other ...the nearness and the touch, the relation. The difference in the relationship, say between a mother and her children and how she touches them and how she hovers near them and how a father does is completely different. And how conscious and consciously different we feel, and how differently you would feel if, instead of my sitting here facing you this way, I was sitting next to you. How I would feel, for instance, if I didn't know you and suddenly we sat down next to each other in a train and we felt each other's arm.

And then a lot of images began to arise in my mind as I worked on that — of certain people I knew, and especially of one family. And so I began to feel the importance of how these rocks hovered over each other, touched each other, pushed against each other, see, this whole business of next to each other — or what I call, contiguity. Then I felt I had gotten something that was unique. ...It was a document, you see, it was documentary. It was a document of my philosophy, a projection of my philosophy, and I was able to do it without distorting the rocks too much. [But] I did distort them. I had to wipe out, to some extent, their physical reality. In other words, they had to become darker, so that the detail, to some extent, was lost. And then, of course, there were certain other interesting things which turned up. I was doing the whole business of the negative space, so that you had that operating in there, which made the whole thing much more interesting. But, that's a very interesting development. Here's one from 1949, you see, which is a combination of taking a rock picture, which is like a statue, but it's on a flat plane. And then this use of this line cutting it, making it again more picture-like ...almost arbitrary, cutting it in, and so forth. Of course, it worked with that material. But that whole rock development was very interesting. And now, I'm going to Rome where I am going to come across an awful lot of rocks, but these will be cultural rocks. It'll be very interesting to see what I can absorb and do with them.

JS: Do you ever consciously think of the anthropomorphic qualities of some of the shapes that you use?

AS: Oh yeah, I feel them. I feel them very strongly at times. Sometimes, I mean, I think it looks like an animal ...looks like something. I just feel it as a kind of force or an energy, or something of that sort.

This one is a very interesting one because again this picture theme keeps recurring in my things all the time. I don't know how many of them we have here, but they are usually two figures. And usually one is bigger than the other, more dominant. And this is a mother and child thing. It comes out of feeling and I find them very often. Of course, this is a little different. This is very alive to me. It's like three figures, to me, the Holy Family. You have two figures holding a little figure in there. There are a great many like that. And here is another one, you see. The big figure with the little one inside it.

A lot of them, I don't know what they mean — to tell you the truth. Here's another two figures. Right here, you see. These are more even, on a kind of equal basis. And those are what I would call conversations. When you feel a picture right ...when you get it right, after you take it or you decide to take it ...and you examine it, sometimes you come on something and you decide you're going to take it. You look at it a little more, you find that there is a terrific amount of internal stuff that supports the original feeling you had about it and this conversation picture is just two figures that result from some torn paper, two torn posters. They were like notices from the Board of Health. And they were on a door. And when you get in there you can see that these were notices about how to induce vomiting as a result of rat poisoning, in three languages. So the whole thing is unbelievable ...and then everything supports it, because of the way the wall was marked. I was able to produce a very dim ...and canopy over these two figures

Then you get into more sophisticated things, that are definitely the result of art. Like this one here, you see, which is a desecrated poster, a torn poster of some sort. [But] the way in which you work black and white, and the nature of the figures [are] very related to modern art of the period about 20 years ago. The whole way in which it involves tonalities of balance

**JS: I found this one very strange just because of the strange space that comes through. And then, you start realizing that it is a space that is an illusion, a very obvious illusion.**

AS: Yeah, well, this is illusionary because you have the real space... Just these figures in a landscape ...it really doesn't interest me very much.

You know, when you get figures like this reclining figure ...and this very active figure with this line, then the thing, of course, that's always interested me a great deal is the whole business of disintegration. And to me, it's not [just] disintegration but integration, too. Things are in a becoming or unbecoming stage and you have these fragments.

**JS: I think that when some people have read the photograph — I think in Aperture or something like that — they found the letters very important. Were they?**

AS: They were never important to me, no. I mean, I saw it as a fragmentation picture. Of course, there are endless fragmentations you could take. I liked the orderliness of it. As a matter of fact, I have a painting that is a collage done by a neo-plastic painter, Charmion Von Wiegand. I can't remember whether she gave me that painting — or whether I saw that painting — before I made this picture or after. It may be that she gave it to me before, I don't know. But there's a very strong similarity, a very strong similarity.

Maybe there is something to the beauty of the surface and things like that. I've always been concerned in getting that surface and those tonalities related to the idea, and that's why over the years when I print them and reprint them, they always change. Of course, sometimes to convert some of this original material to a picture is quite difficult. Of course, the original material is pretty difficult.

It's hard to contain all this stuff when you look back on it. Looking over your life, talking about all the women you've been married to, and all the women you haven't been married to, it's almost exhausting.

**JS: I mentioned to Walker Evans whether he might be interested in the idea of an exhibition of his work. He said no, too much work. He didn't want to be involved with it.**

AS: It's very interesting to talk about Walker ...he's, of course, one of the few photographers that has meaning to me ...how pretty consistent his work has been. Almost, you might comment on the sameness. And when I look at my stuff, I think I've gotten a reaction from some people. They felt that there was a continual repetition ...it's unbelievable to me.

I've always felt, to me, nothing ever was the same. Even though I might take 50 flat wall pictures, to me they are all very different. But, I'm not even talking about that. I'm talking about going through all that document stuff and the architecture stuff, and then getting on that flat plane and the variety within that. And the whole, you know, even the treatment of the rocks — so varied. You only have a small bit of it. And then going back and doing architecture in Mexico, and how different that is. How a new element of mystery has been put into a straight photograph. Just a complete, utterly straight photograph of a building.

Well, I think these last years have been years of a lot of turmoil and change and trying things. This whole business with the divers is. And then, the feet, and then at the same time working with the other material — so very unsettling. And, I suppose you always feel unsettled, but I

think I feel much more that way now than ever. Even within the divers series, I know that the early ones were. Although very early in the working it became an idea, this whole business of Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation. The early ones were, I would say, very pure and classic in their form. So that, for instance, when Tom Hess saw them, he used them, reproduced them, but his concept of them was almost as though they were figures out of Tintoretto, or something like that. But then they suddenly became something else. Like these three, these funny forms, these funny guys, these strange people. This guy with this thing on his back. They got very baroque, very unpure, very unclassical. So it's quite a change there. Of course, there were dozens, but that represents pretty well the change in them. And of course, there is a whole area of work that I don't think you have here, that does concern me and is of interest to me. But, I don't think I've done it right. I was working with plant forms and especially with trees, making these trees, and limbs, and branches, things like that, really come to life. It's almost like making the trees human. And, I've been recently working on the nudes, you know. And I'm moving the nude into the other direction, using the solid form and things of that sort.

So there is a real turmoil, and maybe a confusion. Certainly this whole "feet" thing involves a great variety of feelings. Sometimes I become conscious of doing these things like this, so that you have a pure form, so that it almost is lovely. And then some of the others, which are almost obscene. And taking them out of context and working with the context. It's almost like I don't know what the hell I'm doing ...what I'm trying to find out. So it's very confusing.

JS: It's very interesting.

AS: Yeah, they still interest me. Actually, I think my work interests me more than almost any photographer I know, not more than any artist I know, by far. I think I pretty much have the same feeling about the whole thing that Weston had. He said he found painting much more interesting an art than photography. Well, I like a lot of the other work. I like Paul Strand. I think he's very great, but I find it sort of dull to me. It's all the same with Weston, except that I find some of his very stirring.

Well, there was a whole period — I think it was 1960 — that I think was a pretty productive year for me and a very good year and it was really the production of just a few weeks time. And the pictures have a completely different quality. There is a kind of, I would say, utter simplicity about them, but they are all pretty strong. They're simple, but they're very simple. I think there were one or two others of this group or this period that I sent in to *Photography in the Fine Arts*. And they sent them back to me and asked me to try again next year, that I might have better luck. I guess maybe they are a little hard for them to take. Especially one like this, which, I think, is a very powerful picture. I mean, it's just pure fire, you know.

Of course, I have always been excited by the writing on the wall. I suppose it's ever since I read the Bible and the whole business of the writing up on the wall. And to come across writings on the wall that are very sensitive writings, physically ...the way it's been put on, very unself-consciously. And it looks like it means something, and you'll never know what it means. Of course, the problem is to make a picture out of it. And I think it works because I've included it into this marvelous, wonderful shape that was there, of course. And I've had to control the tone so that it really is whole, but it's kind of like that to me. And because of my memory, it's rough Jewish writing. I can remember my father writing. I've always liked writings on the wall that become pure fantasy. It gives you sort of joy. I remember finding one that was marvelous. It was like a complete painting and it was made up out of arrows which apparently was on a big tin. And it was above a door. Somebody must have needed the piece of tin



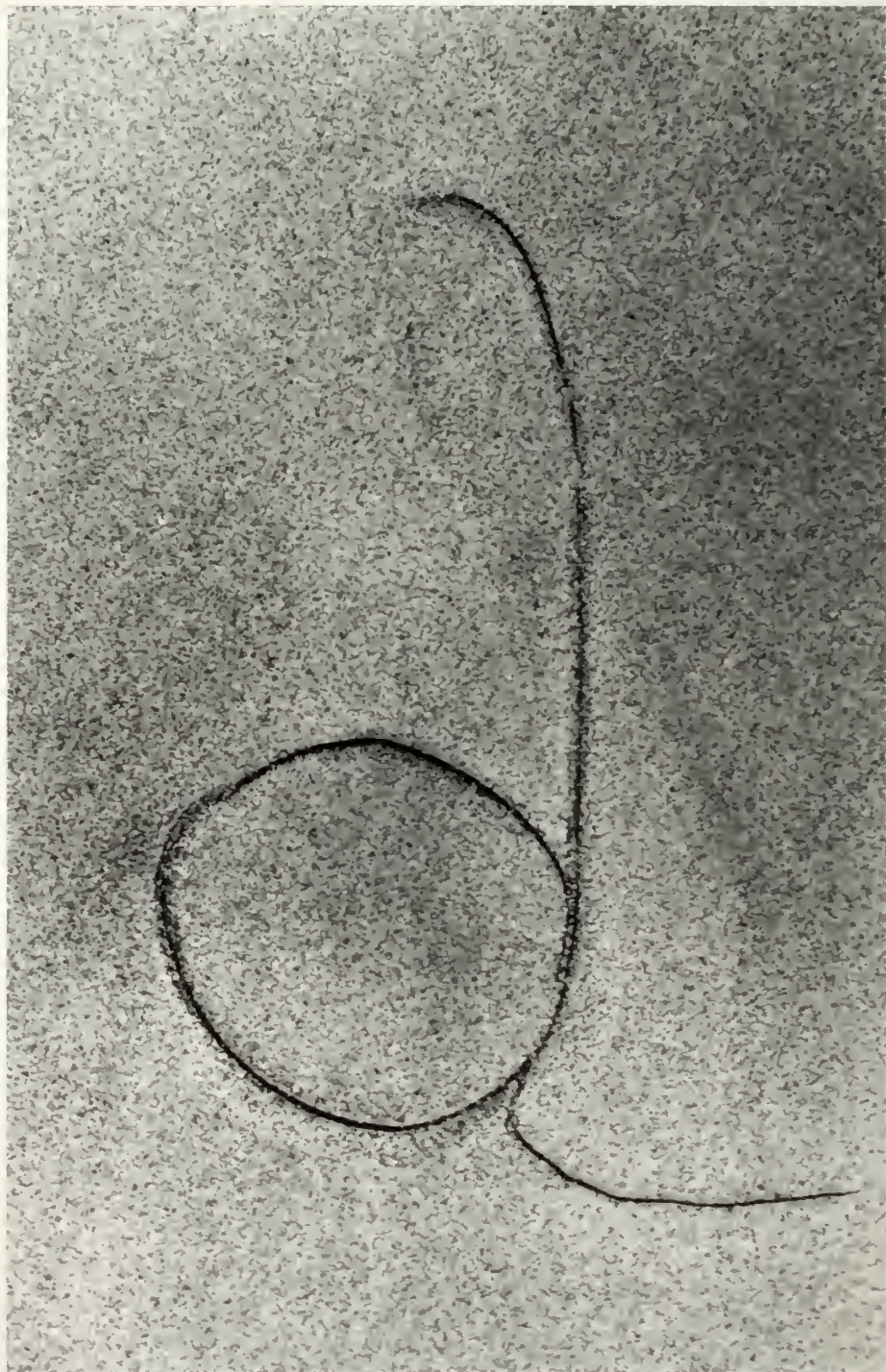
to fill in the space ...and they put it up there. And these arrows were actually crazy, probably. You know the arrows were also labels — north, west — but they were going all directions, west going in two ways. So you have all these arrows and they make such a marvelous picture, so beautifully sort of organized. And apparently it's a document; it's a record of maybe a discussion that some guys had or something. And in the end it's like a pure fantasy, because you can never figure it out.

And I guess that's the way it is with the pictures: you can never figure them out. And actually, the pictures that I can figure out are the ones I lose interest in. If they're compelling in some way so that you really want to know what they mean — because they deserve knowing — and you can't find out, it really keeps you interested in them.

**JS:** There's a lot of work that would really keep me interested a long time. One thing is rather strange. Just arranging them in order, and suddenly I came up with this one. It was the last photograph you made that I had access to, and I saw this switch, as you mentioned before, the tonal qualities here being so different. I was kind of wondering whether this was a possibility of ...has this been carried out in any other photography that you've done recently?

**AS:** I think it came out that way because the material just came that way, you see, came out that way. I'm never worried about things having a disagreeable tone. Sometimes, I worked for it. I remember years ago doing a study of the Civic Repertory Theatre here, and they were tearing it down. It was kind of a sewer passing a building on 14th street. Oh, this goes a way back to maybe 1935-1939 — another part of my documentary. So I made a very methodical study of the facade and then, since it was a study of destruction, I found elements of destruction. And I remember I printed them, and showed them at the Photo League. And because I had this theme of destruction, I printed them very dark. I was technically very unskilled. And I remember — can't remember his name, but later on he became a *Life* photographer. It wasn't Eliot [Elisofon], it was another guy — objecting very seriously, "Why the hell did you print them so dark?" You know me, you know, a young photographer. "Well, that's what I want to say, that's what they mean." Of course, they were ridiculous. They were too dark, so that I was destroying the picture itself. I made it impossible for him to get the dark mood. ...But I think it was a good thing that I did it because I was really concerned with relating the print quality to the idea, the tones to the idea, rather than always getting a full range of tones and everything ...beautiful surface and toning and things like that. Which is very nice, but sometimes it's terribly irrelevant.

Now I think that is kind of a dead end, making everything look beautiful.



1008 Aaron Siskind  
*Seaweed 2*  
Gelatin silver print  
7 1/6 x 4 5/8  
Robert Klein Gallery

## THE DRAMA OF OBJECTS (1945)

Aaron Siskind

51

*The impetus toward creating more permanent and carefully composed images of form in Siskind's photographs of still-lives, natural details in Tabernacle City, and urban collages of objects of everyday use took the form of the New England Vineyard in the summer of 1943. Siskind visited the Gloucester fishing village in 1944, producing photographs of natural details of discarded work-gear and fishing tools around a fish market located on the harbor in Tabernacle City, Massachusetts. In his essay "The Drama of Objects," first published in *Memorial Photographs* (vol. 2, no. 3) of *Art* (1945, 8-10), he articulated what he recognized as a "new departure" in the photographic field, one that transcended the previous aesthetic. In this probing and articulate piece, Siskind discussed the relationship between the form of the photograph and his earlier documentary practice.*

Last year I spent the summer at the famous New England fishing village of Gloucester, and made a series of photographic still-lives of rotting strands of rope, a discarded glove, two fish-heads, and other commonplace objects which I found kicking around on the wharves and beaches. For the first time in my life subject matter, as such, had ceased to be of primary importance. Instead, I found myself involved in the relationships of these objects, so much so that these pictures turned out to be deeply moving and personal experiences.

This work was a new departure for me. I used one camera and one lens throughout (familiar enough to be an extension of my hand and eye), a limited number of types of film, no filters. The daily working time (2 1/2 hours) was as regular as the weather permitted (it did), and I left the studio each day with six pictures to be taken and film enough to give each picture three exposures. The purpose of this procedure was to clear my way for complete absorption in the problem — and this is about the heart of what I want to say.

Curiously enough, these still-lives were an outgrowth of my documentary practice. Producing a photographic document involves preparation in excess. There is first the examination of the idea of the project. Then the visits to the scene, the casual conversations, and more formal interviews — talking, and listening, and looking, looking. You read what's been written, and dig out the facts and figures for your own writing. Follows the discussions to arrive at a point of view and its crystallization into a





Aaron Siskind  
*Gloucester 16*

Gelatin silver print  
13 15 16 x 10 1 4 inches  
Museum of Art,  
Rhode Island School of Design  
Mr. and Mrs. Julius Bloom  
Photography Fund

statement of aim. And finally, the pictures themselves, each one planned, talked, taken, and examined in terms of the whole.

I worked pretty much this way in making *Harlem Document*. However, I cautioned my co-workers on this job to become as passive as possible when they faced the subject, to de-energize for the moment their knowledge of the ideas about the subject, to let the facts fall away and at that crucial moment to permit the subject to speak for itself and in its own way. That's how the pictures reproduced on these pages were made.

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 the simple, precise work 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. And they shall continue to carry me along until these ideas begin to become fixed, resulting in clichés. When that happens, I shall have to chuck them and start out freshly again.

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. We have been conditioned to expect. And indeed it is socially useful that we agree on the function of objects.

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. Its elements were not put together, with whatever skill or taste or ingenuity. It came into being as an instant act of sight.

Pressed for the meaning of these pictures, I should answer, obliquely, that they are informed with animism — not so much that these inanimate objects resemble the creatures of the animal world (as indeed they often do), but rather that they suggest the energy we usually associate with them. Aesthetically, they pretend to the resolution of these sometimes fierce, sometimes gentle, but always conflicting forces.

Photographically speaking, there is no compromise with reality. The objects are rendered sharp, fully textured, and undistorted (my documentary training). But the potent fact is not any particular object; but rather that the meaning of these objects exists only in their relationships with other objects, or in their isolation (which comes to the same thing, for what we feel most about an isolated object is that it has been deprived of relationship).

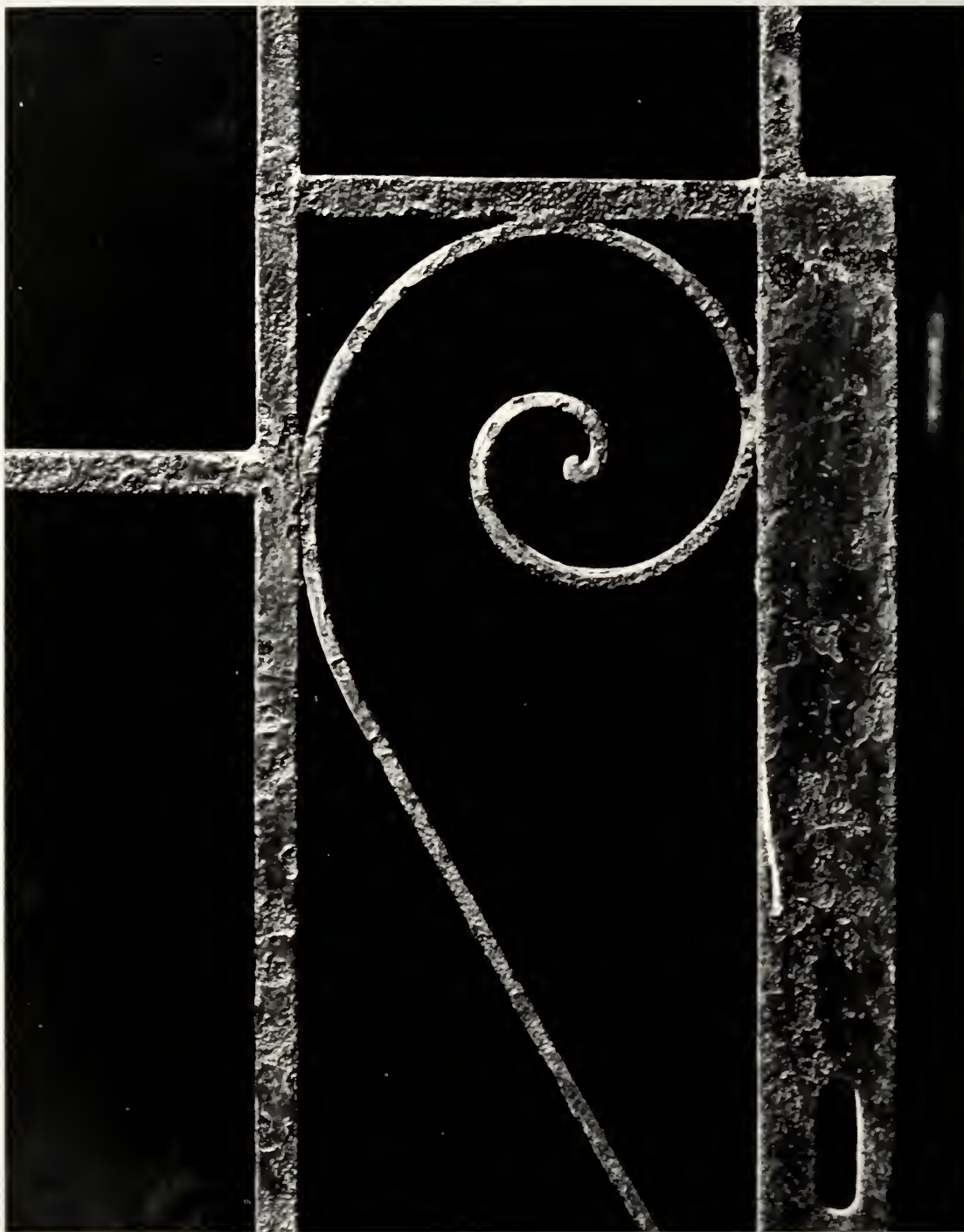
These photographs appear to be a representation of a deep need for order. Time and again "live" forms play their little part against a backdrop of strict rectangular space — a flat, unyielding space. They cannot escape back into the depth of perspective. The four edges of the rectangle are absolute bounds.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

Essentially, then, these photographs are psychological in character. They may or may not be a good thing. But it does seem to me that this kind of picture satisfies a need. I may be wrong, but the essentially illustrative nature of most documentary photography, and the worship of the object per se, in our best nature photography, is not enough to satisfy the man of today, compounded as he is of Christ, Freud, and Marx. The interior drama is the meaning of the exterior event. And each man is an essence and a symbol.

There are, I suppose, many ways of getting at reality. Our province is this small bit of space; and only by operating within that limited space — endlessly exploring the relationships within it — can we contribute our special meanings that come out of man's varied life. Otherwise, our photographs will be vague. They will lack impact, or they will deteriorate into just "genre" as so many documentary shots do.

My camera is a 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 Linhof with a Speed Graphic back and I use a Cine-Kodak tripod which is light, steady, and a joy to handle. For printing I use either Velour Black or Kodabromide.

All of these photographs were taken in daylight, usually between 10 a.m. and 12 noon, and with aperture f 29 (that's where my aperture stops because of a repair job on the shutter). I made three exposures for each picture, varying from 1X to 4X Weston depending on the importance of the darker elements in the subject. The film was not developed until I returned to New York — all normally and according to the manufacturer's charts and graphs. I can't see much of anything by inspection so I had to depend on exposure for variety of contrast in the negative. For enlarging I used an old Elwood (diffused-light type) enlarger, and though some changes in composition were made, they were minor and few.



08.100.01 Aaron Siskind  
*New York* [iron work]

Gelatin silver print  
9 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum  
Harvard University Art Museums  
Gift of Richard L. Menschel

## MUSEUM FELLOWSHIP ESSAY (1945-46)

Aaron Siskind

*Written in 1945 or 1946, Siskind designed this program as a questionnaire for a Museum Fellowship in which he proposed to undertake a photographic study of the decorative ironwork on the buildings of New York City (buildings). Although he did not specify any date for the project, it seemed to have produced a series of pictures over the same period in 1947. Siskind continued the series until 1948, after the exhibition, both in subject and in form. (The photograph is a reproduction of a photograph of a photograph.)*

55

Aaron Siskind: The Photograph

The photographs I am submitting show a progression from the representational with sociological context to a more austere, more abstract, and somewhat symbolic expression.

The documentaries go back 5 to 10 years and were made under the auspices of the Photo League. The Feature Group, a production unit which I organized and directed and whose personnel I largely trained, produced photographic studies of Park Ave., The Bowery, A May Day Parade, a city tenement, St. Joseph's House (uncompleted), etc, etc. Photographs 1 to 3 are from Harlem Document, 4 and 5 from Dead End: The Bowery, and 6 from St. Joseph's House.

The transition to my most recent work was effected in the field of architecture. Tabernacle City is a study, mostly through architectural details, of a folk culture now moribund (photographs 8 to 11). Old Houses of Bucks County followed closely the script of an architectural historian. Photograph 12 is one example of the eighty we made.

The work of the past two years, represented by photographs 13 to 25, were made without script or the involved preparations of the documentary method. This conception depends on factors that may be characterized by the phrases "complete absorption in the object," "the instant act of sight."

For the Museum Fellowships I would like to photograph the decorative iron work on New York buildings, mostly preceding the year 1900. The great variety of design exhibits a lively imagination. And if, as I suspect, the designers and the makers were often one (or, working so closely together, a unit) we have here something of the nature of a folk art, expressive of the culture in which it operated; and giving us a special insight into it, very much as the gothic-windowed, scroll-work-decorated houses of Cottage City reveal the spirit of the camp-meeting community of 100 years ago (see photographs 8 to 11).

However, I do not intend to make a factual record. Rather, I wish to face this creation of a past time with my own creative vision, much as I faced the rocks on the shores of Cape Ann (photographs 18 to 21) or the odds-and-ends of stuff about the wharves of Gloucester (photographs 13 to 17 and 22 to 24). My ultimate aim is to create a new object — a picture — which, though not unfaithful to the material photographed, has its own excitement, its own meaning. (See photograph 25)





Aaron Siskind  
*Untitled*  
 Gelatin silver prints  
 4 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches (each print)  
 Aaron Siskind Foundation/  
 Robert Mann Gallery



## CREDO (1950)

Aaron Siskind

As a matter of abstract expressionism, Aaron Siskind's *Credo* (1950) is a statement of his artistic philosophy. "Credo" (pronounced as *credo*) is a Latin word meaning "I believe." It is a symposium titled "What is Abstract Expressionism?" organized by Alfred X. Frey, and presented at the Museum of Modern Art on November 22, 1950. Siskind's emphasis on the relationship between the flat plane of his reference to primal and emotional meaning, in his work, is a reflection of the "credo" of the 1940s and 1950s peer group—the New York School painters and their group. "Credo" was first published in *Artforum*, vol. no. 2, a publication of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, in 1951.

When I make a photograph I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order (unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder).

The business of making a photograph may be said in simple terms to consist of three elements: the objective world (whose permanent condition is change and disorder), the sheet of paper on which the picture will be realized, and the experience which brings them together. First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture. The experience itself may be described as one of total absorption in the object. But the object serves only a personal need and the requirements of the picture. Thus, rocks are sculptured forms; a section of common decorated ironwork, springing rhythmic shapes; fragments of paper sticking to a wall, a conversation piece. And these forms, totems, masks, figures, shapes, images must finally take their place in the tonal field of the picture and strictly conform to their space environment. The object has entered the picture in a sense; it has been photographed directly. But it is often unrecognizable; for it has been removed from its usual context, disassociated from its customary neighbors and forced into new relationships.

What is the subject matter of this apparently very personal world? It has been suggested that these shapes and images are underworld characters, the inhabitants of the vast common realm of memories that have gone down below the level of conscious control. It may be they are. The degree of emotional involvement and the amount of free association with the material being photographed would point in that direction. However, I must stress that my own interest is immediate and in the picture. What I am conscious of and what I feel is the picture I am making, the relation of that picture to others I have made and, more generally, its relation to others I have experienced.



1001

Aaron Siskind  
*Kentucky 7*

Gelatin silver print  
9 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches  
Center for Creative Photography

## THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF AARON SISKIND (1951)

Elaine de Kooning

*As a leading member of the White School and the only photographer actively involved in abstract art, Siskind and socialize with the New York avant-garde, and in the 1940s and 1950s, he organized informal round table discussions on art, politics, and philosophy at the White School. Like many abstract expressionists, Siskind created his art in a very personal way, drawing on charged symbolic images, and on a vocabulary of abstract forms. His work was introduced by Barnett Newman in 1947. Siskind joined the support of the White School, a group of artists who regularly exhibited New York School art. In 1951, he was included in the fourth exhibition of photography at the White School, 141 East 57th Street, New York City (1951). The artist and critic Elaine de Kooning relates Siskind's art to the concept of photography as a form of abstract expressionist painters.*

59

THE WHITE SCHOOL, NEW YORK, 1951

Aaron Siskind might be called a painters' photographer in that a large part of his public is composed of artists, but also because his work is much more directly related to the contemporary styles of painting than to those of photography. He completely rejects whole spheres of photographic possibilities — to be found in arrested movement, dramatic subjects and the ascertainable virtuosity in recording a given view — to go looking for forms as highly personal as any that a painter could invent.

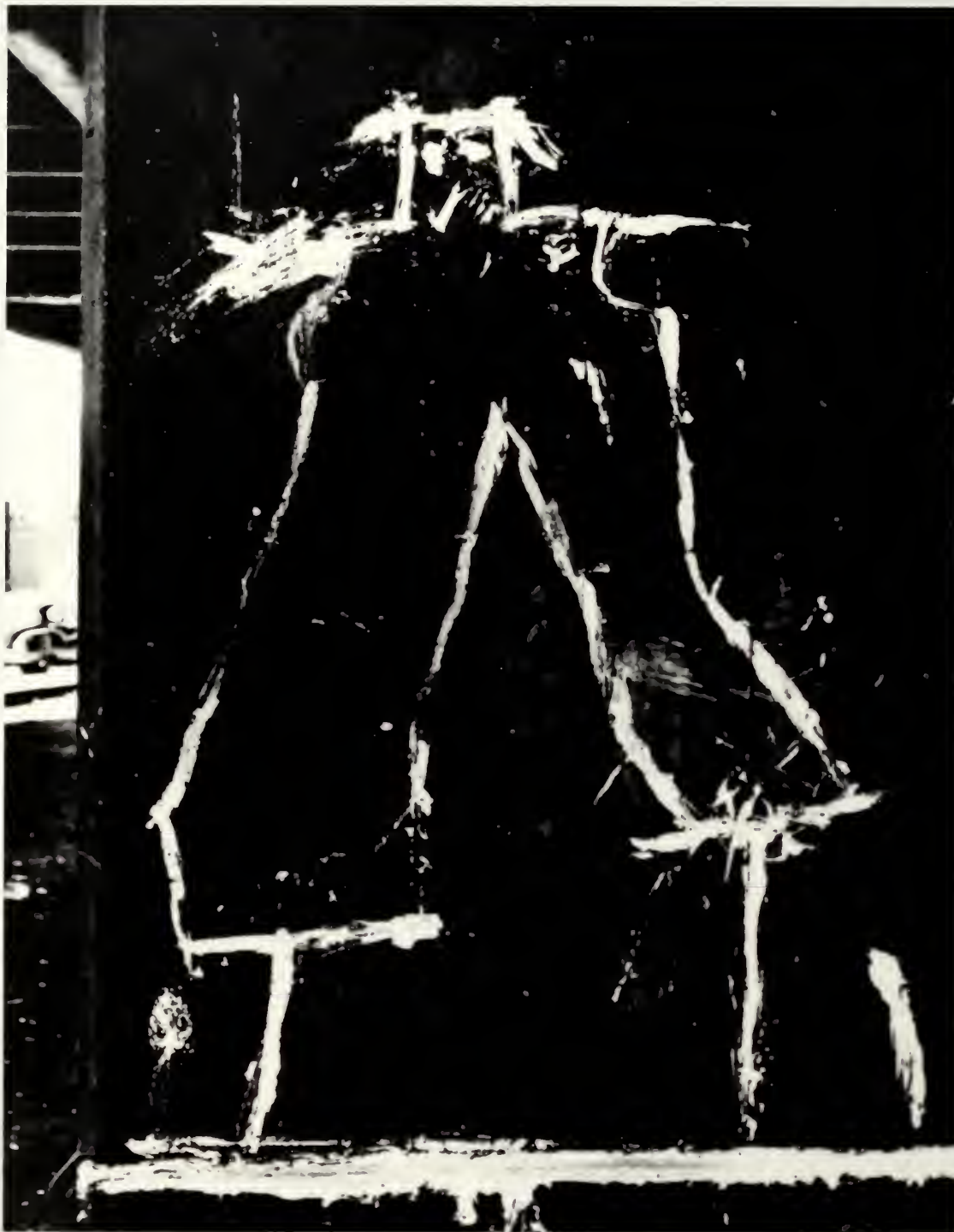
And stubborn as a painter in the face of objective reality, he rejects the recognizable order in the large city-scenes around him to ferret out, in mystifying fragments, a more obscure scenery of his own. "When I make a photograph," he says, "I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained." His sources are completely disguised as the photographer peers into the flat, weatherbeaten surfaces of billboards, gutters and neglected buildings to find a glorious, Gothic facade in tar-splotched concrete, or a vision of flying white birds in the paint peeling off the side of a truck.

For, selecting his images, Siskind is extraordinarily active and insistent. Although he sometimes accepts the three-dimensional compositions to be found, logically,

in a grouping of solid objects — like some huge rocks in a breakwater, most of the time, he reverses the natural, photographic order of vision and, through the eye of his camera, a jagged hole in a slab of concrete becomes a bulging piece of sculpture, or the grain in a plank of wood yields up rippling distances as a stretch of ocean.

Working with static, visual subjects, he doesn't look only for the fixed elements of design in shapes and tones, but exploits an uncanny perception for the variety of ways an image can occur on a picture plane. Here he seems actually to influence his subject as his pictures offer a sense of "brushing" evocative of different styles of painting: surrealist techniques are suggested as some cluster of detail is rendered with a piercing attentiveness; Japanese watercolors, as contours gracefully subside in an echoing haze; and going through the brilliantly varied compositions, one even finds oneself comparing the "drawing" in his abstractions with the work of particular painters.

But although mood, imagery, tonalities and techniques vary from year to year and, in one show, from picture to picture, there is everywhere present a severe clarity of style through which the "objects" that Siskind's lens creates are always poignantly recognizable as his.



1083 Aaron Siskind  
*Chicago 208*

Gelatin silver print  
13 3/8 x 10 7/16 inches  
Aaron Siskind Foundation  
Robert Mann Gallery



## GUGGENHEIM ESSAY (ca 1956)

Aaron Siskind

*This essay was composed by Siskind in application for a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant submission in about 1956.*

61

My photographic work over the past twelve years has been in three fields: documentary (social realism), architecture, art.

Activity in the documentary field extended roughly from 1935 to 1940. Working alone at first, I later trained four young photographers who, together with myself, explored the possibilities of our medium in the expression of social ideas. We produced planned documentaries of New York City such as *Harlem Document*, *Park Avenue*, *A Study By Contrasts*, *Dead End: The Bowery*, *Portrait of a Tenement*, *St. Joseph's House: The Catholic Worker Movement*, etc. These photographs were widely exhibited and reproduced.

In architecture I have produced four complete studies. *The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre* depicted the old Fourteenth Street Theatre, now demolished, through the interplay of three elements: neo-classicism, theatre, decay. *Tabernacle City* is a study, through its architecture, of the community of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association. A moribund community now, the aim of this study was to penetrate back to its original vitality. This was accomplished through a careful selection of detail and through the use of a style of the utmost simplicity and purity. These photographs were exhibited at the Photo League in New York City (May 1941) and at the Dukes County Historical Society (August 1941). This document is now in the permanent collection of the Society. *The Colonial Architecture of Buck's County* consists of 80 photographs based on the scholarly text of Charlotte Stryker Perry and was made during the years just prior to the (last) war. Due to an unavoidable delay in the preparation of the text, the study is only now in the hands of publishers. The photographs were exhibited in the Delaware Gallery in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

A fourth architectural project, two years in the making and now ready for publication by the University of Chicago Press, Fall 1956, is a definitive study in black-and-white and color of the architecture of Louis H. Sullivan.

This document was produced by the advanced students of the Institute of Design under my direction and with my active participation. Three students are taking their master's degrees in this area. Over \$2500 was raised privately to finance the project. One hundred of the photographs were exhibited at the Institute of Design (May 1954), at North Carolina State (April 1955), and at Yale University (May 1955). One Hundred photographs were privately purchased for the Burnham Library (Art Institute of Chicago), and both Yale University and Oberlin College have purchased complete sets for their files. Six pages are devoted to the work in the October 1954 issue of *Architectural Forum*, and 15 pages in issue 205 of *Cassabella* (Milan).

During the past twelve years my primary concern has been the practice of photography as art, away from illustration and representation, a concentration on the world within the frame of the picture. For my material I have gone to the "commonplace," the "neglected," the "insignificant" — the walls, the pavements, the iron work of New York City, the endless items once used and now discarded by people, the concrete walls of Chicago and the deep subways of New York on which water and weather have left their mark — the detritus of our world which I am combing for meaning. In this work, fidelity to the object and to my instrument, the clear-seeing lens, is unrelenting; transformation into an aesthetic object is achieved in the act of seeing, and not by manipulation.

During the past eight years, five groups of these photographs have [been] shown in galleries and museums in New York, St. Paul, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Amherst, Black Mountain College, Colorado Springs and Chicago. Articles on them have appeared in *Art News*, *Mademoiselle*, *The New York Times*, *Minicam*, *Graphis* and *Industrial Design*, and the exhibitions have been reviewed by art critics in the cities where they have been shown.



1983 Aaron Siskind  
*Vineyard Landscape 6*  
Work print

Gelatin silver print  
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches  
Center for Creative Photography



1984 Aaron Siskind  
*Vineyard Rocks 3*  
Work print

Gelatin silver print  
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches  
Center for Creative Photography

1982 Aaron Siskind  
*Vineyard Rocks 134d*  
Work print

Gelatin silver print  
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches  
Center for Creative Photography



In his 1963 interview with Jarrold Stephens, Siskind indicated the importance of the New York wall series, considering it an expression of his mature personal vision. The best known work from this series depicts highly abstracted anthropomorphic details of stone rock walls against a white ground. Many of the work prints that support these finished prints show long rows of hand-crafted stones, aspects of Siskind's working methods that reflect his renowned documentary-based working process.

These hand-crafted walls also relate to Siskind's ongoing celebration of anonymous folk expression in architectural forms, particularly in his Bucks County, Tabernacle City and New York iron work series.

1954 Aaron Siskind  
*Martha's Vineyard*  
 Gelatin silver print  
 10 5/16 x 13 3/8 inches  
 Aaron Siskind Foundation/  
 Robert Mann Gallery





1951 18

Aaron Siskind  
Walker Warehouse, Chicago  
Louis Sullivan Project  
Institute of Design, Chicago  
(Adler and Sullivan, built 1888-89)

Gelatin silver print  
13 1/2 x 10 inches  
Collection of Len Gittleman



# LEARNING PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE INSTITUTE OF DESIGN (1956)

Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind

*Published in **Aperture** 4, no. 4 in 1956, this article by Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind describes the general intent and pedagogical objectives of the B.S. and M.S. in design programs at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. Siskind came to teach photography at the Institute of Design at the invitation of Harry Callahan in 1951, and he remained there until his forced retirement in 1974. In the time that this introduction was written, the Institute of Design offered one of the few academic photography programs in the United States. Siskind and Callahan based the undergraduate foundation course and some of the graduate student problems on the existing Bauhaus model established by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. As described below, however, the advanced undergraduate projects and the M.S. thesis projects appear to be structured more similarly to the documentary book group or Learning Groups that Siskind had formulated 20 years earlier at the Photo League. Over the decades of Callahan and Siskind's tenure at the Institute of Design (and later at Rhode Island School of Design), they taught not only a generation of photographers, but a generation of photography teachers, many of whom filled academic posts established by the growing demand for photography programs in the 1960s and 1970s. The model of academic photographic education that they helped to establish continues to impact American visual culture in subtle and profound ways.*

The photography section is one of four sections of the Institute of Design, an academic department of the Illinois Institute of Technology. Each section is semi-autonomous, but participates in a mutually agreed-upon total program. Interplay among the sections — product design, visual design, shelter, art education — goes on all the time and keeps the students (as well as the instructors) aware of other ideas in design, other techniques, and philosophical implications. Students of other sections are always using the photography studio and dark-rooms; photography students use the workshops of the other sections. This “fluidity of movement” (controlled, of course) has always been a primary characteristic of the Institute of Design.

The general direction of the training is from the abstract, the impersonal, the exploratory to the personally expressive. And our aim can be stated: from within the framework of a broad professional education to open an individual way.

The four years (leading to a B.S. in Photography degree) are broken up somewhat as follows:

- 1st - Foundation course.
- 2nd - Clarification of technique; picture making through photographic techniques.
- 3rd - Experiencing the photographic disciplines (traditions).
- 4th - Planned picture making: the feature, the project.

The Foundation Course at the Institute of Design is largely traditional. However, instructors are always free to make changes or shift emphasis, and there is frequent re-evaluation and reorganization of this basic program by the faculty as-a-whole. Besides this Foundation Course in photography the photography student takes courses in two and three dimensional design, works with all materials (paper, wood, metal, clay, type, inks, paints, etc.) and acquires facility in the use of hand and power tools. As Harry Callahan says, "In Foundation Course, photography is done in such a way that the students *experience* the fundamentals of photography." It is taught half a day a week for one year.

The first three assignments have to do with the qualities of the medium, such as tone and texture. (In this year each assignment is dealt with in the terms of a standard long scale print.) In the first two sessions the student makes photograms. Here he learns print quality immediately, as well as the idea of exposure and developing, fixing, washing and drying of paper. The first session is exploratory in terms of images, and the second session is to carry further the ideas discovered in the first meeting. In the third session the student uses the camera for the first time. A large piece of paper (cut, crumpled, folded) is photographed just for tone. This is done first with enlarging paper in the film holder, and, in the fourth session, with film. Here the student sees what light does photographically. The next session deals with photographing

texture. The student discovers the infinite detail that the medium can produce. At this time the meter is explained and he determines his own exposure. He then prints and mounts the work for his first critique.

The next two assignments are in terms of the diaphragm and shutter. With the diaphragm there are two objectives: one to get extreme depth of field with as much exaggeration as possible between near and far objects; the second part is to very carefully use limited depth of field, with the out-of-focus objects having meaning. In the use of the shutter we have the students make a virtual volume with the use of slow shutter speeds, such as the form of objects blurred through movement. This can be created in the studio or found in everyday life. The next two assignments deal with camera usage, such as point of view and extreme closeup. In the point of view we have the students photograph a familiar object from a different point of view than they generally observe it. Then the macrophoto in which they photograph a familiar object very close up. The final assignment for the first semester is to photograph some objects they have made in school — to show their essences. All through this semester the mechanics of the medium are explained little by little — as the need arises. The emphasis is on the extension of seeing, and making a picture that is direct and, if possible, beautiful. All printing in the first semester is contact printing.

In the second semester we start with a simple problem of just reflection, such as in water, store windows, etc. The next three sessions deal with multiple exposures: first, a multiple exposure placing a new image within a silhouette; second, a multiple exposure of any number of subjects; third, a series of exposures to create the illusion of motion. The students then do a lighting problem which can be carried out either in the studio or outdoors. They apply five different kinds of lighting on the same subject: first, a cloudy, shadowless day

which can be imitated in the studio. Three other kinds of lighting are silhouette, cast shadow on the object and edge lighting.

At this point I usually try one somewhat freeing problem concerned with form: a series on similar forms such as a circle in which they would perhaps photograph hub caps, tops of cans, wheels, etc. The main purpose of such a problem is to train the seeing of objects in nature as basic forms. Finally, there is another assignment to photograph an object to show its meaning. During both semesters sessions are interspersed for printing, mounting and criticism.

In the first half of the second year the student is subjected to a rigorous step-by-step check-up technique. He devotes much of the remainder of the year to photographing through means peculiar (essential) to the medium: multiple exposure, varying depth of field, full and short tonal scale, camera movement, slow and fast shutter speeds, solarization, etc., etc. It is intended that these become means for expressive ends, not just so many technical gimmicks.

The third year is devoted to the traditions (disciplines, in an educational sense) of photography. Through a series of "problems" the student experiences the main streams, such as documentation, journalism, pictorialism, architecture, portraiture, illustrations, etc. Along with and paralleling the actual work, an attempt is made to give the students perspective and enrich his understanding of what he is doing through historical study, examination and criticism of the "masters," and by picture analysis.

The last year is devoted to the planned project, both by the individual and the group. These projects usually arise from an actual need and serve some social purpose. All the facets of the project — the interviewings and consultations and research, the outlining of a plan or acceptance of a script, the accommodation of "art" and objectivity to necessity and urgency — all these and

many others may be, with proper guidance, a true testing ground of the young photographer's knowledge and spirit. Some examples of such work done during the past three or four years are:

1. A study of a Chicago settlement house, used to raise funds. (1 student)
2. Two studies for the Chicago Housing authority, used for publicity. (8 students)
3. Photographs of the cultural life of Chicago, for a book used to raise funds for a new educational television station. (5 students)
4. The complete architecture of Adler and Sullivan, a book to be published by Horizon Press, Fall 1957, consisting of 200 pages of halftones, 20 pages of color, 150 pages of text and notes. This project took three years, and over \$4,000 begged and earned to finance it. (10 students)
5. Apartment interiors of the Mies van der Rohe Lake Shore Drive skyscrapers, for an article by Hugo Weber. (2 students)
6. The faculty and facilities of the Institute of Design, for a new catalog. (5 students)



79 + Aaron Siskind and Institute of Design Graduate Students  
 "Chicago's Sullivan in New Photographs"  
*Architectural Forum* (October 1954)

pages 28-29  
 12 1/2 x 18 3/8 inches (page spread)

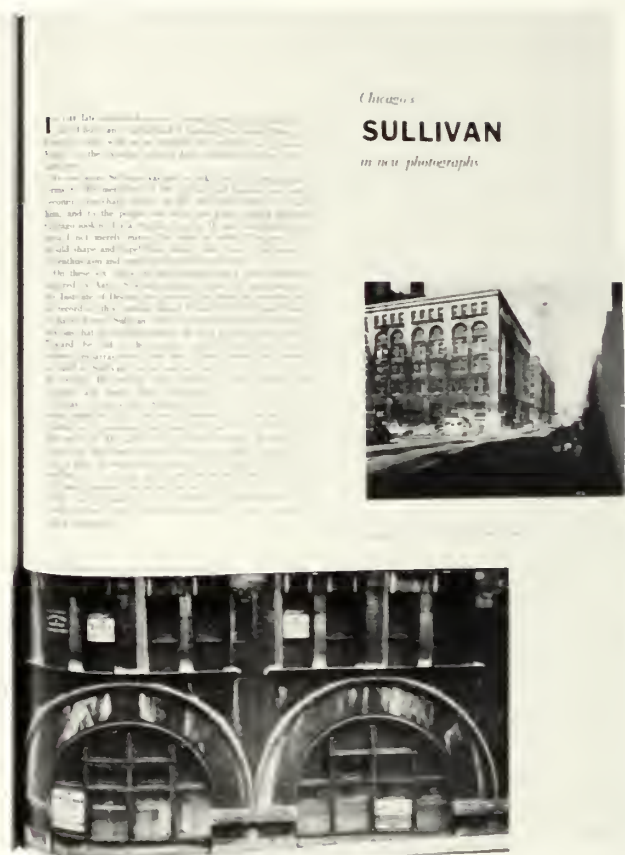
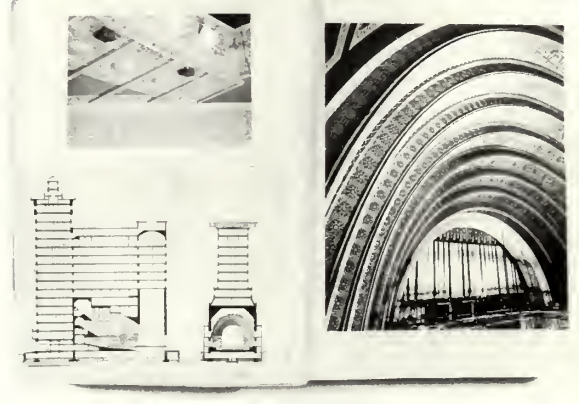
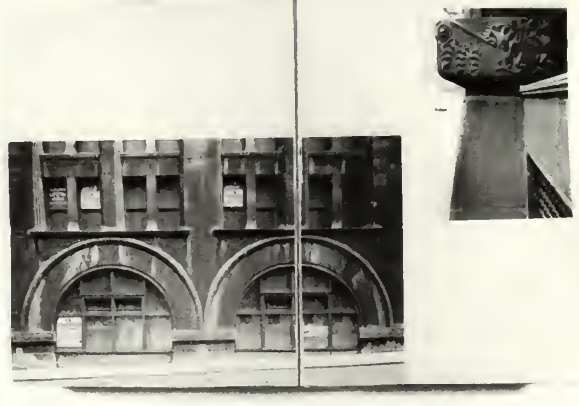


Figure 27.2 Aaron Siskind and Institute of Design Graduate Students  
 "Chicago's Sullivan in New Photographs" (October 1954).  
 The image shows a two-page spread from the magazine *Architectural Forum*. The left page features a large, dark, abstract photograph of a building's facade, with a sign for "J. HAMME & SC" visible. The right page has a title "Chicago's SULLIVAN in new photographs" and a smaller photograph of a building. The text on the right page is partially visible, mentioning "Sullivan" and "Chicago".





1955-56 Aaron Siskind and Institute of Design Graduate Students  
*Book Maquette* (selected pages)  
 Louis Sullivan Project  
 Institute of Design, Chicago  
 Gelatin silver prints  
 12 1/2 x 18 3/8 inches (each page spread)  
 Richard Nickel Committee



1950 Aaron Siskind  
 Chicago 59

Gelatin silver print  
 13 1/2 x 10 9/16 inches  
 Private Collection



## INTERVIEW WITH AARON SISKIND (1977)

Charles Traub

*Charles Traub interviewed Aaron Siskind as a part of his research about the history of the Institute of Design (I.D.) at the Institute of Technology in Chicago. The interview took place on November 29, 1977 in Providence, Rhode Island. Traub's research culminated in the exhibition, *The New Vision: Forty Years of Photography at the Institute of Design*, at the Light Gallery, New York, in 1980. He also served as editor of *Aperture* no. 87 (1982), which was based on the exhibition and published under the same title. Traub received an M.S. in Photography in 1971 from the Institute of Design, where he studied with Aaron Siskind. For the next twenty years Siskind remained a mentor, colleague and friend to Traub. Presently, Charles Traub serves as Chairman of Photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.*

**CT: To the best of your recollection, tell us how you came to the Institute of Design, Chicago [I.D.] in 1951?**

AS: I was just the kind of person [Harry Callahan needed at I.D.] to take over the advanced courses and there were a couple of graduate students then so I worked with them on their theses. We did a lot of teaching then. We complemented each other very well.

I had left the New York City [public] school system in '49 and I really wanted to try to make it in New York — make enough money doing some magazine work or commercial work and then be a full-time photographer. But it soon became apparent to me that I wasn't going to be able to make much of a living doing commercial work.

For two years, between the time I left the elementary school and the time I went out to Chicago, I taught at a junior college in Trenton, New Jersey ... I got a card from Richard [Lippold] in the summer [1949] I was on the [Martha's] Vineyard, saying I have a job one day a week, for \$1000 a year, will you take it. I remember I was out with Jane [Teller] ... walking up some hills and looking at stone walls and we sat down to rest. In the course of our conversation, I pulled this card out and I said, you know, if I had an assurance of \$2000 a year, I think I'd quit my [public school] job and do it. And so she said, well, if \$1000 is all that's keeping you from doing what you want to do, I'll give you \$1000. And so I sent him a card back: I accept the job.

**CT: Were you assigned to teach — or asked to teach — advanced classes [at I.D.] right from the start?**

AS: I taught all kinds of classes. I taught foundation class in the daytime and I had a foundation class at night. I taught an advanced class [to] juniors or seniors. And then there were two guys, [Marvin] Newman and [Leon] Lewandowski, who were working on their theses, so I took them over and worked with them.

**CT: What previous affinities or information did you have about Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and the [I.D.] program?**

AS: Well I had some ideas about it; I don't know where I got them from. And I wasn't particularly interested in that way of working, you know, the experimental way and the objective way. I was interested more in working in an intuitive way and I related my whole life to another tradition in art.

CT: But were you well informed about that tradition?

AS: Not well informed. But I had a little knowledge. I just knew enough so I could have strong prejudices. When I got there I kind of enjoyed the whole spirit of the place. I thought there was a lot of creative energy there and I liked everything that was going on there.

CT: Can you describe that a little bit, what you think that energy was or what you think characterized it?

AS: Well, there were guys with a lot of ideas there. They worked together and there was still a residue of Moholy's influence there... There were a lot of creative guys there who were working and there was a strong underlay of the whole Bauhaus system of learning and teaching. This was in the foundation ...So these Bauhaus ideas were very strong for the first two years and affected everybody ...it had to do with exploration and investigation and it had to do with delight in the use of materials ...and that was right through the whole school, all the time, right to the end.

Now guys like Harry and I were different. I was willing to organize things and plan things, but I shied away from experimental investigations. So a great deal of what I was doing was documentary work, social documentation, which is a part of Moholy-Nagy's work, too. He was interested in that.

CT: What do you think were the general attitudes among students to photography itself?

AS: When I came there, photography maintained a top position in the school. It was very much respected. The discipline of photography. Harry, of course, was very highly respected by everybody. Everybody was interested in learning some photography. We had just a few students who were going through photography for three years. They started in the second year. I think a year or two later they changed it so we started in the first year. Somewhere along the line they changed it so that photo majors could get four years.

CT: Generally, do you think that people were receptive...to the kind of photography you represented?... (And Harry represented?)

AS: They held us in the highest respect. I felt that they all respected me very much. And they certainly respected Harry. And their students respected me. I did a lot of work with the students right at the start. That whole "student independent" movement came initially from an impulse from me. I came across a whole group of students ...very wonderful artists, and I suggested that they have something independent of the school ...I was very interested in them ...and I know I had something to do with their having an exhibition called "Student Independent." I know that [it] was through me and my contact with the President of the Contemporary Arts Society at the Art Institute [of Chicago] that a group of them was invited down to show their pictures ...they were all honored at a dinner of the Society. Then of course there were other people who became interested in promoting their work and so they started the Student Independent publications.

CT: Ray Pearson made a statement in passing that he thought one of the reasons photography was so strong, in the late-fifties/early-sixties there, was that Jay Doblin really gave you latitude.

AS: Well, they've always said that. Siskind, he's off there running his department by himself. And he makes up his own programs and all that. That's a lot of nonsense. Jay knew everything I was doing and I never did anything without Jay knowing about what I was doing. This is from '55 on. I was very friendly with him. He respected me and I worked with him all the



time and he knew everything. The thing that gave them an impression that I was doing it all by myself was that it was set up in the following way: We were given our schedules for all the classes — the sophomores, the juniors and seniors, the [M.S.] program ...that of course was meaningless to us, because our system was to arrange for each class to have a meeting time, critique time, or a teaching time, and the rest of the time they worked. I would have a meeting with the whole department and we'd arrange when the sophomores would meet and who has them, and the juniors and the seniors. Of course, in '55 we didn't have many students. Sometimes we didn't have enough students for a class, even. We'd put two classes together ...Later on, I had an enormous number of students. So I'd call a meeting and find out a convenient time in terms of other things that they had to take.

But in the last years, since they wanted to integrate the school, they claimed I was disintegrating the school. But I was always interested in everything that was going on there. You could always find me in the Product Department looking at what they're doing and I always took students in. When I counseled them, I put them in a class here and a class there, outside of photo, if they needed it. I even created courses for the other departments. I created a course for the Product Department, to photograph products and surfaces and materials and things like that.

**CT: Tell me about the beginning of the graduate programs. How did that come about? When?**

AS: Well, it began and grew very easily because there was no pressure. When I first came, there were two [graduate students]. They graduated that year. Then on the I.I.T. [Illinois Institute of Technology] campus, we began to get two or three people in now and then. Ray Metzker came and Joe Jachna and then Ken Josephson — those are all in the late-fifties. We didn't have many [students]. Harry and I would meet with them, pretty much together, in the office. We'd meet with them or sometimes we'd meet them privately. It was all pretty informal. But they were all very good people, special people.

**CT: The undergraduate program was more integrated with the other undergraduate programs?**

AS: Photography people took mostly photography, but everybody in the school took foundation and took foundation photography. [We didn't] have too many students. For a number of years we actually even used to solicit students. [Jay Doblin would] go to New York to some of the better technical high schools. And he built up his department quite well. Probably got money and assistance for them. And there were all kinds of ideas for going around to promote [the school] — we had very few students. Then Harry left in '61. And from then on the number of graduate students began to increase. Whereas we never had more than three or four before, suddenly they began [to come] because of the [growing] interest in photography, and because of the way in which I accepted the students.

I'd accept any student with interest in doing work. And then I would very informally put him into various classes until he got up to a certain level and then he started working on his thesis. Later on we formalized it, so that I would take students with "deficiencies," and I was permitted to [do] so officially, like twelve credits' deficiency or something like that. [I took] any student I felt we could deal with who could, for instance, in a year or a year and a half catch up, and get to a certain level of proficiency. And I did that right along. That was a very practical, very clever idea, because there were very few students at that time coming out of any four-year photography course, or three-year course, in any other institution. So we had mostly people who were self-taught. Or had studied for a year somewhere. And so we just took them in. I had some students even take a foundation course. And they'd take two or three courses in the semester, and they'd work with whoever was teaching the course. I taught some of them. I always taught the second year and third year and they joined the undergraduates. Then later on, when we had enough graduate students, somebody would make a class of them after they got to a certain level.

CT: Looking back on that, how do you feel about graduate programs, which are taking students predominately from undergraduate programs in art or photography...?

AS: Well, I think we have some very good programs. But each of the programs depends on two things: the guys who are running it, the kind of people they are; and secondly, the kind of program the school demands. What you have now is a number of graduate programs which are very good and each one has a different character. So a student can go to them. You see, you can't compare the graduate program, say, at the University of Florida with the graduate program at the Art Institute. They're very different. Because they are dominated by different kinds of thinking in photography.

CT: When you came [to I.D.] were there certain problems [that existed in the curriculum] that you adapted or changed?

AS: The foundation course was there. I was curious about it, and interested, and I taught it.

CT: You really followed the problems that were already [in place]?

AS: ...for the first semester. Second semester became a little less clear, and a little less formalized. But there were still certain ideas that I used. They were very good problems. For instance, I remember in the second semester, the first problem we had to make up a little by ourselves. I remember ...what we wanted to do was give them a problem which encompassed basic technical procedures and certain decisions, very basic decisions, tone and things of that sort. And Harry, I remember, used to always give them what he called the sky problem — take a picture with three-quarters sky, because he wanted to make sure that they knew how to have a clean negative. That was a problem that didn't interest me because I could never do it. I used to give them what I called "a copy problem," and with that problem I felt that I could check up on certain basic things that they [needed] to know in order to go on.

...I had them copy a black and white continuous tone, like another photograph; A black and white — not continuous tone; and a color picture that had a great many colors that relate to continuous tone. Then, of course, their presentation had to have the thing they copied and their copy, side by side. That's what they had to lay down for me. With that simple problem I could find out whether they knew how to use the lights, to get even lighting. Whether they could stand their camera up so that it was absolutely parallel. And if they couldn't get it parallel, [whether they could] use the swings a little bit to get everything lined up. So that if they have a rectangle [to copy], they have to [produce] a rectangle. And then exposure: how to make a proper exposure. And also a proper exposure being not only the average exposure but also under-exposures and [over-development] for the line drawing. And then how to develop it and then print it. So if they could do all those things in that very simple problem, which would take two or three weeks to do, then I was sure [of their technical ability].

Then I began to give them problems. I would give them, for instance, a problem on significant form, which I gave them in a very simple way. I had them go to the greenhouse and photograph the plants there. And I showed them very many examples of the kind of picture. Everybody can go and photograph plants, but you can photograph a plant so that you can plainly describe the plant. You can make a selection; you can photograph the plant so that you have a half of an inch in focus and all the rest. You can make a poetical decision. You can photograph the plant as pure form, so it's a triangle or a square. You can break it down that way. I liked that problem because it made them very conscious of the very basic things of art, which had to do with the transformation of an object into an aesthetic thing based on form.

Another problem that seemed to have been there all the time was the problem called "house numbers," which I felt was a wonderful problem. I didn't make that up. I saw some examples of it. I used to look through the pictures that they saved. Then there were problems in over-exposure [and] problems like "virtual volume." That's terminology which they learned the first semester. It was the last problem that we applied to something else, like going out and photographing automobiles moving and things like that. We did that problem.

Then we did problems in sequences ...that was a big problem — series of pictures. And there you see our concern with the aesthetic series. You could have series that have to do with time; you could have series of similar form; series of similar subject matter, and there the problem is how do you place each ...and we used to give them that — make a series of similar subject matter. And then they make ten pictures of buildings. Well, is it a series? It's just ten buildings. They'd have to see that the ten buildings have to be photographed a certain way that relate to each other. It can't be any random photographs.

**CT: And that was a problem you inherited?**

AS: Absolutely. Series was a very, very important thing there.

**CT: How about things like the light box and modulators?**

AS: Light modulator was in the first semester. It was about the third or fourth lesson. That's a concept from Moholy [-Nagy] — that everything is a light modulator. I loved that idea. And that stressed the importance of light, which you get from the photogram. And then you just make a light modulator. Of course, [Arthur] Siegel says that they used to make very complicated light modulators until he came along, and he just told them to take a brown piece of paper and make a few slits in it and fold it or crumple it.

**CT: So basically you would say that you felt pretty attuned with most of the problems that were there?**

AS: Oh, I enjoyed them, sure. It gives you a method. It's when you get past the second year, you have to figure out what the hell to do with these students. And I had to figure [it] out especially because for a while there I would have the students for all years. There weren't that many students. I would teach second, third, fourth year. Maybe someone else would teach the foundation. Well, if you have guys with you all the time, year after year, you've got to maintain their interests in some way. So I developed a junior year, which was divided into what I call the basic traditions, four or five traditions. We [would] take two or three months for each one, like the documentary tradition. We did documentary photography. Portraiture. We did illustrations maybe for a month. One or two other things ...we did architecture. I made a whole series of problems for the architectural discipline.

**CT: Did you and Harry sit down and talk about the problems, about the structure?**

AS: We talked about them sometimes ...he liked to teach the first and second years. When he came to the advanced ones, he didn't know what the hell to do with them. And I was a little more comfortable with them ...I was more pedagogically oriented, I was more comfortable, so I kind of made up a program. Harry had certain ideas. I remember one of his big ideas was going on location. And I remember I picked up that idea from him and took a group of our students. I told them we were going down to this building and I want you to work at it. It was the auditorium building and that's where the [Louis Sullivan] Project began.



CT: You actually went with them?

AS: Yes. I went with them and worked with them. Harry would do the same thing ...but I was a little more pedagogical. I would talk to them a little while they were working. And then, of course, we would look at the pictures. And then we all decided that we were interested in this thing. I remember one of the first things I did was I got a hold of Ray Pearson, I got a hold of maybe Crombie Taylor, to come talk to these guys about Louis Sullivan. Which indicates how secretive I was about keeping everything separate. No, I invited these guys to come. As a matter of fact, have you talked to Ray Pearson? Ray Pearson says it was his idea to do the project.

CT: I don't think he did.

AS: Oh yes, he's told me that. He may have. He may have come in there and given a talk to the kids — I don't know. I can't remember exactly. And then we decided to do something about it and we did. We got [Hugh Sinclair] Morrison's book and we all read that and we made up a list of all the buildings. We raised some money and bought some equipment. That, of course, is what I did with the students. It was no longer a class; it was a production unit. That's all we did.

CT: Speaking about equipment, the beginning classes were taught with a 4x5 camera.

AS: And they were miserable.

CT: Why was that held onto for so long?

AS: I don't know. That's what we believed in.

CT: Do you know why? Was there really a philosophy behind it, or was it just by habit?

AS: Sure. We had a good method of learning, you see, and all the problems we had were very suited to a view camera.

CT: By the fifties, 35mm had come in with a big deal of popularity.

AS: There wasn't as much small camera work as you think. We had a system. You wanted to teach someone, for instance, how to photograph a light modulator. You have to do it with a piece of paper. [You] would show them how to cut the paper, how to load the holder. They can make an exposure. They can go and develop it and show it to us. And make another one. Show it to us. We're right there with them all the time. Then they'd do it with film. We'd show them how to do it. And if you want to learn about depth of field, they learned that out of view camera much better than a small camera. Small camera — you can hardly teach it, because the depth of field is so easily realized.

CT: Do you still believe in it? Would you still do it?

AS: I don't know. No, I don't think I would. Personally I would use a two and a quarter, which we finally shifted to later, in the sixties. You had to make a whole roll and develop it. But they can produce a great many pictures. When we worked with the 4x5 camera they didn't produce as many pictures. We worked with the 4x5 camera, when I was first there. They didn't learn to enlarge until the second semester, so they just ran contact prints. Then the second semester, the

very first thing we do is show them how to enlarge, which they did on that problem that I gave them, the copy problem. That was a very good problem to do that. And, for instance, when I had them enlarge, I had them enlarge the image so that there was space around — they photographed, say, a drawing: they couldn't enlarge that drawing if they'd cut into the edges of the drawing, they had to show me the whole drawing so I could tell whether they had the thing lined up. Later on, they could crop and do anything they want. But in that problem they had to have that damn thing lined up. When we worked with them, I used to be there with them. If they had trouble lining it up, I showed them how to tip the back a little, line it up, because sometimes it's a little hard on the tripod.

**CT: Do you think that there are any ideas that particularly characterized the traditions of the I.D.?**

AS: Sure ...the idea was the integration of all the arts with a practical end in view, which had to do with the creation of useful products for man, broadening our knowledge of the world, things like that, you know. Making the world a little more pleasant.

**CT: Were there any political overtones to this?**

AS: I don't think so, not really. Not really. I think there were aesthetic overtones. That's why, for instance, the artists that I knew in New York detested the Bauhaus approach, because the Bauhaus approach was the use of art for the benefit of man, so to speak ...the application of the artistic sensibility to the everyday problems of man.

**CT: Do you think that photography at I.D. adapted these ideas?**

AS: Well, they certainly did. Because essentially what I.D. wanted to do was to create designers in the broader sense of the word. And so finally it worked up to the pinnacle, where Jay Doblin reorganized the whole curriculum. So that, although there was some linkage between the various sections of the I.D., now the whole thing became one thing. So we could hardly talk about the Photography Department or the Visual Design Department. All they wanted to do was to create a person whom they imagined to be the "all over designer."

So that photography, for instance, to them became a function of this designer that they predicated. And, of course, it became a very important part of this designer, because they began to find all kinds of other uses for photography. For instance, they began to envision the time when the designer didn't need to draw anything, could make every image with a photograph. So he just merely had to know how to combine certain things that existed, and so you find that the product designers were no longer making models themselves.

The whole thing became more and more mental. The designers in their visual design course, they rarely would give what we call a drawing. They would make arrangements and things like that from already existing materials. And, of course, they were trying to work the photography into that whole system. And that's when they worked me out. Somebody in architecture who knew me well and was interested in photography ...once spoke to [James] Montague, and he said, "Why are you getting rid of Siskind?" "Well, he is a great photographer, but he doesn't belong in a design school." His whole concept of me was that I was teaching them something pure and I wasn't willing to relate what they learned to other things.

**CT: Did you believe in this idea of the total designer?**

AS: Well, I thought what happened was that they were degrading every area. And I think that if you reduce the quality of the work in any one area, or all the areas, if you reduce the quality,

78

you're not going to produce. You may produce somebody who knows something from each area, but that guy will not have any real quality to him. Sure, you have to relate these things and let them find out what's going on in all these departments. But I think that notion of making an "all over designer" was to me very preposterous. To me, my whole point of view was that every human being has to have a center. And when you're in school, you have to have a center of interest and all your other interests radiate from that, and all your perceptions of all the other areas radiate from that, and all your values radiate from that center. This is a center in which you are proficient, in which you know a great deal, and in which you have a basis for evaluations. They were destroying that center.

**CT: Do you think there are things that characterize particularly the photography students at the graduate level, that one would call the "Chicago School" or a "School of the I.D.," that those of us who graduated from there have in common, in terms of the style of our work?**

AS: Oh, I don't know. There were certain ideas that were running through the school. These ideas came from the students who were there, and they came from some of the teachers — that's all. Some of these ideas were a little left over from former years. I think as you got into the late-sixties, very few of them were around anymore. There was some. There's been work that has been produced — their pictures are all up. We believed in certain kinds of things.

**CT: [Arthur] Siegel said that the work of the I.D. students is very formal.**

AS: That's not true. It may have quality, but it's not all formal at all. It has to do with picture making. That's one thing they learned. That you were making a picture, you were not doing something else, like reforming the world or making psychological evaluations. The thing that you were primarily concerned about, which we always stressed, was what's going on in that picture frame. But if you look at the work of all the people who came out of the school, you'll find that there's a great deal of variance. You will find that they use certain devices, which we made them conscious of. This guy might use solarization, this guy might use double exposure — they're all conscious of these things. But that's what we call picture making. They don't come out of there only just learning how to take a picture, just getting as much stuff in the field as you can and let it go.

**CT: They said the I.D. was very object oriented, very straight camera oriented through camera vision.**

AS: It's not true. What about the social documentation we did? Enormous quantities of social documentation. How about the work in architecture? Well, I suppose what comes out is, if you have a group of people and week after week they have to come in and show you pictures, they have to take pictures that have certain formal consistencies and relationships, etc. You have to balance those things; you have to remember that you have students and as students they should search and try to learn new things. At the same time, if you make this search too mechanical, make it an end in itself, that's no good. So what you have to do is keep everybody in touch with the traditions of photography and things that have been done in terms of meaning, so you can keep your balance.

**CT: Do you think there was a very graphic quality, object-oriented quality, to a lot of the image making at I.D.? Was it the influence of the rest of the school, as well as your own influence?**

AS: Yes, I think probably the school. But it certainly wasn't my influence, because I did an endless amount of documentary projects. I always taught social documentation and then in the whole last year the student can choose practically any project and we did even group



projects. We'd take documentation, say, we'd come upon it a couple of weeks before the election, so we make the project the week before election — what's going on.

**CT: What was your interest in the documentation?**

AS: My only interest in it is just a way of making a picture. So what you have to do is make a picture a certain way according to certain principles and see if it's meaningful. I always stressed the aesthetic values when I worked in documentary.

**CT: Were you particularly interested in stimulating students to become interested in social causes?**

AS: I thought it was a viable way of working. Why shouldn't they know about it? And if a student said I can't work it or I don't want to do it, I'd say, "Okay, what do you want to do?" My job was to interest them in doing it, showing what value it might have to them, and get them to accept the situation as a student.

**CT: Your contribution as a teacher is a very monumental contribution.**

AS: Well, I'm a little too short for monumental.

**CT: I mean horizontally monumental. In terms of a single person who was instrumental in dealing with education in photography, I think you would be the person.**

AS: Well, I had a good background in it and I had a great deal of interest in it. I needed all the contact I guess and I put a lot of energy into it, that's all. I could have done it better if I knew more, if I was a better man. If I was stronger with the administration so I could get more from them. But there wasn't any level on which I wouldn't have helped them.

On the [Louis] Sullivan Project, I used to go to Iowa, Wisconsin, you know travel with them, days with them. And I had a project — I remember even before we left we had a project on old people. I took the whole group to City Hall. We got together with all the people who were head of all the different phases and facets of helping, working with old people, and we had a conference. Another time, I had a class on documentary photography, so we had a plan to decide what project to do. I arranged to go up and meet someone who was in the welfare department, and had relationships with various community centers and things like that. I mean the number of things I did like that are endless, but I liked to do it. And I didn't know any other way of teaching them how.

**CT: Do you think the I.D. made any marked change in your work? Did it affect your work?**

AS: Sure, I think so. I think technically it helped me a lot, influenced me. I didn't know very much about photography technically. I was self-taught. I learned a lot of things. You see things and you're affected by it. What the hell did I know about a lot of things? I didn't even know anything about things like ...extension, compensating for that. I used to have a bellows extension when I used to photograph things close, but I didn't know why. I used to increase the exposure; I did it by instinct. I had instinct about certain things and I learned about these things. It was very good for me. I learned about the formula for bellows extension. I learned a lot about swings and tilts and learned a lot of things. I guess I learned a lot of things from Harry [Callahan] because he was taking such wonderful pictures and it was very stimulating. But I learned from all those people. I used to hang around Conrad Waxman all the time and Hugo Weber and I'd go around Visual Design. I knew all the guys there, the young artists, students there, so I think it affected me in some way.

## CHRONOLOGY

80

- 1903 Born in New York City, December 4.
- 1926 Earned a Bachelor of Social Science degree, College of the City of New York.
- 1926-1947 Taught English in the New York City public schools.
- 1932-1935 Active in the New York Workers Film and Photo League.
- 1936-1941 Active in the reorganized New York Photo League. Established the Feature Group, a documentary production unit, as part of the Photo League School. Produced group and independent photo-series including: The Catholic Worker Movement, Dead End: The Bowery, The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre, The Harlem Document, Lost Generation: The Plight of Youth Today, The Most Crowded Block in the World, Park Avenue: North and South, Sixteenth Street: A Cross-section of New York, and Tabernacle City.
- 1940 Published "The Feature Group" in *Photo Notes*.
- 1943-1944 Created increasingly symbolic and abstract photographs based on discarded and found objects on Martha's Vineyard and in Gloucester, Massachusetts.
- 1945 Published "The Drama of Objects" in *Minicam Photography*. Established close and enduring ties to the New York School artists.
- 1947-1949 Taught part-time at Trenton Junior College, Trenton, New Jersey.
- 1947-1951 Exhibited regularly at Charles Egan Gallery. Elaine de Kooning wrote "The Photographs of Aaron Siskind" as the introduction to a 1951 exhibition of Siskind's photographs at Charles Egan Gallery.
- 1950 Wrote "Credo" as an artist statement for a symposium titled "What is Modern Photography?" organized by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City.
- 1951 Taught during the summer at Black Mountain College with Harry Callahan.
- 1951-1971 At the invitation of Harry Callahan, Siskind joined the faculty of the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. There he directed and participated in advanced student projects including studies of: Apartment Interiors of the Mies van der Rohe Lake Shore Drive Skyscrapers, A Chicago Settlement House, The Chicago Housing Authority, The Complete Architecture of Adler and Sullivan (also called The Louis Sullivan Project), Details of the Human Body, The Park System of Chicago, and The Series Form.
- 1956 With Harry Callahan, published "Learning Photography at the Institute of Design" in *Aperture*.
- 1963 Founding member of the Society for Photographic Education.
- 1971-1976 Taught photography with Harry Callahan at Rhode Island School of Design, Providence.
- 1971-1991 An established master, Siskind continued to make photographs and was published and exhibited widely.
- 1991 Died in Providence, Rhode Island, February 11.









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