

**Photographic Seeing:
The Camera Work of Kenneth Josephson**

by A. D. Coleman

A bare suspended lightbulb illuminates four black & white Polaroid prints of images of (presumably) that same lightbulb, taped to a wall.

The reflection of a French mountain range in the roof of a car appears to sprout an actual rock formation.

Another car, in Stockholm, leaves a perfect silhouette of its profile in a dusting of snow on the pavement.

A crouching woman, mostly obscured by a little girl, makes a close-up portrait of the girl's face with an amateur camera. Attached to a black & white print of that image with family album-style photo corners is a second print, presumably of the image made by the woman at that moment, showing the child apparently reaching for the woman's camera.

A black & white Polaroid photograph of a naked woman's pelvic area lies atop the dark dress of (presumably) that same woman, positioned in her pelvic area.

A hand holds a postcard image of the summer palace in Drottningholm, Sweden, taken in the warm weather, while the owner of hand and postcard confront the same vista in the winter.

Kenneth Josephson's photographic works do not reduce well (or at all) to words. In that way, among others, they distinguish themselves from most conceptual photography and photo-based art, which often starts from an articulated or written premise and can equally often find satisfactory summation in words to which the images, uninteresting in and of themselves, serve as mere illustration or demonstration. Concept dictates percept.

Josephson's work functions otherwise. His images fall somewhere between the visual puns of René Magritte and the elliptical, labyrinthine conundrums of Jorge Luis Borges. He shares with both a spare, stripped-down aesthetic, a fascination with layers, and an inclination toward the recursive and self-reflexive. His pictures begin as optical experience, to which he then applies analytical consciousness. What his photography exemplifies one might define as visual thought, in which percept embodies concept.

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The quarter-century between the end of World War Two in 1945 and 1970 remains a particularly fertile period in the history of photography, and surely the least closely studied and most misunderstood. Kenneth Josephson's oeuvre exemplifies the fecundity and complexity of the medium's field of ideas during that era; his elaboration of them down to the present day demonstrates the durability and substance of the questions he and others began asking — and answering, at least provisionally — as they explored the medium. That Josephson has only recently begun to become securely positioned in the histories of photography, conceptual art, and photo-based art speaks to his decision to inhabit a largely unmapped territory in the decades between then and now.

The several generations of photographers who came of age and entered the field committedly in the United States during those 25 years constituted the first cohort to engage with their medium in the college, university, and art-institute context. More than a few of them learned their craft much as photographers had done for the previous century: autodidactically, from a hobbyist relative, by apprenticeship in various applied modes, in vocational courses in the military, via the avuncular amateurs who populated the still-thriving camera-club network. But the combination of the G.I. Bill and the postwar economic boom in the U.S., which poured funding into the higher-education system, created an unprecedented opportunity — seized by many — through which one could opt for formal study of photography in either the polymedia environment of the art school or the interdisciplinary milieu of the liberal-arts college.

Whichever alternative one chose, at that juncture in this country the curriculum most likely derived from the model devised by László Moholy-Nagy in pre-Nazi

Germany and transplanted by him in 1937 from the Weimar Bauhaus to Chicago's Institute of Design as Europe lurched toward catastrophe. Moholy believed in laying out the entire toolkit of the medium for students, requiring them to experiment with and master numerous approaches thereto and consider it infrastructurally. He also emphasized photography as an ideational process, and taught that the raw material with which the photographer worked was not the physical stuff of the "real world" but light itself. Moholy's pedagogy became the foundation on which post-secondary photography education in North America got built.

Not coincidentally, Josephson studied photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology in a program headed by Minor White, whose ideas (evolved from Edward Weston and others) augmented those of Moholy, and whose teaching method proved no less committed to a questioning of the medium, though from a very different standpoint. He went on to do graduate work at the Institute of Design itself, under Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. One can see clearly the imprint of all three of these mentors on Josephson; some of his early pictures resonate as *hommages* to them even as they extend his precursors' lines of inquiry. Yet by the end of the 1960s Josephson had come fully into his own, generating images that looked nothing at all like theirs.

The term "photographic seeing" had considerable currency in the discourse around photography during that phase.¹ As a catchphrase, *photographic seeing* sought to pinpoint two significant distinctions — the first between the habits of everyday looking and the active observational process of seeing, the second between seeing as one does with one's own alert eyes and mind and seeing with the concomitant awareness of how camera, lens, film, and then photographic processing and printing could translate that reflected light into marks embedded in (most commonly, in those days) particles of tarnished silver on emulsion-coated sheets of paper.

Which is to say that these photographers — those who studied it, those who

¹ That discourse took a primarily oral form; historianship devoted to the medium remained rare, and a true critical dialogue concentrating on it would only begin to emerge at the end of 1960s. Photographic circles in those years remained small and insular; aside from certain clusters of academically unaffiliated practitioners and curators in a few cities — New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Rochester — it localized itself primarily within the population of those studying and teaching

taught it, and those who then (like Josephson) went on to practice and/or teach it in turn — did not have a naïve, uncritical, theory-less relationship to their medium. Nor did they do their work in ignorance of what other image-makers past and present pursued in other media, or oblivious to the artistic and cultural ferment that characterized their own time. To the contrary: they engaged fully and deliberately with photography on both a perceptual and hermeneutic basis, aware of its history and field of ideas but not constrained thereby, devoting themselves to the evolution of a relationship to the medium that took for granted its necessary existence within what one of their number proposed as "an integrated history of picture-making."²

No photographic body of work created in the second half of the 20th century better demonstrates these concerns than that of Kenneth Josephson — although none, of course, can represent by itself the breadth and complexity of the medium's field of ideas in that era. Like that of his close friend, the late Robert Heinecken, Josephson's project with its implicit challenges and provocations has reverberated in the awareness of photographers and others since it commenced its public life. These images of Josephson's, individually and cumulatively, do not ignore or deny the existence of the "real world"; instead, they insistently address the act of photographic picture-making as a means of knowing that world, requiring of maker and viewer alike an attention to the implications of that act, to the technological process that enables it, and to the light that makes it possible in the first place.

Photography as a creative medium and a respectable tool for picture-makers of all kinds can be said to have entered the marketplace for art and the field of ideas of art-making activity circa 1970. At that juncture, hardly any critics of art knew anything at all about the history (including the intellectual history) of photography or the activities of this medium's practitioners, and few have taken the trouble since then to inform themselves on that score. Photography commands center stage in the global art environment as we move into the 21st century, but the "integrated history of picture-

photography at college level.

² See Chiarenza, Carl, "Notes toward an Integrated History of Picturemaking," *Afterimage*, summer 1979, pp. 35-41.

making" remains unwritten. Unquestionably, however, within that hypothetical account still to come, Kenneth Josephson's name and accomplishment have already been inscribed and extensively annotated.