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Who's Who, What's What & Here's How in Photography

NOVEMBER 1973 75¢ U.K. 30p.

Great Debate!!! A.D. Coleman vs. Minor White

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Photograph by BOB MONKTON

"Before man existed, natural symbolism was."

MINOR WHITE

from Octave of Prayer

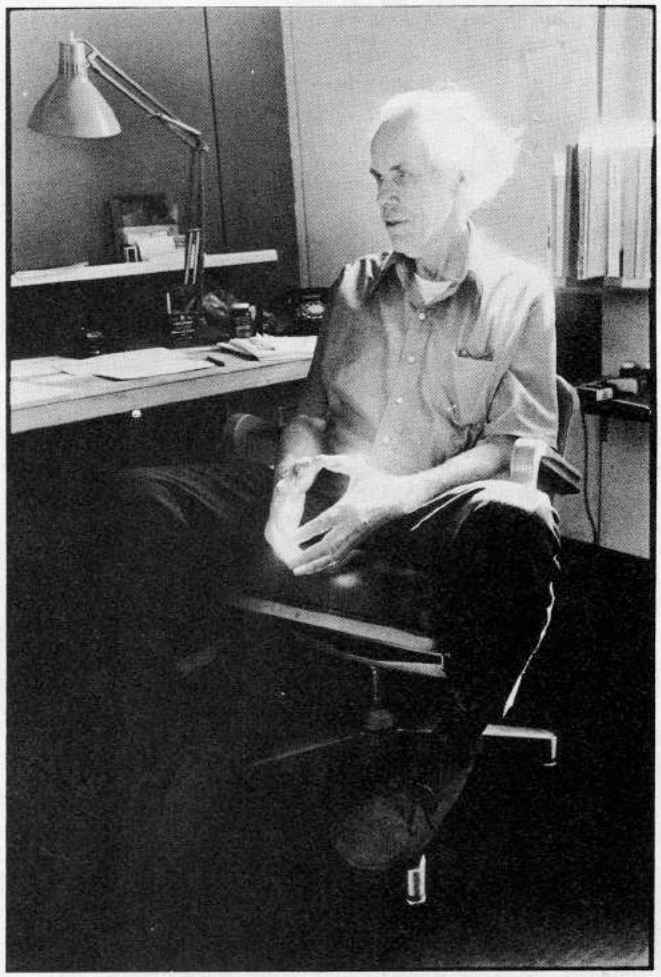

Photo by Maje Waldo

Editor's Note: A.D. Coleman writes photographic criticism for *The New York Times*. Up until March of this year, he also wrote a regular column—"Latent Image"—for *The Village Voice*. The following review of Minor White's *Octave of Prayer* (a special issue of *Aperture* in book form, based on a major exhibit of the same name) was drafted in late February for publication in *The Voice* in two consecutive installments. Part I—a discussion of the photographs—was submitted to *The Voice* on March 2 for publication in the March 15th issue, according to Coleman. Part II—which concerns itself with the text of the book—received final editing and was handed in on March 6, with the expected publication date of March 22nd, according to Coleman.

Part I was published as scheduled, without alteration or incident. Part II did not appear as scheduled and, in fact, announced by Coleman in Part I. Instead, on that date, Coleman received a letter dated March 19th from Michael Smith, the editor in charge of Coleman's section at the time (Coleman's regular editor was on vacation). Smith's letter said he couldn't run the second *Octave* piece because "It's too long. It's wildly lacking in perspective. You quote his 'inanity' at stupefying length. You sound like a hysterical countercultist." Unable to contact Coleman by telephone, and finding it "not possible" to cut the piece, Smith says he decided not to run it, to wait to hear from Coleman.

Coleman interpreted Smith's letter as a "demand that I tone the article down and modify my point of view." He cited two weeks as "ample" lead time to contact him about any problems, and noted that other columns of equal length had run previously. Coleman called his article "legitimately angry and impassioned" rather than "hysterical" or "wildly lacking in perspective." Then, citing his five years tenure as regular photographic writer for *The Voice* in a column of his own creation, he added: "However, even if the piece is hysterical and lacking in perspective I feel it is my prerogative to be hysterical and to lack perspective if I so desire on occasion." Coleman ended his reply with an ultimatum: "If my column does not appear as written in the next issue of *The Voice*, you can take upon yourself the responsibility of finding *The Voice* a new photo-

"Before man existed, natural symbolism was not."

A.D. COLEMAN

from the "Latent Image" column about Octave of Prayer that never ran in The Village Voice

S.

graphy critic."

Events from this point on get a bit crowded. The column did not run. Coleman wrote a letter-to-the-editor, charging censorship. Executive Editor Ross Wetzsteon wrote back, informing Coleman the letter would not be published because it did not accurately reflect the facts. He began: "To be perfectly frank, it seems to me that you escalated a relatively minor editor-writer disagreement into a major confrontation ..." He went on to say, "Whether Michael (Smith) is correct or not in his assessment isn't the point. The point is that he was trying to help you improve the quality of the column, not to censor it in any way." Coleman later met with Wetzsteon, Diane Fisher (Coleman's regular editor), Ed Fancher (*Voice* Publisher), and Dan Wolf (*Voice* Editor). The upshot of the meeting was another letter from Wetzsteon, this one dated April 9, reaffirming support for Smith's original position, and accepting Coleman's resignation. Wetzsteon also said that if Coleman were willing, *The Voice* would publish the disputed second part of the article, since it had been promised in print. Coleman wasn't willing; he submitted it instead to us, and in April he also used it as the text for a talk he had been scheduled to give at the University of Massachusetts in Boston—White's home territory (he heads the photography program at M.I.T.) A friend of White's was there, obtained a copy of the text and gave it to White. As fate would have it, White was scheduled to talk before the same group two weeks later. He used the opportunity to respond to Coleman; then he, too, submitted a text to us.

Coleman's criticisms and White's rebuttal are printed here as written, edited for reasons of space only. We hope the above-described, admittedly fascinating sequence of events will not overshadow the basic photographic debate, as set forth in the texts themselves. As White has said, "forums in still photography are painfully lacking." We hope this one will encourage further dialogue on the state of the art of photography, and we will try to publish same as and when it occurs. *J.H.*

COLEMAN

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Coleman

"Only one, Chris Enos, stands out—and apart—from this show's claptrap by virtue of image content, which is so sardonic and satirical of just exactly the wispy mysticism and puffy religiosity of the sequence that it is obvious White failed utterly to understand them."
Coleman

"Stepping into a convenient darkroom, meek, mild-mannered Art Photography assumes his true identity—Jesus Freak!"
Coleman

Coleman Critique I

Octave of Prayer is the book version of Minor White's latest anthology/sequence of other people's images, published by *Aperture* ($5.95 softbound). I realize now that it was wrong of me to poke fun at the letter White wrote soliciting submissions (I use the word advisedly) for his next show, "Celebrations," because in combination with *Octave of Prayer* that letter indicates beyond any doubt that White has given up functioning as a photographer and teacher in order to elevate himself to the priesthood of a peculiar new religion. Compounded of a visual banality so adolescently puerile as to be offensive and an intellectual Jesuitry so arrogant and anti-creative as to be proto-totalitarian, this religion—the Cult of Camera—is reminiscent of nothing so much as those arcane Southern California sects that believe orange juice is the one true sacrament.

I believe that *Octave of Prayer* is an insidious insult to all photographers, not only to those whose work is included therein but also to anyone trying to sculpt an idea in silver. I consider it such an arrant abuse of power that I am going to give it a full exegesis—the images this week, the text next—in an attempt to counter its harmful potential at least partially.

Let me preface my remarks on the imagery by saying that I have little sympathy with the photographers whose work is abused by this show. Not only were they given fair warning—in *Light*[7]—that White is capable of going off the deep end when it comes to the Cult of Camera, but they relinquished their right to beef at White's use of their images when they submitted them for his approval and for incorporation into his sequence. This exegesis is more in the nature of a class action suit.

Nothing is inherently wrong with the notion of thematic group shows; not only can they serve useful informational purposes, when associated with a clearly-defined social issue or event, but they can even function as weathervanes indicating the overall direction of the culture's thinking on more generalized concepts—the family of man, say, in the exhibit of the same name. By sampling numerous visions focused on a common theme, some sort of picture can emerge to indicate trends of thought and attitude.

However, this presupposes that the work is being selected on the basis of quality and applicability to the theme, not on its support of one particular interpretation of that theme nor on its suitability for the role of cog in someone else's intellectual machine. Once this presupposition is invalidated—as is the case with the conceptual construct behind *Octave of Prayer*—the inevitable result is not the strengthening of strong individual voices by juxtaposing them (democracy in action) but the weakening of individual statements (or the selection of initially weak ones) and the subsumption of them into a collective voice capable only of repeating the idea of whoever collected them. This, of course, is a basic totalitarian tenet—ask not what your country (or Minor White) can do for you, ask rather what you can do for it (or him).

So, sad to say, only six photographers managed to retain their identity within this sequence, and five of them achieve this mainly through immediately identifiable styles which function as benchmarks: Edward Weston, Barbara Morgan, Jerry Uelsmann, Paul Strand, and Ansel Adams (a distinctly ugly image, by the way). Only one, Chris Enos, stands out—and apart—from this show's claptrap by virtue of image content, which is so sardonic and satirical of just exactly the wispy mysticism and puffy religiosity of the sequence that it is obvious White failed utterly to understand them. With their hideous, garish Magic Marker tonalities and their mordant humor, they stick out like sore thumbs and mock the sappily reverential hush of the entire show.

Ms. Enos's work, breath of fresh/foetid air that it is, hardy compensates for the vacuousness of the remaining images. There are images in this book that I would be ashamed of if I were a photographer, images so corny in spirit and mediocre in concept as to be embarrassing—or, if you are on the viewing end, offensive. The face of Buddha superimposed on a leaf, for example. A hand in a foreground outstretched over the sunrise (let there be Light). Lots of beautiful clouds and waterfalls. Lots of intense-eyed young men with long dark hair, beards and moustaches, which to White are evidently manifestations of saintliness. A little girl in sackcloth staring up at the heavens. Even a seagull, believe it or not, though whether it's really J. L. in the flesh is difficult for me to say.

However, I know that—in the context of the larger bodies of work from which they have been untimely ripped—many of these images are nowhere near as gushy as they seem here. Brought together into this new context, however, they come to form an expanded Hallmark Gift Book, needing only appropriate excerpts from *The Prophet* and suchlike to make it (minus the Enos images) into a best-selling item at better newsstands and candy stores everywhere.

The wisdom of Merle Miller's epigram,

"Never trust a man who does his praying in public" (from *A Gay and Melancholy Sound*), has rarely had a better photographic demonstration. The images are saccharine, cloying exemplums of the creeping Jesus sensibility, both ensemble and, in far too many cases, separately as well. They are, nevertheless, only the velvet glove. The iron fist is in the text, which we'll get to in the next issue.

Coleman Critique II

Last week I dealt at length with the photographs in *Octave of Prayer,* which show that Minor White has attained the enviable position of not even having to make his own photographs any more. All he now has to do is tell other people how to do it and then sequence the results in order to walk off with the lion's share of the credit. Many of his images in the book were quite obviously made to please White, for, despite his protestations anent the openness of his mind, White asks for—and, of course, receives—specific kinds of images.

He also generates a slavishly imitative brand of mystical pablum in prose. This is exemplified, in *Octave of Prayer,* by a most remarkable statement submitted by Ruth Breil to accompany her photograph of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the Russian poet: "It struck me suddenly, as I was crouching down at Yevtushenko's feet—the stage above my gaze . . . that the most beautiful, the most holy poem of all . . . the most sacred sound in the stillness around me . . . was the sudden anxious hiss of shutters clicking softly.

"I felt my tension ebb as I clicked this one and only image."

Now, language is a somewhat older and more symbolic medium of communication than photography, and poetry—the simultaneous distillation of experience and language—goes back a bit further than 1839. A human being standing alone before a huge crowd of strangers, offering them that essence of self which is poetry, attempting thus to communicate with a full understanding of the ultimate insufficiency and fragility of words, is committing an act of staggering heroism. If anything transpiring at that reading deserved to be called "sacred" or "holy," it was what Yevtushenko represented, by himself on that stage, trying to touch people with words. It surely was not *more* sacred or holy for numerous photographers to devote less than their full attention to those words in order to snatch images which cannot hope to capture even a whiff of the courage of that lonely act. For Ms. Breil to suggest that her and her colleagues' intrusion into Yevtushenko's music with their machine noises was devotionally superior to the work of the poet himself is inexcusably ignorant and insufferably arrogant.

The remainder of the text is mostly White's own writing. It occasionally reaches that pinnacle of inscrutability previously scaled by White ("because it was there . . .") in *Light*[7], a work whose incomprehensibility rendered it comparatively harmless. In *Octave of Prayer,* though, White is dangerously understandable.

Consider, for instance, the tortuous illogicality of the following. "The history of conscious prayer in photography goes back to the beginning of the century. In fact, to 1902, when the quarterly of the Photo-Secessionists, *Camerawork* (sic), was first published under the guidance of Alfred Stieglitz. Though Stieglitz meant art more than prayer, this exhibition is one more proclamation of the option of prayer in photography. The best name for that option is camerawork."

Roughly translated, what White says above is this: The tradition of conscious prayer in photography goes back to Alfred Stieglitz and *Camera Work.* Of course, Stieglitz (and the tradition he represents) was concerned with art, not prayer. Nevertheless, this exhibition is a continuation of the tradition Stieglitz didn't found. And anyhow, we're going to rip off the name.

One might wonder about a man capable of such semantic gymnastics, engaged in for the sole purpose of aligning himself post mortem with a thinker who would have disdained the sanctimony with which this book is awash.

One might wonder, too, about a man capable of quoting at length one "Father MacNamara, Director of the Spiritual Life Institute of America," without identifying this organization any further or even giving MacNamara's first name. One might wonder about a photographer who laboriously describes eight levels of prayer and tells us authoritatively that poetry can only reach the second level but photographs can reach the third.

Having thus indicated to the faithful just where they stand on the scale of things, this self-appointed high priest gets into gear. "When a man experientially 'Sees' or discovers God in himself, with his mind, heart and gut, he grasps the joy of camera and man working in the service of the

"Having gotten but a glimpse of my teaching method, he (Coleman) has been unable to discern the rest."
White

"Coleman, having identified with the one anti-religious note in the *Octave of Prayer,* was unable to see the rest of the notes in the Octave . . . he looked at both pictures and text only for ammunition to promote his anti-Jesus passion."
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"Anyone who takes the time to make sardonic and sarcastic photographs or write passionate hatchet criticism is as powerfully linked to the object of their fury as the believers."
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COLEMAN

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"I can think of nothing more useless to the medium, or to the world, than the photographic attitudes outlined in such proselytizing fashion within the pages of this book. Its egotism, abuse of power and irresponsibility are monumental."
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Coleman

divine. *In the lawful relation of Man to God, he ceases to needlessly rebel.* The fallen Lucifer returns to his birthright." (Italics mine.) Stepping into a convenient darkroom, meek, mild-mannered Art Photography assumes his true identity—Jesus Freak!

Like all true believers, White would have one think that he and his acolytes are selfless. "Though some of those who leave the medium behind spend the rest of their lives in orison, meditation, and mystic prayer far from camerawork, a few return. Again they pick up the option of camerawork as meditative prayer and potential catalyst to the contemplative. The reason may be hard to believe [you betcha] because it seems so non-egotistical. They realize that they have a natural talent for camera, that the medium is a part of their responsibility; so they keep their photography-as-prayer alive, but they do this just to strengthen or *magnetize others* of like mind, heart or soul, not for themselves!" In other words, boys and girls, that ain't *Aperture* you're holding, it's a copy of *The Watchtower,* intended to make converts willing to follow a man who can simultaneously assert his own "natural talent for camera" and lack of egotism, who can claim, in so many words, that he and his followers are God's gift to photography.

White subsequently goes on to tell anyone who cares to listen just how and where to go about making equivalents. "The major sources of equivalent and metaphoric images in photography," he writes, "are the great forces of erosion that shape and reshape the world. Camera has a positive genius for turning the effects of weathering into beauty and equivalence: wood, stone, faces, ice. It grandly celebrates the forces themselves: light, snow, wind, space, water, fire, earthquake, bulldozer, dynamite. In turn, man's artifacts on reverting to nature provide the photographer with many expressive abstract equivalents. Auto graveyards, crumbling buildings, rusting machinery, peeling paint offer camera rich, ambiguous, ambivalent images that may help the photographer evoke the sense of prayer. With a sudden shift of a mental Gestalt, images may allow us to recover even the ambience of historical personages and their halos, a Thomas or a John, a Judas or a Peter." (Indeed, an example of the latter is even included—Carl Chiarenza's image, on page 44). Having thus, like one of Texas Guinan's satisfied clients, told 'em where he got it and how easy it was, White can nonetheless assert, in his letter calling for contributions for an exhibit extending this theme, that he has no idea at all what the work submitted will look like. He has dictated locale, style, and subject matter in the above paragraph; in the letter he dictates style even further, as well as size and even the precise tonal range of prints according to the Zone System. His threshold for surprise must be abnormally low.

White next compliments himself on the exhibit: "Considering the *medium* of camerawork, this exhibition is practically complete: some images are beautiful and thus art in both the profane and the religious sense, other images are symbolic and retrieve from storage hidden data in ourselves. Some images snap to the surface of the mind and can be talked about, others are 'dark to the mind,' reach us intuitively and so are 'radiant to the heart' (Evelyn Underhill)." Note White's equation of beauty and art, an outdated and indeed fatuous equation which explains, in the letter about "Celebrations," his refusal to consider images of sickness or depression.

"Included," he rambles on, "are images that occupy the mind, images that reach for the heart, those that satisfy the sense-loving body, and especially images that may be grasped intuitively by heart, head, and body simultaneously." Here White indicates that psychic intuition was the basis for the selection and sequencing of the images in the show. "Radiant to the heart" became the basic criterion for the selection for *Octave of Prayer. As a criterion, 'radiant to the heart' reduces the terrors of connoisseurship by removing evaluation from the head and putting it in the physical and psychic heart. This criterion makes the whole of photography available to cameraworker, viewer, and critic alike. When seen in depth, the radiant heart sees that all subjects are equally important."* (Italics mine).

Note the value judgments in this paragraph masquerading as definitions. "The terrors of connoisseurship" would seem to be those necessary intellectual risks taken in venturing a verbal interpretation of an image. "Removing evaluation from the head" is a more overt statement of this anti-mind attitude, also revealed in the previous line about "ceasing to needlessly rebel." "Placing it [evaluation] in the physical and psychic heart" is a remarkable critical construct which implies that the way to tell if it's a meaningful image is if it makes your heart beat faster. And the statement that "all subjects are equally important" is a rephrasing of that most intellectually debilitating of all religious panaceas, "Is not all one?" The less thinking anyone does, according to White, the better off we'll all be, floating around in that famous peace that passeth under-

standing. No doubt it was that same mindlessness which allowed White to write, further along, "Before man existed, natural symbolism was." Symbol-making is a peculiarly human function; no other creature invests things with symbolic meaning, and thus before man existed, natural symbolism *was not*.

It is in the section of the text headed "New Photographers" that these anti-intellectual and self-aggrandizing themes manifest themselves most frighteningly. "Today," White says, "we have come to that impasse of visual overproduction where *breakthroughs are an idle fantasy and revitalization of the old is the task of artists and cameraworkers. Whenever a revitalization, a rejuvenation, a resurrection, or a regeneration occurs, that image is a glowing contribution to one of the already established traditions.*" (Italics mine.) There is no point in trying to find your own path, to do something new and original, he claims. Your task as photographers is to repeat—with variations—the breakthroughs that past gods (among whom White tacitly includes himself) have made. And do not think that you will be able to take credit even for excellent imitation; anytime you succeed, your pictures will be considered only as homage to the gods.

The vanity of this self-serving claptrap is almost too blatant to be believed, and White obviously hasn't the faintest idea of just how insulting he is being to the intelligence of every young photographer by arrogating to his greater glory not only those photographs turned over to him for exhibitions but every effective image to be made from here on in.

The next three paragraphs, whose inanity is mind-boggling, merit quotation in their entirety. "While I was embroiled with the contributions of over four hundred photographers, a realization crystallized regarding a demand by new photographers. ('Free, twenty-one, and owns a camera.') The new photographer is not crushed when I tell him his image has been done a thousand times before and better. He says to me, 'This is my experience of Isabelle, or a Teton, this is my experience of union with a dead baby in the rubble, this is my experience of a cloud, or a boss I despise. And the favor I ask of you is this: please have the perception and sensitivity to evaluate the depth of my experience.'

" 'I know you have the capacity to evaluate the photograph along some certain lines, aesthetic, social, documentary, symbolic, whatever your specialty; but can you evaluate *my experience*? My union with something is to me a form of reality; and I have felt it in my head, in my heart, in my body. My photograph may not be as strong as Stieglitz's pictures, as Strand's pictures, Uelsmann's or Caponigro's, but here it is! Do *you* have the capacity to measure my personal contact and union?'

"Whether I or any other critic or teacher has the capacity to judge the depths and breadths and heights of the new photographer's rapport, he looks to us for affirmation on the dark road of his Way. He may want photographs to promise stature, or love, or to be told he is headed for stardom. But the unexpected jolt is this: what matters to him more than fame is the depth and validity of his experience. Depth of experience is hard to judge in ourselves, let alone in others, so his question is one that most of us would rather sidestep."

There is, of course, no such thing as an invalid *experience;* one's response to and interpretation of one's experiences may be sound or not, but the experiences themselves are neither valid nor invalid. And there is absolutely no way of gauging the depth of anyone else's experience, either. As a critic, I do not consider either of these qualities to be among my concerns. All one can learn from a photograph is how the photographer sees, thinks, and communicates. Most photographers become adept at only the first of these. White has removed from the shoulders of young photographers the obligation to acquire the other two skills—thinking and communicating—and has replaced them with the nebulous non-skill of "feeling" or "experiencing," which everyone practices from birth. For his following, then, White is specifically calling forth those who do not want their work dealt with critically on any level other than the mystical.

The reason for this is made appallingly clear in the next few sentences. "...While we will probably continue to evaluate still photography according to the going exhibition standards or the criteria of social comment, today we are begged to supplant those standards with our psychic perception of the depth, breadth, and heights of the photographer's experience of union.

"The spiritual crisis of the times demands that we should heed him. *The healing capacity of the process of creative work is desperately needed, now!* Let 'greatness' appear when it will, we do not need that ego trip. Best of all is the using of art and camerawork consciously for healing *no matter for how few* the psychological wounds caused by a society destroying itself." The italics are White's, and so are the implications: The culture is collapsing around our ears. If we few

"There are changes of fashion, but still nothing is new in photography. Spirit alone gives freshness among the millions of photographs. Needless to say, spirit visits whom it wishes and when."
White

"We can easily imagine that had Coleman accepted prayer as a worthy photographic theme, he might have praised what he now calls abuses."
White

"What right does the picture editor have to change the meanings of photographs to fit the editor's purpose? Well, in fact, the right is given to him by the photographers who submit pictures."
White

"The power yielded by putting pictures side by side that is, juxtaposition, is heady stuff indeed."
White

"I would risk my reputation for the sake of a theme."
White

COLEMAN

"There are images in this book that I would be ashamed of if I were a photographer. . . ."
Coleman

"Minor White has attained the enviable position of not even having to make his own photographs any more. All he now has to do is tell other people how to do it for him and then sequence the results in order to walk off with the lion's share of the credit."
Coleman

Throughout White's talk color slides were shown at 15-second intervals in order to evoke a surreal effect. Slides and talk were not related.

tender souls choose not to engage ourselves with it, either to repair it or build a new one, but decide instead to retreat to our monasteries and ivory towers and soothe our poor bruised little psyches with pretty, irrelevant imagery, who's to stop us?

It is not entirely startling that a man capable of such elitism and disengagement from the actions and passions of his time is also capable of saying, in response to adverse criticism of Bruce Davidson's *East 100th Street*, "Well, that's *Bruce's* ghetto."

Octave of Prayer is obviously intended to serve as the catechism for converts to an effete estheticism remote from its own age. It tells young photographers that the best they can hope for out of their work is the imitation of past masters in the medium. It tells them that their minds are not only useless but actually antagonistic to the making of images.

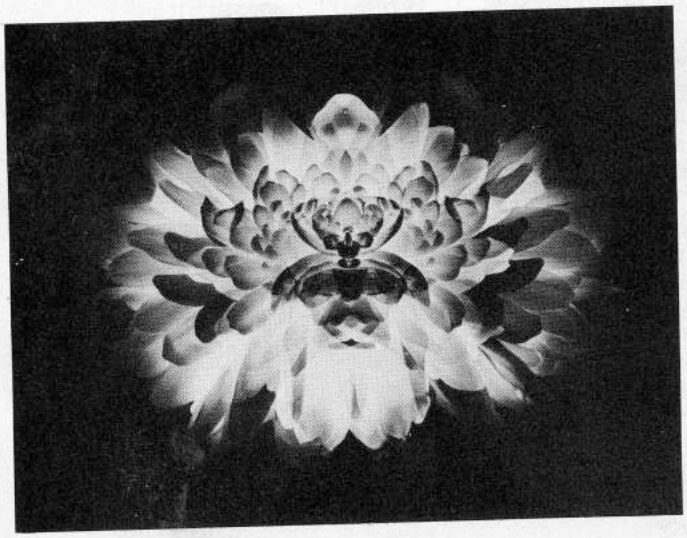
Octave of Prayer represents a man, once a respected and vital teacher and philosopher in photography, coming to believe his own legend and making himself into an institution. This auto-deification is a sad and dangerous turn of events. There was a time when I thought the inferior, derivative imitations of White so often produced by his former students were merely the unfortunate byproducts of his teaching methods. It is apparent from *Octave of Prayer* that White does not regret his acolytes, but encourages them. I can think of nothing more useless to the medium, or to the world, than the photographic attitudes outlined in such proselytizing fashion within the pages of this book. Its egotism, abuse of power, and irresponsibility are monumental. It seems the time has come for White to be folded up neatly and carefully put away before he gets a chance to hurt himself or anybody else.

White Rebuttal

These Friday nights on photography at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, are beginning to resemble forums. Forums in still photography are painfully lacking and so I am pleased to take this opportunity to respond to Alan Coleman's address which he gave here two weeks ago. *Octave of Prayer* can never be definitive; its scope is too big, but it can raise questions and clues. Coleman asked many other questions, some of which I want to take this opportunity to try to clarify.

One embarrassing oversight may be considered before attempting the tougher questions. Alan quoted from *Octave of Prayer* a passage advising young photographers to return to old ways of photographing. Wondering how he got misled, I looked up that portion of the text, and sure enough the word "old" was right there—now twice as big as a sore thumb. As published, I side with Coleman in his abuse of this passage. If we replace the word "old" with the words "eternal" or "spirit," my position on this topic becomes straight. The passage would then read, "Today we have come to that impasse of visual overproduction where breakthroughs are an idle fantasy and revitalization of the *eternal* or of spirit is the task of artists and cameraworkers."

Regarding newness in photography, we should recall that Alfred Stieglitz was saying in the 30's that everything in art can be imitated except spirit. The same applies to photography whether it be documentary, creative or avant-garde. There are changes of fashion, but still nothing is new in photography. Spirit alone gives freshness among the millions of photographs. Needless to say, spirit visits whom it wishes and when; we must admit, not



Nicholas Callaway, *Untitled, 1972*

Edward Weston, *Krishnamurti, 1934*

nearly as often as necessary to make a million great photographers.

During a few thousand years of history, man has learned how to prepare himself to be visited by spirit. The methods are ancient and proven. One name given to them is meditation. The phenomenon appears in all creative work, usually unconsciously. Poets, artists, and photographers; scientists, businessmen and philosophers when involved with creative work, concentrate spontaneously not necessarily knowing how or why. The same activity is more conscious in esoteric circles and is loosely called prayer. I encounter little resistance trying to teach students to concentrate before exposing film or seeing into photographs. The revival of spiritual concerns in the past 10 years has shown that some of our younger generation will be less hostile to a method of reaching out toward that allows them a little control of creative concentration. With a meditative discipline, we can fill in the low periods with intensified perception when peak experiences are not spontaneous.

Two Questions Put To Coleman

The *Octave of Prayer* put two questions to Coleman. The first may be stated thusly, "Is prayer a legitimate theme for public photography?" He answered in the negative. The second question, "To what extent was the theme handled and how well?" Coleman avoided this question altogether.

We will flash on the screen slides of photographs by Chris Enos which Coleman considered to be the most outstanding of the book. He clearly understood their negative meaning; their anti-religious jab. Not only did he recognize the intent and accomplishment, but also by his words, he identified himself with their anti-religious stance. "Only one, Chris Enos, stands out–and apart–from this show's claptrap by virtue of image content, which is so sardonic and satirical of just exactly the wispy mysticism and puffy religiosity of the sequence that it is obvious White failed utterly to understand them."

The photographs by Enos, and others in the same section of the book, *Octave of Prayer*, were included because anti-Christ is one note in the full Octave of Prayer. Anyone who takes the time to make sardonic and sarcastic photographs or write passionate hatchet criticism is as powerfully linked to the object of their fury as the believers.

The story goes around that Stieglitz used to say about certain of his pictures, in effect–tell me what side you prefer up and I will tell you what you are. Photographs that work this way are common and many teachers are well aware of the effect and learn to use it in teaching. At one level, *Octave of Prayer* is a large scale ink blot test. In identifying with the Enos pictures, Coleman put his attitude toward spirit right on the line. In so doing, Coleman also established a feature of his position as critic. He took a stand which here-to-fore has not been well-defined in his criticism.

Coleman, having identified with the one anti-religious note in the *Octave of Prayer*, was unable to see the rest of the notes in the Octave. Contrary to his usually objective reviews, in this case he looked at both pictures and text only for ammunition to promote his anti-Jesus passion.

In his second review, delivered in person in this room, Coleman addressed himself to the text. Alan basically avoided the explanations regarding the connections

"Coleman's condemnations are only what can be expected of one who habitually condemns what he does not understand."
White

"Because spirit happens to be, at present, a difficult field for Coleman, that need not detract from his future criticism in areas where he is comfortable and qualified."
White

Christine Enos, *Church, 1972*

Charles Gatewood, *Female Jesus Person, 1972*

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between creativity in any field and prayer. Instead, he concentrated on raising questions about the responsibility of picture editing and the survival of photographers when faced with picture editors and critics. (These questions will be dealt with later.)

Coleman overlooked the quotation from Ralph Hattersley's book, *Discover Your Self Through Photography*, and thereby missed a word clue to Octave. Ralph suggests this: that photography is the closest that many people come to religion, and that they are not particularly aware of it. Ralph's observation underscores the function of "Octave" as an experiment to see what kind of a show could be produced of many photographers, most of whom are only vaguely aware of the relation of making photographs to creativity and prayer.

The other verbal clue which relates photography to prayer is the quotation from Ruth Breil, which Coleman maneuvered into a supremacy fight between poets and photographers. "It struck me suddenly, as I was crouching down at Yevtushenko's feet—the stage above my gaze . . . that the most beautiful, the most holy poem of all . . . the most sacred sound in the stillness around me . . . was the sudden anxious hiss of shutters clicking softly. I felt my tension ebb as I clicked this one and only image." I think Ruth Breil's experience of a sense of prayer while photographing a well-known poet reciting his verse, would ring true to many photographers. It did and still rings true to me—without discredit to the poet.

While Alan singled out Edward Weston's picture of the great spiritual leader Krishnamurti for praise, at the same time he missed it as one of the spiritual notes in the Octave.

Since Coleman's position as a critic excludes spirit, prayer and religion as possible topics for photographic exploration in public places, his taboo could extend so far as to include individual photographers' private explorations. We might wonder how Coleman would have reacted to Alfred Stieglitz's Anderson Gallery show in the 20's when Stieglitz put up, for the first time, his equivalents and "Songs of the Sky." This was at once a photographer's show and a theme show. To deal with it, Coleman would have had to deal with spirit. It remains to be seen whether he will later take a different stance on the topic.

Because spirit happens to be, at present, a difficult field for Coleman, that need not detract from his future criticism in areas where he is comfortable and qualified.

Questions Coleman Put to White

(Note that for this evening's talk, the term picture editing includes both publication and exhibition.)

The main question Alan put to Minor was something like this: what right does the picture editor have to change the meanings of photographs to fit the editor's purpose? Well, in fact, the right is given to him by the photographers who submit pictures. By definition and by tacit agreement, the contract is to utilize the exhibition editor's expertise and idea, instead of the photographer's. Only the photographers who feel the theme is worthy, or who trust the exhibition editor, will submit photographs. None of the hundreds of photographers who offered Steichen their photographs had any idea where they would appear in the "Family of Man."

Implied permission does not dispose of Coleman's accusation that I use other photographers' work as means in the process of my self discovery, and theme exhibitions as a way of making personal insights public.

If Alan had not disqualified himself as a critic of "Octave," I would try to see where I had overstepped the bounds of picture editing and neglected my responsibilities to photographers. We can easily imagine that had Coleman accepted prayer as a worthy photographic theme, he might have praised what he now calls abuses. If Coleman were a promoter of spirit in photography, he might have claimed that the photographs were enhanced in service to an eternal theme.

Any critic working creatively is expected to share with his readers whatever insights he has gained from a study of a show or of a photographer, if they happen to be moments of self discovery that is also worthy of note, and sometimes gratitude to the photographer or picture editor. So I feel that Coleman denies insights to the picture editor, "rights" he himself exercised in his two reviews. Exaggerating a little, we can turn some of Coleman's accusations into negative "shoulds." The picture editor shalt not use photographer's work to explore a theme, he shalt not learn anything from his work with images, or if he does he shalt not let anyone know about it.

We can wonder, is it possible that Coleman's two reviews are examples of critical work that adheres to his negative principles of not making his insights public? We can wonder, is it possible that Coleman has not grown in stature and knowledge, self discovery and insight since he started writing criticism about five years ago? Reading his reviews chronologically, we see that he has matured by his very work with other peoples' images.

We can lump many of Coleman's accusations into groups: elitism, cult leadership, hypnotized disciples and so on. Seen thus, I am reminded of an exercise found in both psychology and esoteric training. *If you wish to get an idea of yourself as your friends see you, take careful notice of what you dislike, hate and rant against in other people.*

Fallibility of Personal Projections

There is another feature of human nature and photography that plays an important role in picture editing (as well as criticism and photographers' photographs), and that is the gap between intention and product, whether it be a photograph, a show or a review. Coleman rightfully drew special attention to this feature more than once.

Obviously, no matter how hard critics and picture editors try, they cannot work entirely outside of their personal projections onto the photographs they handle. Because they are not the photographers, however, they may be a little less compulsive about owning their personal projections and foisting them on the public as authoritative interpretations. They have a better chance of acknowledging a public response that differs from the photographer's intention, experience, or interpretation.

On the side of the photographer, fallibility of personal projection is no less; in fact, it is often more. Let me repeat this observation, because no photographer is ever going to believe it until he has learned its grain of truth the hard way. The photographer's personal projection onto his photograph is entirely subjective, just as was his imposition of a personal projection onto the original subject. His interpretation of either subject or photograph may be unique to himself. When this is the case, his private photograph does not communicate as a public image, but it may evoke valued and cherished responses which are *independent* of the photographer.

In photographic education, constant attention is paid to the gap between what the photographer intends to say with his image and what the image actually communicates to others. Practically all of photographic education is aimed at narrowing this communication gap, and I must say with little marked success. The Camera

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almost seems to have an unbending will of its own, and that usually seems to invariably run counter to the photographer's intentions. As an educator, sometimes it seems to me that until students start seeing according to lens and light sensitive emulsions, any closing of the gap—"credibility gap," as we call it—is purely accidental. Photographic educators are familiar with the student who just loves everything that comes out of his camera and his only discernable intention is to do just that. Nathan Lyons long ago stated the choice between being a photographer and being a machine: "Do you photograph what you want, or do you want what you photograph?" If we see this constantly in schools, heaven only knows how many "machine" images are afloat in the world made by self-taught or semi-trained photographers. There may be an element of truth in the following statement: when photographers are extensions of their cameras and not masters of them, their *"machine images" really belong to photography and not to photographers*. The picture editor can ask, if these images belong to photography, who will take responsibility for their use in the world? Frequently, these photographer-less pictures are strong, striking and also very valuable to other people, and picture editors have never been slow to learn how to use them. When I write that photographers may be the last to know the meaning of their images, and some members of the audiences the first, I am neither speculating nor drawing conclusions from isolated instances.

In the research on audience response to photographs done in the creative photography section at M.I.T., photographers directly encounter the effect of subjective private interpretation by viewers. In one kind of experiment, each member of the class studies the same photograph at the same time, and finally makes a sketch of his experience. Since we are all inexperienced sketchers, we have to explain them verbally. Each student clarifies his sketch in a few short words for the rest, and in so doing we all get a touch of his interpretation. Long before each member of the class has spoken, it becomes clear how very private, indeed, each student's private image of the photograph is.

Photographers who have offered their pictures for this experiment are shocked. The most shocked are usually those who pride themselves most on their ability to communicate. The rest of the class is shocked into realizing that other people can have valid and viable experiences of images, *though they are different from their own!* After several weeks of hard work, almost every member of a class will admit to himself that his interpretation of an image is not the only right one or the most important. It ordinarily takes months for photographers to digest the fact that their experience of both the subject and its photograph is pure personal projection and whatever rightness it has applies solely to them.

In many respects, Alan is not materially different from these students at M.I.T. He is doing criticism on his own. (At times it is tough on all of us that he has to learn it the hard way.) For example, he thinks that I have become anti-intellectual. That is, having gotten but a glimpse of my teaching method, he has been unable to discern the rest. At M.I.T., students come to our creative photography classes who have driven all emotions but boredom into the black dungeon. Remedy for this situation is sought. Even to try to get students to remember their emotions and find their bodies again, it is necessary to find ways to engage photographs non-intellectually. From the outside this appears to be anti-intellectual and certainly for a few weeks it is anti-head stuff, for sure. For one set of exercises we encourage looking at images while not talking to oneself silently. Later on, when the emotional side and the sensate side have reappeared, it is time to engage pictures as a *total* person; that is, once again the head is involved, but in the right way (i.e. in team with heart and gut). It is only then that one can begin to engage *total* images and expect experiences in depth.

My personal experience in this situation may be of some use here. Since I often use my slides for these experiments, I have had too many revealing moments for comfort. Usually, when some student's interpretation shows me a meaning beyond the level I had been able to reach, it is an embarrassing revelation. In some cases, that deeper meaning has been hidden to me for as long as 15 years. In others, it is powerful joy to have a horizon expanded.

Another prime example of fallibility is the credibility gap between photographers' credos or statements and their images. When we are starting to learn criticism, we think one avenue of approach is to ask the photographer what his intentions are, and then measure that against the photographs. When we do this, rarely is there a firm connection between the statement and the pictures. Frequently they seem to come from two different people. In the face of such evidence the "photographer's intention" comes out as a rather unsatisfactory standard for photographic criticism.

The persistence of personal projection applies equally to everyone in photography. Photographers cannot escape it; neither can the critic or picture editor, nor any member of the viewing audience. As this visual situation gets home to us, we get a glimpse of the potential madness of all photography. Anyone can accuse anyone of anything and hit some element of truth. The accuser stands accused by his own accusations.

For an example of credibility gaps clashing (in this case critic and editor), consider the question raised by Coleman in his discussion of the "Female Jesus Person," as Charles Gatewood entitled it on the back of his print. Coleman expressed dissatisfaction that the cynical intention of the photographer had not been made clear in the book. "Well," the picture editor can ask the photographer, "if you did not close the gap between your intention and your photograph, is it up to me to set things right?" Coleman says it is. In the present instance, the problem never came to mind because the photograph is an unequivocally straight record of a man and a woman immersed in some form of prayer. If Gatewood did have cynical intentions, they do not show. The photograph makes no comment. It is pure record. Thus, anyone can project what he pleases onto the photograph, just as he would in real life. By contrast, Chris Enos' pictures are unmistakably sardonic.

We have here a maddening situation. Alan thinks I have a duty to help the photographer realize a cynical statement. Considering the picture, what else could I do but put the girl in a religious context and still remain faithful to the image. Any cynicism will have to be imposed by the viewer.

Now that this clash of projected images has been aired, one more question can be raised. If the photographer has cynical reactions to the presence of such a woman in the world, what right does he have to impose his private image on her experience? I am not believing that cynicism was Gatewood's intention; I am arguing from Coleman's information. We could go on like this endlessly.

The Medium of Picture Editing

So few theme shows appear that are as specific as "Family of Man" and "Octave of Prayer" that photographers at large are not well acquainted with the scope and nature of theme shows. So we should take a brief look.

Exhibition and publication picture edit-

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ing, as I experience it, is a whole medium. (It is also closely akin to the medium of criticism.) Picture editing as a creative medium has structure, options, tools, scope and responsibilities. The scope includes a polarity: illustration of a photographer at one end and illustrations of an idea at the other. Between these two poles, all the kinds of photographs live: creative, documentary, scientific, propaganda, pictorial, commercial, etc. The tools of picture editors are selection and juxtaposition, scale and framing, with or without words. The power yielded by putting pictures side by side, that is, juxtaposition, is heady stuff indeed. Placement is the greatest source of power picture editing possesses, whatever the visual material.

A variety of responsibilities have to be considered, weighed, and given priorities. Priority can be given to the photographer's individuality, it can be given to the picture editor's idea, or it can be given to the effect on audience. Actually, careful consideration of all three priorities goes into the development of a theme show. And finally, there is the responsibility to the picture editor's creativity and view of himself. This he may invest in the photographer, in photography, in theme, in propaganda, in himself, and so on.

For an example, we can consider how, out of the numerous options available, the priorities and responsibilities were allocated at the start of the experimental "Octave of Prayer." Contrary to my usual concern to aggrandize the individuality of the photographer, I would restrict my selection to the photographs submitted, including both creative and documentary images. *I would take photography as the medium and not art.* I would send announcements stating the theme as accurately as proposals allow, along with specifications geared to economy of time and money for all concerned. I would limit selection to pictures which alone evoked a sense of presence and pictures

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which in the company of others produced a sense of spirit. In both cases, symbol or sense of prayer was sought. I would strive at all times to enhance the photographers' images by juxtaposition. I would risk my reputation for the sake of a theme.

Photography is well fitted to theme shows, because of the sheer quantity of available visual material, for one thing. For another, the general level of competent work, thanks to the technologists, is a step higher than it was a decade ago. Because the theme exhibition can use single brilliant images, they are a boon to young photographers who do not yet have enough photographs for one-person shows; they give the picture editor scope for his creative talents.

In a way, theme shows are extensions of sequencing done by the individual photographer with his own photographs. And I am happy to see that there is a growing interest among photographers in grouping and sequencing. This development is fortunate because photographers are extending their visual creativity limited to single images so as to include the kind of creativity made possible by juxtaposition. In the latter, an unending array of aesthetic and literary decisions arise which do not occur while making single images.

The one topic I regret lack of space forbids explanation is that of the healing power of media, and photography especially. No one knows much about it, and Coleman's condemnations are only what can be expected of one who habitually condemns what he does not understand.

I would like to bring my side of the dialogue to a close with an anecdote:

Regarding the position of Minor and Alan, a memory jog pops up of something I witnessed day after day in Portland, Oregon, probably during 1937. I was living in a back alley near the river. At irregular intervals, an oldish woman would wander through the alley hiding religious tracts in curious places such as on ledges, in fences, behind garbage cans, and under the bridge. Every now and then, an oldish man from skidrow would wander through and destroy any tracts that happened to still be around. He muttered to himself rather loudly about destroying works of the Devil. On rainy days (and there were many of them in Portland), he was sure that his mission on earth was to destroy these tracts. One day a tiny miracle took place. Going about their secret duties, the two met. She handed him a sheaf of tracts. The man added a little bow as he turned away and started distributing them in odd places. She hid behind a broken fence until he was out of sight. Then she started gathering up the tracts. A little later she built a fire of them at the end of the alley.

Alan and Minor live in a more ordinary world than these two archetypical figures. They lived in a separate reality. The hope of forums such as the present one is that miracles will occur.