weston & the post-modernists

These newer artistic efforts may contribute not only to our understanding of how some post-modern photography works, but may also offer us new ways to think about Weston and his oeuvre.

Alison Nordström

Sometime around 1980 photography was discovered to be a perfect vehicle for a new kind of art. Before then, photography had been understood as an unflinching recorder of the real, an exemplary expression of ordered, rational, and abstract purity, or an opportunity to meld craft with high art in singular personal expression. What came to be called post-modernism discovered that the photograph could be used to borrow images, comment on popular culture, and manipulate the circumstances under which an image is seen and understood. Photographs surrounded us. They were almost infinitely reproducible. They existed simultaneously as image and object, art and commerce, truth and fiction. They were reflections of real things in the real world yet their meaning was rarely fixed or certain. Critics, practitioners, and audiences were stimulated by this new approach to what the camera could do, and much of this new work raised questions about the meaning of photography itself.

Many photographic artists of the '70s, '80s, and '90s made images that commented avidly on the history of their own medium, yet in most cases it was the slipperiest and lowest elements on the high/low continuum that attracted their attention. The film still, the advertisement, the snapshot, the random and anonymous historical image, and the pop brashness of the picture postcard may have seemed easier to claim than the triumphant icon of the battle to justify the photograph as a medium for art.

For many, perhaps, the monolithic rigidity of photography's traditional canon defied approach. The art historical notion of inevitable and singular progress could be most easily rejected by complete denial. The very certainty of the cool and impeccable modernist exemplars that had long set a single aesthetic standard may have made them of lesser interest than the cornucopia of other photographic images that surrounded us and increasingly made up our reality. It should also be noted that, unlike their predecessors, this burgeoning generation of photographers was often unschooled in the traditions of photographic history, coming from backgrounds in art, critical theory, literature, cultural studies, or design. Despite this, some icons are so ubiquitous as to be unavoidable. Edward Weston's preeminence as the grandest of the Grand Old Men is underscored and affirmed by a wide range of work that follows him, referencing his name, his images, or his place in the history of photography. These newer artistic efforts may

Right: *Mike Mandel (American, b. 1950). Cover and two interior pages of* Seven Never Before Published Photographs of Edward Weston, *1974. Published by the artist. Richard and Ronay Menschel Library collection, George Eastman House.*

contribute not only to our understanding of how some post-modern photography works, but may also offer us new ways to think about Weston and his oeuvre.

As early as the 1970s, the questioning spirit of the times encouraged a wryly humorous look at the great figures of photography's canon. In 1974, Mike Mandel produced *Seven Never Before Published Portraits of Edward Weston,* an early conceptual project that prefigured the art world's growing interest in the vernacular, the archive, and the interview. Mandel sent form letter questionnaires to several people named Edward Weston and published the responses from seven of them, including a furniture store manager from Schenectady, a beekeeper from California, an insurance agent from Texas, and a school administrator from Brooklyn. Queried about their occupations, relationship to the photographer whose name they shared, and their own perspectives on photography, Mandel's subjects answered with sincerity and photographs of themselves. In his dedication, Mandel thanks them ("Edward Weston, Edward Weston, Edward Weston, Edward Weston, Edward Weston, Edward Weston, Edward Weston") but also tellingly acknowledges Woody Allen, Spike Jones, Tom Lehrer, the Ink Spots, and Jacques-Henri Lartigue as well as his California photographic cohort, Ed Ruscha and "Lawrence of Sultan." The dedication situates the project within the parameters of subversive popular culture, new art making, and vernacular photography, and places Edward Weston, the photographer, in a context as banal and common as his name.

In 1979, Sherrie Levine, an artist deeply influenced by the theories of Walter Benjamin, re-photographed six of Edward Weston's classic torsos of his young son Neil. She presented them untitled under her own signature along with similar appropriations of Eliot Porter landscapes and images from Walker Evans's illustrations to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It is significant that Levine chose to comment only on photographs made by men, and her initial selection of Weston marks the beginning of a dialogue that challenges his particular concern about the originality and privilege of the photograph as an immutable work of art. By photographing images printed in books, and printing from the resulting internegative, Levine created objects that were several steps removed from the Weston original, reminding us that the reproducibility of the photograph has always made it problematic for arts institutions that value the aura of the unique as an essential element of art. In a paradox she willfully embraced, Levine reminded us that an original existed, while simultaneously questioning notions of authorship and commodity value. As she herself explained: "Instead of taking photographs of trees or nudes, I take photographs of photographs. I choose pictures that manifest the desire that nature and culture provide us with a sense of order and meaning. I appropriate these images to express my own simultaneous longing for the passion of engagement and the sublimity of aloofness. I hope that in my photographs of photographs an uneasy peace will be made between my attraction to the ideals these pictures exemplify and my desire to have no ideals or fetters whatsoever." (quoted in Molly Nesbit, "Bright Light, Big City: The '80s without Walls," *Art Forum*, April 2003)

Edward Weston's pre-eminence as the grandest of the Grand Old Men is underscored and affirmed by a wide range of work that follows him, referencing his name, his images, or his place in the history of photography.

In 1987, George Blakely literally deconstructed (and reconstructed) the entire photographic canon with his wry and ambitious *TEXT/IMAGE* series consisting of three pieces titled *The History of Photography by Beaumont Newhall*, *A World History of Photography by Naomi Rosenblum*, and *American Images: Photography 1945–1980 by Peter Turner*. Blakely addressed these holy writs of photographic history by scissoring out all their photographic reproductions and reassembling them, without text, in two-sided collages that measure as much as twenty-five feet long. The familiar images, randomly juxtaposed, nearly overwhelm. The viewer longs for the imposition of order and chronology that these textbooks supply on a chaotic world of images. Blakely's new constructions speak to the repetition and selectivity

Edward Weston's place in the canon seems sure, but the ways we consider his work must change as we do.

of most historical treatments of anything. The number of photographs produced in the world is truly staggering, and the reduction of this activity to a few hundred exemplars is made to seem arbitrary, peremptory, and restrictive. In *Beaumont Newhall*, Weston images are front and center and they are, of course, the most iconic and celebrated landscapes, vegetables, and nudes. Among other things, Blakely's work serves as a catalogue of Weston's greatest hits and an observation of how they may have come to be so.

Chuck Samuels takes on the canon in another way, by considering its tradition of the female nude from the perspectives of the man, the woman, the model, the artist, the aesthete, and the voyeur. In *Before the Camera* (1990–91), Samuels presented what he termed "respectful parody" of the twelve images that came most readily to his mind when he considered the genre of the female nude, including work by Bellocq, Avedon, Man Ray, and, of course, Edward Weston. Samuels poses himself as closely as possible to the naked female, an approach that makes gender issues strikingly clear. From this experience he also tells us that the majority of the positions were very painful. "I realized that one of the reasons why these images touched people, was, perhaps, that these positions were not natural at all." (quoted in 11 e edition of the *Cent jours d'art contemporain de Montréal*/interview with Sylvie Parent, trans: Nordström) *After Weston* is Samuels's comment on Weston's celebrated *Head Down Nude* (1936). In it, the pose and environment are exact to the wrinkle in the blanket s/he sits on, though we miss the line of the original's part in the hair and we don't quite know—intellectually or in terms of composition—what to make of the penis. With this work, Samuels has sensitively and intelligently subverted photography's history and may have changed forever the way we think about its icons.

In 2001, Jim Stone published *Historiostomy: A Study in Repurposing Content*, a collection of digitally manipulated responses to emblematic art historical figures such as Weston, Robert Frank, Harold Edgerton, Cindy Sherman, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Man Ray, and Dorothea Lange, a selection of artists, he says "for whom I have enormous respect and admiration—making the pieces usually brought me closer to their spirit as well." (personal communication to the author 11.27.04) In *30 Peppers* Stone combines two of Weston's best-known studies of the sculpture-like forms of ordinary objects. The cool glinting perfect porcelain curve of the Mexican toilet of *Excusado* (1925) is here digitally supplemented by a plethora of round and anthropomorphous peppers spilling from their basket to loll erotically on the floor, an obvious reference to Weston's numerous pepper studies and specifically to *Pepper No. 30* (1930). It can be read as a funny picture, to be sure, with the suggestion of cause and effect in the tourist cliché of Mexican toilet and too many peppers. It is also a gentle and knowing rejection of the reverent removal of these objects from the real world that Weston intended and accomplished. However, like Samuels, Stone approaches this work with appreciation and the desire to understand Weston's thinking. The quantity of peppers is a tribute to Weston's persistent willingness to look hard with his camera and to find beauty and sensuality in what is generally overlooked.

What we know about history of any kind—including the history of art—is that it is not so much a record of what happened as it is the story of the past we choose to tell ourselves in order to make sense of the present. This story is mercurial, slippery, and constantly open to negotiation, interpretation, and challenge. Edward Weston's place in the canon seems sure, but the ways we consider his work must change as we do. Just as it is impossible today to look at a photograph from 1930 as someone would have in the year it was made, it is impossible to dismiss today's consideration of the work of the past. It is this ongoing discourse that gives meaning to our collections and our lives. *i*

Alison Nordström is the curator of photographs at George Eastman House.