

# LETTERS

## REINTERPRETATION

To the editor,

Catherine Lord misreported my talk on Walter Benjamin's photo essays at the ICP's conference "When Words Fail" [Afterimage, April 1982]. I had said that Benjamin raised huge, provocative issues only to dodge them and leave things hanging about. Ms. Lord left a lot hanging about, too. Readers of her piece might have wondered, as I did, how she got from my "close textual analysis of the metaphors of Benjamin's writing..." to her judgment that mine was a "Neo-Conservative misreading." This gives the impression that Benjamin was far too left-wing for me, whereas I regretted that Benjamin had not delivered any Marxist dialectical analysis on subjects that clearly invited it.

He liked the anti-sentimental character of New Objectivity photography, for example, but had nothing to say about its celebrations of the industrial order and its highly visible pro-capitalist tendencies. And though he wanted captions for photography, to spell out its messages, he was implicitly very accepting about the prospects of political and corporate management of photographs in the Western press.

I said these and many other like things in my talk. Whatever this makes me, it isn't Neo-Conservative. Believers in that doctrine, Hilton Kramer, for instance, think that the U.S. and its fascist clients should be exempt from moral criticism because they're anti-communist. Ms. Lord may have gotten on the wrong track because she was working from notes on a speech rather than an actual text, which she could consult. Walter Benjamin's interesting writings on photography are part of our professional literature. Re-reading them, above all for sense, I found them *obscurantist*, and therefore incapable of any serious critique of the authoritarian right, and, for that matter, of the authoritarian left. My point was not so much that his writings on photography were disturbed, but that they hadn't made their disturbance productive. As for me, I don't mind being characterized as one who believes that the exemplary political thinker of the thirties was George Orwell.

—Max Kozloff  
New York, N.Y.

### Ed.'s reply:

It's true that I was working from notes. Rereading them, it still surprises me to find that you said, for example, Benjamin was a "rabbit," who was "mesmerized by the two monstrous forces of the right and the left." I was by no means the only person at the ICP conference to be taken aback by these remarks. And fragmentary though my notes are, such phrases cannot be made to vanish.

I still think they represent an astonishing misreading of Benjamin. I mean, for example, the man who spoke out against the Moscow orthodoxy which condemned Lukács for theoretical revisionism in the late '20s, and the man who could write, 10 years later, about "the ensnaring nets of those politicians in whom hope had been placed that they would be opponents of fascism, but who in this moment lie flat on their backs, affirming their defeat with the betrayal of their cause."

I also mean the friend and colleague of Brecht. I mean the man who, particularly if one considers the context of his writings on subjects other than photography, engaged in a considerable amount of "Marxist dialectical analysis" on inviting subjects, such as the sociology of art and the reification of culture. Indeed, Benjamin's 1934 essay, "The Author as Producer," is quite astute on the difference between "the mere supplying of a [media] apparatus and its transformation." And in the very same essay upon which your talk so heavily relied, "A Short History of Photography," Benjamin wrote something which seems to me to take cognizance of the function and cooptation of photography:

*The more the crisis of current social order expands, the more firmly moments enter into oppositions against each other, the more the creative principle—by nature a deep yearning for variants, contradiction its father, imitation its mother—is made a fetish, whose features owe their life only to fashionable changes of lighting. The "creative" principle in photography is its surrender to fashion. Its motto: the world is beautiful. In it is unmasked photography, which raises every tin can into the realm of the All but cannot grasp any of the human connections that it enters into, and which, even in its most dreamy subject, is more a function of its merchandisability than of its discovery. Because, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is advertising or association; therefore its correct opposite is unmasking or construction. For the situation, Brecht says, is complicated by the fact that less than ever does a simple reproduction of reality express something about reality.*

I don't find that interesting piece of writing *obscurantist*. I do think it is complicated, which is different. Complexity, I would hazard a guess, is not the only reason that neither Benjamin nor writers of simpler prose failed productively to reverse the course of world history in the '20s and '30s. To ignore the totality of Benjamin's work, to confuse complexity with mystification, to speak of him as somehow mentally squashed between a "right" and a "left" you equate by applying the word "authoritarian" is not only to misread but, in effect, to discredit. Leaving Hilton Kramer out of it, that's why I said "neo-conservative."

—Catherine Lord

**COVER:** *The President Speaks about Peace*, from *Fate Morgana USA*, by Josep Renau. See "Notes on Spanish Photography, 1930-1980," by Joan Fontcuberta, page 8.

## RE: EXPECTATIONS

To the editor:

As editor of *Harlem Document Photographs, 1932-1940: Aaron Siskind*, I was dismayed to find Anne Tucker's treatment of our book [Afterimage, May 1982] less a review of "the book in her lap" than an outline for "the book in her mind." I am acquainted with her work and have no doubt that she could deliver an interesting manuscript on the Feature Group's coverage of Harlem. But for the time being, I wish she had stuck to reviewing our "New Document" of Harlem—on its own merits—as an insightful vignette of the community as told through previously unpublished Aaron Siskind photographs and aimed at a varied and intelligent audience, rather than an exclusively photographic one.

Ms. Tucker's enthusiasm and wishfulness for the "Harlem Document" which might have sprung from the Feature Group's Depression-era chronicles are feelings which I share. Still, I feel that her disappointment at the project's abortion and her anticipation of its future resurrection should not contribute to her critical stance on our book. As planned, the original "Harlem Document" was different in content and intent; I think we succeeded admirably in producing the 80-page, 48-picture book of Harlem which we initially sought to design. Rather than suggesting that our effort is a borrowed distillation of the original Document, I feel that Ms. Tucker should be welcoming the publication of Mr. Siskind's generally unseen photographs, complemented by the recently resurfaced writings of the Federal Writers' Project. Does this not whet the appetite for the more extensive study that she proposes?

It is implied that Mr. Siskind had somehow abandoned the Feature Group after 40 years. This is a little humorous. After all, the preservation of most of the photographs in the Feature Group which scholars now have access to is a result of Mr. Siskind's donation of this material from his personal archive to the George Eastman House. Furthermore, he has made himself available and cooperated in every way possible to provide any notes and private recollections of that period in order to preserve the history of his activities and those of others for all who sought this information. For a number of years following the disbandment of the Feature Group, Mr. Siskind actively sought publication of the work, dropping it only as a result of a fruitless search for an interested publisher. After so long, it seemed no longer an appropriate task as the relevance of the original material was in question and much of it had been lost. (Only once in all the years since did someone else seek a publication. Jack Manning momentarily inquired of the availability of the photographs, but ended his pursuit when he found that compensation was due the George Eastman House for material they held.)

As previously explained to Ms. Tucker, Mr. Siskind resisted publication of his "Harlem Document" photographs for fear that they would be meaningless without a text that would make the book something other than just a compendium of his work from that period. For the record, the title originally decided on for the book was "In Harlem," but the title "Harlem Document" was later appropriated after Morris Engel, a principal member of the Feature Group, stated that he felt there would be no objections by other members to its use.

Finally, if the present Harlem Document appears as a monograph to a "mythic artist," then this, too, is not without merit. It was Mr. Siskind who worked in Harlem before the formation of the Feature Group, who spearheaded the activities of the Group and who continued working on the project after others abandoned it. In the final analysis, he emerged as the most important photographer of the Feature Group and his work the most complete and enduring.

—Charles Traub  
Matrix Publications  
Providence, R.I.

### Anne Tucker replies:

I'm sorry I didn't write the review that Charles Traub expected, but I do believe I reviewed the book Charles Traub edited. In preparing the review, I addressed the "varied and intelligent" audience of *Afterimage* subscribers. I stated that *Harlem Document* was "a well-printed, 80-page book of 48 photographs taken by Aaron Siskind... the photographs are exceptional and their publication long overdue. Since [Michael] Carter's writing has been lost, the Federal Writers' Project interviews are an excellent choice of text to accompany the photographs."

The above excerpts indicate that I found considerable merit in this book. Other sentences described the book's content and structure in detail. I acknowledged that half of the pictures were made independently and half in collaboration. I also acknowledged that Aaron Siskind was the Feature Group's leader and still is its most prominent member. In considerable detail, I cited examples of his leadership. The rest of the review puts Siskind's pictures into the context in which they were made with my reasons as to why this context was relevant.

I did, however, omit citing Siskind's generosity to me personally in my research on the Feature Group and in his response to the first draft of my review. I wouldn't have had the Feature Group minutes to quote had Siskind not saved them and graciously shared them with me; likewise, the collection of photographs at the Eastman House. In addition, in 1978 when the Eastman House insisted on charging the Visual Studies Workshop a large loan fee to borrow the Feature Group's photographs for the Photo League retrospective, it was Siskind who, as a VSW trustee, paid the loan fee. As the donor of the material to the Eastman House, Siskind had asked them to waive their fee in exchange for our scholarship about the material (reattributions, correct dates, identifications of subjects,

etc.). I am grateful to Siskind and regret not having stated this in my original review. I would also like to thank other members of the Feature Group who also read the first draft of my review and took the time to respond with corrections and comments.

In the light of Siskind's previous generosity, I found his not acknowledging the other Feature Group photographers by name in the *Harlem Document* atypical. I still believe that to print these photographs as a monograph without the contextual discussion given in my review is to abbreviate our understanding of Siskind's photographs.

## RE-EXPOSURE

To the editor:

There are substantial inaccuracies in your account of the recent SPE National Conference which require correction [Afterimage, Summer 1982].

Concerning the Committee on Censorship and Freedom of Vision, you wrote,

*The reason the committee could be approved in this year of budget cuts, could be empowered to do anything at all, was that Coleman offered to finance all but a nominal fraction of the costs, and to wait and see whether SPE could repay him. As was pointed out at the board meetings, this forces questions about SPE sponsoring activities, not because they are seen as priorities high enough for the organization to support financially, but because someone who can front the money has volunteered to do so.*

I did in fact volunteer to "front the money"—for postal costs only. The exact language of that offer was,

*I will implement all the proposed functions [of the committee] to whatever extent is possible on the basis of postal communication only (assisted with notifications to the membership-at-large in the Newsletter and Exposure, and discussions in the national and regional conferences). I will not incur postal expenses which I myself cannot afford to provide out of pocket. I will keep track of these costs, and submit them in my annual reports to the board... Reimbursement of these expenses... will be a priority consideration [from any funds subsequently allocated to the committee].*

I made this offer because I considered the formation of the committee to be an urgent matter, had been made painfully aware of the organization's budgetary straits, and estimated the postal costs at somewhere in the environs of \$50-\$100 per annum.

However, the SPE Board rejected that offer, precisely because it was felt that a problematic precedent would be established thereby. The committee was therefore given a budget—of \$50.00 for the first year—to which I plan to adhere. Thus, contrary to your report, the reason the committee was approved in this year of budget cuts, was empowered to do anything at all, was because the Board of Directors of the SPE unanimously felt it to be imperative, even to the extent of squeezing funding for it out of an already overstrained budget.

Also, in regard to the proposal on which the committee was founded, the language of the original proposal did not limit the committee's "implied scope" (or its explicit one) to "sexual imagery," nor exclude attention to the censorship of critical and/or curatorial activities. Certainly such a limitation was not my intent. As it happened, the two instances I cited in my original proposal—the Kirstel and "Private Parts" cases—involved sexually oriented material, but I thought the political nature of their prosecution was self-evident. At the Board's suggestion, examples of censorship cases in which the imagery was not sexually oriented were added, and the concern with textual/curatorial situations made explicit rather than left implicit. This was not an "expansion" of the original proposal, merely a clarification. I share your hope that "the needs this committee might meet are not needlessly restricted." That will be in large part up to the SPE's membership, for the committee is their instrument, not only the Board's—and certainly not a private fiefdom.

On another subject, the Board's decision to limit the editor's role as a contributing writer to *Exposure*, your article raises some useful questions but also contains considerable error. One example is its ascription of responsibility for this decision, at least in part, to an inquiry initiated in regard to a complaint of mine. The subject of that complaint in no way concerned situations in which the editor(s) functioned as writer(s) for *Exposure*; to cite it in that context was both irrelevant and misleading.

Your account fails to mention that the Board's restrictions on the *Exposure* editor as writer, while recommending that s/he "not be the author of any book or exhibition reviews," continued by adding "but shall write such general or thematic articles as he or she may deem fit." The omission of this clause distorts the Board's position considerably.

The Board's debate on various matters concerning *Exposure* was long and complicated. It would be difficult (and out of line) for me to attempt to summarize that discussion; the minutes will have to speak for themselves. For the record, however, I want to point out that only a portion of that debate—pertaining to specific, formal complaints in

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