

# letters

## Photo books

### To the editor:

The January 1979 *Afterimage* arrived. I always enjoy receiving it, although I don't agree with everything you print. But that makes reading (and publishing) interesting!

I think I should make some comments on Robert Leverant's article about photography books. He makes both good points and questionable statements. I can only make precise comment on those which relate to me and my work.

From what I know of publishing, the controlling factor is sales (unless the book enjoys a subsidy). But I am not going to get into that hornet's nest here.

It is true that the printed image can be superior to the original print. There are many reasons for this, but probably the principal one is that the silver image may be poor in value and "color" to begin with. Then, also, the engraver-printer may try a bit of creative work on his own in making a better reproduction from the poor original. But most of the time I feel it is the other way around — the original silver print is better than the reproduction. This has to do with trying to reproduce with dots of ink what is, in the original, a continuous play of white to black.

For me the most important ingredient in the artist-printer relationship is that the printer understand what I want in the reproduction of my work. I happen to have a very good working relationship with George Waters of San Francisco. He understands what I want because we have worked together on two books and scores of brochures, cards, etc., over a period of time. I know what sort of print he needs in order for him to make a good reproduction — and this is not the "fine print" that I would exhibit. What I make for the engraver is a "soft" print, with tones that he can hold. Then he expands and interprets the reproduction print, and this is a very creative procedure on his part.

Over 30 books of my photographs have been published over the last 50 years. Some were printed to very high

standards, some were not very good. **Making a Photograph**, published in England in 1936, was a beautiful production with letter-press plates tipped in. **Sierra Nevada—The John Muir Trail**, published in 1938 by the Archtype Press in Berkeley, had excellent letter-press plates made by Donnelly in Chicago. The **My Camera** books, published in 1949 and 1950 by Houghton Mifflin and my wife, Virginia Best Adams, had superb letter-press plates made by Walter H. Mann & Co. and printed by H.S. Crocker of San Francisco. Among my most recent books, **Images** and **Photographs of the Southwest** were both printed by George Waters, and they are among the finest I have seen. Sometimes I cannot tell the difference between the reproduction and the fine print. For almost every one of these books I supervised the production of the plates and approved the final print run. I think it is essential for the artist to be present during the printing as only he knows precisely what the final reproduction should look like in order to most closely simulate the "feeling" of the fine print.

To continue with more concrete points about Mr. Leverant's text, there are some errors:

### Paragraph 41 PLEASE CORRECT!

I had a casual visit with Steichen on my first trip to New York in 1933, but I certainly did NOT hire a publicity agent afterwards. I never would have dreamed of doing so, and my pocketbook would not have been able to afford it. In fact I have never had a "publicity agent." I did have for the past seven years a business manager, Bill Turnage, but he has overseen my business affairs and publishing and gallery relationships.

In 1952 we set up a small family business called 5 Associates to produce postcards and note cards. Run by my daughter, Anne Helms, this small business did publish six paperback books of my photographs in the 1950s and '60s, but they were not successful financially and had limited distribution. 5 Associates now produces only postcards and note cards and one poster.

I agree with Mr. Leverant that many of

the photography books that appear today look the same—from the point of view of both design and the actual photographs reproduced. But I think the public quickly recognizes a really good and valuable addition to the field, and those books do sell, leaving the others on the remainder table. There will always be an important role that only the small publisher can fill, bringing relatively unknown or esoteric photographs to our attention. The combination of large and small publishers keeps the marketplace lively and imaginative, and I hope both will continue to flourish.

I am always grateful when I find a photographic book of quality and beauty. Having worked on a few books myself, I know how hard it is to arrive at just the right balance of all the essential elements. A fine book stands as a testimony to the hard work done by everyone involved—artist, author, designer and printer.

—Ansel Adams  
Carmel, Calif.

## Manhatta

### To the editor:

Having recently completed a dissertation on Paul Strand's early career, I would like to add the following comments to Scott Hammen's welcome article on **Manhatta** (*Afterimage*, January 1979).

According to Richard Shale, who has been researching the material, the text for the film was provided by a number of Whitman poems, including **Mannahatta**. Although Strand claimed that he and Sheeler had taken the title directly from the Whitman poem, the variant spelling has never been explained.

When first shown in New York as **New York, the Magnificent**, the film received six favorable reviews in the local press, aside from Parker's perceptive recognition of its cinematic qualities in **Arts and Decoration**. In addition, Arensberg, DeZayas, and Duchamp expressed their admiration for the film. Retitled **The Smoke of New York**, it was received with enthusiasm at a Dada festival in

Paris in 1923 and was shown in London in 1926. The following year, after distribution rights were acquired by Symon Gould of the FilmArts Guild, at which time Sheeler and Strand agreed to the deletion of their names from the credits, the film disappeared. It was not located until 1950, when a print turned up in the National Film Archives in London.

As brief as it was, Strand claimed that it was useful in his later work on **Redes** and **Native Land**. In comparison with the diffuseness of Robert Flaherty's **Twenty Dollar Island**, a work with similar subject that appeared around 1925, **Manhatta** demonstrates the value of an underlying text or structure in providing coherence.

Hopefully, the interest expressed by Scott Hammen and others will lead to the revival of this early "brave step" in cinema.

—Naomi Rosenblum  
Long Island City, New York

## Birthdates

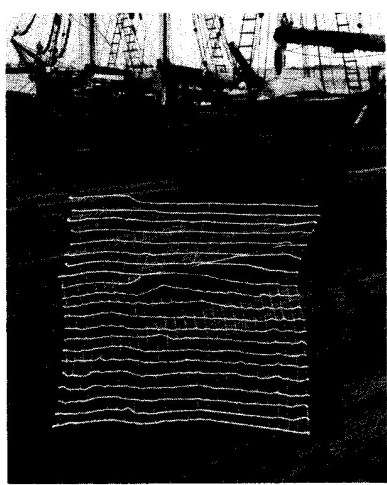
### To the editor:

According to her birth certificate, Marion Palfi was born on Oct. 21, 1907, not 1917 as has been printed in the past, and *Afterimage* (December) unfortunately corrected my tribute to read.

Marion was one of half a dozen photographers that I know who have intentionally dropped from five to ten years off their ages. It is a problematic practice, but one provoked by human and also by practical needs. Our society discriminates against older people. In 1975, would the New Jersey prison system have let Marion come in and photograph if they known she was 68 and not 58? Other photographers have dropped their ages so that they can continue to teach. Whatever their reasons, I have always felt compelled to abide by the photographer's wishes, recognizing their right to define their future, over my desire to clarify their past. Now that it doesn't matter to Marion, 1907 can stand.

—Anne Tucker  
Curator of Photography  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

## Cover:



John Pfahl, **Net and Ship**, "The Sophia," Boston, Mass., June, 1978 (20 x 24 Polacolor photograph).

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