

POWER OF AUTHENTICATION

ENCOUNTER WITH AARON SISKIND

(The Fog Art Museum: April 26th, 1988)

With all his dedication to the formal, highly graphic aspect of the photograph's composition, Siskind seems to be equally concerned with the ontological authenticity of the image. In his search for the graphic/pictorial arrangement of objects/shapes/lines as he finds them in nature, Siskind resists the natural temptation to change or re-arrange the visual structures as they appear "on the spot". He admits that this temptation is always present, but he has learned not to give in: whenever he changed even the slightest detail within the natural arrangement, it turned out that the final photographic result was disappointing.

Siskind insists that "Almost regularly, such interventions are in direct opposition to the contention that one is improving the visual aspect of the image." The reason for such a strong belief in the preservation of the ontological authenticity of the referents' position and relationship within the environment has to do with Siskind's practice of looking at nature through the imaginary photographic frame/viewer (the rectangle). The moment he *feels* that a certain natural arrangement of objects or graphic design fits his imaginary frame, he is simultaneously sure that the composition will work in the finished photograph. This is not so much the question of whether the re-arrangement may be better or worse than the found one (after all, nobody can prove it by an analytical comparison), but that the intervention runs counter to the artist's perceptual instinct which, in turn, is the best controller of the aesthetic aspect of an abstract photograph – for there is no other way of judging its relation to the referent which is not representational, but through the photographer's own artistic sensitivity. Siskind explains that once he "sees" the abstract configuration in nature as an effective (this term infers numerous connotations) composition, he "knows" that any change would conflict with the artist's creative vision of the future photographic image. He cannot risk the loss of this initial creative impulse, even if, perhaps, the change would be more effective. Most of the time isn't.

Siskind continues his reasoning: “I make picture because I feel a drive to photograph what I see. My instinct tells me what will make a good picture, and I realized that it does not mislead me in spite of my rational consideration which may disagree with my photographic perception. Gradually, I learned to neglect my mind, and to follow my creative instinct which, in turn, helps me to avoid the frustration which appears whenever I try to improve the composition that initially struck me as being powerful. Let me give you an example which may sound as an anecdote, but which indeed occurred. One day, walking along the Bridgeport beach I spotted a fish bone, several empty shells and a few curiously shaped pebbles displayed on the sand. The natural arrangement immediately captured my attention and, as I began to explore the pictorial aspect in relation to the tonality of the sand, I saw a tiny small metallic piece in the left corner of what I considered should be the composition’s frame. After a while, I decided to remove the metallic piece: I looked around carefully to be sure that nobody was looking at what I was doing and – as fast as I could manage it – I picked up the piece and threw it away... After I developed and printed the negative, I concluded that I made a wrong decision, i.e., that tiny metallic object would function as a perfect dramatic compositional accent (with a different material/texture as well) within the frame. Early next morning, I went to the beach to relocate the metallic piece, put it back where it belongs, and make another exposure. To my disappointment, however, I couldn’t find the object. I searched and searched but in vain... I tried to change the framing of the display (which was still there), even to add another piece of wood similar in shape to the metallic piece, but nothing satisfied me, and I returned home without making another exposure. The first thing I did in my lab was to destroy the negative exposed the day before... To this day I carry in my mind the initial composition I found on the beach – an imagery that has never been materialized. And I still feel frustrated by my interference with what I think was a fascinating order of things on the Brockton beach...”

Following this fascinating personal account, I asked Siskind why is it that he is so obsessed with the natural arrangement of objects in nature? Does he think that it is impossible to make a found arrangement visually more effective, or at least more meaningful by an inventive alteration or addition of certain details (objects, colors, lines, shadows)? His answer was again direct: “Probably this has to do with the limitation of my visual perception – since I work within a very narrow attitude toward the outside world which for me is the source of all inspirations. To

put it simply, whenever I decided to intervene, I ended up with a feeling of ‘guilt’, so much so that it was not worth doing.”

I proposed the idea that, perhaps, the viewers would not react in the same manner, and that maybe they would enjoy the change in spite of the photographer’s feeling of “guilt” for providing such a change. Siskind’s immediate answer confirmed the honesty and seriousness of his attitude: “This may be the case, but even if they would enjoy the change, I would nevertheless feel differently, because my feelings are triggered immediately after the printing of the image is over, which is part of the creative process so important for me. In other words, it is my most intimate creative process that is disturbed and spoiled. With such a feeling I cannot anticipate what could be the viewer’s reaction to the same image. I make pictures because of myself, my inner need to express what I see in reality in a photographic way. If I were a commercial photographer, if I were to make advertising illustrations, I would probably entertain all sorts of manipulations, combinations, additions – or as they call it today appropriations – in order to produce the images that would make the needed effect on the consumer. But I am not making photographs to please others, even though I am happy if others like them. As I said, I do it exclusively to materialize what I find visually expressive in reality, what I find emotionally moving and associative at the moment I face the reality. My artistic responsibility is to satisfy this inner drive in the best possible way, hoping that the result will – perhaps – exert a similar emotional and aesthetic response in the viewer. My entire experience taught me not to go beyond this hope under any circumstances, or else my pleasure of making photographs turns into suffering.”