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From Expression to Creation: Minor White's *Memorable Fancies*

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Just as the ultimate experience of music is soundless, just as the supreme experience of poetry is wordless, so is the understanding of images invisible.
—*Memorable Fancies* (September 1963)

All my work has been that of braiding together images, words, and teaching. Still the braid itself is not of my doing, it is of my receiving.
—*Memorable Fancies* (September 1966)

"THERE IS NOTHING OUTSIDE THE TEXT"

What is *Memorable Fancies*? Diary, memoir, selected letters, photo journal, poetry journal, photo manual, teaching aid, travelogue, shopping list, scratch pad, address book—it is all these things and none of them. In form, it recalls most directly *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, edited and compiled by Nancy Newhall in the 1960s. But as the date suggests, White could not have been thinking about Weston's example until well into the process of writing. White's first entry appears in 1931. He began to describe the entries as a "book" in 1947, and by 1951 he raised the idea to Nancy Newhall, at which point Weston's daybooks were already on their collective minds. White periodically published elements from *Memorable Fancies*, including long extracts in *mirrors messages manifestations* of 1969.[1]

Questions of inclusion and exclusion loom large when reading this "book." Inclusion involves not just what one might expect—reflections on spiritual growth or photographic theory, encounters with fascinating people—but also intimate aspects of his private life. (White was unsparing, especially

for his moment, in detailing sexual matters.) The question of exclusion is more pressing. Consider this entry (from 1976):

Ted Mail	
	Prepare Porter shipment
Someone	Bank deposit on way to hospital
9 a.m.	call hospital went on [illegible] and Lasix one per day indefinitely
	Letter to Light Gallery IRS
	Dave
Fri.	Check from Light banked $2000

Thankfully, lists of this variety are relatively rare. But they raise key questions, present from the beginning: What, for White, constituted the principle of inclusion and exclusion? If sending mail is included, what would *not* be included?[2] Consider, too, the role that letters play in the book. White would often take a "diary" entry, send it as a letter, and then mark the letter for inclusion in *Memorable Fancies*. Or vice versa: he might send an unaltered entry from *Memorable Fancies* as a letter to a friend.[3] Indeed, he was astonishingly free with dating entries. He made no effort to cover the fact that he rewrote earlier moments in light of later experiences; he freely added notes from later in his life reflecting on earlier moments. That everything that appears in the text happens within the frame of the "book" underscores the fact that we are engaging in White's artistic project and *not* reading a diary or memoir.

One way to answer the question "What is *Memorable Fancies*?" is to say that White was extravagantly committed to the idea that the "accidental is no accident."[4] For White, this idea—which goes back to Symbolist concepts of "correspondences" as well as to Alfred Stieglitz's "Equivalents," both grounded in the notion that the world bears meaning for those sensitive enough to discern it (whether that meaning is created, discovered, or solicited from things is a matter of deep ambiguity within the whole Symbolist tradition)—reached the very core of photographic practice. Photographs were at once diaristic in their very being; they were tied—chemically, indexically—to their place and time, and yet they were also something more than that. Looking at a photograph is looking not at reality but at reality transformed by the artist's hand (even if the artist is only pressing a button or removing a cap). Here is White's way of putting it: the photographer "looks at this two-dimensional, flat, light-sensitized piece of paper, not for its approximation of the reality of appearances, but for its typical transformation of appearances." No matter how faithful the photograph is to reality, it "invariably alters" it by bringing the world into contact with meaning.[5]

White applied the principle of "no accident" to everything in his life. Nothing was off-limits to the artist's transforming hand. The artist supplied the frame—a photograph, a photographic sequence (often with captions or poetry), an exhibition, a book—which would lift the object out of mundane reality and allow the viewer to experience the meaning behind the mute surfaces. On this account, sending mail, writing a poem, having sex, eating lunch, spiritual growth, or taking a photograph were on a continuum—given the right setting, nothing is accidental. Here T. S. Eliot's poetic ideal is closer to White's imagination than Weston's: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking: in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."[6] Of course, it remains for the reader to decide whether the setting is enough, whether the transformation from chaos to a new whole occurs.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS POETRY

Minor White's *Memorable Fancies* opens with a note written in 1958 looking back on his earliest entries from the 1930s. He describes the manuscript as a series of "short notations on what I was thinking," always with the idea of "'someday publication'" (73).[7] This opening raises some of the core problems of the book. White was constantly revising the manuscript as it was unfolding—the text, or texts, are full of evidence of his shaping and reshaping hand, raising difficult questions about the "original" and the "finished" work (mirroring, in a sense, the photographic problem itself). White's first explicit remarks about publication occur in 1951, twenty years into the writing process. The document we have covers forty-five years of his life, beginning in 1931 and ending a few weeks before his death in June 1976 at the age of sixty-seven, although most of the entries fall between the years 1947 and 1969, tracking his life from age thirty-seven to age sixty.

My discussion traces White's thoughts as they unfold, sometimes intersecting with the major events of his life, sometimes not.[8] At the center of his thinking is a seemingly impossible set of demands he seeks to reconcile: a commitment to foregrounding the camera as a medium (against a long tradition of catching a subject unawares), an emphatic commitment to artistic control (above all centered on photographic sequencing), and an equally emphatic commitment to the camera as providing access to what lies beyond the self, giving up control to a higher power. All three demands intersect with his personal challenges, as White struggled all his life to find a balance

Figure 1. Minor White (1908–1976; born Minneapolis, MN; died Boston, MA; active Portland, OR, San Francisco, CA, and Rochester, NY), *Lily Pads and Pike*, ca. 1939. Gelatin silver print, 34 × 26.8 cm. Courtesy of the Fine Arts Collection, U.S. General Services Administration. New Deal Art Project. The Portland Art Museum, Oregon (L42.3.9)

between art and life. His entries—many short, some several pages long—cover all aspects of his life under the capacious label of "photography," or—to borrow an idea from his idol, Alfred Stieglitz—"camera work."[9] No doubt one of the primary attractions (or frustrations) of the book is the sheer diversity of material covered under the banner of photography: from botany to poetry, to psychology, to photographic theory, to letters to friends, to personal encounters with friends and lovers, to itineraries of photographic journeys, to notes for workshops, and, most centrally, to a sustained spiritual journey from Catholicism to Zen Buddhism, to Freudian and Jungian psychology, to Gestalt theory, to Sufism, to Gurdjieffian mysticism.

That White began his career as a poet is something that sustains his work from beginning to end and stands behind two of his most controversial ideas: the necessity to "read" photographs and his inclusion of poetic accompaniments to his photographs. "There is a strong resentment to words with pictures," White observes. And yet it was gospel to him that "any photograph seen by itself can only fail to communicate; to communicate or evoke a minimum of two photographs are required or one photograph with words" (241). For White, the work viewed by itself lends itself to endless chains of association, nothing curbing the flight of the viewer's changing affective

Figure 2. Minor White, *Seaweed and Logs (Cape Meares, Oregon)*, August 1963. Gelatin silver print, 19.1 × 23.2 cm (x1980-4002)

response. By contrast, setting the work within a framework, providing a sense of the artist's larger *project*, leads viewers on the path to what the artist wanted to say—at least this is the hope. Rather than the work seen "by itself," as an isolated expressive statement, White emphasized from his very earliest work a *relational* account of meaning. He was committed to creating relations not only *between* works, as with his sequences, but *within* the frame as well (figs. 1, 2). He refused, in other words, the pungent isolation and singularity—bodies, faces, shells, plants, vegetables, trees, rocks—that dominate Edward Weston's photographic concerns (fig. 3). For White, whether landscapes, bodies, or urban spaces, elements were arranged in dialogue or conflict with one another *within* the frame, an idea that he elaborated with his commitment to photographic sequencing.

White's relational approach emerged with his earliest engagement with poetry. He notes early on, "In becoming a photographer I am only changing medium, the essential core of both verse and photography is poetry" (84). In the 1950s he broadened the idea even further. Wondering whether he is a photographer at all, he declares, "No." He sees that he has a "camera in [his]

hand rather than a brush or a chisel" but does not know why. "I might as well have a bow and arrow, or a rifle or a typewriter. It makes some difference in the appearance of the end object, but deeper than that it makes no difference at all" (196–97). White's poetic foundations, the linguistic core that guided his aim, set him in continual conflict not just with his colleagues at *Aperture* but with the photographic establishment at large.

William Blake and Walt Whitman were constant points of reference for White. Blake wrote five dialogues titled "Memorable Fancy" as part of his early masterpiece *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). The Devil of the first "Fancy" famously asks: "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?"[10] Here White discovered his program: there is a world beyond the closed world of the senses. From beginning to end White adhered to Blake's example, including in an entry dating to 1969: "And so far as the sciences are concerned the symbology in fact does not exist. The sciences have reduced the holes in their fishnets to the infinitesimal. . . . Mankind needs other fishnets for understanding the world and the cosmos than science provides. We need an intellectual instruction which can encompass the material and the symbol, the quality and the best of which the manifestation is the symbol" (466).

As the book unfolds, White becomes increasingly dissatisfied with what he calls the "dead end of aesthetics," which is another mode of sensory blockage. Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, his patrons and friends at the Museum of

Figure 3. Edward Weston (1886–1958; born Highland Park, IL; died Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA), *Shell*, 1927. Gelatin silver print, 24.6 × 19 cm. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. Johan Hagemeyer Collection/Purchase (76.5.7)

Modern Art, are "upholders of Aesthetic Art" (462). White sees "Design and composition" as "man's form (limited) of seeing the larger design of nature—not to be despised but to be recognized as peculiar to man. . . . Photographs of nature are faced with the difference and do not necessarily resolve it" (473). Following Blake, White was highly sensitized to the least degree of false sentiment; the threat of a kind of performance seems to haunt his barest sense of artistic production (an issue he confronted with his early engagement with the Portland Civic Theatre). White's aversion to strained effects was so acute that he came to imagine a mode of production that fully (and impossibly) identifies with nature, as though the photographer can entirely dissolve into his subject without remainder, a process that would eliminate the capacity of the photographer to perform for an audience. At the extreme limit White declares that as a "photographer" he is finally "*free of photography!*" (448). Photography, at this point (in the 1960s), is effects, clichés, performance, the intrusion on the audience of "an aesthetic and an ego"; to be a "photographer," by contrast, is to be stripped of an ego, the pure receiver of the "It" (476).

What White took from Blake is not hard to find. Isaiah of the second "Fancy" speaks of how his "senses discover'd the infinite in every thing" and of his "desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite." The prophets speak of a future in which there is an "improvement of sensual enjoyment," one based on a refusal of the idea that "man has a body distinct from his soul." Blake's sensuous ideal was intimately associated with his artistic medium. Sensual enjoyment will come to pass "by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives . . . melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid."[11] Blake's corrosives were White's chemical emulsion. Mixing meaning and medium, White equally blended craft and mysticism: "The seeing of the Real as reverse of seeing real? In a way then it hit me—the upside down image of lens! This is the reality of a view that our eye has reversed and, it is claimed, that we adjust to an upside-down vision and reverse it. But do we? Perhaps we merely pervert the Real world. The G[round] glass image is truer of Real than the customary vision" (474). Finally, as White remarks, one should read *Memorable Fancies* as though witnessing the climb up the rungs of "Blake's stepladder, 'fourfold' seeing" (190), from facts to intellectual appraisal, to interpretation to a final stage of "seeing imaginatively."[12]

White's attraction to mystical thinking emerged with his earliest notes on botany, in which he reflects on how plant families "have a life of their own," revealing a world of phenomena that the human mind is "unable to cope with." White's botanical fantasies drift into the first of his many reflections on homosexuality. Underlying both is a fascination with supposed biological patterns. The first mention of homosexuality sets the tone for the book as a whole,

Figure 4. Minor White, *Lostine Entrance (Copper Creek, Wallowa Mountains, Oregon)*, summer 1941. Gelatin silver print, 17.5 × 22.7 cm (x1980-300)

"1. One authority says that the homosexual is incapable of love." And, by point 4, as though logically deduced, someone incapable of love is driven to "one of his own sex as a means of self annihilation thru sterility" (76–78). It would be no exaggeration to say that White was haunted by this idea all his life.

A note inserted from 1958 asserts that around 1934 "I discovered my homo leanings and discovered that the family read my diary in which these discoveries were written." He adds, "Realizing that I would have to live a lie the rest of my life was a great burden" (78). There was "a brief crisis" at home, after which the subject was never brought up again. Indeed, we hear almost nothing about his parents throughout these pages. It was also in 1934 that he offered his earliest reflections on the theme of impossible love:

> Give me, oh Lord, one quarter hour with my loved one in my arms
> But ever so lightly held
> The dark kept him from seeing the love that shown in my eyes
> And while I wanted to sweep him up in a kiss
> I blessed you, my Lord,
> That I did not, that I gladly did not
> And that the dark kept him from seeing how much I loved him. (78)

The sense in which he gives thanks, couched in religious terms, for being *unable to consummate* became an almost philosophical principle for White, no doubt in part rationalizing the situation of a gay man in 1930s America. A few weeks later he writes of how "momentary disappointment and despair was overcome by the same power" of passion that caused the pain, another principle that organizes his practice. "Freedom from passion comes when a power can be exercised over the reciprocate," leading to "freedom by control over the emotions which engendered it" (80). That power over the self is soon identified with the power of *photography*, a medium defined by its unprecedented proximity to life.

Reading *Memorable Fancies*, one is continually struck by the fluidity with which White moves between art and life. In the same breath in which he struggles with his homosexuality, he turns to defining "Great Art" as something that can be "loved for its own sake and not its associations." The two were forever entangled for White, a point made especially relevant for him in his understanding of the nature of the photographic medium, tied at once to reality, to life, and to expressing things beyond appearances.

Looking back on his earliest entries, White notes "two major points" that were left out. The first was his shift from poetry to photography; the second was the "effect of Walt Whitman on my life." He records the "shock" of reading Whitman's 1890 letter to an admirer, the English poet John Addington Symonds. Whitman insisted, seemingly against all evidence, that any "morbid inferences" to homosexuality discovered in the "Calamus" section of *Leaves of Grass* were "damnable."[13] For White, this letter dashed "all my hopes of working out a 'good,' in my grandmother's sense of that word, life." Formerly Whitman had been "one of my firmest roots," but now he found that it had "twisted itself around a rock" (84). The figure of roots twisted around a rock is a frequent early motif, one meant to evoke his frustrations (fig. 4). This too is a Blakean reference: in the fourth "Memorable Fancy," the speaker sits with an angel "in the twisted root of an oak," his head hung downward into the "infinite Abyss." In Blake, the Abyss becomes a kind of paradise, the Devil a prophet; for White, as for Blake, the decision to side with the Devil becomes the source of his strength. White set out to prove Whitman wrong, that siding with the "Devil" is the only path to paradise, even if that path is also one of suffering.

The most frequent notes sounded in *Memorable Fancies* are frustration and self-pity, "my only emotion" (255). White's initial response to Whitman's rejection of a homosexual ideal is drawn from a reading of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, explaining how "power" emerges from a "banquet of frustration" (84). Or again, in 1950, summing up his life: "If a man live his frustration to the hilt he will lead a full life" (118). By 1960 these thoughts become increasingly pessimistic: "masturbation has become more enjoyable than contact with a human, so the pictures

Figure 5. Minor White, *Mendocino, California*, December 30, 1947, from *Sequence 12: Doors*, 1957. Gelatin silver print, 24.5 × 14.9 cm (x1980-887)

may become more effective contact than humans also." His frustrated wishes turn into an empty idealism: "The body has always offended me when close," adding that only from the "viewpoint of the womb with a view [i.e., the drape over the viewfinder] they are lovely, desirable, soft, hard, no blemishes, no smells, no hair to moisten with my lips" (266). White's aversion to the body is sadly directed against women. Some of the most unsavory material turns on his relations with women. (He blurts out—not the least of his misogynistic outbursts, to Nancy Newhall no less—"I am so mad at Dorothea [Lange] I could spit. That female is absolutely ruthless, a destructive element to photography" [145].) He writes of his "fear of women—showed as boredom or indifference and avoidance of situations leading toward intimacy" (254). Women, he says, "revolt my flesh. I do not want to look at them," adding, "there is not much desire to touch *any* flesh," which both complicates his misogyny and provides an excuse for it (312). I "resent the feminine in me with a violence," observing how his dreams are expressions of "horror to touch a woman" (319). In 1965, the darkest moment of his career, frustration no longer carried the least savor of triumph, only defeat. "So it is clear that 'successful' holding back of desire was repression and not a growth towards something finer," a thought that reverses the main line of his thinking (414). He observes that "sublimation is all that I have learned" but that this hard-won achievement "might have been used in fruitful love" (417). This is not his final thought, more like a moment of desperation. The text is the record of a struggle, largely against himself and the limitations forced on him.

White returns to Whitman in 1957, remarking how reading the Symonds letter shaped the whole of his work up to this point, explicitly so with *Sequence 12: Doors* (fig. 5). The response to Whitman explains in part the impulse to write *Memorable Fancies*: "Whitman's no, that his city of comrades did not include lovers, was a blow. I know of nowhere else to turn. The psychologist at the University had proven worse than useless, my family were silent but still aghast, boyhood friends had drifted away. . . . Lacking precedent, I set out to make one. With nowhere to turn I turned inward and promised to write down some kind of code of morals for the minority group of which I found myself a part" (214).

Looking back now more than twenty years after the event, White saw that "all my photographs . . . and my thinking about photography" have been shaped by Whitman's denial of the "good life" for the homosexual. Or rather, Whitman's work, like his own, is all the evidence one needs of the "good life." Whitman's true answer "lies in the rest of the poems and what a structure he built on the foundation he was given. He was in work and living the decency, the generous, the honesty that I knew must be possible" (214). Against his notes of desperation, White more often saw his own work as expressing the same sense of possibility expressed by Whitman's life work.

Figure 6. Minor White, *Meyer Schapiro, New York City*, 1946. Gelatin silver print, 10.7 × 9.3 cm (x1980-582)

Figure 7. Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946; born Hoboken, NJ; died New York, NY), *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1933. Gelatin silver print, 9.2 × 11.6 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Alfred Stieglitz Collection (1949.744)

White's early entries are fragmentary. He inserts a note about the crucial five years between 1937 and 1942, touching on his beginnings in architectural photography working under the WPA, photographing at the Portland Civic Theatre, encountering Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (1933), and creating his first photographic sequence while working for the YMCA. He tersely notes that "Edward Weston and the f.64 school dominated," well before he had the chance to meet Weston. In April 1942 he left for the army and not long after converted to Catholicism, "whole hog or nothing" (87–90).

A brief note covers 1945–46, when White studied with Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. Schapiro taught a psychoanalytic approach to visual art, an idea that took root in White's thinking from this point forward. It was also in New York that he met the Newhalls, who became lifelong friends and supporters, and it was through them that he met Alfred Stieglitz. From his encounter with Stieglitz, he records a fateful sentiment: "Have you ever been in love?" Yes. "Then you can photograph" (93) (figs. 6, 7).

In July 1946 White returned to the West Coast ("home at last") and took up a teaching position at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, working alongside Ansel Adams. At this point White included the first in a series of succinct summations of his thinking that are threaded throughout the book: "The lessons learned from the Boleslavski went into effect. The principles of art history were converted to use by photographers; the psychological approach learned from Schapiro went into effect, the idea of the equivalent from Stieglitz went into the curriculum; technique was learned from Ansel at a high rate of speed and his Zone System became my staple" (93–94).

If Stieglitz formed one half of White's pantheon, Weston was the other. In the winter of 1946 White visited Weston at Point Lobos, undoubtedly among the most transformative events of his life. As Peter Bunnell remarks, "Point Lobos will become for him a kind of quintessential photographic site, and it is in relation to his understanding of how Weston gained his inspiration here that White will approach . . . other landscape sites for his own creative purposes."[14] White's superb second, third, and fourth photographic sequences (figs. 8–10)—*Songs without Words* (1947–48), *Knotholes and Doorknobs* (1948), and *Fourth Sequence* (1950), made up entirely of images drawn from the California coast—emerge directly from his experience at Point Lobos. Unlike Weston's, White's landscape photographs were saturated with all-too-human feelings, every work expressive of frustrated desire.

Whatever impact Weston had on White's career, it bears underscoring that White had already developed a strong sense of a personal approach before meeting him. No doubt one of his formative experiences prior to meeting

Figure 8. Minor White, *Devil's Slide, San Mateo County, California*, October 19, 1948, from *Song without Words*, 1947–48. Gelatin silver print, 8.9 × 10.9 cm (x1980-1123)

Figure 9. Minor White, *Benicia, California*, February 11, 1948, from *Sequence 3: Knotholes and Doorknobs*, 1948. Gelatin silver print, 9.3 × 11.8 cm (x1980-985)

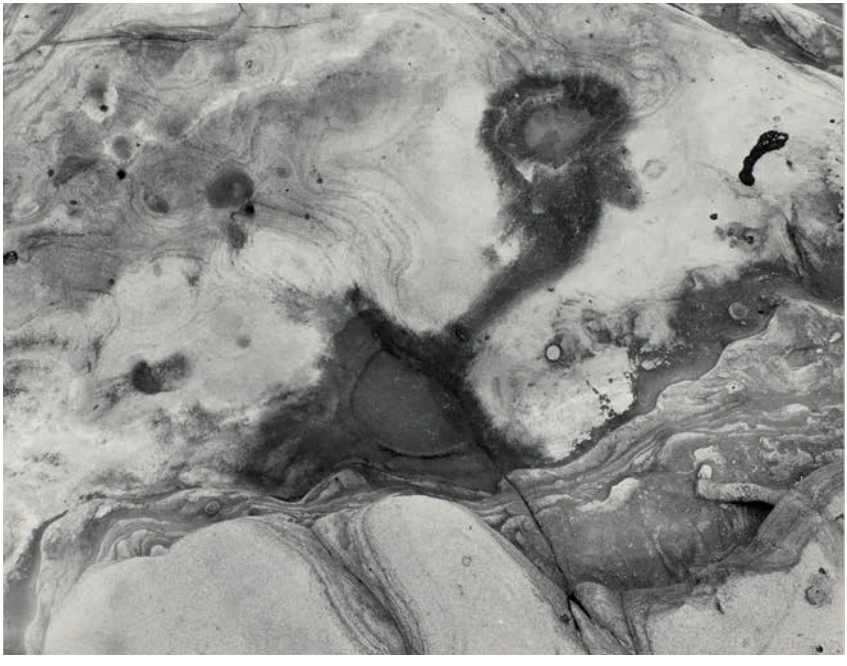

Figure 10. Minor White, *Pebbly Beach, Point Lobos State Park, California*, February 25, 1948, from *Fourth Sequence*, 1950. Gelatin silver print, 18.6 × 24 cm (x1980-1033)

Weston or Stieglitz was his reading in 1941 of Boleslavsky's *Acting* and his work with the Portland Civic Theatre. Reading the book, he says, "hit me very hard." It "was the seed of the next period of work" (90). Looking back on this moment in 1973, White reflected how the lessons in Boleslavsky's book provided the "essentials of creative work" that could be "applied to photography"; the book, he said, was "a major influence in my work." While in the army he "attempted to write the same material [as Boleslavsky] for photographers,"[15] and indeed from 1942 until his discharge in September 1945, White penned an homage to Boleslavsky titled "Eight Lessons in Photography" as well as a dialogue titled "Seven Lessons in Photography" (1948).[16]

One can see the impact of Boleslavsky's book with White's first publication, "When Is Photography Creative?" of 1943.[17] The essay rested on a formative distinction between expressive and creative photography. Expressive photographers are individualistic, solipsistic, private; they "do not make their pictures for the sake of the audience." Creative photographers, by contrast, aim to "arouse emotions in other people." Boleslavsky provocatively described the actor as an "emotion maker." The actor created emotional states in his audience like a logician, a "mathematician," or a "cabinetmaker."[18] Boleslavsky's last lesson, on rhythm, summed up the book as a whole, defining the work of art as the "*the orderly, measurable changes of all the different elements comprised in a work of art*" to "*progressively stimulate the attention of the spectator and lead invariably to the final aim of the artist*."[19] White found in Boleslavsky a vision of the dramatic unfolding of scenes to "invariably" communicate the "final aim of the artist." White put these ideas into practice with his first photographic sequence, a picture story on his YMCA ski trip to Mount Saint Helens.

White later reflected on the process of "emotion making" in *Aperture* magazine in 1956. Boleslavsky, he wrote, taught the photographer how to be a methodical craftsman of "feeling," to find a "working technique . . . applied specifically to the problems of evoking feeling and mood in people via the photograph." It is the knowledge, he said, of how to "turn on and off, at will, a state of mind . . . which one can create" in the viewer. As White summed up Boleslavsky's book, "the final product of the actor's art is the feeling aroused in the spectator."[20]

In his 1943 essay White provided readers with an example of the creative approach to emotion making in an audience. The scene is of a house along the beach with the ocean behind it, and the feeling it evokes is one of "aloofness." But when the photographer comes to consider how to convey this feeling of aloofness to an audience through "a lens and a print," he discovers the incompatibility between the medium and the feeling he hopes to communicate.[21] His point is that if the subject matter does not lend itself

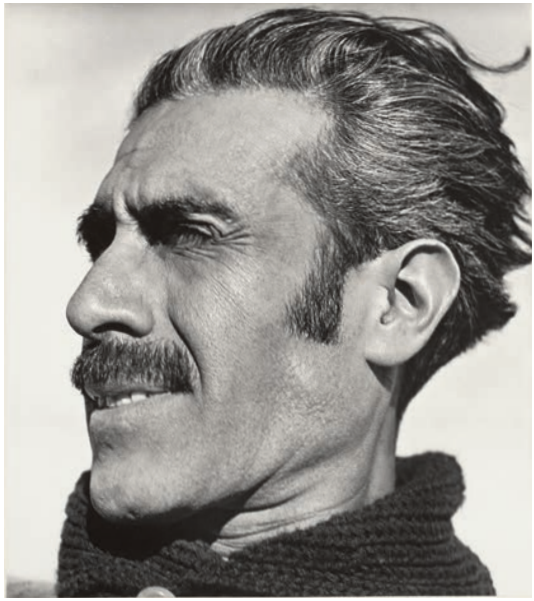

Figure 11. Edward Weston, *Manuel Hernández Galván, Shooting*, 1924. Gelatin silver print, 20.8 × 18.4 cm. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. Edward Weston Archive / Gift of the Heirs of Edward Weston (82.10.27)

to the photographic medium, the subject must be dropped and a more suitably photographic variant found. The first half of White's essay defends Weston's infamous notion of *previsualization*, a theory of art making wherein feeling and medium are felt to be one.[22] When the photographer "previsualizes," he wrote, "he looks at the scene but sees in his mind's eye a print of it. Printing from a previsualized negative is to get out of it the content remembered to have been inserted." Above and beyond this technical approach, White saw previsualization as a ritual practice. "'Previsualization,'" he wrote, "is a discipline. When a man can do it, he has become one with his camera."[23] Becoming "one" with the medium meant that seeing had become *seeing photographically*. This is what it means, literally, to take "camera as a way of life": "I have made enough pictures so that now I see like a lens focused on a piece of film, act like a negative projected on a piece of sensitized paper, talk like a picture on a wall."[24] It would be a mistake to see previsualization as an *idealist* approach, one that involves a separation between idea and execution, intent and realization, subject and object, inner and outer, mind and matter. Better is to see how previsualization aims to resolve the hard separation of inside and outside. An artist who has immersed himself in his medium is able (or forced) to see the world in terms of his medium, rather than projecting or inserting some content into it from the outside.

Edward Weston, in his *Manuel Hernández Galván, Shooting* of 1924 (fig. 11), offers a thematic expression of previsualization. Galván's concentrated gaze—looking out toward a peso that he is ostensibly shooting with his

revolver at this very moment, both coin and gun out of view—was meant to exemplify the concentrated mode of photographic seeing, shooting the figurative target in some kind of quasi-instantaneous realization of idea and execution. "So there stands my camera," Weston wrote, "focused, trained like a gun."[25] White, by contrast, tended to avoid this kind of intensely absorptive rendering of momentary connection as well as the isolation of figure against ground, preferring instead to capture moments of what he called emotional "rapport" or "communion" *between* elements in his photographs, as though they are playing a part in some mysterious play.

White described this rapport or relation between elements in his work as the "implications" of the subject, and in his 1943 essay he asked photographers to think in terms of a unity of a subject's "implications" and the "photogenic" nature of the scene. For White, the implications of a subject were typically of a "contradictory" nature. Photographing the ocean, for instance, brings to mind memories of both "good" and "harm," "depth" and "shallow," "pools" and "rocks."[26] Here too he is following Boleslavsky, who describes the nature of "double feelings," how the actor must be "happy and sorry at the same time. Gleaming and tender."[27] The question White was asking was how to convey this ambivalent or conflictual reality to an audience. He concluded that the best way to express the "recurrent power" of the ocean was not to photograph the ocean at all. Here too, White seemed to be following Boleslavsky's account of "affective" or "emotional memory." Emotional memory was a kind of storage facility in the mind where feelings are stored for use in the future. White's fictive photographer traveled around the landscape with this emotion in his head and sought out the subject that would match the feeling.

White lists as possible subjects a field of grain and a series of folded-up snow fences, finally coming to a wind-eroded tree stump. The wind has shaped the stump in a "marvelous fashion to form recurrent spirals swirling together like whirlpools stilled by a catastrophic hand." As usual, White's imagery moves from the natural to the cultural, as the hand that shapes the tree makes it in the contradictory form of a frozen whirlpool. Unlike the ocean, wheat, or fences, the wind-shaped stump will convey the "feeling of recurrent power to anyone who looks at it."[28] This registers a profound problem at the center of White's practice. It is not a theoretical problem but an evaluative one. Can it possibly be the case that "anyone who looks at" the photograph of the stump will experience the "double feeling" of "recurrent power"? More than that, White insisted that this double feeling would be available to anyone "over and over again just by looking at it." If his case rested on these grounds—that everyone will always and only feel what he wants them to feel, no matter how complex the emotional state he wants to communicate—then White's project

Figure 12. Minor White, *PG&E Vaca-Dixon Substation, California*, February 3, 1947, from an incomplete set of the sequence *Amputations*, 1947. Gelatin silver print, 11.8 × 9.3 cm (x1980-619)

is a manifest failure. More important than the specific kinds of emotional realities he wanted to convey was his theoretical commitment to "universal" communication. ("Photography," he wrote, "is a language more universal than words.")[29] The great achievement of White's practice is his complex account of the communication of shared emotions through photographs—that everyone looking at a work, no matter who they were, when they were, or what they were—would be able to share in the same set of emotional qualities. It is less important that his photographs *effectively* communicated specific emotional states—sometimes they do, often (if this viewer is any measure) they do not—than that he tenaciously sought to make available emotional states to anyone who cared to look.

No doubt one of the central emotional states White wanted to communicate was his all-but-concealed sexuality, a nearly ubiquitous theme of his photographic output. Writing of a 1947 photographic sequence at an electric plant outside San Francisco, he noted: "In my recent photos there is frequently a penis between tall things. Wish for intercourse? Who doesn't? Also a feeling of being alone expressed? Who isn't alone?" (98) (fig. 12). The shift from personal to universal was for White the necessary progression from expression to

creation. He thought the impersonal nature of the camera automatically generated a first-order distancing from personal expression. For "those who are prone to print their hearts on their sleeves," he said, the "camera image automatically provides aesthetic distance" (110). It was the photographer's job to *reinforce* this automatic distance and to think of the audience's feelings as a version of their own.

At the end of his 1943 essay, White introduced a crucial distinction between two types of creative work, objective and subjective. The objective approach revealed the "character" of the subject. The subjective approach—White's own—aimed to "understand all the possible implications of a subject" and then extract the implication that best matched the "idea" in the artist's "mind." According to White, the idea in the artist's mind might be unrelated to the reality of that feeling in the photographed subject (here is the root of his critique of documentary photography). In his example, whether or not a person photographed was in fact kind was irrelevant to the photographer who wanted to convey the emotion of kindness, which could be extracted from the face of a disagreeable person. In Boleslavsky's terms, the actor must "substitute creation for the real thing. The creation must be real, but that is the only reality that should be there."[30] For White, when the viewer looked at the photograph, they should see the photographer's "creation," something that went well beyond the expressive "reality" recorded. This meant that the scene recorded had to *be recognized as created, had to appear as staged* for an audience, even or especially if the photographic medium seemed to point directly at a reality "caught unaware."

PHOTOGRAPHIC SEQUENCING

Writing alongside his photographic work at the electrical plant, White, for the first time, saw his diary entries as constituting a book. The book, in other words, played out the same problems as his photographs, how to turn purely personal experiences into universal ones. The tone of the project is set with the first line of his new writing campaign: "Trying out the free association method of the psychologist on photographs" (94). The process leads directly to the expression of repressed sexuality, and the language, for the first time, is explicit. Pianos lead to masturbation; wires refer to a "finger in the anus." He declares that "expressiveness is thus connected with sexual practice," adding that photography is a "sublimation of my inability to have the sex I want" (fig. 13). White wonders whether his interest in "self exploration in photography may be a reflection of my continual masturbation" (a theme that recurs). At this point he sees photography as a means of "self discovery," observing that the "artist has one thing to say—himself" (96–97).

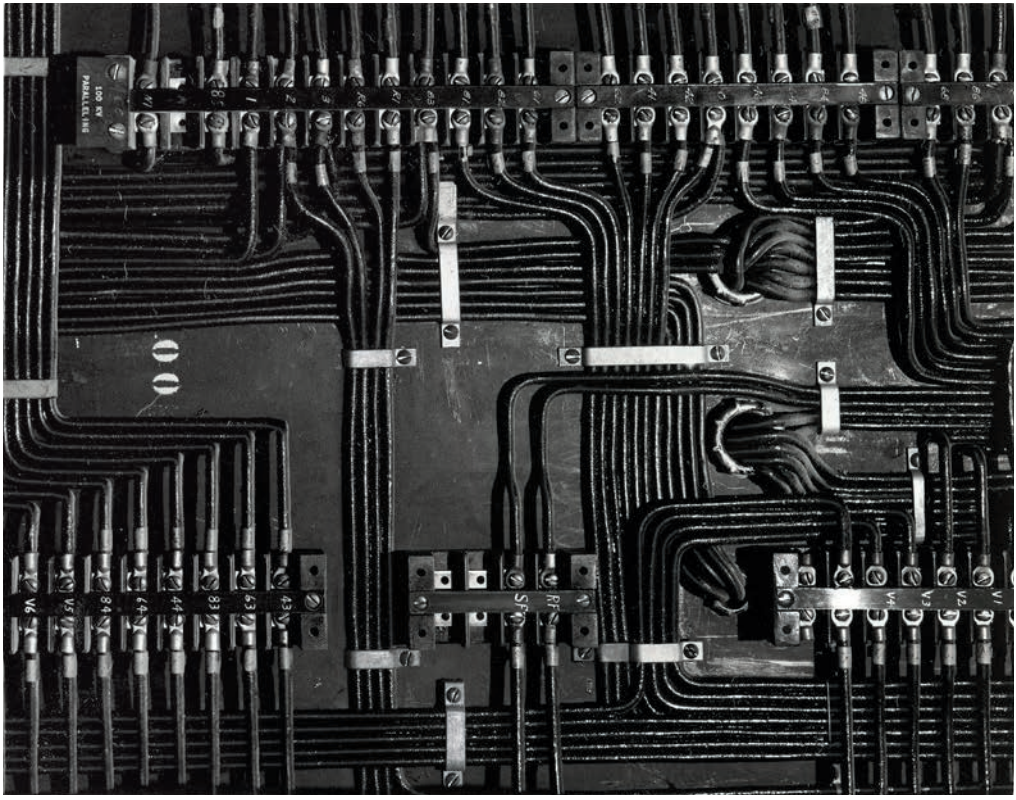

Figure 13. Minor White, *PG&E Substation, Newark, California*, February 7, 1947. Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20.3 cm (x1980-624)

White found resources for detachment in the medium. "The camera injects a bit of objectivity," he tells himself. It is the "impartiality of the machine which it levels to expressiveness" that matters more than the associations generated by the referent (98). And again: "The camera image automatically provides aesthetic distance to those who are prone to print their hearts on their sleeves" (110). Twenty years later he was focused on the same problem. Raising the issue of artistic judgment, he warns himself, yet again, "Don't *Mix* Life and Work" (424). One must evaluate a photograph just as one should evaluate the response to it: "without judging [the] person—that's the trick that separates in life from in work" (429). That White needs to continually warn himself against this impulse captures a central fact about his life and art.

How did this change of heart, from expression to creation, come about? He describes a "real jolt" to his thinking through teaching (100). His students manifestly rejected any confessional approach. They were "showing pictures with *obvious* sex symbols," as though saying, "'for you, White.'" He gathered it

was a pointed "insult." He took this as his cue to change direction. White now came to see "sex [as] the basis, but not the ultimate expression foundation upon which the cathedral is built" (100). Nearly twenty years later White was still struggling with sexual content and the blockages it produces: "The wall before me is always sex. The whole unfinished thing" (413).

White's ambition to move past confession was codified by his commitment to photographic sequencing, and some of the most important materials in the book are gathered around this subject. The idea emerges in response to open-ended "interpretation," which he sees as the audience's fixation on *themselves*. Because any "fine photograph is open to numerous interpretations; an expanded title or short story would guide the spectator to the intended meaning" (100).[31] Narrativizing the work, setting the individual element within a larger context, is a means to step outside the immediacy of the self for the artist and for the viewer. One of White's basic concerns is the sheer availability of open-ended response, as though anyone can turn a photograph into empty reflections of themselves. Writing, like sequencing, was driven by the effort to frame the experience of the work according to his intentions and exclude the free-flowing impulse to affective response.

In his 1950 introduction to his *Fourth Sequence*, a series of ten close-up photographs taken at Point Lobos between 1948 and 1950 (see fig. 10), White provides his most cogent statement about sequencing: "A SEQUENCE of photographs is like a cinema of stills. A cinema arrested at the high points and which lock the story to the memory. Each image is economical because of what has led to it and what it leads into. Each contains the thrust of foreword movement as well as the foundation of what has happened. The gaps between pictures are as important as the images, though they have to be filled by the reader from what he can grasp of the intentions of the artist, the implications of the subject, the implications of the treatment" (116) (fig. 14).

It is a cinematic idea but perhaps more obviously musical, a kind of theme and variations, in which the first theme contains the germ of its final recapitulation, and no matter how far a thematic motif strays from its initial setting, it still carries aspects of its original character, bringing together the disparate elements into a larger whole. The sequenced material is often drawn from disparate moments and subjects in his life, and it was White's aim that through proper arrangement his intentions would be clarified at once for himself and for the audience. No doubt the sequences, like the *Memorable Fancies* itself, were an effort to find (or create) a pattern within the "noise" of life. Writing of *Sequence 13: Return to the Bud* (1958), he saw the exhibition as the "completion of one long, long trajectory." Even though he "didn't know where it was going" eighteen years earlier, now he was able to look back at his

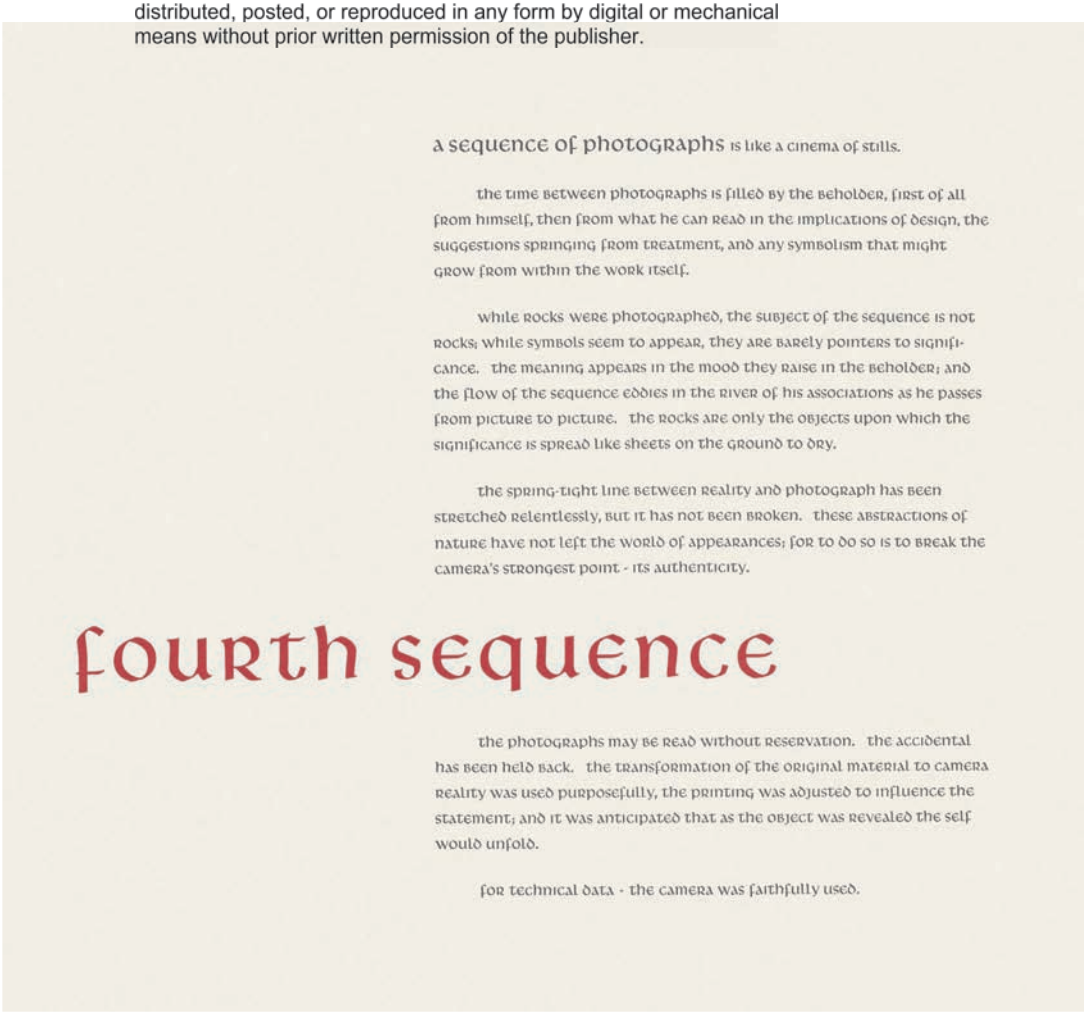

Figure 14. Minor White, Introduction to *Fourth Sequence*, 1950. Printed by Adrian Wilson. Ink on paper, 35.6 × 40.3 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Joyce Lancaster Wilson (1995-337.0)

life and "see a completed section" (249). The sequences solicited or created an order for the artist even more than for the audience.

Near the end of *Memorable Fancies* (in 1969), White returns to his earliest thoughts on sequencing and poetry, as well as a lifetime of resistance to the idea, and comes to a remarkably similar conclusion. Again, the emphasis, so unusual today, is on the precision of conveying one's intentions:

> I found myself saying to my surprise that I used words with photos to express myself exactly or that so doing allowed me to communicate with precision in the intuitive field—maybe as exactly as

> numbers in the intellectual field. The reluctance of friends to consider words with photos, or the anger aroused in them to be forced to see my meaning because that prevented their daydreaming their own meaning of the photo has held me in check for years. They have caused me to deny my talent to combine words and photos. With words I can express slow concepts, with images fast vision. So far as the words limit the image and the photo limits the words, so far as each frees the other my communication can be that much more exact. Exactly objective exactly subjective and precisely from conscience. (476–77)

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s White became more and more involved in the study and analysis of audience response. Taking even the most personal kinds of audience response as raw material, he attempted to build them *into* his work, allowing him (so he thought) to guide even the most obscure forms of personal response in the direction he wanted them to go. Here is a succinct expression of his aims along these lines:

> I have shown this photo to scores of people scores of times, always letting people find what they will in it. And without question everyone's findings add then to the total. . . . I do not deny that which others have brought to it and thought they found in it. There have been too many moments of love and understanding of the thoughts of my friends to deny. But if by putting a certain word to it I can unmistakably point to what I want to convey . . . if I choose a word to describe the meaning, point the arrow one way rather than another I have a chance of citing one meaning precisely and unmistakably. And this communicates my understanding and meaning exactly. (477)

The following year (1970) he came back to the idea: "The meaning of the image expands in any directions. The significance of the words explodes differently for each reader. Words AND Images. I can adjust where the meanings of each cross each other and the meanings of each are reduced sharply. Thus I can adjust the crossing and manifest exactly what I want to communicate. Words AND images can completely manifest my meanings" (479, 481). One should not construe this as a *denial* of audience response, rather it is an effort to place the *punctum* (putting the idea in contemporary terms) under the artist's purview.[32]

White is at his most lucid on the meaning of sequencing in his initial elaborations on the idea. Here, for instance, in a 1950 entry he describes how

the spaces between photographs are "filled by the beholder," and while this first step is personal, this stage is widened the longer one looks. What happens after the initial moment of free-floating response is a sense of the "implications of design" that emerges from the specific "treatment" of the subject, releasing a "symbolism" that arises "from within the work itself." He encourages viewers to "read" his works "without reservation," because no matter how far the reading goes, he has done everything he can to ensure viewers will not be able to stray too far off track. "The accidental has been held back," he insists, because every moment is saturated with his intent, even if what appears is not made by human hands. A point he elaborates with the next phrase: "The transformation of the original material to camera reality was used purposefully, the printing was adjusted to influence the statement; and it was anticipated that as the object was revealed the self would unfold" (118). Printing, language, sequence are further attempts to "influence" a reality always already transformed by the camera. In one of his more beautiful and precise formulations, he summarizes the idea: "The unpredictable is never overcome, but it is accepted as a working condition by the artist which he must seek to overcome or fail to do anything" (152).

For White, what appears was always also something other than what literally appears, even if (or especially if) the difference is elusive for the uninitiated. "While rocks were photographed, the subject of the sequence is not rocks" (118). This was his mantra: "to look at things until I see what else they are" (130). The rocks, he insists, are "only the objects upon which the significance is spread" (118) (figs. 15, 16). And while the photographs, most of them so close-up as to obscure any clear reading, appear "abstract," he contends that the "spring-tight line between reality and photograph has been stretched relentlessly, but it has not been broken." No matter how abstract the works appear, he never "break[s] the camera's strongest point—its authenticity" (118). White never wavered in his commitment to the indexical nature of the medium, noting that because "camera depends on light reflected from objects," it is "held firmly to the truth" (153). For this reason, he was disdainful of any form of photographic manipulation, which he described as a "hatred" of the medium. ("The Pictorialists still think that hand and brush is more creative than eye and camera. A bad hangover from pre-camera times and indicating a total misunderstanding of the medium" [106].) White appears to be caught between competing and not exactly reconcilable demands: toward a straight, unmanipulated ideal of capturing appearances and an equally powerful commitment to pushing past the surface of things to *another truth* that lies concealed in the literal.

Figure 15. Minor White, *Point Lobos State Park, California*, March 14, 1950, from *Fourth Sequence*, 1950. Gelatin silver print, 24.2 × 18.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Joyce Lancaster Wilson (1995-337.12)

Figure 16. Minor White, *Rocks in Water*, 1966. Gelatin silver print, 16.8 × 23.2 cm (x1980-5325)

WHITE'S THEATER

In 1951, in a series of letters to Nancy Newhall, White began to actively shape his diary material into book form, his basic theme being how "camera" can function "as a way of life." He continually wavered between seeing a life lived through a camera as a life raised to a higher level and worrying that it was simply "not enough to live by." Life itself is often defined by "horror" and "agony," full of "frustrations, the loneliness, the search for intimacy without embarrassment and not much more," experiences that make life through a camera an attractive alternative. The danger, as White saw it, is to collapse camera with life, his constant concern being that he was "merely letting the camera visualize my inner wishes—a lazy way of working" (147).

White never conceived of photography as an escape from "personal life," but it must, at the lowest register, "let the mirror be clouded, or landscaped, or two mirror images away at least" (147). His constant self-instruction was to refract life through a multiplication of mirrors: "all things must succumb to the lens . . . transform the detail into wholes . . . making all that I can come under the sway of the lens" (148). White discovered in all aspects of his

craft means to release him from the immediacy of life. Even "reprinting," he told Nancy Newhall, allowed him to "terminate" a "mood and bring the new one into sharper relief" (147).

Re-printing, re-production, re-vitalization, mirror reflecting mirror: White's fundamental interest lay in the razor-thin or "spring-tight" line between the literal and the symbolic. Almost everything hinged on the capacity to at once encounter the referent in all its literality and to see through it to "what else things are" (153). "The camera must report a revitalization," he declared in 1952 (158). For White, the world around one was vital, it was *alive*, but the photographer had to make it live *again*, live beyond its fleeting form in the reality experienced in everyday life, even if what fills the frame is nothing but reality unaltered. The latter put White on a collision course with documentary photography.

Because his practice hinged on that "spring-tight line," he felt compelled to distinguish his work from documentary work. He offered an analogy to convey the difference between camera work and documentary work, describing a man finding a "fine piece of wood" on the beach (fig. 17). At first, he says, the experience is "rather indifferent . . . but let a man carve it—and

Figure 17. Minor White, *Lostine River, Wallowa Mountains, Oregon*, summer 1941. Gelatin silver print, 17.7 × 23.2 cm (x1980-298)

(continued...)

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The identities of individuals referred to by only one name have sometimes been assumed. Footnotes provide more information on the level of certainty about these individuals' identities.

An italicized page number denotes a figure on the corresponding page.