Stieglitz

A review of Alfred Stieglitz, A Biography
and Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George
by Peter Brown

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Book Info:
Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George
John Szarkowski
New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995.
112p. 109 illustrations (64 tritones, 45 duotones) $34.95

Alfred Stieglitz, A Biography
Richard Whalen
Boston: Little Brown, 1995.
662 p. $29.95

It's well known that the energy and talents of Alfred Stieglitz helped launch a number of things: compelling photographs, the eventual acceptance of photography as an art form, modernism in America, and with the help of Georgia O'Keeffe, one of the more successful art marriages in history. It is perhaps less known that these energies also launched factions, feuds, disciples, enemies, and, as John Szarkowski writes in his recent essay on Stieglitz, a million words and more photographs than we knew.

Two books, Richard Whelan's Alfred Stieglitz, A Biography and Szarkowski's Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George, (which serves as the catalogue for a similarly named exhibition from MOMA) contribute to a new understanding of this multi-talented, charismatic, generous and often irascible man. A page of adjectives could, and have been used to describe him, and most would, for particular moments in his eventful life, be ringingly accurate.

A few: he was at times brilliant, moody, stubborn, spiteful, dogged, romantic, cold, lecherous, bombastic, kind, ingratiating, vague, self-effacing, monomaniacal, pitiable, self-congratulatory, and of course contradictory. Each of these could to a degree, describe most of us, but Stieglitz, unlike most of us, seems to have played each facet to an extreme, and often in very public arenas. Unlike the imperially reticent Walker Evans, say, of whom a biography has also recently been published, with Stieglitz, it seems safe to assume that whoever was in his presence knew exactly where he or she stood - although a year later, Stieglitz might hammer out an opposing argument with equal conviction.

He was clearly a gigantic presence - utterly self-assured until physical collapse would repeatedly catch him - and Whelan has written a gigantic book, a historical biography that is laden with fact - a book running more than six hundred and fifty pages, mercifully broken into sixty-nine short chapters which cover the eighty-two

years of Stieglitz's life (1864-1946). Surprisingly it is the first full biography published.

It is, apart from a painstakingly thorough biography of Stieglitz himself, a fascinating cultural history (particularly of his early years in and around New York); a blow by blow account of the absurd (from our removed vantage point) factionalism in which the various turn of the century photo groups, clubs, rings, societies, secessions etc. were engaged; it is a history of the rise of Modernism in America as seen through the prism of artists who Stieglitz championed and it is a look into the private life: the extended Stieglitz family, the sad first marriage to Emmy (of which Whelan is strangely dismissive), and of course the meeting of O'Keeffe and the bumptious dance of that marriage.

The strengths of Whelan's biography are many - but primary for me - and an indicator of the book's final success, is the well rounded and well founded sense one comes away with for Stieglitz himself. Out of a murk of genetics, family life and social interaction, emerges a portrait that becomes believable by virtue of Whelan's careful compilation of fact. It's like a Chuck Close painting that from a few inches away is overwhelming, but from a considered distance pops into focus. The detail in this book can, at times seem too much - but the restive, contradictory creature Stieglitz became struggles out - anguished, excited, gesticulating, making his points, moving around the room in quite a lively fashion. And Whelan's writing is, for the most part, lively as well, pulling us from one altercation to the next.

Stieglitz was a welter of seemingly unrecognized contradictions. He was an independently wealthy man, who from a position of relative financial security, railed against professionalism and commerce; a committed and confident artist who yet seemed to take each criticism of his work to heart - often engaging a critic on the other's suggested turf, by using say, the "more democratic" Kodak postcard paper for his cloud photographs, after being accused of being "elitist" in his choice of palladium; he was the confusedly devoted lover of Georgia O'Keeffe, who yet allowed himself, through an idealized vision of what universal love should be, to fall in love with Dorothy Norman and others, expecting all parties to live peacefully in a hermetic Eden of his own devising; and he was a man capable of changing his thought on the meaning of photography in the most basic ways without a backward glance or sense of inner contradiction (a point Szarkowski makes strongly as well).

The mass of detail and stories that Whelan has uncovered and ordered are impressive. Much was new for me. A few quick sketches: the young Stieglitz, as confident in his powers as a student, as he would become as an arbiter of national taste, doing complex mathematical problems in his head to the consternation of his teachers; the love-lorn romantic youth, rebellious and rejecting of convention, holding a detailed and fairly narrow definition of idealized "Woman", yet marrying a woman he clearly despised for reasons of social propriety; the young, competitive athlete and aimless student passionately riding each late nineteenth century fad to boredom: walking, running, biking, until photography finally latches hold of him for good; the technical prodigy - perhaps the first university trained "art photographer" outdoing himself and his fellow students in his obsessive technical experimentation (subject matter be damned), growing into a man whose ostensible reason for existence becomes the visual representation of the human soul; the impresario of art

world factionalism, an indefatigable creator of societies, movements, exhibitions, magazines, galleries - a man in constant motion - giving up his own photography for years, in a confusion of art and politics; and the family man at Lake George neglecting his wife and daughter as he slowly changes his enclave from a nouveau riche playground into a workplace for art. And Whelan is superb on all this - balancing personalities, major events and the everyday in energetic, compelling ways.

The book is more fact of life, than analysis of work and when Whelan does address the photographs, it is generally in the form of description. However, when he plunges into more than descriptive depth, his thought on the work often seems sexually reductive to me. It takes a tone from O'Keefe's painting that I don't think nearly as applicable to Stieglitz. There is an undeniable erotic charge to many of his photographs of course, but to limit them in the way that Whelan often does, I think constricts their true powers. See, for example, his thought on a few hanging apples and the peak of a house, Apples and Gable[1] - a lyrical image, rife with possible interpretation if such is needed, and be bowled over by his certainty that an apple phallus is about to penetrate a vaginal window. This sort of writing can take its toll. Alternately, in the portraits, the readings often seem overladen, the image used too much as evidence to buttress thought on the subject's relationship to Stieglitz or situation in life. These are, afterall, split seconds of peoples' lives, and more is made out of expression, body language, background incidentals etc. than seems warranted. And I say this as a photographer who believes in the interpretive power of an image.

Yet finally, in the context of the book, these criticisms are relatively unimportant. Whelan does not set out to write a critical biography, but a historical one, and this has been accomplished. To my mind, the main things lacking in the book are the Stieglitz photographs themselves. A set of reference pictures, twenty pages say, two or three images to a page would have made a tremendous difference in the experience of the book. It seems self evident that such a selection should exist in any photographer's biography - and it seldom is the case.

If Whelan's book leaves few historical stones unturned, Szarkowski's essay crystallizes fifty years of thought on both the work and the man, and as such, the two books complement each other in interesting ways. Szarkowski, as always, is a pleasure to read. He is clear, forceful and slyly good natured. There is a wink behind the meticulous scholarship and crackling prose - a reference to some two-headed dog or other idiosyncrasy that reminds one that Szarkowski was and is a photographer as well as a curator. His roving eye and intelligence are always at play as well as at work, much like, it could be said, the photographs he has discovered from Lake George.

As he points out, "Stieglitz is famous, but his work is little known. No other major figure of photography's modern era is known by so short a list of pictures ... Stieglitz, whose life as a photographer spanned more than fifty years, has too often

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[1] Whelan, Richard. *Alfred Stieglitz, A Biography,* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995), p. 430.

been anthologized from a standard list of half a dozen pictures, none of which was made during the last half of his working life."[1]
This situation came about as a result of protective controls that O'Keeffe instituted over Stieglitz's estate, the unfortunate effect of which has been to greatly limit the audience the work has had.

In the publication of this book and accompanying exhibition, Szarkowski and MOMA begin to rectify the situation. Half of the sixty-four photographs have never before been published - and in many of them the stern, authoritarian, moralizing Stieglitz gives way to a playful, if inordinately talented, family photographer. Pictures of people, architecture and undramatic events are caught on the fly - or re-photographed in differing light or seasonal conditions, much as Atget did. The Atget parallels also exist in the time capsule quality of this work. In the same way that only a small portion of Atget's work was known until years after his death, we can hope that the work from Lake George is only the first of a number of exhibitions. From what we learn in Whelan's biography, there still is much to see.

But these photographs are what we have now, and they are more than sufficient. Lake George represented a touchstone for Stieglitz, a place he returned to each summer from boyhood on. As Szarkowski says, "In his life at Lake George, Stieglitz was comforted by family and servants and dependable friends, and was insulated from the emotional risks that attended the competitiveness of life in the city. We might even guess that at Lake George not every word or even every exposure need be a statement *ex cathedra,* and Stieglitz could unbend a little, take chances, experiment with the idea of what an art of photography might be."[2]

And this happens, as Szarkowski points out, with Lake George itself becoming one of Stieglitz's teachers. The photographs bear this out: marvelous, homey, unpretentious subject matter - stuff available directly from life. And it is work that is often technically difficult: shots taken from full sun into barn interiors say, or the clouds photographs.

It is finally comforting, in an almost familial way to encounter these artfilled sky images cheek by jowl with the truly erotic unplanned photographs of Ellen Koeniger climbing out of the frigid waters of Lake George, glowing with life and vitality. The visual music one might make of this variety (which occurs throughout the book), finally seems to me far more authentic and of the twentieth century than Stieglitz's romantic attempt to discover Bach in the sky, as he of course professed to do.

In the book we encounter a mix of heart, head and visceral response that in its openness has the cumulative effect of humanizing a photographer who for too long has been kept alive in the narrowest and greyest corridors of art. The photographs extend the available warmth of the everyday, with even the campy pictures of O'Keeffe and friends yucking it up, becoming, in overall context, quite important: funny shots of shoes and garters, fun and games, high and low, head in the clouds,

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[2] Szarkowski, John. *Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George,* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), p. 9.

[3] Ibid., p. 22.

feet on the ground - serious fun. Stieglitz obviously enjoyed making these photographs - it shows.

It occurs to me that these two ambitious books may represent the beginning of a revision, in the truest sense of the word, of our thought on Stieglitz. If so, I think it's appropriate. Even at this late date, there is more to be seen from him, and despite the million plus words now written, there is more still to be said.

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