BOOK REVIEW

William Eggleston's Guide, 2nd edition. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007 (Essay by John Szarkowski)

Prof. John Matturri
Queen College, City University of New York

When first published in 1976, in conjunction with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *William Eggleston's* Guide was extraordinarily controversial, but it and the exhibition also helped revolutionize the practice of art photography. Previously, color photography had been most often used in commercial and amateur photography. Eggleston's prints, which were made with the rich dye-color process shown in this context, clearly demanded to be taken seriously as works that were essentially, rather than merely incidentally, used color. Moreover, the ordinariness of Eggleston's subject matter often seemed to have neither the aesthetic gravity nor the social significance of much previous art photography. Robert Frank's seminal book *The Americans*, published in 1958, along with other photographic works of the 1950s and 1960s, focused (and in some cases literally refused to focus) on scenes of mundane life and the vernacular landscape, but there was little in this prior work to compare with, to use perhaps the most radical photographic in the book, Eggleston's matter of fact picture of the interior of an old and somewhat stained oven, simply entitled "Memphis". Nothing in the content or form of this photograph seemed to suggest any degree of uplift, social commentary, or aesthetic form in any traditional sense. It must have seemed to most viewers at the time to have been a random, meaningless snapshot strangely blown up to an uncharacteristic large size using a difficult and expensive process. The response to the exhibition and book was at the time highly negative. For example, the *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer, responding to the claim that the pictures were perfect, made by John Szarkowsky in the book's accompanying text, suggested that they were in fact "perfectly banal" and "perfectly boring".

Over the past decades, appreciation of Eggleston's photographic work has increased greatly and he is now considered by many to be among the greatest of modern photographers. He followed *William Eggleston's* Guide with a number of other books and his work has been widely exhibited in prestigious museums and galleries, including a large 2008 retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York. Individual prints of his work have been sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars. With this process of acceptance over the past several decades in mind, it is useful to re-examine the work's presentation in *William Eggleston's* Guide, which was so controversial in 1976. The task is made easier by the 2007 re-publication of the now rare and quite valuable first edition. Although the type has been reset and the original transparencies (and in two cases original prints) digitally scanned, this second edition

retains the text and images of the original. In this review, I want especially to focus on John Szarkowski's opening essay.

Szarkowski was the second director of the photography department of the Museum of Modern Art, one whose tenure played an important role in shifting the medium from a secondary to a central status within the art world. Beginning his career as a photographer himself, he repositioned the photograph as art as an object that was neither a formal imitation of painting nor a social document that had an implicit utilitarian purpose of remediating the world's problems. In 1978, Szarkowski organized a MoMA exhibit entitled, "Mirrors and Windows" which was premised on the idea that modern photographers have the alternative of using the medium to objectively portray the world or to engage in self-expression. This dichotomy was not absolute, however, and Szorkowsky suggests that it is the nature of the art photographer's task "to find a personally satisfactory resolution of the contesting claims of recalcitrant facts and the will to form". (quoted in press release for Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960, Museum of Modern Art, 1978, http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/5624/releases/MOMA_1978_0060_56.pdf?2010). In his view, art photography occupies a rather unstable space between the documentary and the aesthetic.

To understand what Szarkowski was up against in presenting this unfamiliar work to the public both as an exhibit and a book of photographs, one might best begin by examining the book's unusual cover. Rather than the staid somewhat academic book design that would have been typical of the period, the cover is printed on a thick cardboard stock covered with a black faux leather material. Towards the bottom of the color is the title, stamped in gold, and rendered in a somewhat archaic design and typeface, with the word "guide" moving horizontally up from a second line underneath the photographer's name. The overall effect is less than that of a catalog of an important museum exhibition, but, rather, that of a high school or college yearbook. Tipped in above the gold title is a glossy photograph of what is now perhaps Eggleston's most famous photograph, a child's tricycle placed in front of suburban housing and depicted neither from a child's or adult's perspective but rather from that of the photographer recumbent on the ground.

In March of 2012, a print of the picture of the tricycle was sold at auction for $570,500 but at the time of publication it might have seemed peculiar indeed. The blue and white tricycle with red rubber handlebar grips certainly does not seem particularly worthy of attention. It is an ordinary toy whose rusty frame suggests that it has provided service over time for the brief tricycling career of more than one child. Similarly, both the street and the single-level suburban houses that stand behind the tricycle are ordinary. The perspective is odd, it is true, but its point is unclear; one might, moreover, wonder why the photographer left in the right side of his frame a tiny sliver of the front of a car parked on the street in front of the sidewalk on which the tricycle has been placed, presumably by its child owner. A photographer who accepted traditional compositional values would not sully the integrity of the print's rectangular frame with such an obvious fragment.

Faced with the decision to so prominently place this unusual photograph on the cover

of a catalog of an important exhibition, one might expect a curator and his designers to both provide the picture with a more dignified cover that connected it to an ongoing tradition of high art, but also to write a text that justifies the implied artistic significance of the work. However, just as that cover sends mixed signals about the type of book we have in our hands, its essayist -- a term "essay" itself suggesting a refusal of the authority that would be associated with a more conventional "introduction" – does not attempt to provide an account that would allow an uncertain reader/viewer a clear entry point into the appreciation of the work's virtues. On the one hand, Szarkowski seems to acknowledge photography's particular connection to the world, a connection that results from the photograph's causal relation to the depicted scene, but on the other hand, he seems to deny that objectivity, holding that the Memphis area depicted in the book is fictive, the construction of the photographer's intuitive grasp of the appropriate way to frame a portion of his cone of vision (p. 6). This framing provides photographs with their form, but Szarkowsky also notes that in photography, presumably unlike other visual depictions, form and subject are "inextricably tangled". (p. 7) Even with a precise subjectively chosen framing, the photograph retains its connection to the "recalcitrant facts" of the scene depicted. Eggleston chose to photograph the tricycle from ground level, but in a real sense, the photograph remains identical to the one that might have been taken if the shutter had clicked as the camera was accidentally dropped to the sidewalk. It is implied by Szarkowski that the photographer's task is precisely to select among the infinity of pictures that could be made by a mechanical device one or more that are of interest.

This process of selection is said by Szarkowski to be complicated by the introduction of color. He provides no clear statement about how the objective view and the subjectively chosen angle are to come together in color, suggesting that the photographer must rely on a multitude of clues that take the form of "modern painting, color movies and television, drugstore postcards, and the heterogeneous flood of imagery that has come from the modern magazine". (p. 9) Presumably, the responsive viewer must also be immersed in this vast imagery in order to gradually gain an appreciation of these pictures.

This implies, it should be noted, that because of its dual nature, art photography stands in direct connection with photography that does not present itself as art. Szarkowsky notes that "the best photography of today is related in iconography and technique to the contemporary standard of vernacular camera work...". (p. 10) Both realms share the photograph's objective views of the facts of the world, and they differ only in "intelligence, imagination, intensity, precision, and coherence". (p. 10) The skilled, or great, photographer exercises these traits in making his selections from the infinite possible views of the world. Both are about the world but only the photographs of an artist provide a coherent private view of the world.

In this 1976 essay, Szarkowsky is struggling through his examination of Eggleston's work a basic problem that has existed since the beginnings of the medium. Because of its mechanical reproduction of the "recalcitrant facts" of the world, up until the period in which Szarkowsky is writing this essay, many re-

jected the notion that photography was art, especially an art that was equivalent to more hand-made visual productions. In this book, as in his other writings, we see him struggling to reconcile photography's objectiveness with its status as art by attending to the entangling of the objectivity of the medium with the personal expressiveness of the photographer using the medium in the interests of art. What is important about this work is not that it explains Eggleston's work to the skeptical observer but that it points out the inner tension that is itself at the heart of the work and its appreciation.