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# Ariel Evans

## “REAL SPACE IS EXPERIENCE SPACE”: DAVID ANTIN’S PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

*This article surveys poet David Antin’s ideas about photography at the turn of the 1970s. Then-new Chair of the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego, Antin shepherded the department’s now-landmark photography program while also experimenting with photography himself as a medium for his philosophy and poetry. Closely reading the cover of Antin’s poetry book Talking (1972), I consider how Antin used photography to represent “real space” — to Antin, the pulse and texture of thinking and talking, its shifts and pauses in response to internal and environmental stimuli. Setting Talking alongside Antin’s critical essays of the same years, I argue that Antin was working toward an art of conversation; specifically, an attention to artist-audience relationships. I also suggest that Antin’s interest in representing the conversational offered an influential theory of photography that Antin’s mentees Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula (among others) elaborated in their landmark “reinvention of documentary” of the late 1970s-early 1980s.*

### Introduction

But you want to know about my experience, not my theory.<sup>1</sup>

Describing his early years as chair (1971–1993) of the University of California, San Diego’s Visual Arts Department, poet David Antin said: ‘We tried to form a department that was right up to the moment. Photography had a big place in it, but it was the philosophy of photography, not necessarily the fact of it’.<sup>2</sup> He did not elaborate. Few have. While Antin remains well-known in literary circles and sometimes features in art histories as a notable critic, hardly any scholars have expanded on the poet’s thought on photography despite his foundational teaching in the subject. After joining UCSD’s then-newborn art department, Antin was close to and/or mentored several signal figures of post-war photography in the United States including Eleanor Antin, John Baldessari, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems.<sup>3</sup> When only a handful of art departments offered no more than an introductory course in camera and darkroom techniques, Antin championed a broader education in lens-based media, sheltering Fred Lonidier and Phel Steinmetz as they built UCSD’s landmark photography program.<sup>4</sup>

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Such a substantive presence in the medium's history makes what Antin meant by "philosophy of photography" a significant question and one that remains underexamined. So I survey that philosophy in what follows, focusing on Antin's photography-related thought as he articulated it in the early 1970s when he undertook a private performance, *Thirty Days of the News* (1971), a month-long project in which Antin photographed newsstands in San Diego. Some months later, Antin arranged strips from the contact sheets of his photographic documentation of *Thirty Days of the News* on the front, back, and inside covers of his landmark poetry book *Talking* (1972) (Figure 1). I show that *Talking's* cover is just like its poems: all attempt to reproduce what Antin variously calls "real space"; that is, something of Antin's sensory and of-the-moment experiences of talking that each poem transcribes in print. "I had been looking for a poetry of thinking and what I found was a poetry of talking", Antin explains later, "because talking was as close as I could come to thinking".<sup>5</sup> In other words, using photographs to transcribe talking and thinking was Antin's "philosophy of photography".

As I argue further, Antin's philosophy was conversational always. His idiosyncratic approach to the spacing between written clauses or images to denote "real space", connotes the talking and thinking of his audience as well as his own. Such represented openness situated listeners and readers in a transformational conversation with Antin, a conversation concerning art's purpose and powers in postmodernity. Antin's "philosophy of photography" circulated among him, his colleagues, and his students; and this circulating both produced and continually changed that philosophy. One such circuit includes the feminist and/or socialist adaptations of—and simultaneous contributions to—that philosophy by some of Antin's earliest mentees: Lonidier, Rosler, and Sekula. To situate Antin in conversation with these artists, I suggest, allows future fruitful rereadings of these artists' modes of address. Accordingly, I circle toward and through photography's place in Antin's philosophy as well as his philosophy's place in the history and theory of photography. But I will not close in. Beyond one essay's scope, what could be meant by "the philosophy of photography" over its "fact" was a matter of conversation, the result of many more persons and transformations than Antin alone.

## Thinking and talking

*Talking's* cover is the extant record of Antin's *Thirty Days of the News*, a private performance that Antin recounts thirty years later for *Talking's* second edition (2001):

I got fascinated with these glass-faced newspaper dispensers whose bold headlines spilled disasters from Europe and Asia or Africa undetected through the glass panels onto the sunny streets in front of the quiet little markets, the sleepy auto repair shops and local bank branches. So without thinking too much about it, I started photographing them. But every day for about thirty days I went to another place, taking care to shoot the newspaper in such a way that you could read the headline and still see the dispenser situated in its untroubled San Diego neighborhood.<sup>6</sup>

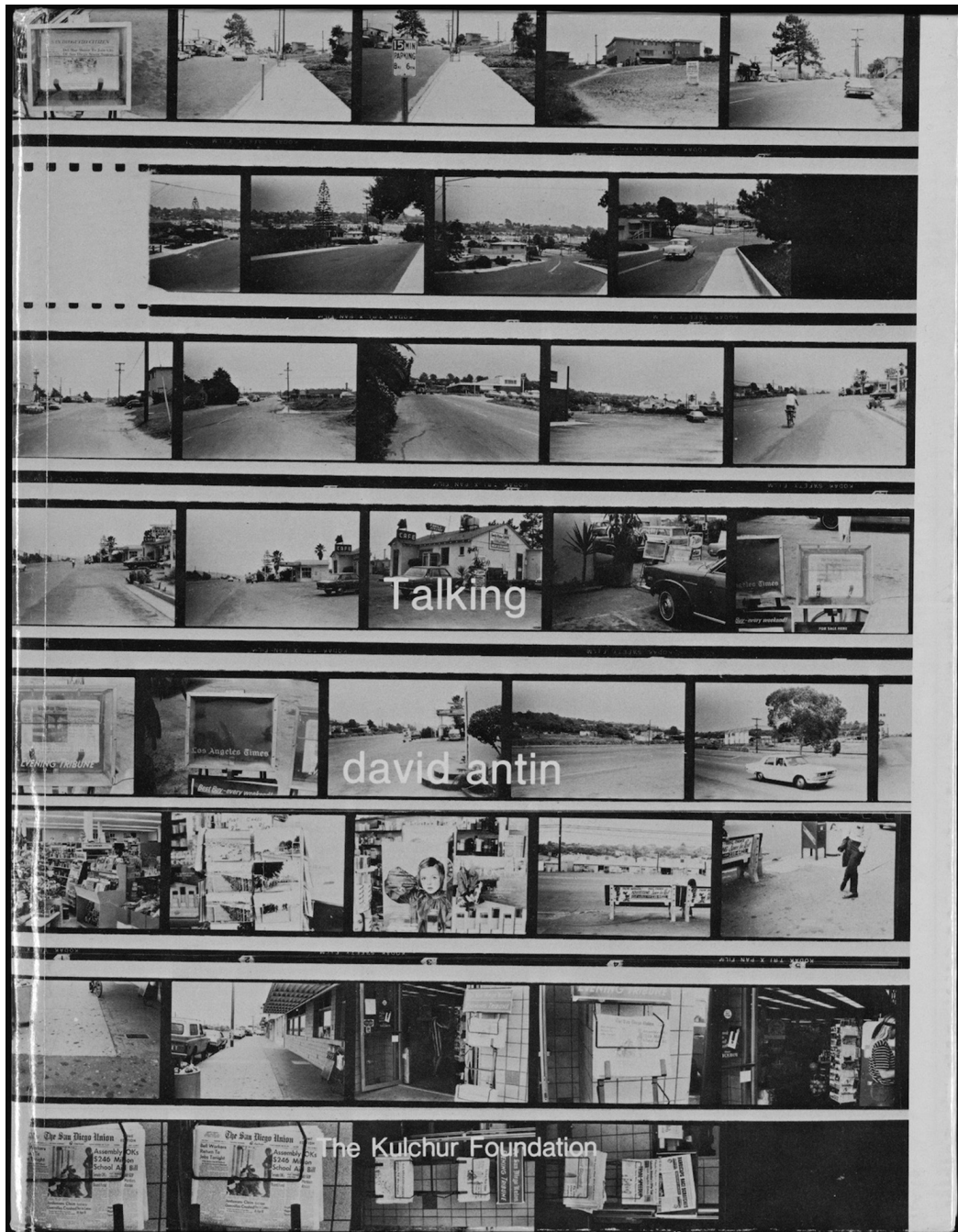


Fig. 1. David Antin, *Talking*. New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1972. Front cover. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Antin's only published explanation for the cover leaves unclear if *Talking's* cover and *Thirty Days of the News* are the same thing.<sup>7</sup> They do not match. Antin may have photographed newspaper stands for thirty days, but the eight roughly parallel rows of 35 mm black-and-white snapshots on each cover (front, inside front, inside back, and

back) represent nineteen days, possibly less, and no more than twenty-one; judging by place and light conditions.<sup>8</sup> It looks like Antin carefully arranged strips cut from contact sheets from the rolls of film—no telling how many—that he used during the performance. Bars of white often appear between rows, and these cannot have resulted from the process of making contact sheets alone.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Antin's later account tellingly echoes the earlier cover in that both emphasize the poet's movement around the newspaper stands of California's North County. Reading the front cover's rows of images from left to right is to follow the poet on five walks. As the top left image closes in on a newspaper stand filled with copies of the *San Dieguito Citizen* the next frame turns back to the street, depicting an expanse of dark asphalt abutting the sidewalk from which Antin aimed his camera. Bead-sized in that image's center is a 15-minute parking sign that appears much larger in the next still, indicating Antin's procession down the sidewalk. The second row offers a second walk along a curving residential street, while a third journey fills the next three rows as Antin approaches a roadside café to photograph the newsstands to its side. Row six documents Antin's fourth stroll into a convenience store, where he photographs its magazine display, and so forth.

Like the front, the inside back cover (both are recto) contains sequences in which Antin arrives from afar to hold his camera directly in front of a newspaper box. Yet in each verso cover's frames (inside front cover and back cover), however, Antin only moves a few feet; it is the photographed subjects who move and change as they walk by the same newspaper stands. When handling the book, readers turn the front cover—where we move with Antin—over to find its verso—where we stay still with Antin while others move—once at the beginning of the book and then again at the end. The sequence goes: walk, remain still, *Talking's* contents, walk, remain still.

But the photographs themselves do not record the cover's structural emphasis on movement; instead these defining gestures occur between frames. There are no movement blurs. Landscape markers, such as the parking sign's growth in scale from one still to the next—or on the verso covers, as different bodies appear by the same convenience store—cue readers that a passage over time and space has occurred between each still. The viewer's recognition of road signs, newspaper stands, and people as they grow or shrink or otherwise shift in perspective, drives the perception of movement.

Markedly, *Talking's* four poems also rely on blank spaces.<sup>10</sup> In "talking at pomona", long tab-spaces replace standard punctuation marks to divide the line by utterance:

[. . .]        sculpture occupied a place lets say on the floor that is to say the  
intrinsic thing about sculpture is that its in your world        it can fall on you  
you can trip        on it it        could be a terrible disaster as there was  
recently        dick serra killed somebody recently the melodrama surrounding  
serra's lead sculptures        that is there was always        a great deal of  
melodrama        largely provoked by dick and his own style<sup>11</sup>

Exacting about the spaces in *Talking's* text,<sup>12</sup> Antin saw these as capturing something of his speech patterns, what he called once "the pulse of the talking."<sup>13</sup> Readers pause along the blanks in "talking at pomona" with the poet's stops for breath or thought,



they rush alongside his turns into elaboration, not unlike the cover's sense of moving and standing still around newsstands.

These spaces mark *utterances*, a term used by linguists to refer to a basic speech-unit defined by the periods or spaces of unintelligibility that gird them.<sup>14</sup> Like the black lines between the cover's photographs, "an utterance is any stretch of talk, by one person, before and after which there is silence on the part of the person", explains the 1951 textbook *Methods in Structural Linguistics*.<sup>15</sup> As a thought, an utterance has no predetermined length. Thoughts may be of considerable complexity and length or as short as a letter. Or perhaps an image, as Antin observes in his 1964 notes for a linguistics class he was teaching:

One of the most interesting characteristics of writing is that initially it isolated utterance (speech) from situation, therefore facilitating refinement of the language in symbolically representational aspect of language. [Writing] seems always to have been preceded by ideographs or pictographs. They don't seem to be are not pictures—as Cassidy says—they are schematic diagrams of concepts, i.e. formalized representations of ideograms<sup>16</sup>

In other words the cover is as much of a "poem" as *Talking's* four other works are: all five transcribe performances of various sizes. While the cover documents a personal performance, "talking at pomona" records Antin's April 1972 lecture at Pomona College. Antin adapted two others—"in place of a lecture: 3 musics for 2 voices" and "the London march: an improvisation for 2 voices"—from recorded conversations between himself and his wife Eleanor. Even the diaristic "the november exercises", which Antin later described as "a series of exercises undertaken several times a day", seems a private performance akin to *Thirty Days of the News*.

## real space      human space

Invoking Antin's speaking, the tab-spaces of "talking at pomona" also suggest something of the student-filled hall in which he lectured. Listening to the Pomona talk's recording reveals that the tab-spaces not only denote Antin's hesitations and exclamations but also audience laughter, the occasional cough or sneeze.<sup>17</sup> Rather than capture the pulse of only his own talking, Antin meant to transcribe a conversation—to him a fundamental aspect of language, as he states in "SILENCE/NOISE" (1965):

BY DEFINITION LANGUAGE IS PUBLIC    THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS  
PRIVATE LANGUAGE THERE ARE ONLY LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES OF  
VARIOUS SIZE IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE A LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY  
SMALLER THAN TWO PEOPLE OR ONE MAN AND A TAPE  
RECORDER    THE SELF IS A LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY IN WHICH  
THE PRESENT AND PAST TALK TO EACH OTHER INSIDE OF ONE SKIN  
[. . .]



“Real space” is what humans experience through the powers and limitations of our senses, as we encounter it from the space our bodies inhabit from moment to moment. Right now, it is the space in which you read this essay. Conversely only in part, human space seems to include mental, intellectual, and/or represented experience as well as sensory:

[. . .] on the other hand human space is a kind of conceptual manifold that is not continuous its the space of experience that is the space of all kinds of experience tactile social literary acoustical olfactory i mean its a very complicated operation [. . .]<sup>21</sup>

The term denotes those distant spaces represented through language and image within real space. For example, it is the space in which you sit and imagine Antin pontificating in a lecture hall as you read these paragraphs, or picture the Southern Californian suburbs depicted on Antin’s cover and the foreign lands represented in its newsstands. It does not seem that Antin saw real space—experience space—as often separate from the human (experiential space, the space of representation). In *Talking’s* five works these spaces overlap and occur simultaneously.

Despite his use of photography, Antin claims that photography “is a very poor visual medium because it is so alien to the way we see and the size and actual material of the physical site can only be recreated in the mind by a major act of imagination stimulated by the recognizability of the terrain” a few months before *Talking’s* publication.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Antin thought photography might make a sufficiently effective linguistic medium, at least in 1971-72. Like words, understanding photographs requires literacy. One needs the capacity to translate three dimensions from a flat surface (an ability that Antin likely saw as learnt rather than possessed naturally)<sup>23</sup> to understand that the scale differences between objects in the cover’s adjacent images indicate passages over time and space. To use Antin’s terms, photographs and words operate in what Antin calls “human space” and to the extent that Antin’s photographic or typed works capture something of the “real space” of Antin’s original thinking and talking—whether to others or to himself—they do so through stimulating that “major act of the imagination” by pointing to what occurs between utterances.

## A very poor visual medium

Antin never attempted anything like *Talking’s* cover again.<sup>24</sup> Insofar as he sought to transcribe his thinking and talking as a multitemporal and multispatial conversation between himself and his audience—just as “SILENCE/NOISE” calls for—it seems that the “talk poem” form that he invented with “talking at pomona” suited him best (since he continued using it until his death in 2016).<sup>25</sup> But he did not abandon photography as a subject for discussion.

Antin meditates on photography’s ability to represent real and/or human space in “talking at pomona”, when he discusses Douglas Huebler’s use of photographs in *Duration Piece #15* (1970) (Figure 2). A conceptual sculpture that uses photographic



images, *Duration Piece #15* features an FBI wanted poster (mugshot photos, fingerprints, and textual description); and, on a separate piece of paper, the artist's offer to pay a reward of \$1,100 to whomever provides information leading to the described man's arrest, with the reward depreciating \$100 a month thence. Were someone to buy Huebler's sculpture, they would take over the responsibility of paying that reward. According to Antin, the work "operates or could conceivably operate in real space", because the sculpture is social rather than material. Its photographs draw connections between the alleged bank robber, the viewers and prospective buyers, and the artist. "its very real space", explains Antin of *Duration Piece #15*, because the wanted poster's three descriptions—one written, another fingerprints, plus three mugshots—affect the represented man's life: "police action only occurs in real space".<sup>26</sup>

For Antin, the cultural understanding of photography's use as evidence, a property that his student Sekula would later call *instrumental realism*, suggests that photographs act upon real space (even if the medium is visually poor, as Antin



Fig. 2. Douglas Huebler, *Duration Piece #15*. 1970. Sculpture. © 2021 Douglas Huebler, courtesy Darcy Huebler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

claimed).<sup>27</sup> When he returned to photography's connection to real space a year after *Talking's* publication in "remembering recording representing", he said much the same:

i think the 20th century that i grew up in has come to feel . . . that the true reproduction of reality visual reality is conveyed by the photograph and you may say thats not true or not entirely true but i think i can convince you on that score suppose a man is accused of committing adultery with a certain woman and the court is presented with a photograph of the two of them sitting on a bed it will probably be admitted as evidence whereas a drawing will not . . .<sup>28</sup>

One might observe that Antin seems to understand these mugshots as performative utterances in the sense that the philosopher of language J.L. Austin developed in *How to Do Things With Words* (1955).<sup>29</sup> Rather than describe the world, photographs act on the world, like saying "I do [marry this person]" (one of Austin's examples of a performative utterance).<sup>30</sup> *Duration Piece #15*, as Antin describes it, shares with *Talking* an interest in using utterances ("human space") and the spaces left between utterances ("real space") to invoke the presence of the social: the spaces between performer and audience, writer and reader in *Talking's* case; and the spaces between artist, buyer, and depicted criminal in *Duration Piece #15*.

Antin's interpretation of *Duration Piece #15* is unusual. A more familiar reading might cast the work as part of Conceptual art's examination of authorship, in that its engagement with the real through documentation (text and photographs) distances the artist's subjectivity from the work. Huebler's commentary on photography supports such readings: "I use the camera as a 'dumb' copying device that only serves to document whatever phenomena appear before it through the conditions set by a system. No 'aesthetic' choices are possible".<sup>31</sup> Art historians have followed suit,<sup>32</sup> understanding Huebler's and similar gestures as interventions with singular and/or modernist forms of authorship associated with Roland Barthes' influential "The Death of the Author".<sup>33</sup>

But Antin does not describe *Duration Piece #15* in this way. Cherry-picking a rather singular example out of Huebler's body of work, Antin's interpretation resonates with the uses of photography seen in the department at UC San Diego at the time.<sup>34</sup> Like Lonidier's *29 Arrests* (1972) (Figure 3), Antin's description of *Duration Piece #15* highlights photography's "real" or evidentiary qualities, its ability to connect photographs to living subjects and social agents to each other. Relatedly, *Talking's* five works never efface Antin's utterances as author. To varying degrees, each work instead suggests the presences of interlocutors, listeners, readers, viewers *with* Antin.

Antin's distinction between teaching the "philosophy of photography" rather than the "fact of it" was no matter of one or the other. Rather the fact of photography made for something to talk about; its philosophy. And this "philosophy of photography" was a frequent conversation with artists using photographs. Indeed Eleanor Antin, Lonidier, Rosler, Sekula, Weems, and many others went on to variously adapt Antin's insights; which is not to say that these artists did not inspire those insights also. Readers might observe that Sekula uses tab-spaces in *Aerospace Folktales* (1973)



Fig. 3. Fred Lonidier. *29 Arrests: Headquarters of the 11th Naval District, 4 May 1972, San Diego*. 1972. Image courtesy the artist.

and *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* (1974). Or notice that Eleanor Antin, Lonidier, and Rosler take their own walks-in-photographs in *100 Boots* (1971–1973), *The Double Articulation of Disneyland* (1974), and *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974/1975), respectively. Such resonances suggest myriad ideas shared across many extensive conversations.

### The condition of poetry the need to gain ground

In “talking at pomona”, the question of *Duration Piece #15*’s (and by extension perhaps, photography’s) operations within and through real space is both part of a series of conversations with artists and/or students; *and*—importantly—a conversation about transforming artistic practice through talking about it. Antin specifies this in the talk poem’s first lines:



[...] i set about to ask myself out loud with a group of students who were ostensibly concerned with art what we could do to make a discourse situation in art meaningful or comprehensible now that sounds a little vague but what I really wanted to know was this how can you think about making art and i use the word art as an undefined at the moment how can you talk about it in such a way that it will lead to making more art and the making of more art will itself be a rewarding rather than a diminishing return<sup>35</sup>

Meant for novice listeners (art students at Pomona College, like the UC San Diego students Antin refers to), Antin's commentary in "talking at pomona" does not use the specialized language and reference points that appear in his critical writings of these years. "It Reaches A Desert in which Nothing Can Be Perceived but Feeling" for *ArtNews* (1971)<sup>36</sup> and "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry" for *boundary 2* (1972) read as intended for art-world and literary audiences, respectively.<sup>37</sup>

All three 1971-72 texts leave open the possibilities of this "art of rewarding returns" (described in "It Reaches a Desert" as a "new art of representation" and in "Modernism and Postmodernism" as "postmodernism"); Antin devoted most of his time to convincing his listeners and readers to dispense with unrewarding ways of talking about art. Antin meant modernist criticism, as is clear in "Modernism and Postmodernism" and "It Reaches A Desert", where he savages Clement Greenberg's formalism as well as Allen Tate, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell's critical anthologies defining the "modern American tradition" through Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Lowell.<sup>38</sup> Essentially, Antin takes issue with each of these critics for their formulation of modernist art as a series of responses by artists to earlier artists. "[The problem] lies in [Schwartz's] genealogical view of what implications are to be drawn from the work of these masters", he observes, "and how these implications validate a succession of poetic practices which inevitably move further and further from the originating styles to the point at which the initiating impulses have lost all their energy".<sup>39</sup>

Delimiting the discursive sphere formed by formalist/modernist artists and critics, these essays only gesture toward present practitioners. Antin suggests that his contemporaries have broken from modernism simply by their occupation of a new conversation, but he does not dwell much on the characteristics of this new set of discourses. As Antin observes in "It Reaches a Desert":

There is something quite arbitrary in the history of art as in the history of all social institutions; but to the degree that this arbitrariness is the shape of the space we inhabit, it looks logical, even matter-of-course, to all of our contemporaries, which is how we know they are our contemporaries but at some point in the future it is also what makes us suddenly bizarre to our successors and nearly incomprehensible.<sup>40</sup>

And in "Modernism and Postmodernism":

But while [modernism's irrelevance to the present] is so evident to really contemporary artists as to be almost platitudinous, it is not so evident to anyone else, mainly because the truly contemporary artists of our time are known primarily to a community consisting of themselves. *In a sense it is this capacity of the contemporary artist to recognize his contemporaries that is the essential feature of his contemporaneity.*<sup>41</sup>

That is, an "ism" is a social gathering: "The difference between the Auden of 1930 and the Auden of 1940, he mocks, 'is merely that people are saying a few different things at the same cocktail party'."<sup>42</sup> Markedly, Antin sees the shift to postmodernism as having to do with changes in who participates. On the cover of the first and only issue of *Pogamoggan* (1964) (Figure 4), a poetry magazine edited by three of Antin's mentees at the time (one was Rosler), appears a visual analogue for Antin's postmodernism.<sup>43</sup> Represented by last names, the issue's contributors face each other across a rectangular space along the cover, as if their names stand in for people sitting at a table. Across that proverbial table/magazine are eleven distinct meanings for the poetic culminating in the magazine's title *Pogamoggan*. That is: the subject of the poet's conversation are poetry's possible definitions and functions, and the gathering of practitioners encircles (defines) those subjects.

Antin's social framework for understanding disciplinary change owed much to Thomas Kuhn's landmark study *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which introduced and developed the notion of a paradigm shift.<sup>44</sup> Analyzing moments of revolution in a science's theories, tools, and methods,<sup>45</sup> Kuhn adapted the term *paradigm* to describe those periods of normal science that occur between such revolutions; that is, a paradigm is the set of ideas (theory), tools, and methods that govern the interpretation and representation of observed phenomena in any given scientific era. Yet Kuhn's primary argument is that paradigms exist because scientists decide *en masse* to operate within them. Antin's assertions quoted above sharply echo Kuhn's statement that paradigms both define and depend on communities. A paradigm, Kuhn states, is "what the members of a scientific community share, and, conversely, a scientific community consists of [those] who share a paradigm".<sup>46</sup> Thus Antin's exhaustive survey of modernist poetry's gatekeepers in "Modernism and Postmodernism": Schwartz, Allen, *et al.*: the men at Auden's cocktail party.

This understanding of the relationships between a social circle and the ideas it produces may well account for the marked rhetorical character of Antin's historiographical argument. "talking at pomona", "It Reaches A Desert", and "Modernism and Postmodernism" are persuasive texts, and paradigm shifts happen according to conversion. "... what occurs is an increasing shift in the distribution of professional allegiances", Kuhn maintains:

At the start a new candidate for paradigm may have few supporters . . . if they are competent, they will improve it, explore its possibilities, and show what it would be like to belong to the community guided by it. . . . if the paradigm is one destined to win the fight, the number and strength of the persuasive arguments in its favor will increase. More scientists will be converted, and the exploration of the paradigm will

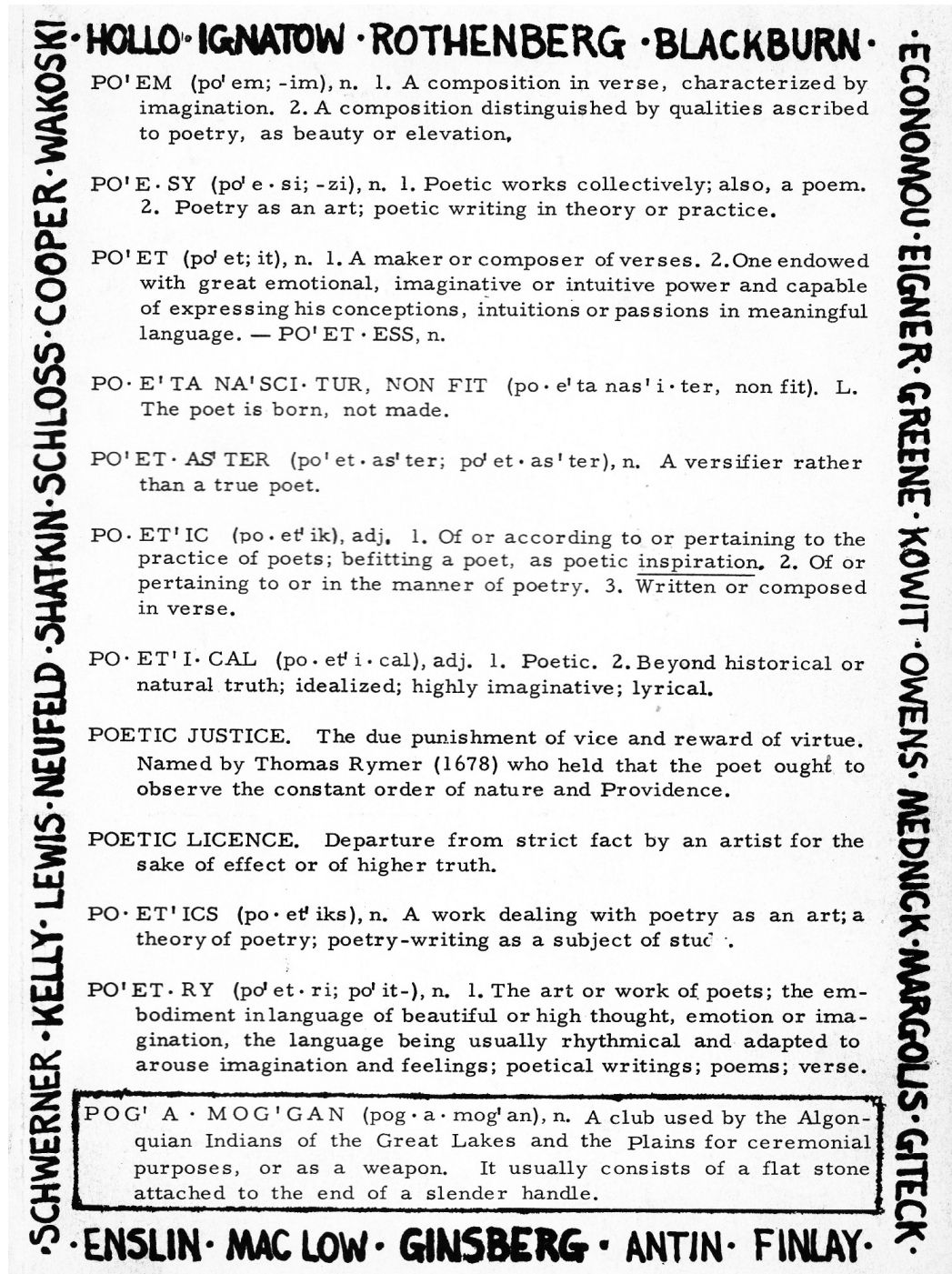


Fig. 4. Martha Rosler, cover of *Pogamoggan* no. 1 (1964), eds. Harry Lewis, Leonard Neufeld and Robert Shatkin. Image courtesy the artist.

go on. Gradually the number of experiments, instruments, articles, and books based upon the paradigm, will multiply. Still more men, convinced of the new view's fruitfulness, will adopt the new mode . . . until at last only a few hold-outs remain.<sup>47</sup>



And after the conversion is complete and the new paradigm embraced as normal science, those hold-outs are simply no longer scientists. The field moves on. In convincing his readers, Antin shapes his paradigm. We can thus read Antin's concluding stanza of "SILENCE/NOISE":

THE FEELING THAT SOME/THING LIES OUT THERE THAT WE  
CANNOT LAY HOLD OF IS THE FEELING OF THE INADEQUACY OF  
THE EXISTING ORDER IT IS THE DEMAND FOR A DIFFERENT ORDER  
THE CONDITION OF POETRY THE NEED TO GAIN GROUND<sup>48</sup>

as referring to a "ground" formed by the social relations governing poetry (inclusive of the visual arts), transformed by the conversion of its participants.

### **All this dubiousness and richness . . . all this talk—this questionable narrative**

Antin's understanding of photography—of its "truth" as contingent on history and culture, its recording of a social relationship between the photographer and their human subject (or object)—are relatively well-known now, in part because others in Antin's circle published related insights in landmark analyses of photography's social uses in the 1970s' second half.

Yet while Rosler, Sekula *et al.* also theorize photographic meaning as contingent on social relationships (like Antin), they did not assume these relationships to be equitable, as Antin seems to. The dedication to issues of class, gender, and race that Rosler, Simpson, Weems, Lonidier, and others all variously demonstrate does not appear in *Talking*. As Rosler recounts in a recent interview with curator Jorge Ribalta:

Our main influence and mentor in the department was David Antin (whom, along with his wife Eleanor Antin, I'd known well back in New York). We didn't look to him for political insight: a political liberal (American style), he once snapped at me that the entire history of the nineteenth century could have occurred without the working class.<sup>49</sup>

Better still Rosler's description of Antin as "poet, mentor, friend, foe" —. It suggests something of a suggestion of the complex and contentious, nurturing and transformative, quality of the social spaces Antin and his paradigm's members sought to describe; and in describing, construct.<sup>50</sup>

So it would be worth looking further into the methodological and/or pragmatic similarities between Antin and his interlocutors concerned with the politics of identity and capital; that is, their work to shape the conversations that happen around and through artworks and/or photographic images. Like his advisor, Sekula's point about *instrumental realism* in "The Traffic in Photographs", and its dependence on more rarefied and seemingly apolitical conceptions of art, cycles into a statement about what photography "has to do" too:

No theory of photography can fail to deal with the hidden unity of these extremes of photographic practice without lapsing into mere cultural promotion . . . The goals of a critical theory of photography ought, ultimately, to involve the practical, to help point the way to a radical, reinvented cultural practice.<sup>51</sup>

And Sekula's earlier essay "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)" (1976, 1978) takes cues from the structure of "talking at pomona", "Modernism and Postmodernism", and "It Reaches A Desert". All three critique modernist discourses to offer a less-defined "new art of representation" in its stead; for Sekula, this "reinvented documentary" is exemplified in the works of Rosler, Lonidier, Sekula himself, and some others.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, it differs from other photographic genres in that it requires continuous conversation between author and audience, "We will also have to work toward a redefined *pragmatics*, toward modes of address based on a dialogical pedagogy, and toward a different and significantly wider notion of audience", writes Sekula, echoing Rosler's more detailed analysis of artist-audience relationships in North American photographic institutions in "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, Makers: Thoughts on Audience" (1979)<sup>53</sup>:

Let us now imagine a relation between viewer and photographic project in which the producer actively shares a community with the audience in a different way from the community she or he shares with other producers. . . . Imagine the implication of the audience in the *formation* of work: It is just this implication of community that is profoundly embedded in the meaning of art. Its present lack of disconnectedness is more polemical than real, and it has left producers at the mercy of everyone but their wider—nonpurchasing—audience.<sup>54</sup>

We could see all these artists as working on a conversation about art that both is art practice and defines it; defines it in part through marking the persons included in said conversation, much like *Talking* does. But where Antin ignores the fact that his paradigm's members are almost entirely Euroethnic elites, mostly male<sup>55</sup>—at least as he describes it in his 1971–72 essays—his students insisted on conceptualizing their audiences as both inside art's disciplinary paradigm and outside of it. "We were determined to change the art world, particularly the practice and understanding of photography", Rosler recounts. "Crucially, we wanted to develop a dual practice: outside the art world's institutions but also inside (though never the commercial galleries)".<sup>56</sup> Lonidier, for example, collaborated with union activists throughout his career, showing works such as *The Health and Safety Game* at government buildings, worker's health information stands, and art galleries.<sup>57</sup>

Even as the art world rightly embraced Rosler and Sekula as important practitioners at the turn of the 1980s, these artists' dedication to working with and intersecting such audiences seems to have challenged scholars and critics. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau comments in 1986: "[These artists and others] have no clearly defined place within either postmodern art practice or traditional photography, which tends to suggest that overtly political and oppositional practices are unassimilable within either".<sup>58</sup> Traditional photography (fine-art and/or modernist)

held fast to such authorial conceits as “originality, self-expression, and subjectivity”, as Solomon-Godeau earlier explained in “Photography after Art Photography” (1984).<sup>59</sup> In contrast, postmodern artists (the Pictures generation) appropriated mass-mediated filmic and photographic images to negate the artist’s presence in favor of multitudinous viewers’ ability to generate their own various meanings.<sup>60</sup> Yet authorial absence or its overwhelming presence do not appear as defining features for artists associated with Antin. While Rosler’s and Sekula’s comments, quoted above, certainly critique authorship, they do not imagine Barthes’ multi-dimensional text in which varied already-read, already-seen (*déjà-lu*) meanings overlap and clatter, “functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors”.<sup>61</sup> Instead, interlocutors (including the author) still matter; works, texts, images pass between subjects and form their relationships.

I suspect that the disciplinary placelessness that Solomon-Godeau observes of Rosler and Sekula (among others) emerges from these overlapping but fundamentally different ideas about the artists’ relationship to their audience; ideas that I have only alluded to in this essay. Solomon-Godeau and others accounted for Lonidier *et al.*’s seemingly-ill fit amidst art’s then-current photographic paradigms by focusing on Bertolt Brecht’s and Walter Benjamin’s Marx-influenced theories of authorship, which argued that political artists must transform their function within institutional apparatuses.<sup>62</sup> But while Benjamin and Brecht offer useful theoretical approaches to these works, art historians like Benjamin H.D. Buchloh still struggled to describe how Sekula’s, Rosler’s, and Lonidier’s social and political activities, their political and aesthetic commitments to and relationships with multiple, overlapping, and conflicting audiences are fundamental to these works. In a 1982 discussion of Rosler’s use of montage, for example—among the first to publish her agitprop anti-war flyers of the late 1960s—Buchloh characterizes Rosler’s political commitments as potentially limiting: “Rosler’s attempt at constructing artwork outside of the existing level of esthetic reflection and formal procedures places her on the side of a political commitment which could fail precisely because of its lack of power within current art practice”.<sup>63</sup>

What Rosler refers to as “the implication of audience in the *formation* of work” and/or what Sekula calls a “redefined pragmatics” or “reinvented cultural practice” calls for further research. But I think Antin’s modes of address—his philosophy through talking transcribed in photographs and words—can illuminate such social methods, even if he was no mentor in political subjects. “i have it in all this dubiousness and richness this image oddly entangled with the photograph—oddly because we dont normally think of a photograph this way surrounded by all this talk this questionable narrative”, he writes, distinguishing between our image of photography as factual as opposed to its actually-poor mimesis, relatively speaking.<sup>64</sup> “it has all the character of certainty and clarity that i still prefer to associate with the idea of a fact or of truth”, he observes, then notes that the photograph also “has all the slipperiness of human discourse”.<sup>65</sup> Slippery as photography and discourse may be, clear are the associations Antin drew between them and—most importantly—his belief that in this slipperiness lies the genuine possibility of “real” representation connecting specific persons to produce actual human transformation,

whether individual or social. This possibility seems to me the most central aspect of Antin's philosophy of photography, and its most unique.

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## Notes

1. Antin, *A Conversation with David Antin*, 11–12.
2. Antin in conversation with Jill Dawsey, Solana Beach, California, 26 August 2014. Quoted in "The Uses of Photography: Introduction," in *The Uses of Photography*, 17–18.
3. Antin was married to Eleanor Antin and close to John Baldessari, with whom he shared an office at UC San Diego until Baldessari left for CalArts in 1970. Rosler met the Antins in New York City, and their families hung out in the Antins' kitchen often until the late 1960s when all moved to California. Rosler was Antin's teaching assistant while in the MFA program at UCSD but was not formally Antin's student. Newton Harrison was her thesis advisor (Rosler, interview with the author). Antin served as Sekula's and Lonidier's thesis advisor, however (Oral history interview with Allan Sekula; Lonidier, correspondence with the author). Steinmetz was never a student at UCSD but rather lectured and photographed for Eleanor Antin. Weems and Simpson worked with both Antins, as discussed in *The Uses of Photography*.
4. See Dawsey, ed. *The Uses of Photography*.
5. Antin, "Introduction," 11.
6. Antin, "Looking Back at *Talking*," 188.
7. Antin states in his afterword for *Talking*'s second edition ("Looking Back at *Talking*") that he never showed *Thirty Days of the News* anywhere. However, Benjamin J. Young notes that *Thirty Days of the News* appeared on a list of works shown in the UC San Diego art gallery during a faculty exhibition (October 3–22, 1971) but does not identify the source in 'Documents and Documentary: San Diego, c. 1973' in *The Uses of Photography*, 157 fn32.
8. If we can trust Antin's recollection that he went to one place a day instead of several in one day.
9. Besides the Kodak film brand logos are often cut through horizontally.
10. Save for "the november exercises."

11. Antin, "Talking at pomona," *Talking*, 153. I try to replicate Antin's spaces and line breaks in all quotations from his poetry.
12. As *Talking's* publisher Lita Hornick describes in *Night Flight*.
13. Antin, *A Conversation with David Antin*, 63.
14. In 1966, Antin earned a Master's degree in linguistics from New York University.
15. Harris, *Methods in Structural Linguistics*.
16. Antin, notebook, 1964.
17. These recordings are available online.
18. Antin, "SILENCE/NOISE."
19. Antin's interest in John Cage is well-documented. Those interested might start with reading his 2005 talk poem "john cage uncaged is still cagey", reprinted in *Radical Coherency*.
20. Antin, "Talking at pomona," 175–176.
21. Ibid.
22. Antin, "It Reaches a Desert in which Nothing Can Be Perceived but Feeling," *ARTNews* (1971). Reprinted in *Radical Coherency*, 57.
23. Because Antin's favorite philosopher Wittgenstein argues this in *Philosophical Grammar* (1969): "Let us remember too, that we don't have to translate such pictures into realistic ones in order to "understand" them, anymore than we need to translate photographs into colored pictures, although black-and-white men or plants in reality would strike us as unspeakably strange and frightful. Suppose we were to say at this point: "something is a picture only in a picture-language". Antin's student Allan Sekula makes similar observations in "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" (1974) and "The Traffic in Photographs" (1981), both collected in *Photography Against the Grain*.
24. His later books (*Talking At The Boundaries*, *whos listening out there*, and *Tuning*) all feature single images on their covers. *Talking's* 2001 reprint by Dalkey Archive Press has a different cover (a design using 2 ½ stills from the original), suggesting that Antin did not think the cover so crucial thirty years later.
25. Several critics and scholars indeed look to *Talking* as a watershed in Antin's *oeuvre*, bridging a Pop-influenced and collage-based "procedural poetry"; a period of work that begins with his poem/manifesto "SILENCE/NOISE" (1965), includes *Talking's* "the november exercises" and ceases with "talking at pomona". Charles Bernstein in *A Conversation with David Antin*, 28–35.
26. See note 20 above.
27. Sekula defines *instrumental realism* in "The Traffic in Photographs," reprinted in *Photography Against the Grain*.
28. Antin, "Remembering recording representing," in *The Uses of Photography*, 169. Originally published in *talking at the boundaries*.
29. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.
30. Ibid., Lectures I and II, 1–24.
31. Huebler, *Prospect* 69, 26.
32. As in Alexander Alberro's *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*: "[Huebler's] process of production . . . negated not only the competence of the artist and the role of the author but also the notion that photographs had any aesthetic value," 77.
33. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object*, 23–24.

34. Readers may refer to the following sources to draw their own conclusions on this point: Costello and Iversen, *Photography After Conceptual Art*; and Berger, "Douglas Huebler and the Photographic Document."
35. Antin, "Talking at pomona," 143.
36. Antin's title is a quote from Kazimir Malevich in "Suprematism" in Chipp's *Theories of Modern Art*, 341–345. I thank Dr. Linda Dalrymple Henderson for alerting me to the connection.
37. Perloff discusses the germinal effect in the literary world of Antin's "Modernism and Postmodernism" (and its 1974 follow-up in *Occident*, "Some Questions About Modernism", also republished in *Radical Coherency*) in "Postmodernism/Fin de Siècle: Defining 'Difference' in Late Twentieth-Century Poetics," *Poetry on & Off the Page*, 3–6.
38. Antin is referring to: Jarrell, "Fifty Years of American Poetry"; Tate, "Reflections on American Poetry: 1900–1950," (misidentified in Antin's essay as *Anthology of British and American Poetry, 1900–1950*); and Schwartz, "The Present State of Poetry."
39. Antin, "Modernism and Postmodernism," 165.
40. Antin, "It Reaches a Desert," 45–46.
41. Antin, "Modernism and Postmodernism," 162. [emphasis mine].
42. *Ibid.*, 168.
43. Harry Lewis, Leonard Neufeld, Larry Shatkin, and Martha Rosler.
44. Explicit mentions of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* appear in Antin's work, but only glancingly. However, contemporaries remember that paradigm shifts were frequent topics of conversation with the poet. Rosler recalls discussing Kuhn at the Antins' kitchen table in New York sometime in the mid-1960s (before all three moved to San Diego): "From the beginning I remember talking to him about the death of Abstract Expressionism. The possibility of a paradigm shift though; that was a phrase that came in with Thomas Kuhn. No one had talked that way because, of course, it was a scientific term." Rosler, interview with the author.
45. For example, physics' transition from Newton's laws of motion to Einsteinian relativity.
46. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 176.
47. *Ibid.*, 179–180.
48. See note 18 above.
49. Rosler, *Not Yet*, 79.
50. Rosler, interview with the author.
51. Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 80.
52. Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," in *Photography Against the Grain*. First published in *The Massachusetts Review* XIX, no. 4 (December 1978). An earlier version was published as "Reinventing Documentary" in an exhibition catalogue of Lonidier's *The Health and Safety Game* and Steinmetz's *Somebody's Making A Mistake* at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1976. It is worth adding that "reinvention" was one of Antin's favorite terms, according to Rosler. (Rosler, interview with the author).
53. *Ibid.*, 56.
54. Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, Makers," reprinted in *Decoys and Disruptions*.



55. The postmodernists Antin cites in his 1971-72 essays all identify almost exclusively as white men. Exceptions are his observation that *Yugen*—the publication helmed by Hettie Jones and her then-husband Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones)—was a central forum for these poets; and he names Denise Levertov once in ‘Modernism and Postmodernism (p. 179 in *Radical Coherency*). Gertrude Stein he mentions as an underappreciated modernist (p. 183 in *Radical Coherency*); he wrote a thesis on Stein during graduate study. Perloff discusses Antin’s inattentiveness to social inequities in her essay on Antin’s essays, “Postmodernism/Fin de Siècle”, 5. That said, Antin and Jerome Rothenberg looked for linguistic fundamentals (utterance, orality) in diverse traditions such as Judaism and First Nations peoples in addition to Euroethnic poetry. This research was supported by anthropologist Diane Rothenberg and appeared in works including *some/thing* no. 1, *Technicians of the Sacred*, and *Symposium of the Whole*. Literary scholars have touched on these issues, and those interested might consult *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* for an introduction.
56. See note 49 above.
57. Lonidier, *Not Yet*, 85–88.
58. Solomon-Godeau, “Reconstructing Documentary: Connie Hatch’s Representational Resistance,” in *Photography at the Dock*, 193.
59. Solomon-Godeau, “Photography After Art Photography,” in *Photography At the Dock*, 109.
60. See relevant essays collected in Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* as well as Solomon-Godeau.
61. Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image– Music – Text*, 145.
62. Solomon-Godeau, “Reconstructing Documentary,” 189.
63. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures,” 54.
64. Antin, “Remembering recording representing,” a talk poem first performed at the University of Notre Dame in 1973 and published in *talking at the boundaries*. Reprinted in *The Uses of Photography*, 179.
65. Ibid.

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