

**Memorial for John Szarkowski**  
*Century Association Yearbook, 2008*

For nearly thirty years, John Szarkowski was the director of the Photography Department of the Museum of Modern Art. With the books he wrote and the exhibitions he mounted during those years, John did more than any other person, be they artist or curator, to advance the general understanding of the medium of photography. The ascendancy of photography in the art world today traces back to John's influence.

John's writing was wonderful. At the memorial service for him at the Museum of Modern Art, it was noted that implied in his writing was the assumption that we, his readers, were as knowledgeable and intelligent as he was. His books and his personal letters demonstrate his elegant style, extraordinary knowledge, sense of allusion, and penetrating insight. An example:

As a way of beginning, one might compare the art of photography to the act of pointing. All of us, even the best-mannered of us, occasionally point, and it must be true that some of us point to more interesting facts, events, circumstances, and configurations than others. It is not difficult to imagine a person – a mute Virgil of the corporeal world – who might elevate the act of pointing to a creative plane, a person who would lead us through the fields and streets and indicate a sequence of phenomena and aspects that would be beautiful, humorous, morally instructive, cleverly ordered, mysterious, or astonishing, once brought to our attention, but that had been unseen before, or seen dumbly, without comprehension. This talented practitioner of the new discipline (the discipline a cross between theater and criticism) would perform with a special grace, sense of timing, narrative sweep, and wit, thus endowing the act not merely with intelligence, but with that quality of formal rigor that identifies a work of art, so that we would be uncertain, when remembering the adventure of the tour, how much of our pleasure and sense of enlargement had come from the things pointed to and how much from a pattern created by the pointer.

In this single paragraph, John leads the reader through a series of increasingly sophisticated observations. He begins with the common, intuitive acceptance of photography as a way of directing the viewer's attention, shows the qualities of perception that enliven special works, alludes to the range of a photograph's content, demonstrates the basic analytic nature of the medium, and adds to this the understanding of the relationship of content to form – a relationship that underpins all art. But, he then goes on to say, later in the essay, that photographers don't really point – they frame. Here he abruptly confronts us with the basic analytic decision a photographer makes: where to place the frame, what to include and what to leave out, how the frame will cut off the world, truncate objects and shapes, and form the starting point of the image's visual

structure. A few years after arriving at MoMA, he elaborated on his formal understanding of the medium in his pivotal book *The Photographer's Eye*. This was followed by the brilliant collection of 100 essays about 100 images, *Looking at Photographs*, a book that is essentially 100 section views through the body of photography. In his exhibitions and writings he championed the work of Eugène Atget and Walker Evans, perhaps the two seminal photographers of the first half of the 20th century. He also brought to the public's attention the work of such emerging artists as Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and William Eggleston who became dominant figures in contemporary photography.

John brought his rigorous, formal understanding of the medium into a world, in the mid-1960s, that either saw photographs as illustrations or had a vague, sentimental view of photography as art. And, John eschewed emotionally manipulative sentimentality. This was true even in his dealings as a curator with photographers, a relationship he once described as not unlike that of a zookeeper to his animals. In the late 1960s, when I was about 20 years old, I brought a group of recent photographs of mine to him. In those days I would bring him new work for his comments. I remember his looking at the pictures, puffing a bit on his pipe, and then saying, in his deep, resonant voice, "These are boring. Hmm?" End of critique. Undaunted, I continued to bring each new body of work to him for another decade, even after I had had shows at the Met and MoMA. He was my teacher. I've never met anyone with a more profound understanding of photography. This understanding, which informed his teaching, writing, and curating, sprang from his own experience as a photographer.

John began photographing as a boy in his back yard in Ashland, Wisconsin, a small town rising up from the shores of Chequamegon Bay on Lake Superior. In the summer of 1973, I spent several months driving across the country, making photographs. Without knowing of John's upbringing, I stopped at this same Ashland to spend several days working. Ashland seemed special. I'm not sure what it was. Perhaps it was the town's architecture, which ranged from imposing Richardsonian edifices (made of Ashland's local brownstone) to clapboard sheds. Perhaps it was the clarity of the light as the town opened to the lake. I can't help but think these qualities I saw in Ashland impacted John. His first major photographic project, the book *The Idea of Louis Sullivan*, brilliantly demonstrates his awareness of the complex cultural meanings of architecture. The images are clarified by light and visual structure. His second book, *The Face of Minnesota*, is impressive in its humanity.

John was an accomplished artist, and had just received a Guggenheim Fellowship, when he was offered, at the age of 37, the position at MoMA. He took on this challenge expecting it to be a short hiatus from his first love, making photographs. John told the story that after he had been offered the job at the Modern in the fall of 1961, someone realized that he ought to meet Alfred Barr, who had been the museum's first director and, at the time, curator of collections. There wasn't a lot of love lost between Barr and Edward Steichen, John's predecessor in the Photography Department, and when the two of them sat down to tea with John the mood was rather chilly. John was damned if *he* was going to take the initiative, so silence prevailed until Steichen finally said, "Well, Alfred, it's a

risk.” John’s hiatus at the Modern lasted almost 30 years. During the first year of his tenure at the Modern, John married Jill Anson, an architect. (They had two daughters, Nina and Natasha. Jill died at the end of 2006.)

The photographs John made after his retirement from MoMA express the perception and sensibility of a mature artist. He was honored with a major retrospective exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (which then traveled to the Modern and other venues). Viewing the exhibition, I was struck by how seamlessly John’s pre-MoMA pictures evolved into his post-MoMA work. I was also struck by his sense of craft. In an age that often celebrates the transgressive, here was the work of a mature master. His most recent gallery exhibition in New York – photographs of his beloved apple trees – demonstrated a startling freshness of vision and a new, unfulfilled, direction in his picture making.

John was a man of extraordinarily broad interests, passions, and knowledge. Beside his family, they included: his Columbia County farm (where he spent more and more of his time), flyfishing (his local stream was the Kinderhook), Car Talk (the radio show), Manhattans (the drink, not the island), baseball (the Red Sox), the clarinet (with which sometimes entertained his friends), and, lastly, growing apples. Before a symposium at Wellesley, when his presenter asked him how he would like to be introduced, he replied “an amateur pomologist”. This led his presenter to expound on the relationship between palm reading and curating. Once, many years ago, at a Photography Department dinner at the Modern, he explained that if you have a variety of apple that you like, the only way to reproduce it is to graft a branch of the tree that produces it onto another existing tree. If, instead, you plant a seed from your beloved apple, the fruit of the tree that grows from that seed will be a sport of nature, usually an inedible disaster but –very rarely – a marvelous new type. For John this was an analogue of the process that led to the art that had the most meaning for him. Yesterday, I emailed Peter Galassi, John’s brilliant successor at the Photography Department, to confirm my recollection of this story. He wrote back: “I agree with him but I would broaden the point to include human beings, with John as prime example... There never before was a John Sz and there never will be again, since people can’t be grafted–or at least to my knowledge John wasn’t.”

- Stephen Shore