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L'ordre des mots dans l'espace de la phrase

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# Looking is an Art: An interview with Mike Weaver

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Six photographs by Paul Strand are held in the Musée Réattu's collection, in Arles. We wish to thank the museum's curators for their help and advice.

*L'aveugle*, New-York, 1915. Photogravure 32,5x24 cm. Don de Paul Strand en 1965. Inv. 65.27.1

*La barrière blanche*, 1916. Photogravure.14,5x19 cm. Don de Paul Strand en 1965. Inv. 65.27.2

*Alex MacDonald*, 1954. Photogravure 15,7x19,9 cm. Don de Paul Strand en 1965. Inv. 65.27.3

*Chaumière à Benbecula, Hébrides*, 1954. Photogravure 23,8x19 cm. Don de Paul Strand en 1965. Inv. 65.27.4

*Sur la route de Peter's Port, Hébrides*, 1954. Photogravure 15,5x20 cm. Don de Paul Strand en 1965. Inv. 65.27.5

*Femme du delta, Égypte*, 1960. Photogravure 22,7,x17,8 cm. Don de Paul Strand en 1965. Inv. 65.27.6

- 1 This interview was conducted with Dr. Mike Weaver after his talk on "Paul Strand, Art and Politics" for the visual arts research seminar of the Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone (LERMA) on October 2, 2012. We were curious in asking Mike Weaver more questions in regard to his work on Strand and more generally about his own way of looking at photographic images.
- 2 Mike Weaver, born in Cornwall in 1937, taught poetry, film, and photography at the universities of Exeter and Oxford for thirty years and, concurrently for ten years, at the Royal College of Art. His groundbreaking work on Julia Margaret Cameron was published in an exhibition catalogue in 1984. He was the founder of the Department of

American and Commonwealth Arts at the University of Exeter. From 1978 to 1983, he became chairman of the Photography Advisory Group of the Arts Council of Great Britain. In 1991 he became co-editor, with Anne Hammond, of the journal *History of Photography* (1991-2000). Since then, Anne Hammond has published *Ansel Adams: Divine Performance* (Yale University Press 2002) and 'Ansel Adams: *Born Free and Equal* (1944)', in *American Photography: Local and Global Contexts*, ed. Bettina Gockel, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2012, 131-161.

- 3 In 1986, Weaver and Hammond decided to photograph together, to challenge equally the fixed ideas of the single *auteur* and the dominant male. They have now printed seven portfolios, the first four of which are at the Princeton University Art Museum and the first one also at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Currently, Mike Weaver continues his epic journey with the photographer Paul Strand and Anne Hammond is writing on the comradely relationship between Strand and the American poet Genevieve Taggard in New England.
- 4 An account by Ian Jeffrey of Mike Weaver's work on photography was published in *Fifty Key Writers on Photography*, ed. Mark Durden, London: Routledge, 2013, 250-255.

**Q:** Mike Weaver, you kindly accepted to launch the inaugural session of the LERMA visual arts seminar, the aim of which is to facilitate scholarly exchanges and cooperation, as well as to raise interest in this field of research amongst students. How do you read visual images, in particular photographic images?

**Mike Weaver:** Now, let's get completely practical at once. I am a pragmatic type who believes in learning-by-doing. That is to say, direct study of the thing underpins our practice, both in class and in the field. Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of photography-on-paper, in *English Etymologies* (1847), derived thing from the German *Ding* and *denken*, announcing that 'Any thing is any think'. For him, objects were coterminous with thoughts; verbs were always waiting to become nouns, and vice versa. So I put a photograph or a projected image on an easel or a wall, and invite a student to begin describing every thing or object in the picture as objectively as possible, going from bottom left upwards; stopping to allow for minute adjustments to what words the student uses, and allowing other students to progress around the picture, up-and-down and from side-to-side. Ten minutes has now elapsed, but we have achieved an overall visual form rising before our eyes to the point that it may become figuratively significant. If we continue, with another six or seven photographs by the same artist, we arrive at a state of apperception from which we can intuit themes in the whole group of pictures.

**Q:** You have given talks and seminars in many different countries. Have you noticed any significant cultural differences in the way your approach was perceived by other teachers, scholars or students?

**Mike Weaver:** Regardless of the cultural context, when you are working with images and students, you will be surprised how easy it is to introduce my viewing method. The students will help each other when they are at a loss for words. The biggest turn-off in learning is to have a teacher reading from a written text. Of course the teacher will have to conduct them like the leader of an orchestra.

**Q:** What is the function and place of theory and criticism in your method of teaching?

**Mike Weaver:** What is primary is scrutiny of the photograph, which proceeds (like reading a poem) from left to right and then up and down; unless, of course, you come from a culture which reads from right to left and down to up. If you 'read' attentively

you earn the right to call yourself a ‘critic’ (someone who assists, in every sense, at a significant event). If you can’t learn to read perceptively in the company of others, there’s nothing left to do but to theorize. Theory is for theologians, not teachers.

**Q:** Has your method of reading images had any impact on the way you organize exhibitions, and has your editorial experience with the journal *History of Photography* helped you in this?

**Mike Weaver:** My best book is actually an exact translation of an exhibition called *The Photographic Art: Pictorial Traditions in Britain and America* (1986). All the pictures in the exhibition are in the book, in the groups in which they were exhibited on the wall. Look at the pictures in a given group, first, and then read my short text for that group. Pictures always first, texts second. It’s a bit like being at the exhibition, where you can think your own thoughts quietly to yourself, but can’t talk to others out loud! Despite all our efforts to get people to write perceptively about pictures, we found that in *History of Photography*, most academics were not interpreting pictures much at all. They merely used them to illustrate their second-hand theories. Very disappointing.

**Q:** Do you practise photography yourself?

**Mike Weaver:** Yes, Anne Hammond and I practice photography together. That is to say, since 1986 we have used a 1956 Rolleiflex with a standard lens, mounted on a lightweight tripod, and using colour film, which we printed chemically until recently. For the last two of our seven portfolios, we have had the negatives scanned, and have printed the images digitally to a high specification on good paper. The couple who can photograph together without argument, silently adjusting the subject in the viewfinder, will stay together! This is not artistic collaboration; it is a matter of aesthetic bonding. There is no room for ego.

**Q:** Recent critical and scholarly attention has been given to Paul Strand, including in France on the occasion of an exhibition at the *Fondation Cartier*, in 2012. In which direction are you currently pursuing your own work on Strand?

**Mike Weaver:** I have written twice about Strand already: ‘Paul Strand: Native Land’, *The Archive* (University of Arizona) 27 (1990) 5-15; and ‘Paul Strand: Dynamic Realist’, in *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, ed. Maren Stange, New York: Aperture, 1990, 197-207, which raised the big question of his politics, which had been so far completely ignored. Now I have a much more comprehensive point of view on the relation between his aesthetic ideals and his socialist politics.

**Q:** Why did you lead us to an observation of something in Strand’s famous *Wall Street, 1915*<sup>1</sup> that others had not previously noticed?

**Mike Weaver:** What I had missed myself, until 2006, was the flat-capped workman in the left foreground, with his stick over his shoulder (symbol of his class) intruding upon the be-hatted bourgeoisie exactly on the Golden Section of the picture. In my LERMA lecture, I wanted to help the audience to discover it for themselves, to make it all their own, if I could lead them to it. [See *One Hundred Greatest Photographs*, ed. Mark Haworth-Booth, London: Folio Society, 2006, p.96.]

**Q:** During the LERMA seminar, you mentioned Claude Roy’s *La France de profil*, a book illustrated by Strand’s pictures.

**Mike Weaver:** Well, for a start, may I politely correct you? *La France de profil* (1952) is a book consisting of Strand’s photographs illustrated by Roy’s texts. No offense to M. Roy’s memory intended!

There is work to be done precisely on the subject of Strand's relationship with Claude Roy, which would involve the kind of approach to viewing pictures that I have talked to you about. It would leave plenty of room for close viewing, critical deliberation, political theory, and much else. I would like to see this research project undertaken in France, and why not in Aix-en-Provence?

- 5 We would like to thank you very much for answering our questions and for having shared with us your approach to the 'photographic art'. We now understand the way you use that term.

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## NOTES

1. [http://www.masters-of-photography.com/S/strand/strand\\_wall\\_street\\_full.html](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/S/strand/strand_wall_street_full.html), lien actif le 23 septembre 2013.
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