

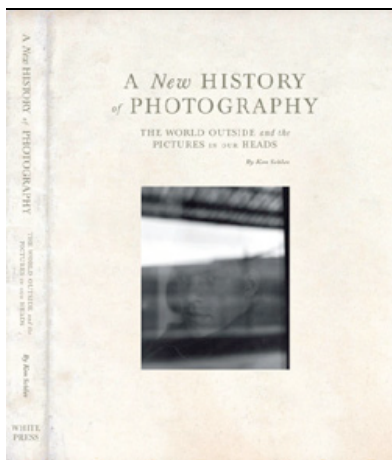
## A New History of Photography: The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads

REVIEWED BY GEORGE SLADE, PUBLISHED ON FEBRUARY 4TH, 2009

[VIEW COMMENTS \[1\]](#)

Ken Schles | **A New History of Photography: The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads**  
PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY KEN SCHLES

White Press, Koln, 2008. Hardbound. 173pp., Numerous black and white and color illustrations. 8¼x10¾".



*A New History of Photography: The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads*  
Photographs and text by Ken Schles, published by White Press, 2008



How often are you compelled to quote a photographer's printed writings? I have two favored references: the first, chronologically and in number of conscious appearances, is Robert Frank's pithy and enduring comment that "it is always the instantaneous reaction to oneself that produces a photograph" (from "A Statement..." published in *U.S. Camera Annual 1958*, p. 115); the second, Charles Harbutt's summation that "In some ways, all photographers must become cavemen. Or aliens. Or children." (from "I Don't Take Pictures; Pictures Take Me," the Epilogue to his seminal 1973 book *Travelog*; I used this quote in my college yearbook). I am also

frequently visited by Garry Winogrand's aphorisms, though I always have to return to the sources to recall his exact wordings ("illusions of literal descriptions," "suspension of disbelief," "what something looks like photographed"—all these fragments floating around in my mental card file). Typically, photographers become what they are because of their talents with image-making, not their abilities as word-smiths. There are exceptions; Robert Adams, Tod Papageorge, Bea Nettles, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Deborah Willis, John Szarkowski, and a handful of others craft images and phrases with comparable dexterity.

Reading Ken Schles' *A New History of Photography: The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads*, I wondered what I would take away from the experience. The text matter—a multi-sectioned essay with marginal notes, biography, bibliography, and list of plates—commands 66 of the book's 173 pages, so it begs for attention. But I kept wanting to get back to the photographs. Schles has not been over-published in his career; *Invisible City*, his very collectible 1988 Twelvetreets monograph, was followed by one other book, *The Geometry of Innocence*, a 2001 Hatje Cantz release that I've yet to see. Born (1960), raised, and now based in New York City, Schles has

a strong international following and an admirable string of kudos. The images in his new book offer a tantalizing survey of his vision, and the advance blurbs about the book suggested that this would be "a book about influence and the connections we make: an experiment in the history of photography." Not sure who wrote that, but the notion was attractive; I imagined a kind of self-and-other dialogue, with Schles forthrightly citing the effects of certain photographs on his own, an homage to the image world that surrounds and infuses our search for meaning.



*A New History of Photography: The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads*, by Ken Schles. Published by White Press, 2008.

The end result is, however, less experiment than manifesto. All of the 106 plates in the section titled "A Discussion on the History of Photography" are Schles' photographs ("furnished by the photographer," and "reproduced by courteous permission of Mr. Schles"), with no leavening from other sources. As I say, I'm happy to see a fuller range of his work. But what about influences, connections — the discussion of photography's history? There's a lovely image of an East Hampton apple tree, begging fruitful comparison to similar Stieglitz photographs. The acknowledgements lie deeply buried in his text, at turns philosophical, linguistic, psychological, technological, historiographic, anything but overt or specific. Latent in this is a sense that to cite an individual image as a corollary to one of his own would be either to insult his audience (sophisticated enough to know all the pictures in his head) or devalue the significance of his own accomplishment by comparison. This "new history" seems less dependent on the world outside than on a construct of the author/photographer. Still, there was a quote that stood out for me, from the last ten pages of his text, which appear under the collective title "Errata and Addendum" (and which, by themselves, are a rewarding read, more forthcoming and honest than the forty-plus preceding pages):

Perhaps it is because ultimately images exist outside of language and it is hard to be circumspect and specific about a *Gestalt*. We see an image and we *know* something, somehow. We believe, but we don't know why. The non-verbal quality of our image conversation places it in the realm of the emotional and pre-rational (*i.e.*, outside of language), which is why, when our images speak us [sic], we don't have a clue as to what's going on. (*A New History of Photography*, page 46) [emphasis by Schles]

A disclaimer, forthcoming and clear, even though it's about ambiguity;

I sense Schles' struggle for meaning and understanding here, as I do in the rich plate section that shortly follows, and am grateful for the artist's honest efforts toward immediacy. It may not be as memorable for me, long term, as Frank and Harbutt's statements, or Winogrand's oracular fragments, but it reflects the motivation and challenge that all artists have to find form for meaning, and photographers to an even greater degree. —GEORGE SLADE

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**NOW DISPLAYING: ALL COMMENTS**

**ADD A COMMENT**

I want to thank George Slade for his thoughtful comments on my book. He is very correct in describing the book as a struggle for meaning and understanding. We bring many ideas to bear on images. Images, in ways unlike text, are open to various readings that invite a complex (and possibly contradictory) set of interpretations, which may or may not be reconcilable between different observers. That is why I subtitled my book "The World Outside and the Pictures In Our Heads," a direct reference to the title of the introductory chapter of Walter Lippmann's 1922 seminal book *Public Opinion*. In that chapter Mr. Lippmann describes how we use "a small vocabulary [to] express a complicated world," and how "a trickle of messages from the outside is affected by the stored up images, the preconceptions, and prejudices which interpret, fill out, and in their turn powerfully direct the play of our attention, and our vision itself." (pg.18). Images have a surprisingly small vocabulary of subject matter (which we place into genres) but the way we photograph something, the context in which it is seen and the way that we interpret images all point to subtle and not so subtle meanings. We bring prior understanding to bear upon images that we confront. What we think we see is filtered through prejudices, stereotypes and assumptions. And the filtered world we encounter (or construct) then leads us on towards other understanding.

It was because of this that I quite purposefully did not set up a one to one correlation between the images in my book and some distant source image. I felt to do so would limit the experience of any viewer. I did not want to direct them in so specific a manner. I wanted them to "create" and explore the content of the book by giving them just a title (ok, I did write a whole lot of text). But by and large this is why I call the image section of the book "A Discussion On The History Of Photography." It was not that I could assume that people would already know "the pictures in his (my) head." Nor did I feel that to do so would "devalue the significance of his (my) own accomplishment by comparison." (Aside: though I have struggled with a variation of these themes some 25 odd years, I claim very little as real accomplishment). What I wanted to do was to engage the viewer in the process of discovery and have them make connections and challenge their own assumptions as to the existence of a concrete canon of authoritative pictures that may or may not already exist, to varying degrees, in their heads. I set the book up in the hope to be seductive and engaging and to challenge the viewer to contribute their associations when looking at the pictures. And I hope that people will do that at whatever level they engage the piece--because images are open to the gaze of all who look. I enthusiastically encourage expert opinion (like that of Mr. Slade's), but expertise is not a prerequisite for visual experience. And any of us can be struck by something visual, at every level of sophistication. What that excitement might mean, to me, is the million-dollar question.

I just came across this wonderful interview with Gilles Peress. He states, "You see, I also have a strange notion as to what is a picture. I see that an image has several authors: there is yourself; there is the camera (because I think that photography through each camera speaks in a different way); there is reality, because reality speaks very forcefully through photography; and then there is the viewer, which is a person who looks at the image, makes his own interpretation of what's happening. And I do think that photography is very much "open text," where half of the text is in the reader." (<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Peress/peress-con0.html>).

The observer, the reader, is very much a part of this project. This project started as an invitation to "play" off another book (which I talk about at length in the text of my book) and eventually became part of another, larger, exhibition (<http://2005.marksofhonour.com/> --which has become an ongoing project of the curators: <http://www.marksofhonour.com/>). I chose for my piece Beaumont Newhall's 1938 book, *Photography: A Short Critical History*. I think it is kind of neat that Mr. Slade picks up on the photograph of apples in his review because it was with that image that I began to think about the assumption of which "images are in our heads," (and in my head). Beaumont Newhall spent a lifetime exploring and in some ways creating (establishing, discovering?) the canon of photography we know today. If you look at his book (the original one), I think we will all agree he visually got some parts quite "wrong," whatever that means. At the time it was a fantastic appraisal, and it was pretty much all there was. Which is to say only that there is a process that we, as human beings, are all engaged in: the process of discovery and understanding and communicating an evolving set of ideas set against a mutating reality. We try to make sense of the world to ourselves. But let's get back to that frontispiece photo. George says, "There's a lovely image of an East Hampton apple tree, begging fruitful comparison to similar Stieglitz photographs." I want to share with you the original frontispiece from the Newhall book and compare it to mine: <http://www.kenschles.com/About/compare/comparison.html>

Here is my surprise: I don't know if George Slade has seen the somewhat obscure 1938 edition of the Newhall book, because the frontispiece is indeed by Alfred Stieglitz. I would also like to add that nowhere in my book do I even name Stieglitz (I just checked). The pictures I can find by Alfred Stieglitz that depicts apples from Lake George are these: <http://www.kenschles.com/About/compare/Stieglitz.html>

These images were in an exhibit I saw in 1995 (4 years after I made my image) at the MoMA called "Alfred Stieglitz At Lake George." The top image is the one that I think George is primarily referring to. I can't say for sure that I saw those images before I made mine. Or does my image reference an Atget or maybe a Renger-Patzsch? In 1981 the MoMA put on an incredible series of exhibits on Atget. Here are relevant photos from The Work of Atget Volume 1 Old France and a picture of tomatoes by Renger-Patzsch:

<http://www.kenschles.com/About/compare/atget.renger-patzsch.html>

That the MoMA Lake George show was 4 years after I made my image might not be that meaningful since I like to look at pictures and I could well have come across a Stieglitz that looks like mine at an earlier time (although a 1995 article in the New Yorker by Ingrid Sischy notes that "Nearly fifty of the ninety-three images in the exhibition are being shown for the first time."

[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1995/09/11/1995\\_09\\_11\\_064\\_TNY\\_CARDS\\_000374248](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1995/09/11/1995_09_11_064_TNY_CARDS_000374248).

Maybe I saw that image earlier at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, from their collection and who published it in Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer in 1965. Maybe my image referenced painting or apple farm or gardening photos. What is significant is that I did connect the two later and included it in my book. And the fact that sometimes we cannot precisely place an image.

So it begs the question--why did both George and me make that connection to Stieglitz--a connection that I very much left unstated? I am struck with the fact that of the pictures I know by Stieglitz from Lake George, the one that does not come to mind is the one reproduced in Newhall's book. If anything you can say that George and me kind of riffed on Stieglitz at Lake George. Independently. And in opposite directions. I had the name Stieglitz at Lake George and associated it with my somewhat unrelated (Atget inspired?) image. He, using only my image, associated it to a specific name that I was thinking of. Is this a parlor trick, or is something going on?

Susan Sontag, in her insightful book, "Regarding The Pain Of Others," says: "The Familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan. And photographs help construct--and revise--our sense of a distant past, with the posthumous shocks engineered by the circulation of hitherto unknown photographs. Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what society chooses to think about. It calls these ideas "memories," and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as collective memory--part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. But there is collective instruction. "All memory is individual, unreproducible (sic)--it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantive archives of images ...which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings (start pg. 85)."

So something is going on. I've tried to explore that in this book. I write this because Mr. Slade made me think a little bit more on this idea that somehow we, over time, individually and collectively try to consider and revise what we understand to get a better idea of just what it is that we have gotten ourselves into. That, and the fact that I have to think about my upcoming lecture at ICP in New York, which I invite everyone to come see on March 11th.

[http://www.icp.org/site/c.dnJGKJNSFqG/b.886227/k.9EDD/Lectures\\_amp\\_Public\\_Programs.htm](http://www.icp.org/site/c.dnJGKJNSFqG/b.886227/k.9EDD/Lectures_amp_Public_Programs.htm)

Or just enjoy the pictures and the book. I think it could be a stretch to tie many of the pictures in the book overtly to another photographer's source picture. Some seem to work that way easily. None were created for that purpose. Some were made with other work in mind (who doesn't do that?). We all have pictures in our heads; they prepare us to experience reality in a certain way. For me the choices I made in the book were at times intuitive and other times incredibly subjective. One day I would love to do a one on one comparison with the images in my book and intuit or speak about their reference source. That could be a really interesting exhibition. But that is not this book. This book is about influence and it is a search for the way in which we make connections. I did write that. And again, I want to thank George for writing this piece.

There is another question I have. Both George and I reference a quote from Gary Winogrand: "Photography is not about the thing photographed. It is about how that thing looks photographed."

Does anyone know the source of that quote?

*Posted By* **KEN SCHLES** | February 11, 2009 at 1:21 PM

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