

Photographic Questions

WHAT REALLY CAN A PHOTOGRAPH tell us? Do the meanings belong to the viewer, the subject, or the photographer? Does it give insight into the silvery (or pixilated) bit of life it renders or does it only distance us further from reality? Is a photograph a window into the world or a mere reflection of the photographer's intent?

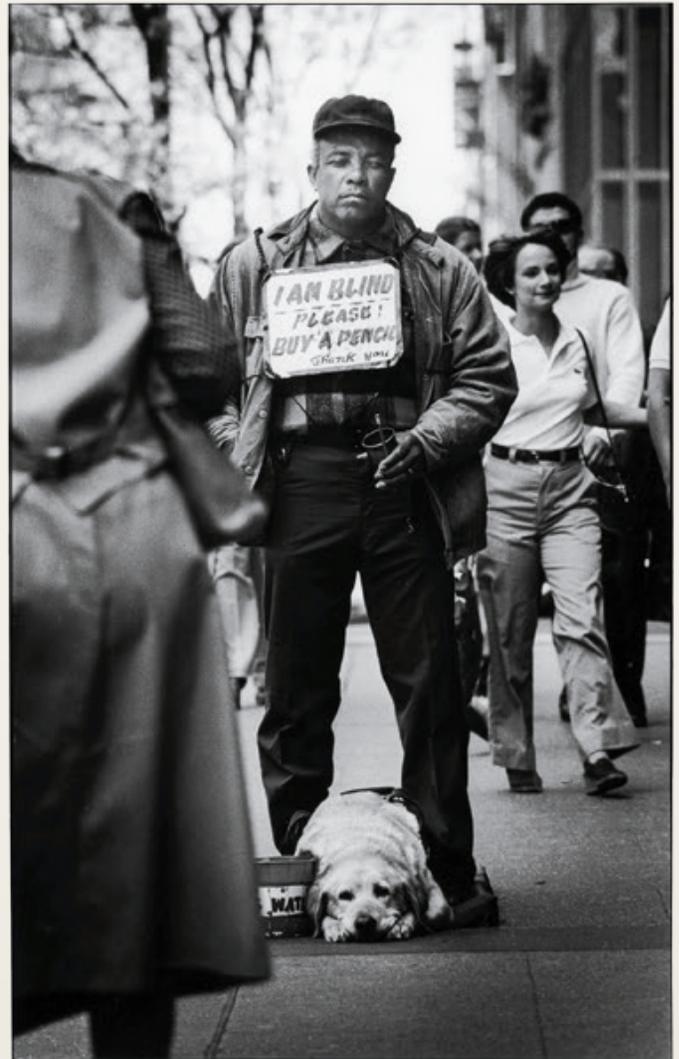
Slippery questions for sure and probably not something I want rattling in my head when I'm actually out there taking pictures. But in our image-saturated culture these questions are imbedded in just about every facet of our daily lives, shaping our relationship to the world around us.

What is real? What is a photograph? What is the relationship between reality and reality photographed? Do photographs give us any real answers or do they just provoke more questions?

Take for example this arresting photograph by Jeffrey Grosscup. What is really going on? How many ways can it be interpreted? When I was going through the Minnesota Historical Society archive, this one caught my eye because it is remarkably reminiscent of one by the celebrated street photographer, Paul Strand. "Blind" (1917) is arguably the most iconic photo ever of a blind person (at least in an American photography history survey course). Strand's depiction, however, is more confrontational. He was able to get close proximity, not by talking to the person, but by using a camera with a trick lens so that he could take a shot without the subject's knowledge.

This of course raises more questions. What are the ethics of secretly taking photos of people in public? Is it even less ethical to steal a photo of a blind person? Did Grosscup have Strand's photo in mind when he snapped the shutter (highly likely)? Did he ever talk to this person? Or at least buy a pencil?

When I showed this photo to several people with differing but experienced backgrounds in photography, their reactions varied: "He looks alienated in the midst of a crowd." "He doesn't see us ignore him." "This evokes racial and economic disparity." "That's a nicely made sign. Is he even blind?" "It manipulates our emotions, like a Hallmark card." "Even the dog mastered looking pitiable." "The man and dog's eyes direct you to the people walking by." "It's perfectly composed in the rule of thirds." "It's perfectly gut-wrenching." What would the blind man



A blind man and his dog panhandling on Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, May 1980 (JEFFREY GROSSCUP PHOTO/MNHS COLLECTIONS)

think about his photo? What would other blind people think?

Rather than encapsulate the world, the most interesting photographs challenge what we think we know. What do you see?

—Wing Young Huie

WING YOUNG HUIE has been photographing for over 30 years, much of it focused on his home state of Minnesota. Although his work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in galleries and museums, his most well-known projects are large-scale public installations, including *Lake Street USA* (2000) and *The University Avenue Project* (2010). Huie has published six books; the Minnesota Historical Society Press will publish *Chinese-ness*, his current project, in 2018.



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