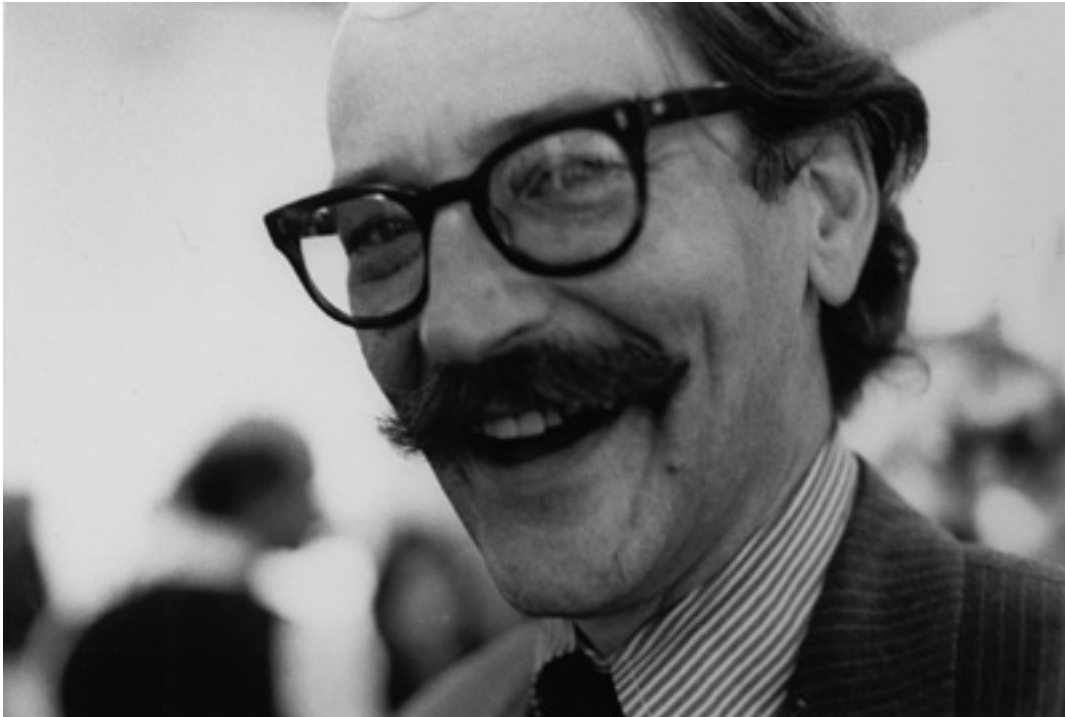


Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 9, 2007

John Szarkowski, Curator of Photography, Dies at 81

Filed under: critics & curators,psa — alecsothblog @ 10:59 am



John Szarkowski, New York, 1963 by Jacques Henri Lartigue

[read the story here](#)

13 Comments

1. Truly a champion of photography as art and a great artist in his own right. Sad to see him go. But he definitely made his mark on photography and the art world.

Comment by Scott Bach — July 9, 2007 @ 11:51 am

2. As a young student of photography and through graduate school in the late 70's, John Szarkowski helped me to articulate photographically what it was I saw of the world and why it resonated so profoundly for me. I took much of my early instruction from he and Garry Winogrand. I miss their wisdom.

Comment by Bill Mattick — July 9, 2007 @ 4:18 pm

3. John Szarkowski's passing will be widely mourned by those of us in photography, although he was always a controversial figure. His vision of photography was maybe narrow, but at least it was a consistent vision, passionately and eloquently held, and importantly from my point of view, privileged photography before pseudo-painting with the camera. It's also important to note that he was a photographer himself – he knew what was going on in photographers' minds at that moment of pressing the shutter.

I was always in awe of him. A long time ago, when I was a young whippersnapper, we were discussing his favourite subject, Eugene Atget.

'Tell me,' he said, referring to one of the major bones of contention in Atget studies – intentionality, 'when he looked through the groundglass, did Atget totally know what he was doing?'

'We can't know that,' I replied, taking the craven way out.

'Of course he fucking did,' snapped Szarkowski, dismissing me imperiously.

Once out of his office, and rather chastened by this, I got to thinking about it. Damn it, of course he was right. Of course Atget knew absolutely what he was doing. He may not thought of himself as an artist, he didn't have a theory, he probably couldn't articulate it. He was a photographer, he used his eyes. He looked through the groundglass, he liked what he saw, he took the picture.

Thank you, John, for that fundamental lesson, and for many others.

Comment by Gerry Badger — July 10, 2007 @ 7:22 am

4. In the early 1980s, the Photography department at the Museum of Modern Art had what was essentially an open door policy for looking at work (for all I know, it may continue to this day). No appointment was necessary; you simply put your pictures in a box, brought them in by Wednesday afternoon and left them with the secretary at the front desk. On Thursday morning, the photography curators would gather and go through all the portfolios that had been dropped off. You'd then come by in the afternoon to pick up your stuff, and that was usually that. The best you'd get was a form letter, thanking you for giving the staff the opportunity, blah, blah blah..Of course, every once in a great while, someone would get lucky and sell the museum a print or two. I first brought my own pictures there in 1983. When I came to pick them up, the secretary informed me that one of the curators wanted to speak to me. She walked back into a hallway while I stood at the desk, stunned. I heard someone say "John will talk to him", and about fifteen seconds later, John Szarkowski was offering me his hand,

"Bladen?", he said.

"It's Baden", I mumbled.

"Ah, Baden. I'm John Szarkowski."

"I know."

"You do? OK, well, let's go into my office."

We sat down across from each other and he, I think, began to tell me how much the department enjoyed looking at my work. I say 'I think', because I was terribly nervous and, even though I could hear his words, their meaning didn't register. He began to refer to specific images in my portfolio, but his descriptions sounded entirely unfamiliar. Before long, I was convinced that he had confused my work with someone else's.

"I think you've made a mistake," I finally blurted out, "I don't think you're talking about my pictures."

Szarkowski paused. "Well, maybe you're right. Why don't we bring them in and take a look?"

'Ain't this the story of my life,' I'm now thinking. 'The only reason I get an audience with this guy is because he thinks I'm someone else...'

So they bring in a Fiberbilt case full of photos and, lo and behold, they turn out to be mine. I left the museum that day with one less photograph in my portfolio, and the promise of a check for \$125. Not a lot of money for a photograph, even in 1983, but it gave me a sense of confidence that I have rarely, if ever, felt since.

The Idea of John Szarkowski, to appropriate a phrase, may have fallen out of grace in the past decade or two; his writings, according to several schools of thought, smack of an old-fashioned patriarchy. While this view is not entirely unjustified, I continue to believe that no one has written more clearly, more compellingly and more beautifully about photographs and photography. In *The Photographer's Eye*, *Looking at Photographs* and many of the other books in what is practically a bottomless bibliography, John Szarkowski had the ability to illuminate truth, seemingly effortlessly, with simplicity, elegance and clarity.

Comment by Karl Baden — July 10, 2007 @ 10:12 am

5.

Mr. Anderson and son, near Sandstone, Minnesota, 1957 by John Szarkowski

VERLYN KLINKENBORG writes in the NY Times:

It's worth remembering how much Wisconsin there was in the voice of John Szarkowski, who died on Saturday at age 81. His reputation would almost make you doubt what you were hearing. He was, after all, the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art for 29 years, beginning in 1962. The exhibitions he mounted and the books he wrote quite simply gave documentary photography a place in the world of art. And yet there was that broad Wisconsin in his speech, reminding his auditors that if they could hear the curatorial pulpit in his words they could also hear the sound of a very different place.

I'm struck now by the essential modesty of that other place — the common-sensical view Mr. Szarkowski took of his curatorial work and his work as a photographer. What comes to mind, especially, is one of his photographs called "Mr. Anderson and Son, Near Sandstone, Minnesota, 1957." It is the picture of a farmer and his son standing against the backdrop of an empty wooden corncrib. There is in both faces a wry, inquisitive look, almost humorous in the father's face, more trusting in the son's. The picture embodies the aesthetic Mr. Szarkowski found in the photographers he championed — the aesthetic of merely noticing.

Mr. Szarkowski never pretended that photography changed because of his attention. He pretended that he was just paying attention to what should have been obvious to almost anyone. What he demonstrated, in fact, was the very thing that good curators are able to do. He remained himself, and yet he was changed by what he saw and showed us how to be changed, too.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 10, 2007 @ 11:06 am

6.

More from Richard Lacayo, Mark Feeney, and Mary Rourke.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 10, 2007 @ 11:42 am

7. John Szarkowski by Rene Burri, 1963

John Szarkowski by Elliott Erwitt, 1988

Comment by Alec Soth — July 10, 2007 @ 3:13 pm

8. [...] Read Gerry Badger and Karl Baden's stories and then post your own here. [...]

Pingback by alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Szarkowski stories — July 10, 2007 @ 3:34 pm

9. John taught a semester-long course when I was a non-classified grad. student at the University of Arizona. I was one of ten, I think, that got to be in the seminar. We'd sit in the print viewing room outside the curatorial space on the second floor of CCP. One day he told us a story about those days when they'd review whatever work was dropped off at MOMA. My recollection is that he said this time it was slides, but it was Lewis Baltz's work. I think slides, because John would get physical in his descriptions—dramatic—and I remember him holding his hand in the air as if looking at slides by holding them to a light. Perhaps this gesture was to explain the technique through which so many curators viewed work in a 4-hour period. At any rate, on looking at the slides or prints by Baltz, he looked at all of us and said, in sort of a giddy way, "These were REALLY good!"

This was maybe the best thing about John's stories to me a 23 year old photographer at the time—seeing him remember the first time he saw something like a Baltz photograph, and understanding now, how important that moment was.

He said that he told the receptionist to let him know when the photographer came in, he wanted to meet him. Then he said that when he heard Baltz was there he was a bit nervous, excited by the photographs. He introduced himself to Baltz, said the work was quite good. He said, "It's, it's, it's almost...boring."

"OH!" boomed John, as he slapped his forehead with his hand and smiled, and said something like, "I knew that hadn't come out right. But they REALLY were."

I'll always remember John emphasizing a point by slapping both hands on the table in front of him. This was the only time I saw the forehead slap.

Comment by Colleen Mullins — July 10, 2007 @ 4:38 pm

10. Well, when John Szarkowski retired from the MoMA I was still a student of art history, working part time at the photography department of a German museum. His name was legendary already and I have never heard anyone talking about him without utmost respect. At that time I got the impression that there were curators for photography who were more or less good in their jobs and that here was John Szarkowski.

For me he always was a kind of mythic, far away figure, until I began to become more and more interested in Japanese photography. Soon I learnt that he organized the first group exhibition on contemporary Japanese photography outside Japan and that he was the one (together with Shôji Yamagishi) who set the foundation with the selection of photographers and through his essay for the reception and perception of Japanese photography in the West. But it seems that the exhibition did not have an immediate impact, since it took many years until others really realized the value of the visual treasure he presented in the West for the first time.

Ferdinand

PS: I wrote a little bit more about John Szarkowski's seminal exhibition "New Japanese Photography" in my blog at <http://www.japan-photo.info>

Comment by Ferdinand Brueggemann — July 11, 2007 @ 5:20 pm

11. I was accepted to MOMA in photography collection in 1982 at the time Mrs. Szarkowsky was the Curator, and at the time I was a young photographer arriving from Portugal to have my first photography exhibition in New York, and for me it was very importante to have a special person like him, very "Human " giving the right value to the Human figure and to the Nature things, to be accepted to the permanent collection it was like a voice telling me "go ahead", yesterday I was at the phone to New York with my good friend Ani Rivera, and when he gave me the terrible new about Mrs. Szarkowsky , I told him, when this kind of persons go to another dimension we die a little, because they are a very important influence in our space and time in this World, but this kind of people never die, their work last for ever. And the portrait above, taken by Lartigue shows us the Jon Sarkowski in the real sense and meaning of what should be a real portrait, he is there in Space and Time for ever... Thanks Mrs. John Szarkowsky.

Comment by Guta De Carvalho — July 12, 2007 @ 5:44 pm

12. [...] Amid all of the sad news about Szarkowski and Hartwell, some might have missed the news that JoAnn Verburg's retrospective opened earlier this week at MoMA. Fortunately today's NY Times has a big profile of JoAnn. It also includes an audio slideshow by Philip Gefter. [...]

Pingback by alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Verburg retro — July 15, 2007 @ 11:49 am

13. John had been very gracious and helpful to me over the last few years. He gave some very positive (and humorous) criticism of my work. He was also willing to write those annoying letters of support you so often need for grants – a few were even successful. (he once apologized because he didn't think he had as much influence with the grant making committees as he used to...).

He also used to complain that as his eyesight wasn't so good the last couple of years and that my writing was too small (after he once described it as looking like "spider spit" I started writing larger and larger...) and he had to hunt out his 4x5 loupe before he could read it and reply. He also managed to give me advice about looking after the couple of apple trees I have in my garden.

I only knew him, mainly at a distance, over the last 3 years or so, but I'm going to miss him.

Comment by Tim Atherton — July 23, 2007 @ 10:23 am