

# PHOTOGRAPHY



# and LANGUAGE

# **PHOTOGRAPHY and LANGUAGE**

Lew Thomas, editor  
Donna-Lee Phillips, design

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# Introduction

## Lew Thomas

All the material for this book comes from the exhibition, *Photography and Language*, shown simultaneously at Camerawork Gallery and La Mamelie's Arts Center, San Francisco, 1976.

Because of the open structure of the exhibition photographic works were received from all parts of the United States. In order to stimulate interests beyond the fetishism of the object and to allow artists outside California to participate on an equal basis, an 8" x 10" horizontal format was made an unequivocal condition for entry to the exhibit. Within this context artists were free to send as many prints as they thought necessary to fulfill their projects. Images could be any size, vertical or horizontal, so long as they were presented in the prescribed format. Unmounted and unframed work would then be stapled to the gallery walls in alphabetical order. Therefore, the conditions and policy of *Photography and Language* made it possible to install work without subjective mediation, encourage work beyond a regional scope, neutralize the value of the object and, equate an exhibition with theory. Thus a context was established to explore the meaning and identity of art and artists.

*"If a thing appears which is neither one thing nor another within an established classification, it should not therefore be suppressed as it may prove to be the seed from which an alternative and instructive classification can be grown."*

Victor Burgin

Once linguistic structuring is integrated with photographic procedures genres are subjected to reinterpretation and expansion. Unexpected formats emerge enabling artists to handle content that no longer can be contained within a pictorial tradition. Some of the material selected for this book utilizes familiar territory of photography like landscape, portraiture and documentary in which the application of language provides an objective tension to the imagery. Works implying feminist ideology have found an accessible methodology within photography and language to express their views. This dialectical approach to photography is further reflected in the book by work that confines its meaning to measuring, locating, limiting or defining the boundaries of the medium. The independence of ideas in relation to photography has opened up an entirely new set of possibilities to deal "with the social mediation of the physical world through the agency of signs" as put by Victor Burgin.

The written material included in the book provides an intellectual framework for the positioning of the visual contents. The tone of these essays are distinctly different from the *promotional* literature common in photographic writing.

Special acknowledgement must be made to John Lamkin (Camerawork Gallery) and Carl Loeffler (La Mamelie's Arts Center) for their support and undertaking of a complex exhibition and of course to everyone who submitted work to the exhibition and book. Responsibility for selecting work for publication and its structuring abides with me.

Finally, the design and production of the book would not exist without the indefatigable efforts of Donna-Lee Phillips.

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# ALPHA

Peter D'Agostino

*"Knowledge of language results from the interplay of initially given structures of the mind, maturational processes and interaction with the environment."*

Noam Chomsky<sup>1</sup>

*Just as the vocal musculature, brain, and cultural context set limits on the production of sounds and the manipulation we can make of them, so also do the technology of film and the psychology of perception and cognition set limits on the way we manipulate our film signs."*

Sci Worth<sup>2</sup>

*The exact meaning of words become known only in the context of each new statement."*

Wittgenstein<sup>3</sup>

*"We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by our linguistic systems in our minds."*

B. L. Whorf<sup>4</sup>

1. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, MIT, 1965

2. Sci Worth, "The Development of a Semiotic of Film", *Semiotica* 1, 1, 1969

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, Humanities Press, 1974

4. B. L. Whorf, "Language, Thought, and Reality", MIT Press, 1956, 1967

*ALPHA* was initiated as a semiotic study of the film *Alphaville* (Godard, 1965).

The film narrative involves the loss of language meaning in a future society run by computers: Yes means Yes and No, In is Out. (Like 'Newspeak', in 1984, and the burning of books in *Fahrenheit 451*, the goal is to limit language, to limit thought.)

The subject of *Alphaville* is FILM and LANGUAGE:

Light	Image
Time	Word



A series of 8 photographs—

*ALPHA* is a translation and distillation:

from FILM (French spoken) Movie  
to PHOTO (English written) Still

Peter D'Agostino



