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modernism
antimodernism
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with 637 illustrations, 413 in color

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Thames & Hudson

To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

We would like to thank Thomas Neurath and Peter Warner for their patient support, and Nikos Stangos and Andrew Brown for their editorial expertise. The book would not have been begun without Nikos; it would not have been completed without Andrew.

The publishers would like to thank Amy Dempsey for her assistance in the preparation of this book.

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1916b

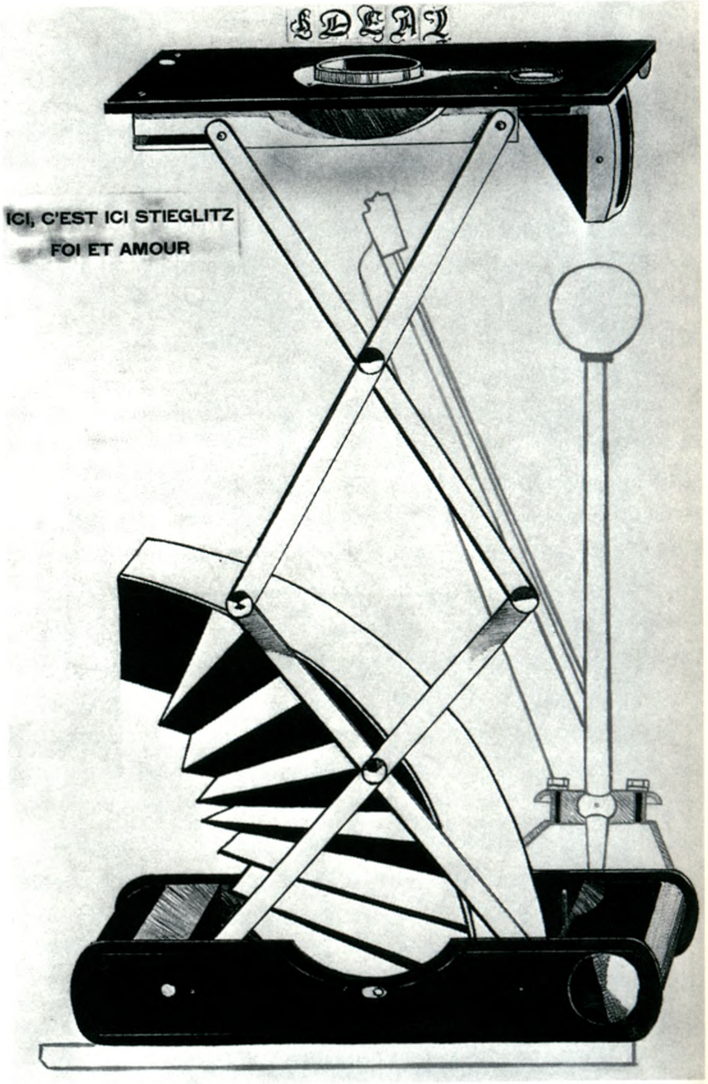
Paul Strand enters the pages of Alfred Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work*: the American avant-garde forms itself around a complex relationship between photography and the other arts.

▲ That Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) should have been portrayed by Francis Picabia in 1915 in the form of a camera [**1**] would have surprised no one in the world of avant-garde art, certainly not in New York, but not in Paris either. For by 1915, Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work* (published from 1903) was famous on both sides of the Atlantic, and his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, having changed its name in 1908 from the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession to simply 291, had mounted major exhibitions of Matisse (1908, 1910, and 1912), Picasso (1911, 1914, and 1915), Brancusi (1914), and Picabia (1915).

Nonetheless, several contradictions crisscross the "face" of Stieglitz's portrait. For one thing, the Dada spirit of the mechanomorphic form has nothing to do with Stieglitz's own aesthetic convictions; his belief in American values such as sincerity, honesty, and innocence clash as much as possible with Picabia's ironic rendering of the human subject as a machine. And as a continuation of this, Stieglitz's commitment to authenticity, taking the form, as it did, of truth to the nature of a given medium, had placed him at direct odds with the photographic practice of his day. The result was that from 1911, 291 no longer exhibited camera-based work (the one exception being Stieglitz's own exhibition in 1913 to coincide with the Armory Show). In Stieglitz's eyes, that is, modernism and photography had, distressingly, become antithetical.

It was only when the young Paul Strand (1890–1976) presented Stieglitz with the photographs he had made in 1916 that the elder man could see the vindication of his own position. For he viewed Strand's work as a demonstration that the values of modernism and those of "straight photography" *could* utterly fuse on the surface of a single print. Accordingly, Stieglitz decided to hold an exhibition of Strand's photographs at 291 and to revive *Camera Work*, which had been languishing since January 1915. In October 1916, he brought out issue number 48, and in June 1917 he ended the project with number 49/50. Both issues were intended as monuments to Strand and to a renewed sense of photography's having definitively joined an authentic modernism. With this assessment in place, Stieglitz ended his entrepreneurship on behalf of the avant-garde and redevoted himself to his own practice of photography.

The peculiar zigzag of this trajectory had begun in Berlin, where Stieglitz had enrolled as an engineering student in 1882. A course in photochemistry introduced the young American to photography, a medium he took to immediately, although he had had no previous training in art. "I went to photography really a free soul," he later explained. "There was no short cut, no foolproof photographing—no 'art world' in photography. I started with the real A.B.C."



1 • Francis Picabia, *Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz*, 1915
Pen and red ink on paper, 75.9 x 50.8 (29⅞ x 20)

▲ 1914, 1916a, 1919

By 1889, Stieglitz had made *Sun Rays—Paula—Berlin* **[2]**, a work that in its sharpness of detail was far away from the idiom that had settled over all aesthetically ambitious photography in the late nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth. Called "Pictorialist," this photography had bet the future of the medium on aping the features of painting and was thus involved in various effects of blurring (soft focus, greased lenses) and even handwork ("drawing" on the negatives with gum bichromate) to manipulate the final image as much as possible.

Focusing instead on "the real A.B.C." of photography, *Sun Rays—Paula—Berlin* not only mobilizes a strict realism to separate itself from Pictorialism's simulation of "art," but also produces something of an inventory of the values and mechanisms inherent to the medium itself. One of these mechanisms is the brute fact of the photomechanical, by which light enters the camera through a shutter to make a permanent trace on the sensitive emulsion of the negative. Bodying forth this light as a sequence of rays falling across the field in a striated pattern of dark and light, *Sun Rays* also identifies the opened windows through which sunlight streams into the darkened room (or *camera*) with the camera's shutter.

None of this would be remarkably different from the various Impressionist attempts to present the light on which their technique depended as the very subject of a given painting were it not for the concatenation of images pictured inside the room itself. For there the photomechanical's relation to mechanical reproduction—to the multiple duplication and serialization of the image—is dramatized, as the young woman writing at the table bends her head toward a framed portrait (possibly of herself) that we identify as a photograph, since above her on the wall we see its exact duplicate flanked by two landscapes betraying their own identity as photographs in their similar condition as identical twins. And this fact of reproducibility set up inside the image of *Paula* rebounds, by implication, onto *Paula* itself, so that at some later point in the series it, too, could take up residence on that same wall. In this sense, *Paula* is a display of Chinese boxes, a demonstration of the reproducible as a potentially infinite series of the same.

Stieglitz forms the Photo-Secession

Nothing could be further from the values Stieglitz encountered in the photographic magazines and exhibitions occurring both in Europe and in the America to which he returned in 1890. Joining the New York Camera Club, Stieglitz had no choice but to take up arms *for* Pictorialism rather than against it, since it was only in the hands of certain of its practitioners (such as Clarence White ▲[1871–1925] and Edward J. Steichen [1879–1973]) that photography was being taken seriously as a valid means of artistic expression. From 1897 Stieglitz began to edit *Camera Notes* as a forum for the Pictorialist group he supported against the vigorous opposition of the more conservative members of the New York Camera Club, which had recently merged with the Society of Amateur Photographers to form the Camera Club of New York, the magazine's sponsor. In 1902, on the pattern of other avant-▲garde "secessions," this group resigned from the Club and constituted itself as "The Photo-Secession," led by Stieglitz, who inaugurated *Camera Work* as its editorial arm in 1903 and, with the encouragement and assistance of Steichen, opened "The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession" in 1905.

The Armory Show

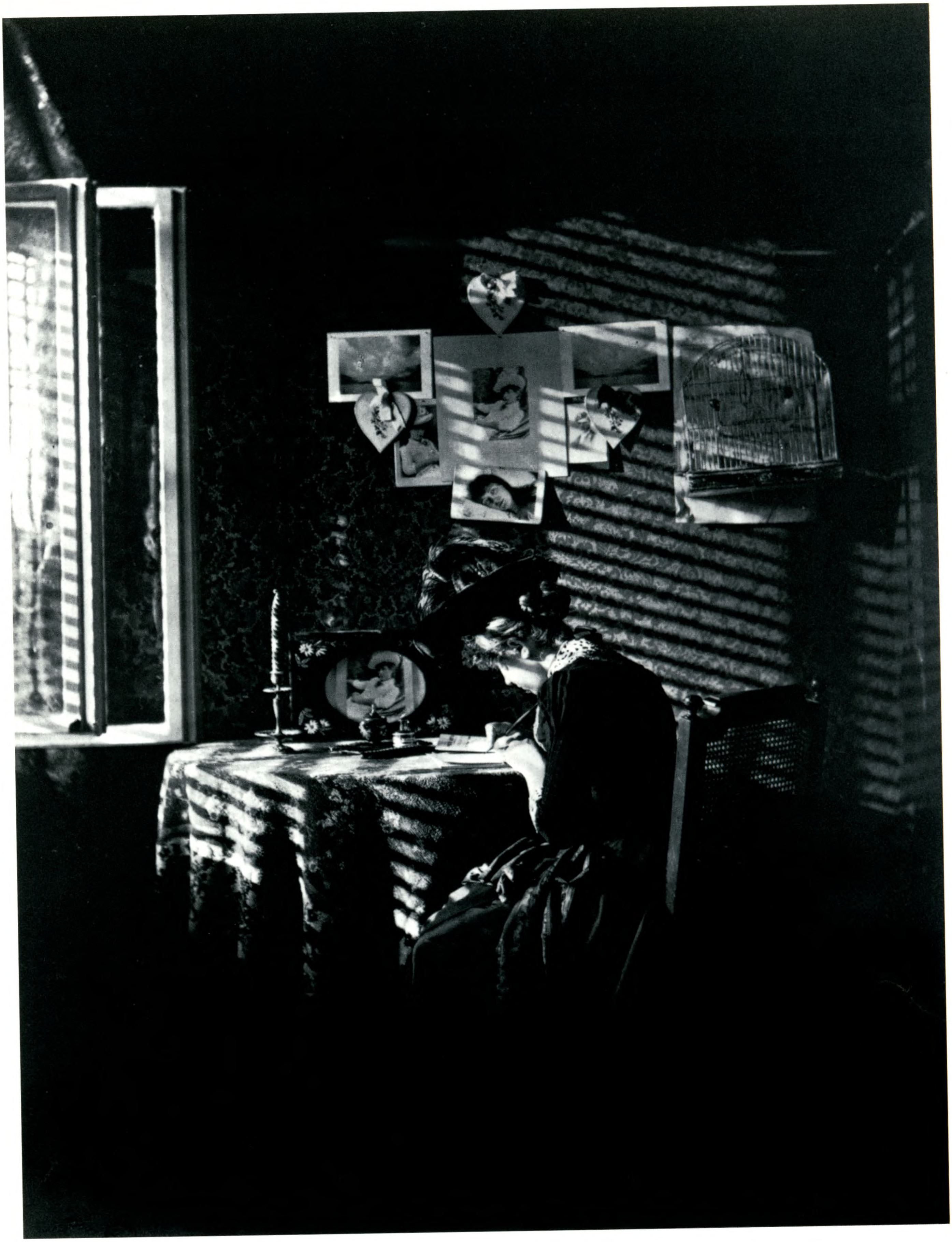
On February 15, 1913, an exhibition sponsored by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors opened at the armory quartering the 69th Regiment of the National Guard in New York City. Baptized "The Armory Show," the intention of its organizers was to bring the most advanced European art to the consciousness of American artists, who would be tested by showing alongside the work of their counterparts from across the Atlantic. The effort to find such work took the show's impresarios, Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn, associates of the most noticeable wing of the American avant-garde—a group of realist painters called The Eight (Stieglitz's more radical 291 operation was known mostly to insiders)—all around Europe. For the developing international avant-garde exhibition circuit now included the "Sonderbund International" in Cologne, Roger Fry's "Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition" in London, as well as shows at The Hague, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich, and Paris, where Gertrude Stein and other Americans-in-residence gave Davies and Kuhn access to dealers such as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Ambroise Vollard, or artists like Constantin Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp, and Odilon Redon.

Outrage against the exhibition's 420 works, expressed by the press, mounted quickly during the month of the show's duration, bringing record crowds (a total of 88,000) to the Armory. Famous sneers at Brancusi's *Mlle Pogany* ("a hard-boiled egg balanced on a cube of sugar"), at Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* ("explosion in a shingle factory"), at Henri Matisse's *Blue Nude* ("leering effrontery") set part of the tone. But the other part was fixed by the leap in taste among American artists and collectors who experienced the assembled work as a revelation. Thus, while the newspaper headline in the *Sun* ironically signaled the exhibition's departure as good riddance—"Cubists Migrate, Thousands Mourn"—the success of the show, which had also toured Chicago and Boston, inaugurated a clamor for advanced art, which would now be hosted at department stores, art societies, and private galleries (between 1913 and 1918 there were almost 250 such exhibitions). Another immediate effect was the repeal of the fifteen percent import duty on art less than twenty years old, a legal battle led by lawyer and collector John Quinn. It was this that permitted European art to enter the States, but it also set the stage for the notorious customs case over the entry of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* in 1927, in which modernism's very status as art became a legal issue.

Soon, however, Stieglitz's natural antipathy to Pictorialist manipulation and his belief instead that photographic excellence must arise from a "straight" approach to the medium, opened a rift

▲ 1959d

▲ 1900a

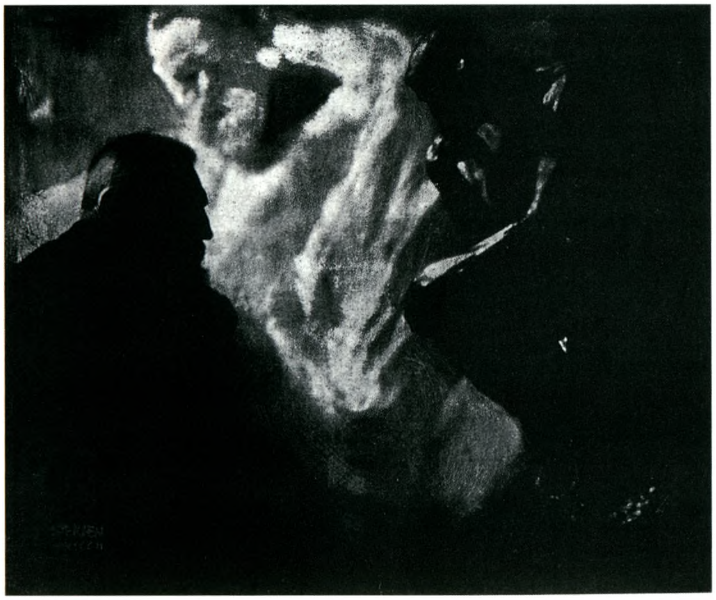


2 • Alfred Stieglitz, *Sun Rays—Paula—Berlin*, 1889
Silver-gelatin print, 22 x 16.2 (8⅝ x 6⅜)

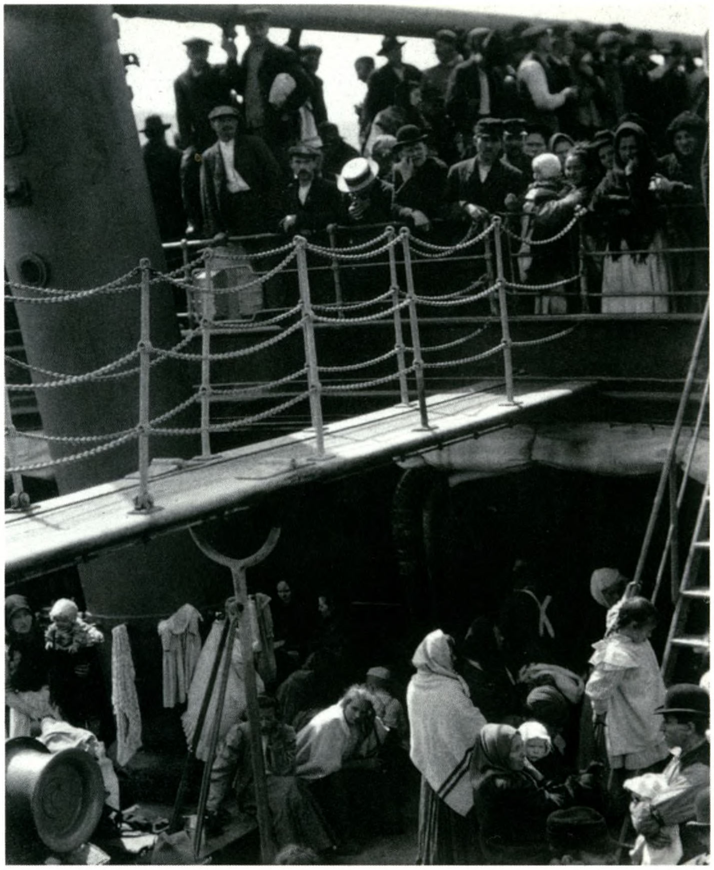
between himself and his Photo-Secession confreres. Confessing to Steichen that he could not see enough strong work coming from photographic quarters to fill the gallery, Stieglitz relied on the younger man, by now installed in Paris, to supply the gallery with serious work, by which the two agreed that the choice must necessarily shift from photography to modernist painting and sculpture. ▲ Beginning with the Rodin drawings that Steichen picked out in 1908, the selections came to be increasingly influenced by far more adventurous tastes, whether they were those of Leo and Gertrude ● Stein or those of the American organizers of the 1913 Armory Show who had been scouring Europe for examples of the most advanced work. Thus Stieglitz's commitment to straight photography progressively synchronized itself with a belief in Cubism and African art rather than with the late Symbolist values of Pictorialism celebrated by and through Steichen's portrait of Rodin.

Indeed, nothing could offer a greater contrast than Steichen's *Rodin and The Thinker* [**3**] and Stieglitz's *The Steerage* [**4**]: the former, a willing sacrifice of detail to the dramatic conflation of silhouetted profiles (the sculptor's confronting the hunched contour of his own *Thinker*) against the blurred features of Rodin's *Victor Hugo*, which, godlike, constitutes the enigmatic background; the latter, a devastatingly sharp play of forms. Captured from the upper deck of an ocean liner, *The Steerage* peers down into the jumble of human forms separated visually from the parade of bourgeois passengers above it by the bright diagonal of a gangplank. The separation of classes could not, thus, be more forcefully maintained even while the photograph's even-handed mechanical viewing, which holds everything in the same focus, produces a redistribution of "wealth" over the surface of the image, such redistribution given a formal translation in the rhyming of ovals (the straw hats, the sunlit caps, the boat's funnels) over the surface of the print.

It would be this principle of rhyming, but now emptied of its social content and, almost, of any recognizable content whatsoever, that Stieglitz would find in the work that Strand produced in the summer of 1916, after having experimented with Pictorialism for a number of years. Whether it was *Abstraction, Bowls* or *Abstraction, Porch Shadows, Twin Lakes, Connecticut* [**5**], Strand so controlled the play of light that a deep ambiguity settled over the image—as concave confused itself with convex, or vertical field with horizontal—without yielding anything of the relentless sharpness of the photographic as such. Indeed Strand's photographic "abstraction" did not seem to depend on pushing toward the unrecognizability of the objects photographed. The experience of being startled by a kind of hyper-vision—vision ratcheted into a focus beyond any normal type of seeing—that outdistanced the mere registration of this or that object could be found in Strand's presentation of lowly things such as *The White Fence* (1916), a line of pickets seen against a darkened yard.



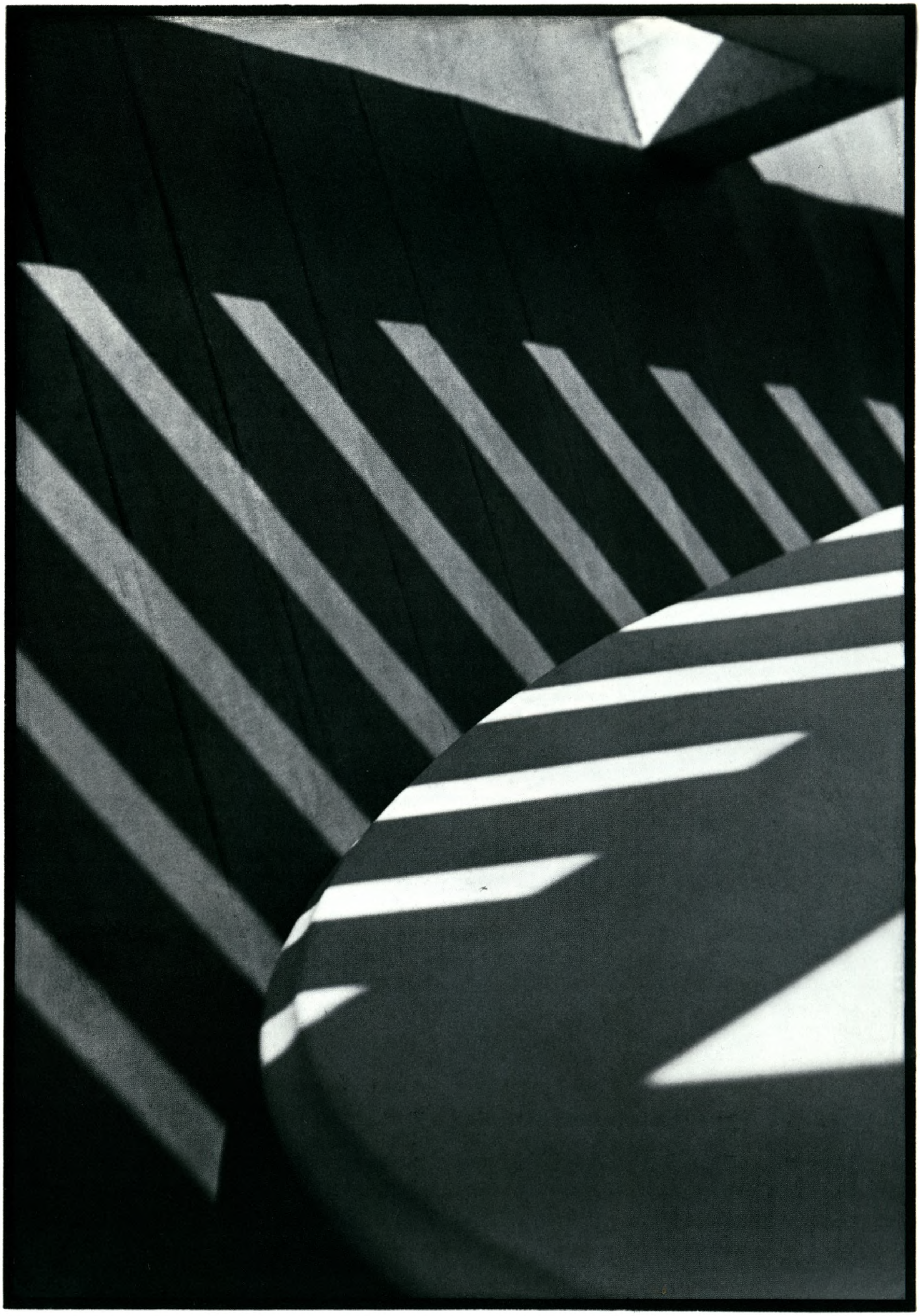
3 • Edward Steichen, *Rodin and The Thinker,* 1902
Gum-bichromate print



4 • Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907
Photogravure, 33.5 x 26.5 (13¼ x 10⅜)

The jolt delivered to Stieglitz by Strand's photography was reinforced by his growing sense of conviction that modernism itself was no longer the exclusive property of Europe. And, indeed, at the same moment when he encountered Strand's new work he had another revelation, in the form of the series of drawings by Georgia ▲ O'Keeffe (1887–1986) called *Lines and Spaces in Charcoal,* which had been passed to him by a friend, and which he exhibited in 1916 as well. The abstract watercolors that O'Keeffe went on to make in 1917, flooded as they were with a kind of pure luminosity, constituted the final exhibition at 291.

▲ 1900b ● 1907 ▲ 1927c



5 • Paul Strand, *Abstraction, Porch Shadows, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*, 1916
Silver-platinum print, 32.8 x 24.4 (12⅞ x 9⅝)

By 1918 Stieglitz had set off on a new phase of his life and his art. Living now with O'Keeffe and spending his summers with her at Lake George, New York, he turned with a new intensity to photography. In certain instances he seemed bent on outdoing Strand in the dazzling purity of a photographic kind of "hyper-vision." But in other parts of his work he returned to the kind of investigation he had opened in *Sun Rays—Paula—Berlin*, namely the naked answer to the question "What is a photograph?"

The abstraction of the cut

Coming most radically in the form of a series of cloud pictures that Stieglitz made between 1923 and 1931, called *Equivalents* **[6]**, the answer to this question was now struck by the drive toward unity that one finds in many modernist responses to the same kind of ontological question—"What is ___________?"—responses, when posed for the medium of painting, for instance, that take the form of the monochrome, the grid, the image placed serially, etc. Stieglitz's answer now focuses on the nature of the cut or the crop: the photograph is something necessarily cut away from a larger whole. In being punched out of the continuous fabric of the heavens, any *Equivalent* displays itself as a naked function of the cut, not simply because the sky is vast and the photograph is only a tiny part of it, but also because the sky is essentially not composed. Like Duchamp's ▲ readymades, these pictures do not attempt to discover fortuitous compositional relationships in an otherwise indifferent object; rather, the cut operates holistically on every part of the image at once, resonating within it the single message that it has been radically moved from one context to another through the single act of being cut away, dislocated, detached.

This detachment of cutting the image away from its ground (in this case, the sky) is then redoubled within the photograph as its resultant image produces a sense in us as viewers that we have been vertiginously cut away from our own "grounds." For the disorientation caused by the verticality of the clouds as they rise upward along the image in sharp slivers results in our not understanding what is up and what is down, or why this photograph that seems to be so much *of* the world should not contain the most primitive element of our relationship to that world, namely our sense of orientation, our rootedness to the Earth.

In unmooring, or ungrounding, these photographs, Stieglitz naturally enough omits any indication of Earth or horizon from the image. Thus, on a literal level, the *Equivalents* float free. But what they lose literally, they parody formally, since many of the images are strongly vectored (that is, given a sense of direction), light zones abruptly bordering dark ones, producing an axis, like the separation of light and dark achieved by the horizon line that organizes our own relation to the Earth. Yet this formal echo of our natural horizon is taken up in the work only to be denied by being transformed into the uninhabitable verticality of the clouds.

At this moment, then, the cut or crop became Stieglitz's way of emphasizing photography's absolute and essential transposition of reality; essential not because the photographic image is unlike reality in being flat, or black and white, or small, but because as a set of marks on paper traced by light, it is shown to have no more "natural" an orientation to the axial directions of the real world than do those marks in a book we know as writing. It is in this "equivalence" that "straight" photography and modernism effortlessly join hands.

6 • Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent*, c. 1927
Silver-gelatin print, 9.2 x 11.7 (3⅝ x 4⅝)

FURTHER READING

Jonathan Green (ed.), *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Aperture, 1973)
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▲ 1914