

© Brian Taylor, *Our Thoughts Wander* From the series "Open Books," 1993.  
16 x 25 inches. Handmade book, illustrated with silver gelatin photographs and selective toning.



**Robert  
Hirsch**

**On Photography**

## Transformational Imagemaking: Handmade Photography Since 1960

Assembled from a maker's perspective, my book *Transformational Imagemaking: Handmade Photography Since 1960* examines, explains and advocates for a curated group of American photography-based artists who have worked to expand the "window-on-the-world" and fine print practices of traditional photography. In making no attempt to hide its hand, this diverse group of curious experimentalists challenges and subverts these conventional practices to play off photography's believability factor by utilizing the photographic medium as a springboard to a

physical, expressionist interpretation of subject that enlarges the medium's lexicon.

Conceptually, these artists propel the medium's evolution by materially realizing the pictures that otherwise exist only in their mind's eye, reminding synthesis of the empirical and the imaginative produces pictures that are tactile in nature and offer a more resonant representation than an ostensibly dispassionate topographic view. They share a corporal impulse to convey intuitively the enigmas of life that reside beyond the reaches of standard photographic language. In turn, their works allow viewers to get as close to the making as to what is



© Dinh Q. Lê, *Fallen Angels*, 2006.  
70 × 48 1/4 inches. Chromogenic color prints and linen tape.



© Jerry Uelsmann, *Man on Desk*, 1976.  
20 × 16 inches. Gelatin silver print.

made. These artists strive to recompose the world and make it personal by creating in-depth experiences that interpret their subject matter differently from previously recognized views of a similar topic. In doing so, their methodologies broaden how a photograph is perceived and interpreted by expanding the established artistic and societal preconceptions of how a photographic subject is supposed to look and what is deemed to be truthful. Hence, their transformational picturemaking is an energetic act of authentic assertion, control and organization over their topic, which extends and transforms their subject beyond boundaries of what is considered to be photographic reality.

The artists presented in the book employ a wide range of photographic methods to visualize their

thinking. However, their work does not approach process as a repeatable recipe, but as an idiosyncratic, heightened means to an end.

*Transformational Imagemaking* emphasizes photographic “makers” who direct and control their final images as opposed to photographic “takers” who capture their images from the flow of outer reality. From this still large group of makers, the book finds its artistic core by moving through the rings of several ever smaller concentric circles of practitioners. It passes by those who stage scenes solely to be photographed and then print them using contemporary or historic processes. It also does not cover those whose work is primarily philosophically and/or rhetorically constructed, though ironically the outsider mindset



© Keith Smith,  
*Untitled*, 1972.  
40×66 inches.  
3M Color-in-Color  
transfers to bridal satin.

of the earliest artists presented in this book laid the groundwork for the cerebral and deadpan cultural messages delivered by the practitioners of photographic conceptualism in which ideas take precedence over how the subjects are depicted. Finally, it concentrates on those artists who consider themselves to be in the photographer camp rather than the painter alliance. This includes artists, such as Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer who have received considerably greater acclaim.

The book is both an acknowledgement and a response to John Szarkowski's *The Photogra-*

*pher's Eye*, in which the former curator of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) elegantly makes the case that photography is "a process based not on synthesis but on selection." In his 1966 book and over his long career, Szarkowski fortified the stance that Beaumont Newhall took in his *History of Photography from 1839*, which either ignored or treated any deviations from the "pure" photographic practice—as epitomized by Alfred Stieglitz's later work, along with the oeuvres of Paul Strand and Walker Evans—as digressions from an ordained and inevitable path. Szarkowski's well-articulated position that photographs are *taken* and not *made* remains the standard concept by which most museums and market-based galleries and collectors decide what to narrowly embrace in terms of contemporary practice.

*Transformational Imagemaking* counters the modernistic confines of Newhall's and Szarkowski's restricted definition by showcasing an array of photographic practices that shares a desire to see beyond the camera's viewfinder. Each of these methods was chosen as a means of strong metaphorical expression to work outside the medium's conventional descriptive realism. In the past, the products of such practices have been referred to as alternative photographic processes as well as hand-altered or manipulated photographs. All of these terms are imperfect. Coined during the 1960s in the spirit of a countercultural rebellion against an entrenched photographic position, today they are tainted by a lingering prejudice against experimental counterculture norms and values that contrasted with those of mainstream society. One common complaint is that such art constitutes a dishonest and nostalgic means of covering up aesthetic and technical inadequacies.

Another objection comes from those who believe strongly in the Western tradition of *positivism*. These people tend to reject any photography

that is not “straight,” which insists on picturing the world as it is found, on the grounds that it corrupts photographic standards or is irrational in its intent and meanings. Some dismiss these methods as being strictly process oriented and lacking in rigorous theoretical underpinnings, and therefore merely artsy-craftsy. This misplaced criticism fails to acknowledge photography’s long attendant relationship with process-oriented work including its past connections with the Pictorialists championed by Alfred Stieglitz and F. Holland Day. Since 1960, the many connections between photography and printmaking were strengthened through the rise of artists’ books and the creation of book arts programs at such schools as the University of Iowa and the Visual Studies Workshop.

Other critics admonish these makers’ embrace of beauty, splendor and technical expertise as showmanship, which they claim detracts from a photograph’s supposed objective value. Still others grumble that such practices and use of materials are not genuine and are something other than photography. Yet this is precisely what many inventive artists were attuned to—manipulating new and unusual materials, such as fabrics, plastics and caulking, as well as innovative technologies including Verifax, xerography and fax. The list of offenses goes on ...

The most widely recognized term that covers the photographs found within this book, *alternative photographic process*, is inaccurate and insufficient in that it is a form of negation that fails to speak to what these artists are about. Its adoption suggests acceptance of a characterization of photography as a single set of predetermined approaches and that any other methods must therefore be alternative (if not illegitimate) ones. The

only reason to continue using this term is for the sake of continuity. *Transformational Image-making* rejects any such fractious definition in favor of one that looks to the root meaning of photography—writing with light—and embraces all images created through the agency of light, regardless of the techniques or processes employed and whether or not they involve lenses, film, chemistry, or pixels..



However, in an attempt to avoid the disapproving undertones that cling to earlier terminology as well as to stress how the makers’ objective is to dynamically direct creation, this book instead refers to these approaches as *handmade*

© Holly Roberts,  
*Three Birds Resting*, 2012.  
11 1/2 × 8 1/4 inches.  
Mixed Media on Panel.

*photography*. While all nondigital art photography is handmade in the sense that the photographic print is crafted in the darkroom, this book employs the photographer's hand as a symbol of the desire to actively insert oneself into the subject through analog and/or digital means, which recognizes that personal interaction directs the outcome. Regardless of what one calls this way of working, the makers' unique fingerprints can be found embedded in their work.

While some of the makers may critique and satirize prevailing styles, theirs is not a cynical vision. Rather than just deconstructing the photographic canon, they avidly seek to multiply our ways of seeing and thinking in a manner that incorporates emotional experience with imprints from the external world. Some makers operate with a sense of deep humor, the type that is not funny for the sake of being funny, but rather to lead you somewhere. These artists, who some might call "process-nerds," ignore the impersonal, market-driven art system in favor of an in-be-

tween place that exists among genres, where imagination and reality overlap to defy categorization. They embrace their eccentric interests and reject any bright lines between mediums in their pursuit of making something new. They use out-of-favor words, such as beauty, magic, mystery and process, to describe the creative driving forces within their practice. Their iconoclastic, nonlinear approach can be infused with layers of experiences and time, stimulating viewers to look more deeply and see beyond customary story-telling structures and frozen moments of time. This organic approach, often featuring braided, internal dialogues, can be thought of as a wide umbrella under which one can see that life is not neatly divided into chapters, but actually unfurls with an enriched all-at-onceness. Their contemporaneous stance is an expression of their passion for finding a problem and solving it that can be simply stated: Nothing is more authentic than the energy that comes from within oneself to express what was thought to be the inexpressible.

**Robert Hirsch**  
is author of  
*Exploring Color*



*Photography: From Film to Pixels; Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age; Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes; and Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography.*

Hirsch has published scores of articles about visual culture and interviewed eminent photographers of our time. He has had many one-person shows and curated numerous exhibitions. The former executive director of CEPA Gallery, he now heads Light Research. For details about his visual and written projects visit [lightresearch.net](http://lightresearch.net). The book is available at Amazon.com.  
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© **Thomas Barrow**, *Moonlight, Los Angeles*, 1974. 9 3/8 × 13 1/2 inches. Toned gelatin silver print.

