

# PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE, *and the* OPPOSITES



LEN BERNSTEIN

FOREWORD BY ROBERT COLES

## WOMAN EMERGING FROM SUBWAY STATION

One Sunday morning I took the train into Manhattan, and as I came up out of the subway, I saw a triangle of light piercing the darkness. I liked the geometry and angles, and intensified them by tilting the camera. Then this woman appeared. She had the straight lines and angles of her surroundings, and curves that seemed to complete them. She came from below, walking with grace and determination out of the depths of a New York City subway station—and the tilt of the camera made her upward climb even more triumphant. Seen from the back in silhouette, her form is impersonal, and I felt she stands for humanity making its way from darkness into light.

“Len Bernstein’s photographs touch the one who looks at them directly in mind and sensitivity. They are the result of a great gentleness towards people and every form of life that he meets—gentleness that breeds poetry. He gets close to people, but at the *perfect distance*, which is a good and unusual quality in a photographer.”

ANNE BIROLEAU-LEMAGNY, CHIEF CURATOR, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

*Photography, Life, and the Opposites* © 2013 Len Bernstein

Foreword by Robert Coles. Delia Press

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## Excerpts from PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE, and the OPPOSITES

Popular wisdom says you can’t write a book for everyone, but that is what I saw myself as doing. I’ve learned that photography has to do with the whole world, and the beauty that it finds there has to do with all our lives, and how we hope to live them. In *Photography, Life, and the Opposites*, based on my study of Aesthetic Realism, you will learn what makes a photograph successful *and* how our most everyday and urgent questions are answered in art. Questions that affect us all: What makes true love possible and keeps it from fading? How should we see the people close to us, including in a time of illness? What makes us cruel to others, and how can we change? There are answers to these questions, and more, that will meet everyone’s greatest hopes in this landmark principle of Aesthetic Realism, stated by its founder, the American philosopher and poet, Eli Siegel:

All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.

Here, in my careful opinion, is the criterion for beauty and the understanding of ourselves that centuries of artists, philosophers, and people in all walks of life have searched for, and some of the evidence for this is in the pages that follow. The book itself came to be over a period of some years, with the ideas for the chapters arising from various sources: public seminars I took part in at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City, articles of mine published in the US and abroad, and papers and workshops I presented at high schools and colleges, including the University of Northampton, England.

Many of the photographs in this book, chosen from work I’ve done over the last thirty-five years or so, are in public collections, including the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, and Bibliothèque nationale de France,

Paris. Together with the text, they are a means of understanding the fight that rages in every person between respect for the world and contempt for it. They are a means of asking: What does it mean to have a beautiful way of seeing; a way of seeing that will make us proud?

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The momentary and the permanent are opposites central to photography. No matter how fleeting the event, there is, or soon will be, a shutter speed fast enough to capture it for all time, revealing something new about the world. And that is what we are deeply hoping for ourselves—to see the world around us and the moments that fill our lives as having meaning and beauty that are permanent. This is the art way of seeing, the one effective opponent to the contempt that most weakens our lives—the disposition “to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world.”

So much of what happens in this world—from sunlight on the Parthenon, to a baby’s smile, to the path of a sub-atomic particle—can be given a lasting form we can appreciate every time we look at it. Consider this photograph I took of a familiar object: a clothespin (*see p. 4*).

Clothespins are useful, and not only for hanging the laundry. I’ve used them for years to dry my film. Like most people, however, I didn’t see them with much wonder, which is unfair to the clothespin. And so, I chose an angle for this photograph that has us look up to the clothespin as it sits jauntily on a diagonal white clothesline against a background of rich blue sky. It is divided between light and dark: Golden sunlight on one side reveals the character of its wood, while the inside portion is hidden in darkness. It is an ordinary clothespin, and like other ordinary objects we pass by every day without noticing it has more value than we realize—even grandeur.

Everything we meet in life, I learned, is a means of understanding our relation to the world and knowing our selves better. I think this has to do with why I often photograph people sitting on benches. Benches are democratic, there for everyone, and when we sit on them it relates us to our fellow man, even though we may not know it. In this photograph (*see p. 6*), a man sits with his hands clasped and head bowed, almost as if in prayer. He is in his stocking feet and his shoes are on the ground in front of him—he has been through something. Meanwhile, the people around him are turned away. Every person has felt like that man, enduring something while others were not too interested. We have also been complacent, cold to someone when we should have had compassion. I know I have.

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A good photograph, like every work of art, shows that opposites don’t have to fight, that the world and the things in it have a structure that makes sense. This satisfies what Aesthetic Realism explains is our deepest desire—“to like the world on an honest or accurate basis.” Through Mr. Bernstein’s stirring photographs and commentary you will learn that art is not a refuge from the dullness and ugliness of the “real” world; art stands for the way we should look at every situation, object, loved one, and the next stranger we meet. As the Pulitzer prize-winning author Robert Coles writes in his Foreword to the book,

Len Bernstein’s close study of photography’s history and the revelatory work of Eli Siegel, embodied in Aesthetic Realism, reveal to us the moral and ethical behavior implicit in the technique of art. This is a remarkable book; it will delight and deeply inform a general audience, but it also belongs in any comprehensive university curriculum.



CLOTHESPIN. NEW YORK, NY

*Chapter titles and a selection of images from*  
**PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE, and the OPPOSITES**

THE EXPLANATION OF BEAUTY

OUR TWO DESIRES

THE ONENESS OF ASSERTION AND YIELDING IN LIFE AND ART

“CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CANDOR  
AND BRUTALITY?”

WHAT KIND OF EMOTION ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

WHERE DOES PHOTOGRAPHY BEGIN?

TRUTH AND OUR IMAGINATION

ART AND THE ONLY SUCCESS THAT WILL SATISFY US



GIRL AND MANNEQUIN. NEW YORK, NY



2ND AVE DELI. NEW YORK, NY



DOG IN WINDOW. NEW YORK, NY



STREET SCENE. BROOKLYN, NY



TWO COUPLES. NEW YORK, NY



LIVING ROOM. HOBOKEN, NJ



HOBOKEN AUTOBODY. HOBOKEN, NJ

## *Praise for* PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE, and the OPPOSITES

“Wonderfully inspiring images and words from the Aesthetic Realism point of view.”

GRAHAM NASH, CO-FOUNDER OF NASH EDITIONS AND CROSBY, STILLS & NASH

“In Len Bernstein’s book, *Photography, Life, and the Opposites*, I found a perceptive humanist with a camera. These photographs visualize who Bernstein is and his photographic commentary reveals, in the most engaging of ways, the compelling ideas about the relationship of life to art this image creator learned from Aesthetic Realism.”

EARL DOTTER, PHOTOJOURNALIST

“It is clear that Len Bernstein is a connoisseur of human gesture and expression.”

JOHN LOENGARD, *LIFE* PHOTOGRAPHER AND AUTHOR OF  
*AGE OF SILVER—ENCOUNTERS WITH GREAT PHOTOGRAPHERS*

“Len Bernstein has clearly and expertly shown us, through words and photographs, in his book *Photography, Life, and the Opposites*, how to find, understand, and deeply express personal feelings in our photographs and in our lives. His methods, through the use of the concept of opposites and the practice of Aesthetic Realism, help us, as photographers or viewers, to see the camera’s subjects and our related life with deeper, more meaningful love and feeling. This opens us up to a much broader understanding of our true relationship to our immediate personal environment as well as our place in the mystery of human life on this planet.”

RICHARD GARROD, PHOTOGRAPHER, EDUCATOR, AND AUTHOR OF *VISUAL METAPHORS*



LEN BERNSTEIN began to study photography in 1974. The following year, he began his study of Aesthetic Realism in consultations with The Kindest Art, and later had the honor to study with the founder of Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel. His photographs are in many private and public collections, including The Library of Congress, Washington, DC, and Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Mr. Bernstein’s articles have been published in the US and abroad, and his workshops have been presented at high schools and colleges, including The University of Northampton, England. He lives in New York where he continues to have the time of his life studying in professional classes with Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation.

ROBERT COLES is James Agee Professor of Social Ethics Emeritus at Harvard University and the author of numerous books, including his series *Children of Crisis*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. He has also won a MacArthur Award, a Presidential Medal of Freedom, and a National Humanities Medal. He lives in Massachusetts.

For more information about Len Bernstein’s work or the magnificent education that is the basis of this book, contact Delia Press at [DeliaPress4@gmail.com](mailto:DeliaPress4@gmail.com), or visit [www.LenBernstein.com](http://www.LenBernstein.com) and [www.AestheticRealism.org](http://www.AestheticRealism.org)



PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE, *and the* OPPOSITES is about what makes for beauty not only in Len Bernstein's chosen art, but in all the arts. And it is about life, and how art can teach us to live it. The author's critical approach is based on this historic principle stated by Eli Siegel, founder of Aesthetic Realism: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." The book is illustrated with over 70 of Mr. Bernstein's photographs, many of which are in public collections in the US and abroad, as well as photographs by others. Together with the text, they are a means of asking: What does it mean to have a beautiful way of seeing; a way of seeing that will make us proud?

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"I love this book and its philosophy of photography based on the Siegel Theory of Opposites. Len Bernstein's career is an exceptional one, and within these pages you will find a master photographer and critic at work."

GEORGE HOBART, FORMER CURATOR OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHS  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, DC

"This is the most heartfelt and intelligent book on life, relationship, and photography that I've ever seen. With Aesthetic Realism as his personal viewfinder, the author portrays in words and his photographs, a way of seeing and relating that is honest, intimate, and kind to the myriad subjects in his camera's eye and the people in his life."

ROBERT LEVERANT, AUTHOR OF *ZEN IN THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY*

"I'm truly honored to have received this beautiful volume of photographs. I love it and wonder how the hell I was lucky enough to be sent it. Mr. Bernstein, you have introduced me to an approach to art, based on the Aesthetic Realism of Eli Siegel, that is way beyond anything I would have entertained. Thank you, thank you!"

ED ASNER, SEVEN-TIME EMMY AWARD-WINNING ACTOR