



The 2014 International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy in the USA took place during the week of June 23rd in New York City. Mr. Bernstein was introduced by Mark Donfried, Director General, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy.

Introduction

It is a pleasure to introduce Len Bernstein—photographer, author, and educator—who will speak on the subject: “The Potential for American Art to Make for Kindness Between People of Different Cultures.” Mr. Bernstein began his study of photography in 1974 with Lou Bernstein, a member of the famed Photo League. The following year he began his study of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism in consultations with The Kindest Art, and later attended classes with Eli Siegel, the esteemed American poet, critic, and founder of Aesthetic Realism.

Len’s images are in many public collections, such as the The Masters Collection of The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. His articles about photography and how the technique of art answers the questions of our lives have been published in different parts of the world, including Africa, Australia, and the U.S., and his workshops and talks have been presented in venues ranging from the University of Northampton, England to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada. His photographs have been shown in numerous one man and group shows, including the traveling exhibition “Art Against Apartheid.” His book, *Photography, Life, and the Opposites*, with a foreword by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Dr. Robert Coles has received glowing reviews in *Library Journal* and *Journal of the Print World*.

Len and his wife and editor Harriet live in New York City where they are having the time of their lives studying in professional classes with Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation. Please join me now in welcoming Mr. Bernstein . . .

The Potential for American Art to Make for Kindness Between People of Different Cultures

As I speak tonight about some instances from the art of American photography, I am proud to tell what I have learned from the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism about the true power of art. Once, like most people, I saw art as essentially a refuge from what seemed to me to be the dullness and ugliness of the “real” world. Then, I had the great good fortune to learn from Aesthetic Realism that art stands for the most accurate, just way of seeing reality—objects, a loved one, and the next person we meet. This landmark principle stated by Eli Siegel, shows the meaning of art for our lives:

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

Art, in every culture throughout the world, puts reality’s opposites together in a way that’s beautiful, and also ethical—opposites like rest and motion, hardness and softness, sameness and difference—and so we can learn from art what we most need to know. Art enables us to see our kinship to other people, how we are like and also different from them, and as we see this, prejudice and hate are replaced by an honest desire to know, to respect, and be kind.

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 of opposites that makes sense, is even beautiful. That is why the world can honestly be liked, which Aesthetic Realism explains is every person’s deepest desire—no matter what culture he or she is from, no matter the color of one’s skin. And this philosophy also explains that we have another desire that’s completely opposed to art—that is responsible for the false cultural barriers, and every human cruelty—from a sarcastic remark, to a racial slur, to exploitation that takes place in love or in economics. It is contempt, defined by Eli Siegel as “a false importance or glory from the lessening of things not [one]self.”

To give evidence for the crucial difference between art and contempt and how art—here photography—is the effective, practical means of transcending barriers between cultures and people as such, I will discuss the work and life of three American photographers: Jacob Riis, Edward Weston, and Edward S. Curtis. I will also discuss my own work and how the way I see the world and people changed through studying Aesthetic Realism. For example, I used to sum people up, act like I knew them, and felt superior thinking I was too “sensitive” to be understood by them. One result of this conceit was that I often felt bored and lonely, cut off from others—and also mean. The barriers I had erected between myself and the world began to crumble when, in Aesthetic Realism consultations, my fake superiority was questioned and criticized, and I saw that people had feelings as deep and real as my own. I’ll say more about this later.

As a photographer and teacher of the art I love [four of Len Bernstein's photographs follow] . . .





. . . I know that the study of Aesthetic Realism enables a person to be not only a more perceptive artist, but a kinder, more integrated person as well. And so, with a thankful heart, I begin by speaking about one of my own photographs.

1. The oneness of sameness and difference in art vs. racism

In 1963 I was stirred deeply by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when I, a 13-year-old Jewish boy in Brooklyn, saw his televised speech at the March on Washington. He said, “[W]hen we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

Dr. King envisioned a future where people would no longer see the difference of others as a cause for enmity and be able to live in harmony, and I never forgot his passionate plea. In 1983, when I heard plans for the March on Washington for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his immortal “I Have A Dream” speech, I was eager to go. When I arrived in Washington what I saw was remarkable: people of different races and faiths, young and old, well-to-do and poor, marching together in behalf of an America just to all people. Yet, one scene, more than any other, took my breath away—marchers on an escalator, returning home, all joined together as they rose from the darkness below to the radiant brightness above. This was the picture I was looking for!



In Eli Siegel's historic broadside of 1955, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?" he writes about sameness and difference:

"Does every work of art show the kinship to be found in objects and all realities?—and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness, that one can find among the things of the world?"

When I made this photograph I was thrilled by the contrast of light and dark in the scene and how, at the same time, the people mingled with one another, added to each other. With all their difference, light and dark do not fight. There is "kinship" as people seem to merge in the dark. Then, as light outlines a hand on a railing, the gentle slope of a shoulder, the profile of a face, we see in these unique, individual forms, "the drama of otherness."

Prejudice begins, Aesthetic Realism explains, with the desire in people to have contempt, "to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world." It is the feeling "They are all the same, but I'm different, more sensitive, superior—and I have a right to deal with them any way I please." This ugly attitude takes countless forms every day, some quite ordinary—in the family, for example, which is after all a small cultural unit. At our best, my mother and father and sister, and I encouraged each other to see value in the world, and to be more considerate of people. On the other hand, as we sat around the kitchen table, we also talked about others in a condescending way: neighbors, co-workers, schoolmates were seen as having shortcomings that made them inferior to us. Our politics were "Liberal" but we had no idea that the accumulation of ordinary contempt, carried far enough, makes for every injustice, including racism.

With all the strides for equality and justice—including legislative—that have come thanks to the efforts of Dr. King and many others, it's unfortunately clear that racism, contempt for difference, still persists. This is why I feel so strongly that people everywhere need to study what Ellen Reiss, Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, writes in an issue of the international periodical *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*,

"Racism won't be effectively done away with unless it is replaced with something that has terrific power. What needs to replace it is not the feeling that the difference of another person is somehow tolerable. What is necessary is the seeing and feeling that the relation of sameness and difference between ourselves and that other person is *beautiful*. People need to feel, with feeling both intimately personal and large, that difference of race is like the difference to be found in music: two notes are different, but they are in behalf of the same melody; they complete each other; each needs the other to be expressed richly, to be fully itself."

The visual arts abound with examples of this too. For instance, dark and light in a photograph don't tolerate each other. They need each other and bring out good possibilities in each other. Here, [see photograph] light brings out the uniqueness of people in the dark below, while it is darkness that makes it gradually possible for us to see the people as they meet the sky. Simultaneously, their sameness, their universality is

celebrated. As we look at these men and women, can we tell who is white and who is black? They are all “God’s children.”

The upward tilt of the camera with its 35mm wide-angle lens causes the two escalators to converge. This brings people on opposite sides closer as they reach the top, where heavy concrete walls expand outward and dissolve in the light. I felt all these people were going toward a brighter, kinder world—a world I passionately believe the study of Aesthetic Realism can make a reality. I tried to show that feeling in my photograph.

2. What do the world and people deserve?

One of the most useful men ever, author of the classic autobiography, *The Making of an American*, is Jacob Riis. A social reformer, news reporter, and photographer, he lived from 1849 to 1914, and his work brought greater justice to the lives of thousands of disadvantaged, oppressed people living in New York City and elsewhere at that time. His passionate belief in their dignity and what was due them as human beings is embodied in his writings and photographs which show the struggle to survive under a brutal economic system: whole families laboring for pennies a day in tenement sweatshops,



men and women seeking to dull their pain in saloons,



the lowliness and savoir faire of gangs in their hideouts,



the inhumanity of children not having enough food to eat or a decent future.



The work of Riis helped to bring about more humane legislation in behalf of what people deserve, and his power to effect such important, meaningful change came from his large desire to be affected by the feelings of people. In having this ethical purpose, his art was evidence for the fact that there are no barriers inherent in society—cultural or economic—except those barriers created by our own contempt. A colleague of his gave this description of “Jake” Riis at work reporting on a disaster on a New York City street:

“I looked up the block and saw Jake standing on a doorstep—just standing. He was listening to the moans of the crowd as the sounds moved up and down the street. The moans of those poor people made his story.”

With the aid of Theodore Roosevelt, who became Governor of New York, and others, Riis fought for housing laws that literally saved thousands of lives. In New York City tenements in the 1880s, people died from disease because contractors, hungry for profit, refused to install sanitation pipes. In the sweltering heat of summer, babies died from lack of fresh air in the windowless inner apartments. Building codes were ignored and landlords built stairs of wood, turning these structures into firetraps. It was, Jacob Riis wrote, “premeditated murder as large-scale economic speculation.”

Eli Siegel, as historian, explained that the profit system—with its disregard for human life—is based on contempt. He also explained that all art is against injustice because its purpose is to show the full meaning and value of a person or thing. He writes in his essay, “Art As Ethics”:

“The artist...abandons his acquisitive, protective, grudging self to see reality more courageously, generously, fully than usual. Art is an original

way of doing justice to things. The artist then wants to see sincerely, as something deserves.”

There is beauty and justice in what I see as one of the world’s great photographs: Jacob Riis’s “Bandits' Roost.”



[FULL IMAGE]

It was taken in 1888 at 59 1/2 Mulberry Street, notorious as a refuge for criminals, and considered the most dangerous place in New York City. Riis could have looked down his nose at these men and women, thinking, “They are different from me, and what is different is unfriendly, inferior, without value!” Instead, he saw this scene with form, and the people as representing humanity, as a mingling, for instance of welcoming and suspicion—opposites that affect all of us, whether we come from Kansas, Calcutta, or Ukraine.



[DETAIL]

Here, three women lean with varying degrees of assertion from the windows on the right; directly below them are two men partially facing us, giving us appraising looks from under their hat brims; one of them appears to be holding a rather large stick. On the two porches, men and women stand formally or lounge at their ease. And if you look into the depth of the alley, you will see others standing casually, kneeling, or peeking out through the slats of the porch on the right.

The masterful composition of this photograph could only have arisen from the artist's sincere desire to be fair to what was before him: See how the perspective lines create an X that joins the foreground and background, expanding and contracting, coming forth and retreating, the way the self does!

Riis could so easily have looked at this scene and seen it as sordid, a picturesque haunt of a low-class gang culture. Instead, he shows us a scene of transcendent, almost religious quality as the luminous alley floor merges with the hazy brightness of the laundry above. We see light and dark, high and low, hope and despair—opposites in us all, made one. To find one's self-expression in trying to be fair to whatever one meets is to be an artist; it is to proudly tear down false barriers between oneself and the world that we were born to honestly like.

3. The true distinction of art vs. the false distinction of contempt

Both people and nations can succumb to a fake pride in feeling that the barriers we put up between ourselves and others are a sign of our distinction. But it is ordinary contempt, as common as dust, and a lifeless imitation of the true distinction that comes with having the art way of seeing. We can learn about these two directions in us from an important American photographer, Edward Weston who lived from 1886 to 1958. I wanted to speak about him in relation to Jacob Riis because they represent what are often seen as incompatible approaches, diametrically opposed photographic cultures: Riis, the East Coast gritty social-documentarian of the inner city, and Weston, the West Coast master of pristine American landscapes and still-lives. I think that people looking at a Weston picture of shells, a sand dune, the meeting of land and water, or clouds, have been taken by the strange and sometimes wondrous forms he found in them. [SEE SLIDES BELOW







As a photographer, he took genuine pride in himself as “an adventurer on a voyage of discovery ready to receive fresh impressions, eager for fresh horizons...” He could revel in the meaning of an ordinary cabbage leaf, and see how it rose and fell like waves breaking on a shore, a oneness of high and low, grandeur and imperfection.



But as a self he was troubled on the subject of how he saw people, and he veered back and forth between looking down on others and a sense of inadequacy and shame. He wrote in his journal, "I walked the streets...and found myself a stranger....Who were all these drab grey people!?!—not my kind!" And later, he wrote with courageous self-criticism, "I would probably be a first-class Fascist, if I would let my (contempt) for the Masses get the upper hand." While this last statement can seem shocking and far removed from ourselves, I learned from Aesthetic Realism that fascism begins with the desire for contempt that is in the self of every person, and for the sake of humanity, we all need to be proud, unrelenting critics of it.

It is in many of his beautiful photographs that we see the oneness of opposites he could not make sense of in his relations with people. Consider his photograph of toadstools, made in 1931.



They fill the frame, a magnificent oneness of the lowly and exalted, and I was even more moved by this when I realized that these same opposites also make for beauty in Jacob Riis' "Bandits' Roost."

We look up at the dark underside of the upright toadstool and see its crown spreading out like a luminous sombrero. A small, misshapen toadstool lies on its side. Fallen, it has

both dignity and pathos, as it retains its connection to the strong base of its neighbor. The larger toadstool has grandeur, not because it subjugates or looks down on its weaker neighbor, but because Weston—the artist—shows that both are instances of life, united through their sameness and difference. And see the roughness at the base where they join? The oneness of opposites is not a pale, “pretty” thing: it is tough and graceful; the height of honest struggle and resolution that can be found only in the beauty and art of the world.

4. The power of good will

Toadstools are certainly different from ourselves; we may even dislike them, but the Weston photograph, like every work of art, is an opportunity to question our pre-conceived notions and to ask, for example: Is a person I see as only different from me, as an enemy, more like myself than I have wanted to grant? To ask this would be good will and is desperately needed by the people of our world.

In an essay titled “Good Will: The Greatest Practicality” Ellen Reiss wrote: “There will be no peace until a person looks at someone different from himself and feels, ‘I want you to be all you can be, to have what you deserve in this world. I want to understand your feelings—they are as real as my own.’” And in 1982, directly addressing the international terrorism and human suffering of that time—and this is just as emergently needed today—she asked Israeli men and women to take good will seriously, beginning with writing a 500-word soliloquy on “What does a Palestinian person feel to himself? What are his hopes, what are his fears?” And “every Palestinian [was] asked to write such a soliloquy of an Israeli person.”

In a recent article that appeared in “The Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture” its authors—Ruth Oron, Harriet Bernstein, Rose Levy and Zvia Ratz—write:

“We are Israelis who study Aesthetic Realism, and who, for over thirty years, have told about what we’ve learned in letters to persons in the Israeli media and the Knesset. But the ideas we presented were evaded and avoided, with tragic results. As I, Ruth Oron, wrote with detail about a Palestinian woman worried that her husband who was fighting the Israelis might be killed, and realized that her feelings were no different from the terror in an Israeli woman’s heart, I saw for the first time that the feelings of people I had feared and hated and seen as beneath me were real, and it made for a change I never thought possible. I came to feel, as each of us who write this feels now: that justice must come to the Palestinian people. And the Palestinian people also need to see that they are more like us than different.”

5. How the war with my father ended

Like many sons, when I got past a certain age, I didn’t get along well with my father. You could say we had “cultural differences” but the fact is that I was determined not to see that I had anything in common with him, or even acknowledge that his life was interesting—in spite of the fact that he had, among other things, boxed professionally,

read all of Shakespeare, and fought against fascism in Spain as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

I remember the first time as an adult that I spent a whole day with my father without one of our frequent, intense arguments. That was amazing in itself, but we also had a good time! I had been studying Aesthetic Realism for just a few months. My father had noticed a change in me from our phone conversations, and he came from Florida to visit with me and my wife Harriet in New York City. At the end of the day he said to me that, at last, he felt like he had his son back. He told me how grateful he was to Eli Siegel for making this possible and, at the age of sixty-six, began to study Aesthetic Realism for himself. I'll never forget how he looked after his first Aesthetic Realism consultation—like a man who had seen the sun rise for the first time.

It moves me to quote from one of my consultations with the teaching trio The Kindest Art, in which my father was a guest.

Consultants: Every father and son have been against each other and for each other. A beginning is to see where father and son have the same questions. (To Milton Bernstein) What would you say was your biggest mistake?

Milton Bernstein: I refused to listen; if nobody agreed with me, they were wrong.

Consultants: Do you think that your son has any qualities like that?

Milton Bernstein: Yes, he wouldn't listen.

Consultants: Do you think we can use feeling another person is against us to be against the whole world?

Milton Bernstein: Yes, I do.

Consultants: That is the chief thing we have tried to change in your son's mind—we've tried to encourage him not to use you against the whole world.

As my father listened to these questions and spoke thoughtfully about himself, I felt a care and respect for him that was new—and the wall we had built between us began to come down. We both felt that we were getting a fresh start, learning how we were the same and different, for and against each other—and this was in behalf of seeing all people with greater fairness.

Shortly after his visit, Harriet and I went to visit with my parents in Florida. Here is a photograph she took of my dad and me at that time. It shows a father and son who once couldn't be in the same room without fighting, now shaking hands and enjoying each other's company.



6. The good will of art

The last image I'd like to show is by the ethnologist and photographer Edward S. Curtis, who lived from 1868 to 1952. He dedicated himself to documenting the life and culture of the North American Indians and this is a portrait he took in 1905 of Okuwa-Tsire, or Cloud Bird, a boy from the San Ildefonso pueblo in New Mexico.



The first thing that strikes us is his eyes and smile with their interplay of luminosity and shadow. We see the depths of a young person radiating outward, with sincerity. The artist shows that this boy is a relation of what can be seen and what is beneath the surface, the known and the mystery that a human being represents. And this effect is heightened by the garment that both reveals and hides his form, and by the background with its own interplay of dark and light.

And it's important that this moving photograph is the result of a white man and an American Indian looking at each other. With all the terrible history between them one could expect an impassable gulf. But it seems that the Native American men, women and children Edward Curtis met and photographed, saw him as a friend. In the classic work, *Visions of a Vanishing Race*, authors Florence Curtis Graybill and Victor Boesen write:

“By learning the Indian point of view about himself and about the white man...Curtis soon won respect.”

And Curtis himself tells us:

“They instinctively know whether you like them—or if you're patronizing them. They knew I liked them and was trying to do something for them.”

Edward Curtis, as artist, had good will: he wanted to understand the feelings of his subjects; he hoped that good things would come to them, and he didn't try to evade their criticism of him. Each of these things is pivotal in having not only another person trust us, but having nations trust one another. And it was Curtis' good will that made for the power and kindness of his photographs.

Aesthetic Realism makes clear—the only thing that will make for kindness and respect between people of different cultures is good will: “the desire to have something else stronger and more beautiful, for this desire makes oneself stronger and more beautiful.” That is the purpose of art. And this magnificent education is taught at the not for profit Aesthetic Realism Foundation here in New York City, in classes and individual consultations, including by telephone and via Skype to many parts of the world. The aesthetic way of seeing needs to be the basis of relations among nations and in the personal lives of men, women, and children throughout our globe.

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