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Oral history interview with Beaumont  
Newhall, 1965 Jan. 23

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Beaumont Newhall on January 23, 1965. The interview was conducted at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York by Joseph Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: This interview with Mr. Beaumont Newhall is taking place at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, January 23, 1965. Mr. Newhall, your name has been associated with the best in the field of photography for many years, or just about as long as I can remember, from the early days of the Museum of Modern Art, your writings on photography, such as *The History of Photography*, which has gone through several editions, I think, and on through to your present directorship here at Eastman House. How long have you held your present post here?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Actually my present post as director I assumed the first of Sept. 1958. Previous to that I held the title of curator and worked as the associate and assistant to the first director, General Oscar N. Solbert. I came to Rochester for the specific purpose of setting up Eastman House as a museum, bringing to it my knowledge of museum practice, as well as photography. We opened as a museum to the public on the 7th of November, 1949.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well I was about to ask you in addition to my question regarding your career and while we're on the subject of your career - I think you have already begun to touch upon - we would like to have you give us a sort of resume of your background, education, various positions that you have held, and so forth. Where were you born? Let's begin with that.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, June 22, 1908. I went to public school and then one year at Phillips Academy, Andover, and then I entered Harvard and graduated in 1930. At Harvard I concentrated on the history of art working largely under the direction of Professor Paul J. Sachs.

In the summer of 1930 I was awarded a University Scholarship which enabled me to return to Harvard to work for my master's degree, which I was granted in 1931. At this time I took the museum course of Paul Sachs and was trained for the profession of a museum worker. Everybody in those days got a job in some museum, and of course many of the people whom you have interviewed had exactly the same background. It was a wonderful group of people to work with. Paul Sachs found for me a job as lecturer at the Philadelphia Art Museum. I reported for work there, as I recollect, in Sept. 1931, it might have been August. My job was to lecture learnedly about all the works of art in the museum, which was a tall order for a lad of 23 years old.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I should say.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: There would be a nice placard stating that Mr. Newhall would speak on Rubens, I would go in front of a Rubens picture and start talking, people would gather around me and then they would walk away until I had nobody to talk to. In that way I learned how to talk about works of art. It was a wonderful schooling but this experience was very short-lived because we were already in the great depression and the fortunes of the Philadelphia Museum of Art were dealt a staggering blow when the City cut off almost all of the funds. The museum had to close except for weekends, and all junior and unmarried members of the staff were automatically fired. I got this news from my boss, Rossiter Howard, on New Year's Eve...

JOSEPH TROVATO: What a present.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I remember having New Year's breakfast with another young chap and we decided that we would learn how to cook scrapple. But I immediately wrote Paul Sachs of the dilemma and to my intense delight he was able almost immediately to find me another job. As a matter of fact, I lost no time because the Museum at Philadelphia gave me one month's notice and the new job was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the position was to be assistant in residence at The Cloisters. Now these were the old Cloisters that George Gray Barnard had built himself, not to be confused with the present museum. I was to go to this small, very charming hand-built museum, see to it that things were kept up, the garden was flourishing, and that visitors were properly attended to. It was a very attractive job. But when I arrived to report for work I found that the job didn't exist. The position was offered to me by Joseph Breck, who was acting director following the death of Edward Robinson. Contrary to predictions, he was not appointed the director. Herbert Winlock was made director and the trustees gave Joe Breck the directorship of a brand new museum, a complete new Cloisters and I was put on the team under Jim Rorimer, now the director, at that time curator of decorative arts, on the research team to do the archaeological studies for the architecture of the new building. So any time you look at the tiles in The

Cloisters that was my contribution.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Think of you.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: This job gave me an opportunity to get a cross-section view of the whole museum, for I was more an errand boy than a curatorial assistant. The job did not last very long, I think it was 18 months, let's see, I joined the museum in 1932 and left in '33, because—I didn't know it at the time—the Metropolitan Museum had run out of money for the Cloisters project. There had been snags, and monies expected for that were not forthcoming. They couldn't spill the news to this 24 - 25 year old kid and they found some reason for suggesting that I take further studies. I then had an opportunity for a Carnegie scholarship to spend the summer abroad, and I returned to Harvard to work for my Ph.D. And I did one year of residence completing the required courses and then was starting on my thesis and the examination. Without a job, I was living on what my parents could supply. Although this was not very difficult, since we had a house in Lynn, I was happy to accept in January of 1935 an offer from John Davis Hatch, administrator of the art program, to serve as his assistant. The official title, as I recollect, was 'the Art Project of the Emergency Relief Administration of Massachusetts'.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Which was a section of the Public Works Authority, and the head of that was a man named Roach, and a very nice man indeed. John Davis Hatch was, I think, director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, or an assistant to the director, at this time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well I don't know, I seem to tie him up with his directorship at the Albany Museum.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Oh, this was long before...

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh yes, I realize that, yes. I don't know but...

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: At any rate he was too occupied with museum affairs to carry out the duties of an administrator so although my title was assistant administrator I did the legwork.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Now I think this was fairly new, I was trying to recollect...

JOSEPH TROVATO: How long were you on this project? In other words how long were you administrator of the Massachusetts Project?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I resigned in July, I came on board in January so it was a very short stay. I resigned, incidentally, because I hoped I could continue my studies for this graduate degree while working, and it had been represented to me that this was a job that I could do, say, every other day, something like that. But it proved to be quite the contrary. It was a very intense job and I simply couldn't afford, for my own career, to keep on with it. It is true, however, that I did get a job offer from the Museum of Modern Art in November, which was something I couldn't turn down, so I never did go on with my graduate work.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now what did the job consist of? What were your responsibilities? Can you give us a little idea of the job itself?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I would say there were three principal branches of responsibility: Number one, was the selection or the screening of the artists who applied for this work. It was very necessary to determine if these applicants were indeed professional artists who had relied upon art as a living, or if they were hobbyists who thought they could pick up some boondoggling, and this first test was to determine the artistic aptitude and seriousness of the person. This was of course a very difficult thing to do because we were dealing with people who desperately needed money and it was very difficult to turn people down. The second responsibility was to see to it that the artists were carrying out the work, that they had what they needed, and that the program was going on well. The third responsibility was to find public institutions which would like to have paintings specifically made for them, or would like to have other works of art. It was not just paintings and sculpture or "fine arts". One of the most desperate plights in the unemployment situation in New England was that of the wood carvers. There were a great many wood carvers of Swiss origin employed in Boston. They were put out of work not only because of the great depression but because of the change of taste. The great houses of the McKim-Mead White tradition, that had elaborate wood carvings, just like we have here in Eastman house, weren't being built in the 1930's, and the carvers had nothing to do. We made lecterns for high schools and auditoriums, we made commemorative plaques, but all this was a kind of made work. I finally decided that their skills could be used in other ways and we began to explore having them make architectural models for the Springfield Museum and other things like that in an attempt to train them to do things for which there might be a demand when times got better. So there was those three responsibilities, and there was a fourth one; which I

think people have overlooked as I read about the – well, let's call it the WPA because it did become the WPA...

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's right.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: They have overlooked the fact that the community had to pay for the materials, and it was my job to raise money for the materials. Now that didn't necessarily involve great expense but it was more difficult than one might think looking back in recollection at it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well now as to the projects themselves, you have mentioned the matter of wood carving, the enlisting of people who were woodcarvers and providing projects for them. What were some of the other projects, such as, say, mural painting, did it involve—were you involved in such projects? Easel painting?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I would say that the majority of the work was easel paintings. I'm terribly sorry that my recollection is so dim after 30 years...

JOSEPH TROVATO: It's understandable.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I don't have any records of it because my focus of attention on joining the Museum of Modern Art was such a sudden jump that I guess it kind of displaced this, but...

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: We had – I remember definitely that one of the artists that we all know today that worked for us was Jack Levine.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, that's interesting.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: There was another -- Ernest Halberstadt who became a commercial photographer, he was a pupil, I think, of Rivera, and worked distinctly in the Rivera tradition. One of the people that I most vividly recollect and whose work I personally enjoyed as much as any other's was Karl Knaths.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh yes, well he certainly was a prominent figure right on through, for that matter.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: And the only mural that I can definitely remember, and I can show you a photograph of it, because I made one which was published in the *Magazine of Art*, was of a mural in a school in Falmouth in which he made an abstract design of chemical equations and things like that.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And this was Knaths?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Knaths, yes. We had a great many painters of the New England School, particularly the Boston School. I'm sure that you know what I mean – they were in the tradition of Sargent and Hawthorne and they did very pretty landscapes that I don't think have lasted particularly. There were a few sculptors and I'm afraid that's about as far as my recollection goes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Were you at all involved in the Index of American Design project? I know that from Lincoln Rothschild whom I interviewed not too long ago, he was director of the New York City unit of the Index of American Design and he told me of the collaboration that went on between Boston and New York.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: My recollection is that that began later, I think...

JOSEPH TROVATO: I think that is true.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I'm pretty sure I would have remembered it because that was an excellent solution for the use of talents of people with little imagination. Of course this was a terrible thing about the project, it was the charitable thing, the purpose of it was...it was a humane project. The original purpose of it was not so much to create art as it was to keep people from going hungry.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: And it was done within the framework of the person's interest, knowledge and skills so this necessarily made it absolutely imperative that we hire a great many people whose imagination and creative ability might have been rather low.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well it was essentially a relief measure, that's what it amounts to.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: That's right.

JOSEPH TROVATO: But the Treasury Department Section of Fine Arts, this program, of course was aimed at

something else. This aimed at maintaining a higher standard.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: That's right.

JOSEPH TROVATO: But this is something else that we were talking about.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: The reception of the art project was very gratifying indeed, particularly with schools and for some reason – I don't know why – I associate the most active work in Cape Cod. Well, of course, there was a reason for that because Provincetown was an art center. And many artists who normally in ordinary times would have gone to Provincetown to summer camps just during the summer and who had little places there, were forced to live all the year around in these small summer structures. The *Boston Herald* published a little news note datelined. Provincetown, March 14, 1935: "An excess supply of paintings and other art works created by artists of reputation employed on the PWA Art Project is available and can be had free of charge for hanging in public buildings, Beaumont Newhall, Assistant Administrator of the project in Massachusetts, said here today." And then I am quoted as saying: "It does not seem to be generally known that the government is giving away this art work. This is a rare opportunity for much of this work was done by artists of distinction and all of it can be had for the asking to hang in public buildings." And it goes on to say that a dozen or more Provincetown artists were being employed. This was picked up by the *Boston Post* as an editorial in the issue of March 16: "An opportunity like this should not be overlooked. If grownups in communities that have not been supplied are indifferent to decorating their public buildings they should bear in mind the inspiration of the paintings and sculptures to their children. A score of years from now these masterpieces of the depression will in some instances be priceless, all will be worthwhile, now is the time for city and town fathers to . . ."

JOSEPH TROVATO: A wonderful promotional thing and I am glad that you have put this down on the tape. Will you tell us, Mr. Newhall, how you operated?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: We operated out of an office building in downtown Boston. I can't remember the exact location of it, but it was a typical office building, the center of the entire Emergency Relief Administration, and the office for the art project was a very small one, just one room. I was given a secretary and we sat side by side. There was a bench for people to wait on who were coming in to interview for jobs. It was necessary for us to get out the payroll each week and I learned about government red tape for the first time. Then we had to have some kind of evidence that artists were doing something, and this was a great problem and my successor found himself very much bothered by this, because I gather more and more demands were made the accounting division of the WPA for handling this peculiar thing of giving artists a fixed salary. It's one thing to pay an artist for a job. If he does the job quickly he gets paid substantially better in the long run than if it takes him a longer time to get the same price. He is his own judge of his time, he works when he wishes to, and there is no pressure put upon him at all. But if an artist is given a weekly salary he is expected to put in, say, 40 hours of work. This might be not necessarily 40 hours of painting with a brush, it could be 40 hours of thinking, 40 hours of apparently doodling, but we had to have some kind of evidence that the work had been accomplished before we were legally allowed to pay him. So I created what I thought was a very simple idea: we would include in the expected time – I can't remember whether it was 40 hours – but we would include as part of the work week the writing of a letter in diary form of "what I've done". I thought this could be very simply done, I just told them to jot down what they did: made 9 sketches, conceived idea for a grand mural, anything to get me off the hook. This was considered to be demanding, authoritative, fascist...

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, I know, I can substantiate what you're saying because I know that this was a great annoyance to so many artists that I've interviewed, this matter of having to account for the time, this was some thing, as I say, of a nuisance...

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Well we weathered the storm, but my successor met up with organized resistance on the part of the unions and it became a very, very difficult situation indeed. At the time that I applied for the position at the Museum of Modern Art, which was on August 23, 1935, I wrote a letter telling of my experience and I included one paragraph about the art project. I would like to read an excerpt from that letter because it was written at that time and is perhaps a better document than recollections after 30 years. "In January, 1935," I wrote, "I was asked to be assistant administrator of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration Art Project in Massachusetts. The full executive details fell on my shoulders, it was my duty to determine the artistic ability of the numerous applicants, to find work for them to do which would be congenial, useful, and of aesthetic value, to get from the communities money to pay for the artists' materials, to supervise the work, and as certifying officer, to make out the payrolls. There were from 60 to 80 artists working throughout the State and the payroll averaged about \$1500 per week." My pay incidentally as assistant administrator was \$28 per week.

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's very interesting.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: To continue my quote, "I resigned on July 1 in order to continue my studies but keep," since I'm writing in August 1935, "but keep an active connection with the project as a member of the Advisory

Committee, together with Mr. Francis Taylor, director of the Worcester Art Museum, and Mr. Charles Sawyer, Curator of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts.”

JOSEPH TROVATO: Will you tell us, Mr. Newhall, whether you can recall anything in the way of the styles, or style that was most prominent in the work that was done in the East, in the Massachusetts area at that time.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Well it was a mixed bag. There were a great many different styles and I don't recollect any dominating school. This was the period of the greatest influence of Benton and Curry, and this was certainly felt very strongly. And of course a part of this influence was the Mexican renaissance, the mural paintings of Rivera. Abstract art, although it was very prominent in Europe, I don't recollect being felt to any extent except by Karl Knaths. As I said, it was almost entirely, in my recollection, a representational type of painting with a very strong influence of that Boston School stemming from Sargent, Hopkinson Smith, Hawthorne, and so forth. Now that's all I can recollect on that particular subject.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Could I ask you, Mr. Newhall, to tell us whether in your opinion you feel that the projects of the '30s, that the whole program was a good thing for American - I should say, whether or not it was a good thing for American art in relation to the development of American art.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I would answer that most positively yes. I think that the WFA gave a great many good artists an opportunity which might have been lost if they had had to seek employment just to keep alive, and the situation was as desperate as that in those days. This is something the younger generation has no concept of whatsoever: that if artists of the stature of some of those I've mentioned had had to go into industry, or had been deprived of the opportunity of painting, drawing, sculpting, what ever art we may name, we would have lost a great deal because art is not a part-time thing, a person cannot work on a production line and come home and paint in the evening or on the weekends. True, there have been Sunday painters, but these are by far the minority and in my opinion one out of a thousand of the hobby painters who happens to have that spark and that sense of imagination which leads him to produce works of lasting quality. It was a great opportunity. I think in retrospect it could have been a greater opportunity. I think it was so new, it was so much a crash project when I entered it that we didn't know exactly how to handle the painters, the sculptors and the artists. I think if we had perhaps patronage rather than employment and a better, more careful planning of the work, we could have done more. There were ludicrous times when we would just beg communities to accept free art, and a lot of this was bad art. This is bound to happen. But I am very proud of the fact that I played a part in this project even though it was a very small part and it lasted for a very short time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, you've given such a wonderful position answer to my question that I am led to ask you whether you would like to see the Federal government enter more actively into art sponsorship. Now I realize that the situations are different, I mean the '30s and the art situation today, but I should like to have you give your opinion to this question.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I am indeed in favor of a federal arts council, or whatever organ of the Federal government of high administrative power might be created, I speak with a certain amount of experience, having been a member of the Advisory Committee of the New York State Council on the Arts ever since it was founded, and having seen the good that has happened by the subsidies which have been furnished by New York State, a kind of model for other state councils on the art. I would find it difficult at this time and in a few words to outline the method that the patronage should take. This seems to me the crux of the problem: we must safeguard the freedom of the artist to speak on whatever subject he feels free to speak upon, even though it may seem to go against the grain of the government. We must solve the problem of making the artist feel a freedom to create, which is a different type of freedom than financial. We must establish some kind of most selective screening and we must keep this out of the hands of people who have no understanding of art. It must not be a grab bag for politicians. It is necessary that those who are on the Arts Council should be people of broad experience, taste, knowledge and dedication. In other words, I am all for government sponsorship of the arts if it's done in the right way.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well I'm so glad that I asked you this question. For a moment, Mr. Newhall, I should like to change to a little different aspect, and it is, I'd like to ask you if you feel that the projects of the '30s helped very much in the way of furthering the cause of photography. Now I know that some photography was done at that time and I recall the photographs, the photographic program of the Farm Security Administration. I think there was a show held not too long ago of a selection of them. Am I right?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: That's correct. This, of course, was one of the great examples of government sponsorship. I'd like to however pursue our chronology a little more closely and back up to say a few words about photography in the WPA art project. There was none to my knowledge in Massachusetts, certainly not during the period of my administration, with the exception of the employment of a photographer, a very gifted photographer, who is now head photographer for the Brookhaven Atomic Research Laboratory, an opportunity for him to photograph the works of art, but we could not convince the authorities that photography itself was an

art. I believe that in the subsequent years there was some photographic work done in Massachusetts. I know there was in New York City. And one of the most noble projects from my point of view was the employment of Miss Berenice Abbott to make a documentation of the changing New York. She took hundreds of excellent photographs. She, of course, is a photographer of great stature. She is the person who preserved the negatives of Eugene Atget, and who was the photographer working between 1898 and approximately 1928 who photographed with great love, with great skill, great imagination, the City of Paris. She was greatly colored by his approach and did something comparable for New York City. The negatives were deposited in the Museum of the City of New York. This was to my knowledge the greatest example of photography in the WPA. On the West Coast, Edward Weston was employed but I fear that the direction of his work, his administrator, his supervisor was not, did not handle the particular assignments in a way which met with the cooperation of Edward Weston. I'm sorry I never discussed this with Weston. Perhaps there is some thing that we could later dig up out of his letters. But this was a failure there. Now, of course, we have as an example of the Federal patronage of photography the magnificent Farm Security Administration project which began - was it about this time? - 1936 or so? And some of the finest American photographers were employed: Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange are the two finest; Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Ben Shahn, the painter - for a while. This was a more liberal kind of project than the WPA. The WPA was a subsistence level pay, the Farm Security Administration was a professional pay, not high but far above the pay that was given for the WPA. And there was a clear-cut understanding that the negatives belonged to the United States Government. This is an aspect of Federal patronage that has to be considered, incidentally. The artist should know exactly what rights are being purchased by the government. These negatives are all in Washington and anybody can purchase prints from them for 60 cents a piece. These will not be the kind of prints that the photographers would like but there it is. This project succeeded because of its direction and the person who directed the project was Roy Stryker, an economist, was hired by Rex Tugwell, he was a friend of Tugwell's, an associate in scholarly work, and Stryker briefed his photographers with great skill, challenged them, nursed them, helped them, fought for them through the government. And it's this kind of person that we need if we are to develop Federal patronage for the arts: an understanding administrator knowledgeable in the field, not necessarily a creative artist himself, perhaps best not to be a creative artist himself, one who is willing to fight, and one who is willing to stand up for the artist. This is the great problem, it's a problem that we all felt who were working back in the days of the WPA. This Farm Security Administration was not an art project, it was an anti-art project, it was not the intention to produce pretty pictures. It was the intention to produce living documents which would prove to the citizens of the United States that a percentage of their fellow citizens, through no fault of their own, had no land to till, they had no way to live, not only because of the great depression, but also because of the dust bowl. However, out of that came some very great art, and, as you have reminded me earlier, Edward Steichen had a large exhibition with the appropriate title "The Bitter Years" made of these. I recollect that when I was at the Museum of Modern Art founding the department of photography there, in 1937 I went to Washington and picked out a selection of these Farm Security Administration photographs, which we included in an important but almost forgotten exhibition, which was never seen in America. The French government asked us to create an exhibition of American art and this was shown, as one of the major exhibitions in Paris at the Musee du Jeu de Paume, and photography was included. Now you had asked me earlier and I hadn't specifically answered your question. When did photography become accepted as an art by the museums and the world of art? This is a question which can only be answered in a qualified way. I would say we still have to look forward to the full acceptance of photography as an art form. We have made tremendous steps forward, but it seems to me that until an individual can make a living by creative photography, until he can make a living comparable to that that a person can make with brush and canvas, or with etching needle and copper plate we cannot consider that photography has been accepted. And to my knowledge there is not one photographer in the history of photography who has been able to make his living solely by creative work alone.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, was this the very thing that Alfred Stieglitz battled so hard for? I can recall the story about the time in the early years when a newspaper reporter went to Mr. Stieglitz and asked him for his permission to use...

[END OF TAPE 1, BEGIN TAPE 2]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I think I was telling about the time when Alfred Stieglitz was approached by a newspaper man, and the newspaper man asked Mr. Stieglitz for his permission to use one of Stieglitz' photographs, one of those such as The Steerage or one of the fire engines, it was to be used to illustrate a newspaper story that they were doing. And Mr. Stieglitz said to this man, "Well, sorry, but the negative has been destroyed, I can't just let you have this picture, it's the only one I have." Well the newspaper man said that the paper wanted this very desperately and that they would take all precautions. Well Mr. Stieglitz asked the man to go back to his office and come back with a note saying that the news paper office would forfeit so much money should anything happen to this print. Well the newspaper man went to the office, got this signature, agreement and Mr. Stieglitz handed the picture to the photographer who in turn went to his office and had the picture reproduced and never let the picture out of his sight and then came back to Mr. Stieglitz with the photograph and said, "Now, Mr. Stieglitz, here it is, please examine it." Whereupon Mr. Stieglitz took the picture, without

unwrapping it and tore it to bits. It was that - Mr. Stieglitz said, "I wanted to teach this man to respect photography, that one must not think that he can simply go to a photographer as though he was doing him a favor and that the work is not worth very much beyond, say, the honor to the photographer of having his work reproduced." Now is that what - does that recall to you what we were talking about?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: This is definitely part of it and, of course, what Alfred Stieglitz did for the recognition of photography and art is difficult to measure and your story is - I have not heard it before - is very typical. It happened to me. I wanted to borrow a photograph for the Museum of Modern Art. He said the photograph would be released if I would insure it for \$5,000. The Museum took a deep breath at this and the insurance people had to be persuaded, and I finally went over with the policy of \$5,000 in my hand. He then gave me the photograph and tore the policy in two, and said, "I just wanted to teach you to respect the photograph." Now this is the real problem. We here at the George Eastman House are doing our very best to respect not only the photograph but the photographer. I don't want to get off on to the George Eastman House because this would take us far longer than either of us can spare at the moment, but I am very proud of the fact that we have inaugurated a program of traveling exhibitions of pictures purchased from the photographers rather than borrowed. It is true that our budget is not sufficient to enable us to pay as much as we ought to pay. Photographers have met us half way. A photograph which has traveled around the country, even if framed, for three years, is forgotten by the photographer by the time it comes back. He doesn't know what to do with it. If it is damaged, most photographers write off lending of photographs to exhibitions as a part of the game. We have purchased, and have right now on display an exhibition of 183 photographs from 1900 to the present day, which we assembled for the World Fair for the Kodak Pavilion. It was shown there last September. Each of these photographs was purchased by the Eastman Kodak Company for presentation to the permanent collection of the George Eastman House. I do not feel that we can say, however, that photography has achieved the recognition which I hope it will have one day. We have made vast steps forward. In 1937, for example, I was given the great opportunity of organizing, selecting and making an exhibition of the history of photography for the Museum of Modern Art. I traveled abroad as well as in this country and collected over a thousand pictures. This was a major exhibition of the Museum. The museum was then in a domestic building on the site of its present modern building. Each exhibition took up all four floors. For six weeks Cubism and Abstract Art was it; Van Gogh was it; the stage design was it; photography was it; machine art was it; etcetera. A photography exhibition was in 1937 controversial. I'd have to look up the records, but I think it was Edwin Alden Jewell, or it might have been Royal Cortissoz—those two gentlemen were the leading critics of the day - who wrote a blistering article against it. "What will the museum do next," he asked, "after showing photographs in the same building where paintings had been shown?" This temper has vastly changed, of course, so that with the opening of the new annexes of the Museum of Modern Art in 1964, photography was featured twice: once at a special exhibition, and secondly by the creation of a separate, permanent gallery for photography, with a print room and all of the apparatus necessary for a full-fledged department. And I also would like to point out that the Museum of Modern Art published a great many books and catalogues. Its force in publishing is one of its greatest assets, and I am, of course, personally particularly pleased, but beyond and above that, I am pleased for photography, that the major publication is the fourth edition of my *History of Photography*, which has gone to 15,000 members carrying a message to a wider public than we have been able to reach here at George Eastman House; incidentally, the book is co-published by the George Eastman House and is distributed to our membership of 2,000, as well.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, in addition to the wonderful contents I think it is a handsome book.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: So do I. And I can say that without being immodest, because the Museum of Modern Art took the entire responsibility of the production of the book. The working arrangements were magnificent. The layout was done by Werner Brudi, together with myself, and this was a wonderful thing. But we must not feel that the recognition of photography as a fine art is anything new. It's a matter of degree. Here and there photography was understood by the art public and we must not forget that in Buffalo in 1910, half of the Albright Art Gallery was given over to the largest photographic exhibition ever held. This was directed by Alfred Stieglitz. Then we have the other side of the story which is rather sad. At the time of this photography exhibition the trustees of the Albright Art Gallery voted to establish a permanent gallery for photography and they purchased for the collection out of the exhibition something like a score of photographs. In 1937 when I was organizing the exhibition I have just mentioned at the Museum of Modern Art, the director at that time, Gordon Washburn, and I hunted down cellar to find these photographs and at last located them behind a bunch of junk; and in justice to the Art Gallery let me say immediately that the photographs are now preserved along with their Rembrandts and other fine prints. But this was the temper of the day and I feel that it was not only the Museum of Modern Art's founding of a department of photography in 1940 that started this wave of interest and appreciation of photography. Publications had become much more serious about the matter and we definitely had a kind of renaissance, as you said, in the 1940s. And I would like to conclude this little interview by getting back to Alfred Stieglitz and the Armory Show about which you know so much. Because here I think is the perfect parallel and the substantiation of what you just said which interested me very much: that you felt that the appreciation of photography and of abstract, non-figurative art came about at the same time. It's true that about 1940, (I would

perhaps put it after the war, about 1946), abstract art no longer became controversial, and today abstract art is academic to such a degree that young photographers are reacting against abstract art in one of the most violent ways, even more violent than the Dada. As I was telling my students, there is a very close parallel between pop art and Dada except that the Dada artists pointed out the form in things by taking common objects and taking them out of context; and pop art is just taking the objects in the context and everything and moving them...

JOSEPH TROVATO: Lock, stock and barrel.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Lock, stock and barrel. Well now to go back to 1910, there was this great exhibition at Buffalo organized by the Photo-Secession, the chief members of which were Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. Then we have the Armory Show, and Stieglitz' relationship to it indicates this relationship between photography and abstract painting. Stieglitz did not serve as an official member of any committee at the Armory Show. He lent a Picasso from his collection. A photographic magazine wrote one of the most satirical of the many articles against the Armory Show precisely because it was Stieglitz who had sent the abstract drawing of Picasso. Now Stieglitz chose to put on the walls of his own gallery the first exhibition of his own photographs that he had held for a great many years. He wanted to have them on display at the very same time as the Armory Show in order to indicate what photography is, and what painting is not; and what painting is and what photography is not. And with the acceptance of abstract art we come to a realization that the type of picture-making which gives the greatest information in the most efficient way is without doubt photography. This makes it very difficult for an artist to use photography and to make a statement which goes beyond the subject matter. And this, to my mind, is the touchstone as to whether a photograph is a work of art or not: can it live by itself both because of, and also in spite of the subject matter?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Newhall, I would like to ask you at this point, how does the amateur photographer and the great popularity of photography today fit in to this general picture that you covered so well earlier, regarding the recognition of photography as an art? Is this going to help this cause or not?

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: I would like to answer this question first by drawing a parallel between the act of writing and the act of making a picture with a camera. There was a time when to be able to write was a proud accomplishment. Today most of the civilized world, not all, but most of it, knows how to write. Almost everybody can write a letter that another person can understand. Some few people can write a letter which will move another person. A very, very, very small number of people can write a work of literature which will be everlasting. Yet it's all a matter of writing and it's based upon the ability to put words down on paper. Now we have the development of photography. In 1839 two photographic systems were invented: the daguerreotype, by Daguerre, and the calotype or talbotype by William Henry Fox Talbot, of England. These two automatic picture-making techniques were given to the world and the world accepted them at once. It was a miracle that a man could make a picture, that Joe and John and Emily and Jane could make a picture. You'd go on travels and you could bring back pictures of what you'd seen, you could bring back, as they said in one of the French reviews of 1839, St. Peter's itself. The act of photographing is a very special kind of picture-making. It is both related to and divorced from the picture made by the skill of hand. The fact that it's easy to make a photograph and it's becoming easier all the time has opened the picture-making ability to millions upon millions of people. For example the Eastman Kodak Company only two years ago brought out a series of simplified cameras called the Instamatic. These cameras have sold more than any other camera in the history of photography. Several weeks ago it was announced that over 6 million of these cameras have been manufactured and sold. It gives people something that they want and that they like. It gives them an opportunity to "bring back St. Peter's." I'm like every other amateur in that way. I've just been to Guatemala and now this afternoon I've been in Guatemala in my study, looking at these photographs. There's not one great photograph amongst the lot, not one photograph that's going to stand and live, because I do not have that skill, I have not trained myself because I have preferred to train myself for another type of work. I am like the writer who can write a good letter, and most amateur photographers can write a good letter. I think I can write a little better letter than I can a photograph because I am a more skillful writer. But that is what we must always remember about the camera. We are not going to have 6 million artists because 6 million people own this Instamatic camera that all you do is just point and shoot. If out of those 6 million we have 6 people that are artists, it will be a surprising thing. This does not mean that photography in the hands of the amateur is not a wonderful thing; it is. But we must recognize that the mere ability to get a picture, an image on a piece of paper in color, or in black and white is just the ground work in the beginning of what we call art. That art is not something which is produced off the cuff automatically. The greatest use of photography, it seems to me, and a power which the artist may, or may not use, is identity with the world. We trust the photographic image, we learn about the world through the photographic image. Now we are learning about outer space and other worlds through the photographic image. We are surprised and delighted to find that our maps corroborated. We never could visualize what the continents of North America and South America look like. We crawl around them and we make a map and for all we know this might have been just as ridiculous as the maps made when it was believed that the world was flat. We shoot off this amazing space missile which scans the earth with electronic rays, sends these rays back to the earth to a photographic material and in two hours or so the entire earth is scanned and the impulses are recorded as light and dark, in proportion to the lightness and darkness of the earth, and we have a picture which is exactly that of the two

continents as we had figured it out in a map. This is one of the great powers of photography, it's a discoverer, it's a corroborator. And then there is another aspect of photography which we must never, never overlook, and that is the psychological aspect of it, that we partake of nature. The Indian, the aborigine, as I found in Guatemala, is afraid of the camera. He's afraid that part of him will be taken away and that is precisely what we do accept. Fortunately we don't take anything away when we make a photograph. We look upon the photograph as a substitute for the thing. What do we do when we want to show off our proudest possession, a child? If the child is present, of course, the child is presented. But the substitute is the picture in the wallet and I have seen artists of great discrimination and skill proudly pull out a photograph and present it as a record, as the substitute of their child, a picture which they should be just as ashamed of as if a writer couldn't make a sentence that made sense. So strong is this belief that the photograph is the substitute that travelers photograph their companions and their loved ones wherever they go. Notre Dame with Aunt Sue in the foreground is proof that she was there. It's not that the traveler is particularly interested in the picture, not that he is particularly interested in Notre Dame. But it is a way of participating. And I was told a story by a Kodak executive that I will never forget. He loves to hunt and he had his long-fulfilled wish to go into the Hudson Bay area where very, very few people go, and near the Arctic Circle he went into a trading post and there he saw the familiar yellow box of the Kodak camera, and he asked the proprietor of this trading store, "My goodness, how do you process the film here?" The trader said, "We don't sell any film. The Indians want to buy the camera just so that they can take pictures of one another. They just take the camera and click the shutter and out of this they get a certain satisfaction." And how many of you have made the photographs on European trips and on happy holidays, have quickly looked through them, perhaps have shown them to friends a couple of times, and put them in a bureau drawer and forgotten about them? You like to photograph, every traveler carries a camera as a kind of part of his equipment. Now this aspect has really nothing to do with art and it has everything to do with art. This is a phase of art which - well, let me start again. This is a function which painting used to fill and no longer needs to. There was a time when the rich lord traveling in Europe would bring back paintings commissioned for him of the places he had been. The inventor of the negative-positive process, William Henry Fox Talbot invented photography precisely because of this desire. He with his young bride went on a vacation holiday to the Italian Lakes. He wanted to bring back souvenirs of the beautiful sights they had seen as a memento of the event. He took along a camera. Cameras were used by artists to help them to draw, for many years. There is evidence of a very astounding nature, just recently given in the learned journal of the College Art Association that the great painter, Vermeer, made use of the camera in painting his magnificent portraits. The camera was a box with a lens at one end, a mirror at 45 degrees at the other end, and a ground glass on top. The image formed by the lens thus was on the top of the box where conveniently the artist could lay a piece of tracing paper and trace the image. This Fox tried to do but he was so inept that he made a mess of it. And he, being a scientist, began to think about this in scientific terms and wondered why it couldn't be done chemically. Basil Hall, British Royal Navy, visited America, went up and down America, produced a book of drawings which is a precious document of American history in about 1820, 1822. And he made pictures, using a camera lucida. Catherwood also used a camera lucida on his first trip to Central America, and a daguerreotype on his second trip. What is wonderful about this tremendous popularity of photography is that a few people do look upon photography as an art and have the ability and the courage and the skill and imagination to create pictures which live, as I had said earlier, both because of the subject and in spite of the subject. You can almost imagine that the problem of photographic aesthetics is the clash between photography as a substitute for the thing, and photography as an image of its own intrinsic beauty. And the problem is to unscramble these. Now to answer your question specifically, the enormous popularity of photography has encouraged the manufacturers to improve the materials, and techniques to a degree that we didn't know before. But the history of photography is an expansion rather than a progression. We cannot make finer portraits than the portraits of David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, or of Julia Margaret Cameron. We can take them easier and quicker; we don't require a person to sit still for half a minute. By using this wonderful technological invention of Edward H. Lamb - the Polaroid camera - we can see the results immediately; we can work towards more perfection by repeating ourselves with each picture we taken before giving us a clue to what to do next. Only a few years ago we couldn't take pictures inside by color; today we can. We can take pictures of the most rapid action. When Dr. Harold Edgerton developed the stroboscope light in 1935 we begin to see what happens in terms of the micro-second. A micro second is one-millionth part of a second. And we have on display downstairs a photograph taken in one tenth of a micro-second, one tenth of a millionth of a second, which shows a bullet that has pierced a wire and although the wire is broken the top half hasn't had time to fall to the ground. And to show you the measure of how short this space of time is if one second would be linearly represented as the distance between Rochester, New York and San Francisco, you would have traveled 17 feet on your way across the continent in one tenth of a micro-second. Now these miracles and marvels that technology is bringing to photography gives photographers a greater and greater opportunity. We can tract the beginning of modern photography to that critical period in the arts around 1907 marked by the beginning of Cubism. In 1912 a lecturer by the name of Lumb, an amateur photographer, said that photography is in the advance guard of science and in the rear guard of art. And all this discussion about whether photography is an art or not depends upon the photographer, and it depends upon what kind of an artist the photographer is. Is he willing to face up to a realization that photography is an independent art with its own characteristics, its own functions, its own capabilities? Or is he going to warp this beautiful instrument into making weak, pallid imitations of pictures which are better made by some other technique? Photographers

are waking up to this now. We have almost seen the death of so-called pictorial photography. We find that there is a general recognition of what photography can do and cannot do. So it's an exceedingly complex question that you ask me about the recognition of photography as an art. It takes all people to do it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Jell, Mr. Newhall, I think that I have labored you enough. What you have given us is just marvelous for the record and all I can say is "Thank you very much."

BEAUMONT NEWHALL: Now, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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