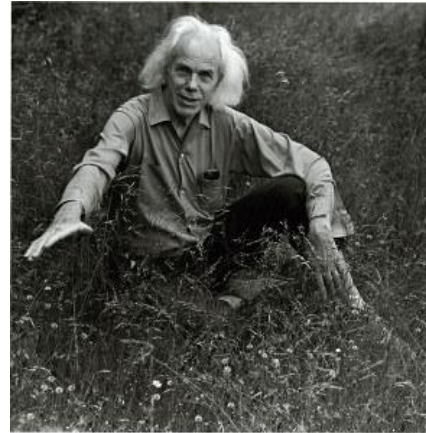


20 July 2017 Cameraderie
Minor White (1908-1976)



Minor White was an educator, theorist, and modernist. He taught with Ansel Adams at the California School of Fine Arts, and learned Adams's Zone System. He edited the famous photography magazine, *Aperture*, for many years. He taught at Ohio University, Indiana University, Rochester Institute of Technology, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was heavily influenced by mystical and eastern philosophies, and incorporated them into his teaching methods. He learned the concept of "equivalence" from his contemporaries and taught it: the idea that an image has additional layers of meaning suggested by the literal image.

The Wikipedia article on White is unusually well-written, and I recommend it as a good read, here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minor_White.

(White's first name is after his great great grandfather of that last name, just in case you wanted to know.)

In 2014, the Getty Museum had a retrospective show of White's work, and I recommend you look through the following review of that exhibit, which also includes all 32 images in the show: <https://artblart.com/tag/72-n-union-street-rochester/>.

Princeton University holds the White archive, and it can be viewed here: <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/minor-white-archive>.

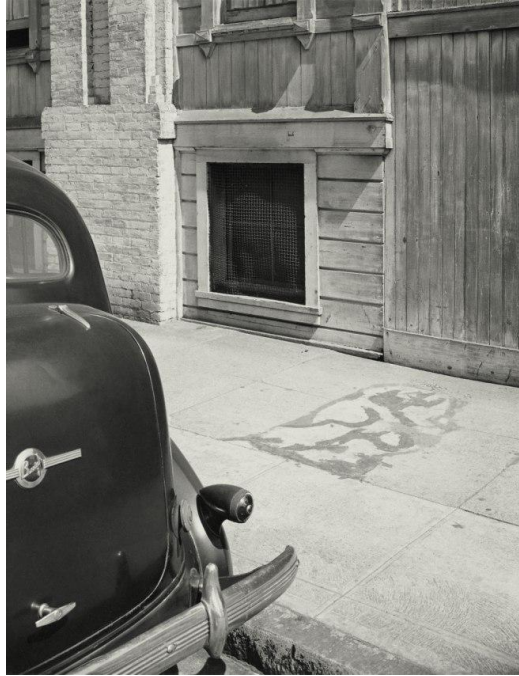
Here are a couple of White's best-known images.



Vicinity of Dansville, New York, 1955

The *Danville* image's obviously striking feature is the shadow of the utility pole, inserted into this image like a knife blade. In my view, it deliberately replaces a conventional diagonally receding split rail fence, and hence it speaks to us about convention and tradition, declaring *that* period of photography and farm life is *over*. Now comes the invasion of the electric—are you now getting what I said earlier about “equivalence?” Yet more, the shadow of the pole (a reference to Plato's myth of the cave in which the inhabitants see only shadows of reality on the wall, not yet seeing the reality beyond) does not yet fully show us the reality of the new world of electricity, which is perhaps too harsh a reality for anyone to look upon—except the strong.

I am fairly convinced that my interpretations are reasonable and valid, and may have been in the forethought of the photographer. Even so, once an image this rich is put before us, we are free to think what we will about it. How about the fact that the diagonal of the utility pole shadow does not line up with the crop rows? Could this be more than the chance of the time of day? What “equivalence” message do you read in that particular feature of the composition? Is it an additional indication that the electric age is out of alignment with the natural age?



Something Died Here, San Francisco, California, 1947

I belong to a Photographic Society of America (PSA) discussion group, in which one of our running discussions is about whether the title of an image is important or not to the quality of the total presentation. I always argue that the title is essential. In White's photograph, I think the title is completely bound up with the image. The title sends us into a deep consideration of nested thoughts. Who died? When? How long ago? How did it happen? Why does the title say "*Something*" and not "*Someone*?" If it was *someone*, does calling it *something* relegate a dead *person* to *thing-ness*? What about shooting the back of that black auto? Why is it there? Does it suggest a hearse?

On the other hand, is that pattern on the sidewalk blood, or a chalk design made by children or street artists? In that case, White draws an "equivalence" between sidewalk art and the traces of death.

A final note. White was a closeted gay man throughout his life. He lived too early to find coming out possible. His sensual photography is part of his life-work, and you can view it on the websites I mentioned above.