



Is this the future of art? William Wegman's "Untitled (Man Ray)."

Stieglitz held that photography could do much more than merely document reality, that it had its own formal qualities.

More recently, photography has benefited from what might be called "cachet by association." The critic Svetlana Alpers has argued that 17th-century Dutch artists used "proto-photographic" techniques; Heinrich Schwarz and Aaron Scharf have argued that the camera has "influenced the visual imagination of painters since the days of Delacroix and Ingres." Photogra-

phy's flattening of space and its ability to capture ephemeral movements, for example, are said to have had a profound impact on the impressionists. Finally, photographers overcame the handicap of the "infinite reproducibility" of their work by winning special status for "original" prints. Today, "masters" such as William Wegman and Sherry Levine enjoy celebrity status.

But now photography is challenging traditional notions of art from within. For example, says Jay, since photography requires no special skills or arcane knowledge, it calls into question the whole distinction between "high" and "low" art. As a British critic put it recently: "Photography makes everyone an artist." And the proliferation of photographic images makes it virtually impossible to produce images "that are disturbingly inaccessible in the manner of many high Modernist works." Above all, a photograph cannot be an "autonomous" artwork, a pure creation of the artist's imagination with no necessary connection to the "real" world.

This is precisely the kind of quality that critics such as Roger Scruton point to in continuing to argue that photography is not genuine art. But Jay believes that its hybrid qualities—its mixture of art and life—make photography well suited for "a leading role in a culture that likes to think of itself as post-modern." Just as music set the standard for the arts during the 19th century, he suggests, photography may set the standard for the 21st century.

Return to Sender

"The Rites of Editing: Letters as Sacred Texts" by Gloria G. Fromm, in *The New Criterion* (Jan. 1990), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

One of the most interesting trends in the literary world today is the proliferation of monumental "complete" editions of letters. The collected letters of Thomas Hardy fill seven thick volumes. Those of William Butler Yeats are expected to fill 12 volumes, and those of Thomas and Jane Carlyle no less than 40.

These tomes aim to include every mea-

ger scrap of correspondence some great (or not-so-great) personage may have left behind, down to and including thank-you notes and dinner invitations. More than the whimsy of editors and biographers is involved, observes Fromm, the author of *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (1977). They have come to regard their subjects as holy figures, whose every pen stroke is sa-

cred text, and themselves as both humble servants and high priests. "To include every available letter seems to mean that the editor has exercised neither choice nor bias, much less engaged in reprehensible interpretation, and to print each exactly as it was written, or as nearly so as possible, is to confirm the purity, the selflessness, the objectivity of the editorial presence." The editor of the letters of the 19th-century decorative artist and socialist thinker William Morris, for example, went so far as to apologize to readers for inserting periods in the text where the great man had neglected to do so.

All of this is worse than poppycock, in Fromm's view. In the name of the disinterested quest for knowledge, editors and others are asserting undue authority over the lives and legacies of their subjects. Last year, for example, there was a great schol-

arly hue and cry when James Joyce's grandson, Stephen, destroyed the letters of his aunt (and James's daughter) Lucia. Stephen Joyce said that his aunt's letters, including a few written to her by Samuel Beckett, were private and had no literary value. But Joycean scholars, Fromm notes, "maintained that any and all material about great writers like Joyce and Beckett belonged to the world, not the family." In fact, she recalls indignantly, when Stephen Joyce said that Beckett had *told* him to destroy the letters, Beckett's biographer Deirdre Bair "flatly insisted that Beckett had not meant what he said."

"If the sanctity of private life and the individual is rejected as a governing principle for biographers and editors," Fromm asks, "what better way to justify profaning both than to 'sell' letters themselves as sacred relics?"

Riddle Me This

"The Persistence of Riddles" by Richard Wilbur, in *The Yale Review* (Vol. 78, No. 3), 1902A Yale Station, New Haven, Conn. 06520.

"When one doesn't know what it is, then it is something; but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing."

It? A riddle, of course. But poet Richard Wilbur suggests that riddles may be more significant than we think. At their most elegant and effective, riddles speak to us with "the voice of a common thing or creature somehow empowered to express, in encoded fashion, the mystery of its being." Consider this example, which restores for a moment "the wonder" of an ordinary thing:

In marble walls as white as milk,
Lined with a skin as soft as silk,
Within a foundation crystal-clear,
A golden apple doth appear.
No doors there are to this stronghold,
Yet thieves break in and steal the gold.*

The earliest recorded riddles were "found on the tablets of Babylonian school-children" and may have had "a mnemonic use in the education of the young." Riddles were a major form of oral

poetry among primitive peoples, perhaps because they were useful forms of subversion—reminders in tradition-bound societies of the occasional need for "mental adjustment." Their ability to make people consider objects from a new perspective even won riddles a place in the religious rituals of some cultures. In other societies, a condemned or captive man might save his neck or gain liberty by "posing a riddle which his judge or captor could not guess." One of the most famous "neck" riddles was the Greek enigma posed by the Sphinx to Oedipus:

What goes on four legs in the morning
light, on two at noontide, and on three at
night?

(Answer: man.)

Solving this riddle saved Oedipus's life and brought him a kingdom, although, as Wilbur points out, he was unable to solve "the puzzle of his own origin" until too late.

Aristotle's *Poetics* speaks admiringly of