

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Blinder, Caroline. 2016. American Alphabet: Photo-Textual Politics in Paul Strand and Nancy Newhall's Time in New England (1950). *Journal of American Studies*, 50(1), pp. 143-165. ISSN 0021-8758 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/14828/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

Summary:

The first in a series of regional studies by the photographer Paul Strand, *Time in New England* pares the iconographical landscapes and portraits of Strand with a cross section of historical and fictional accounts of New England life from 1630 - 1950. The texts, chosen and edited by Nancy Newhall, constitute a counterpoint to Strand's images, designed to historicize the ideological parameters, subjects, and faces of a vernacular New England. This essay examines some of the problems inherent in Strand and Newhall's attempts to record an essentially democratic vision of America through a specific cultural landscape both found and constructed. Partly a post-war response to the trauma of fascism in Europe, *Time in New England* sought to confirm the intrinsic values of America as a safe haven for democratic principles; a project jeopardised by the increasing harassment of leftist artists that drove Strand out of the U.S. the same year *Time in New England* was published.

American Alphabet: Photo-textual Politics in Paul Strand and Nancy Newhall's *Time in New England* (1950)

In 1950, the publication of *Time in New England*, a collaborative venture between the photographer Paul Strand and the writer, critic, and curator of photography Nancy Newhall, was met with little critical attention. Despite Strand's existing reputation as a photographer, *Time in New England* (abbreviated as *TINE* in the following) was seen largely as a quaint homage to New England life, a coffee table project rather than a complex exercise in photo-textual collaboration. As Alan Trachtenberg puts it in his

introduction to *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work* (1990) the pairing of landscapes and portraits of local inhabitants with a cross section of historical and fictional accounts of New England from 1630 – 1950 seemed to present a relatively straightforward ‘concept of New England rectitude, individualism, and perseverance.’¹ This concept of New England, whilst in keeping with an idea of the region as the cradle of American democracy, nonetheless also operates as a critical, and even potentially subversive commentary, on American post-war politics. For Strand, and for Nancy Newhall, *TINE* was more than an attempt to synthesize images and writing into an idealized narrative of the nation- state, it was a way to re-examine - in a time of increasingly domestic political strife - the unresolved schisms and fractures within that narrative. Similarly, even though Strand’s photographs, at first sight, appear to be primarily timeless images of locations and people from New England devoid of any overtly political context, the intersections between text and photography tell a different story.

The book is structured in four parts: Part One dealing with the first settlers, The Second the revolutionary period, The Third Abolition and Transcendentalism, and the Fourth nineteenth and early twentieth century responses to New England. As such, it moves from the original settlers, their religiosity, superstitions, and attempts to set up a workable society (William Bradford: ‘Arrival Plymouth November 1620’ facing an image entitled: Storm and Sea), onwards to civil strife, disobedience, slavery, and suffrage (Margaret Fuller: ‘A Man’s ambition with a Woman’s Heart’ pre-empted by an image entitled: Dried Seaweed). The book’s very last image (insert title) is prefaced by Van Wyck

¹ *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, ed. Maren Stange and intro. Alan Trachtenberg (New York: Aperture, 1990), 2 .

Brooks's "New England: Indian Summer" (1940) in which Brooks concludes:

"Americans had a stake in New England ... as a palladium of truth, justice, freedom and learning."²

Figure 1.

The texts, ranging from affidavits from Salem witch trials to Abolitionist pamphlets, were chosen and edited by Nancy Newhall and set up adjacent to the photographs. Although the extracts appear to complement the subject matter of the photos, they also constitute a counterpoint to Strand's images in ideological terms. If the subjects photographed by Strand seem primarily to be a series of symbolic landscapes, replete with church stables and fallen tombstones, other images, landscapes of looming clouds, and close ups of the local flora and fauna do not immediately present themselves as iconic. Adding to this, is the fact that with over 90 photographs and more than 100 textual extracts, the juxtaposition between the static images of buildings, plants and inhabitants and the explosive textual evidence of an often violent American history is far from transparently linked to an idea of democracy. In fact, at regular intervals throughout the book, anecdotal material detailing Indian massacres, cruelty to run away slaves, and the horrifying narratives of witch hunts, markedly set themselves apart from the placid images. If anything, it is as if the chosen extracts counter the visual iconography of Strand's portraits of New England residents, whose far away gazes and static postures show them as calm and ennobled, rather than the inheritors of regional strife and violence.

² Paul Strand and Nancy Newhall, *Time in New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 248.

A paradox is thus at work in *TINE*. On the one hand, the book clearly does not function as a well-illustrated travel guide through the history of New England, just as Nancy Newhall's chosen extracts cannot be read as simply a collage of famous New England writings. On the other hand, in political terms, the inscription of a democratic heritage into the very fabric of New England is also far from ideologically transparent.

Nonetheless, the concept of democracy is present in *TINE*, it is there in the persistence of the native, of the indigenous, and the local and it is through this that images of local vegetation, a fisherman's face, or the façade of his barn take on added meaning.

This complicates any claims that *TINE* is simply an arena for a particular form of realist photography or that it constitutes a straightforward extension of Strand's 1930s documentary politics. Unlike Strand's critique of domestic politics in films such as *Native Land* (1942) and *The Plow that Broke the Planes* (directed by Pare Lorentz, 1936) *TINE* is a much more subtle investigation into the hopes and aspirations of a nation caught between a pre-war belief in collective democracy and post-war anxieties concerning the erosion of civil liberties. The way in which *TINE* navigates this terrain is by using a New England vernacular as an ideological and aesthetic mechanism capable of crossing the border between the textual and the visual.

If *TINE* didn't provide the comforting vision of democracy a publisher might have sought in 1950, it compensated for this through its use of the vernacular, in the voices of the New Englanders and the 'look' of their surroundings as a fundamentally lyrical take on America. In many ways, the presence of the vernacular is there in the tenor and urgency with which the textual extracts impose various meanings on the photographs. In the section entitled 'Foothold', two extracts from Captain Edward Johnson's 1654 *Wonder*

Working Providence of Sion's Saviour bookend the image of a latch on a wooden door.

Figure 2.

The photograph of the latch, an item nearly unchanged from the 15th to the 20th century, is cropped to foreground the simplicity of the mechanism itself. Unlike similar architectural studies by Strand's contemporary Walker Evans, a photographer equally fascinated by the vernacular aspects of facades, artisanal decorations and other indicators of craftsmanship and local labor, the meaning of Strand's latch appears more symbolic largely because of the accompanying text. In Johnson's diary, Boston "the center town and metropolis of this wilderness" is on "constant watch to foresee the approach of foreign dangers" (*TINE*, 24). The latched door thus connotes both a barrier against the presence of the wild in historical terms, and a more contemporary desire to close off the region, to bar it against foreign and undesired influences. In this instance, despite the book's occasional use of homely allegory, seascapes often accompany narratives of journeys, for example, the alignment provides a more complex vision of the book's agenda in which the 'narrative', rather than chart the progressive nature of democratic values, seems to contradict it. In the example of the latched door, the approach of foreign dangers – whilst historically reasonable in 1654 – also operates as a subtle reminder of the anti-leftist anti-foreign rhetoric of the post-war era.³

If *TINE* questions the problematic reliance on a visible connection between democratic

³ For more on the layout and history of *TINE*'s publication see: John Rohrbach's 'Time in New England: Creating a Usable Past' in *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, (New York: Aperture, 1990), 161-177. A brief summary of how the text in *TINE* has been examined, or overlooked, can be found in Laura Wexler's 'The Puritan in the Photograph' in *The Turn Around Religion: American Literature, Culture and the Work of Sacvan Bercovitch*, eds. Nan Goodman and Michael Kramer, (London: Ashgate, 2011).

values, as set out in Nancy Newhall's textual extracts, and Strand's photographs of a more 'timeless' New England, it is also an investigation into the use-value of documentary photography itself. How do Strand's photographs maintain a potentially reductive version of New England as the cradle of American democracy *and* render it a distinct living regional location? How does the camera, in other words, alter the perception of New England? How does the fact that the camera places itself both in opposition to - and with - the textual material make us read Strand's use of 'time' in New England? Of course, the title *TINE* indicates a deliberate conflation of the regional and the photographic, but the conflation is so obvious, in a sense, that the connection is often overlooked. By referencing the vernacular and the photographic *Time* in New England is both an essential component in exposing the 'essence' of New England and a crucial component in the mechanical process of photography itself. In other words, it is not just politics but "time" itself, that becomes a process that reflects *and* inflects its regional subject. In these terms, the integration of text and imagery, rather than illuminate the book's aesthetic and philosophical undercurrents, also questions the mimetic qualities and purposes of the camera itself.

To look at *TINE* as a book about the mimetic properties of the camera does not, of course, preclude a consideration of the timing of the project in historical terms. As indicated in the image of the latch, numerous photographs carry the potential as symbolic post-war responses to the trauma of fascism in Europe, establishing *TINE* as an attempt to confirm the intrinsic values of America as a haven for democratic principles in an increasingly volatile political climate. It is not coincidental that in 1950, the year *TINE* was published, Strand was driven out of the U.S. because of increasingly aggressive right

wing politics. Nonetheless, *TINE* was read primarily - in reviews of the time - as a clear-cut confirmation of America as a site for democratic principles. Thus the importance of regionalism as an *internal*, as well as external landscape was used primarily as a way to bolster New England as a site of honor, rectitude and perseverance, rather than a way to articulate anxieties about ideology and territorial ownership on a larger scale. In this context, *TINE* not only responds to the anti-leftist sentiment of the post-war years, it constitutes an investigative process – particularly by Strand – into the limitations as well as possibilities of the documentary aesthetic in a post Depression Era.

John Rohrbach's '*Time in New England: Creating a Usable Past*', links the structure and concerns of *TINE* with Strand's earlier projects, such as *Native Land* (1942), another polemic, according to Rohrbach, on the importance of "free and open dissent" as "the core of American democracy and moral culture"⁴. Rohrbach's reading of *TINE* as essentially an ambitious and well thought out commentary on the "fortitude central to New England's settlement" nonetheless underestimates the importance of the schisms between the textual material and the images. Presenting a predominantly "symbolic" landscape rather than "specific places", Rohrbach argues that the images "become metaphors for the surrounding text" designed to synthesize a vision of New England as a site for freedom, a contested site, but a site for freedom nonetheless. By indicating that a form of restitution and, indeed, containment, is delivered in *TINE*, Rohrbach delivers a paradoxically homogenous notion of the photo-text that echoes that of the early reviews. However, in Strand's forward to *TINE*, such a notion is already implicitly questioned:

'The freedom of the individual to think, to believe, and to speak freely was an issue

⁴ Ibid., 162.

fought out here more than once. ... Men gave their lives in the struggle against political tyranny, and when it took courage to speak out against human slavery ... and the threat of mob violence, they spoke out. It was this concept of New England that, like a scenario, gave the clues to the photographs ... and brought them into relationship with the text. I was led to try to find in present-day New England images of nature and architecture and faces of people that were either part of or related in feeling to its great tradition'.⁵

Strand's commentary, whilst ostensibly about a certain American idealism, unity and coherency, is on a more oblique level also about the outward manifestation of an inward movement; a movement spurred on by ideology as much as by historical necessity. Not only does this movement begin in the seventeenth century, emphasizing the ideology of the original settlers, it introduces what will become a running theme throughout *TINE*, namely Transcendentalism. The concept of a transcendental faith and its resulting cultural and literary tradition is thus established as both a fundamental part of the landscape of New England and the voices that inhabit that landscape. Extracts by Emily Dickinson, Melville, Hawthorne, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards, are all infused by a faith configured in overtly transcendental terms. Despite the book's mixing of genres, the use of travelogue, historical narrative, and factual documents, the overall gist is that a transcendentalist ethos binds these various voices together, signaling an America bound by faith if not equal rights. By moving from more overtly puritan doctrine to later transcendentalist thought, the very foundations of American culture become firmly embedded in one place, namely New England.

⁵ Paul Strand, Introduction, *Time in New England* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1950) VII.

The artistic remit for the project, according to Nancy Newhall, supports such a reading. In Emersonian terms, the linking between the thing seen and its most accurate linguistic representation lies not in ornate language or sophisticated metaphors but in the creation of alignments both believable and true. In the EBB section, Emerson laments that ‘It is the age of severance, of disassociation ... Instead of the social existence, which all shared, was now separation.’⁶ In many respects, Newhall’s task is thus to prove the persistence of the opposite in New England, a vision of a region that still carries the germ of something integral to American culture. As Newhall ‘ransacked libraries’ for material: ‘Neither of us was looking for illustrations. Independently, following the twists and turns of our material, we set out for our common goal, the definition of the New England spirit. ... We wanted an integration so complete that either medium could state or develop a theme. The emotional and intellectual clarity of each passage was our goal...’⁷ Newhall’s desire for emotional *and* intellectual clarity, like the transcendentalist idea of a transparency *and* immediacy; requires a connection that spiritually is so compelling, that even though the link between some of the photographs and the textual extracts is far from obvious, they nonetheless render a sense of complete integration. Newhall’s term for this integration of text and image is ‘the additive caption’:

‘In the Additive Caption, the basic principle is the independence – and interdependence – of two mediums. The words do not parrot what the photographs say, the photographs are

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson as quoted in Paul Strand and Nancy Newhall, *Time in New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 187. From ‘Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England’, *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1883.

⁷ Nancy Newhall, Editor’s Forward, *Time in New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), VI.

not illustrations. They are recognized as having their own force.... The additive principle at this stage looks like a whole new medium in itself. Its potential seems scarcely explored, like a continent descried from a ship.’⁸

At first sight, Newhall’s use of the terms “dependence and interdependence” simply describes the use of text and imagery as symbiotically aligned. Nevertheless, setting up her collaboration with Strand as an exploratory one, in line with that of the pilgrims embarking on a voyage to a new continent, Newhall signals an almost religious enterprise at the heart of the project. In her editor’s forward Newhall writes:

‘Could language – not captions, nor the usual pseudo-poetic phrases, but language intimate, alive, and often of real intensity, extend and clarify the condensed meaning of these photographs? Even more important, could words and images from different authors in different periods become an integral whole? The temptation was irresistible.’⁹

Newhall describes the ‘irresistible temptation’ of abolishing conventional captions and ‘pseudo-poetic phrases’. With little sense of the ‘political tyranny or mob violence’ in Strand’s foreword, Newhall’s description renders *TINE* more of an aesthetic than practical exercise. And yet, reviews such as the Boston Sunday Post’s ‘The True Christmas Spirit Survives in New England’ placed its emphasis not on the novel use of text and images, but on New England as the “symbol of spiritual hardihood.”

‘Much of this precious loveliness has been captured between the covers of a book entitled

⁸ Nancy Newhall, ‘The Caption: The Mutual Relation Between Words/Photographs’ originally printed in *Aperture 1* {1952}, in *From Adams to Stieglitz – Pioneers of Modern Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1999), 136.

⁹ Notes for the Introduction in The Nancy Newhall Files, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona.

“Time in New England”. ... None of the pictures is captioned, and Nancy Newhall’s text consists entirely of original documents – letters, poems and diaries, all the way from governor Bradford to Robert Frost, with lots of little people in between. Nancy is a New England girl, born in Swampscott and educated in Boston and at Smith College. Paul Strand is one of the three or four greatest living photographers. Here ... the faces of New Englanders ... are carved out of granite.... In their eyes is eloquence no pen can express; in their features is the kind of courage Americans need today.’¹⁰

Owens’s review emphasizes the native credentials of the book and Newhall as a born and bred ‘New England’ girl. More importantly, the book contains the courage that “Americans need today” (a reference to the cold war) and a stoicism ‘carved out of granite’ like the presidential faces at Mount Rushmore. The fact that “little people in between” have been included indicates that, despite its lofty purpose, the book contains an emphatic and human approach as well. Here is a work, in other words, with a recognizable iconography, natural elements are glorious and clean as opposed to menacing and daunting, the impression of a New England as welcoming prevails.

The sense of New England as a refuge of sorts could, then, be seen as a result of Newhall’s down toning of the more radical implications of the puritan legacy. In Newhall’s original version of the introduction, later changed for publication, a sharper tone regarding New England politics is in evidence:

‘The source of New England character lies in the seventeenth century – in the puritan,

¹⁰ Olga Owens, “The True Christmas Spirit Survives in New England”, Boston Sunday Post, Dec.3 1950.

arch revolutionary and archconservative. It lies in ... family and the burning immediacy of god (or truth, or liberty, or his own special revelation) Again and again in his humanity and his inhumanity he is born into the centuries, as Samuel Adams, John Brown, Thoreau and Mathers of many names, called forth as persecutor and apostle by issues essentially unchanging – hanging of Quakers or electrocution of Sacco and Vanzetti, rebellion against Britain or crusade against slavery. How to compress this dark and brilliant panorama!’¹¹

In the published version the ‘darkness’ of the panorama in the original version has been lightened:

‘The source of New England character lies in the seventeenth century. But the great music of seventeenth century prose that led pilgrim and puritan across the ocean and sustained them in the wilderness was for our ears choked by obscurities and redundancies. Yet in those cadences was the sound of the sea and in their thought the germ of a nation. The sound of that lost time was essential; so were the brisk, bright marching tunes of the Revolution and the dark-bright music of America beginning to sing in its own voice in the nineteenth century.’¹²

In comparing the two versions, Newhall’s original stress on the revelatory nature of New England, both in terms of ‘humanity and inhumanity’, persecutor and apostle alike brings forth a darker vision. By omitting the ‘hanging Quakers’, the electrocution of political prisoners, and instead focusing on the ‘brisk, bright marching tunes of the revolution’ a more patriotic version emerges. Not all journals, however, were oblivious to the presence

¹¹ The Nancy Newhall Files, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona.

¹² Ibid.

of a more complex narrative. According to the Christian Science Monitor:

‘The book is roughly chronological in concept; with headings and subheadings; almost one might say plots and subplots; Wilderness, Savages, Witchcraft, Revolution. And later, Hill and Town, The Sea, Protest, Abolition, Ebb, and ultimately, Affirmations. Puritanism merges imperceptibly into rationalism, rationalism into ‘the age of severance, of disassociation, of freedom, of analysis, of detachment’ (the description is Emerson’s). ... If the text then tells of the past, the dirt-root past as well as the flowering, the photography tells us of the past in the present.’¹³

Unlike Owens’s review, Chapin acknowledges a link between the lay-out of the book and its thematic approach. It also acknowledges the idea of *time* in New England as having a philosophical as well as constructive purpose. More importantly, Chapin links the puritan legacy to a wider philosophical lineage in which the merger between puritan ideals and American rationalism mutate into a desire for freedom; a freedom very distinctly described in Emersonian terms. Chapin’s demarcation between the tasks of the text against that of the images is perhaps a bit too neat, but it indicates *TINE*’s potential as a sort of secular scripture that carries the emotional resonance of the past into the future. Acknowledging how “puritanism merges imperceptibly into rationalism,” Chapin acknowledges that the book’s genuine agenda may be the tracing of an ideological history, as much as a regional one.

The lay-out of *TINE* provides a sense of the complex arrangement that in ideological

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Spirit of the Times’ [1850] in Ruth Chapin “Which Lives In All That Is Free, Noble, and Courageous”, Christian Science Monitor, Nov 18th. 1950.

terms constitutes the book overall: Part I has 7 different sections, starting with ‘New World’ and ending with ‘Witchcraft’, Part II has 3 sections, starting with ‘Native Earth’ and ending with ‘Revolutions’, Part III 5 sections, starting with ‘Hill and Town’ and ending with ‘Abolition’, Part IV 3 sections, starting with ‘EBB’ and ending with ‘Affirmations’.

Despite a potentially uplifting trajectory, Newhall’s subheadings are extremely messy if one takes her edict, that the additive caption ‘extend and clarify the condensed meaning of the photographs’, as a ground rule. For example, the Protest section contains a selection of Thoreau’s freedom manifestos and Susan B. Anthony’s ‘Rights of a Woman’ and yet, any sense of political urgency is diffused in the following EBB section, in which Emily Dickinson’s funeral coincides with Robert Frost’s melancholy poem ‘An Old Man’s Winter Night’. In this sense *TINE* – as indicated in the sub-captions - is governed by its own ebb and flow, by a sense of flux that complicates a reading of the text as straightforwardly progressive. If narrative and historical continuity is less seamless than it first appears, the ideological fissures within the sequencing of the textual extracts illuminate how Nancy Newhall, too, may have had a political axe to grind.

Although Nancy Newhall’s position in terms of House of Un-American Activities was less volatile than that of Strand, her immersion in the New York Photo-League, later targeted because of its alleged leftist sympathies, meant that she was also at risk. During the 2 World War Nancy Newhall’s more famous husband Beaumont Newhall, curator of photography at MoMA, was ousted from his position at the museum. The position was taken over by Edward Steichen shortly thereafter, partly because Steichen’s take on photography was seen as more populist and appealing to financial patrons. Beaumont

Newhall's auto-biography *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (1993) elaborates on the political machinations behind his ousting in 1945, and tells of the museum's refusal to allow Beaumont to officially curate with his wife Nancy, despite the fact that she had effectively been in charge, whilst her husband was in the army.¹⁴

In this respect, *TINE* responds to a changing of the guard in the photographic establishment of post-war America and it indicates Nancy Newhall's desire to pursue projects outside of the museum environment, to cement her position as a proponent of photography irrespective of institutional support.¹⁵ Whether Newhall's investment in the publication of the book meant that she downplayed what might be perceived as overt criticism of American values, is hard to gauge. Newhall may have felt that she, too, was a potential victim of current anti-democratic forces, and yet bound by her role as the editor/facilitator of the project was in a somewhat different role from that of Strand the artist. In an essay written 4 years earlier for the catalogue *Paul Strand: Photographs, 1915-1945*, Newhall – not yet engaged in the project – introduces some of the images that will later appear in *TINE*:

'Where generations of painters and photographers have found only the superficial and the picturesque, Strand reached into the essence of New England. The shuttered white church stands on patches of snow like the terrifying grip of an ideal. In the worn doorlatch, the tar paper patch, the crazy window among rotting clapboards, appear the ancient precision

¹⁴ By moving from a regional perspective to a humanistic worldview, Steichen – according to his critics – took the idea of democracy and made it subservient to an American ideology of good neighbourliness across continents and cultures. Steichen's rise to prominence at MOMA was instrumental in putting precisely this perspective at the forefront; an irony that would not have been lost on Nancy Newhall.

¹⁵ See Nancy Newhall's later collaborations with Ansel Adams, *Fiat Lux* and *Eloquent Light* (New York: Aperture 1963)

and mordant decay of New England.’¹⁶

“The terrifying ideal” and “mordant decay” of New England signal the presence of something that reappears in *TINE*, albeit in ways that are unspoken compared to Newhall’s original descriptions. Photographs of objects such as the modest decoy duck, whose unassuming demeanor is matched by its sparse background, appear at first glance as the antithesis to earlier Strand images from the 1920s in which machine age objects, such as Strand’s own Akeley Camera, appear as homages to the medium itself. In *TINE*, architectural decorations, furniture and tools, appear animated precisely because of their pre-industrial vernacular context, because of their “ancient precision” – as Newhall puts it - and not despite it. Thus, the objects, the implements, and vernacular ornaments, contrary to the machine age objects of modernism, signify handicraft and singularity of design and production. Likewise, the objects in *TINE* are photographed more as conventional portraits; the decoy presents itself with some pride, the tombstone with a sense of melancholy. The upward angle on many of the photographs provides a nearly heroic quality; as though they too – like the immigrants - are survivors from an earlier time.

Figure 3

While this ‘heroic’ quality heralds back to the indexicality favored by earlier Farm Security Administration studies, they rely on aesthetic qualities, on the beauty of the subjects to a much larger extent. As Nancy Newhall puts it in the 1945 catalogue: ‘The

¹⁶ Nancy Newhall, Paul Strand: Photographs, 1915-1945 [MoMA, 1945], reprinted in Nancy Newhall, *From Adams to Stieglitz: Pioneers of Modern Photography* (New York: Aperture, 199) pp. 71-77.

portrait of the old farmer, Mr. Bennett is one the most eloquent and poignant in photography.’ The weathered skin of a fisherman, the proud posture of his wife – all indicate not so much their innermost beings - as the importance of their external demeanor and what it tells us. If these people and objects function as political and aesthetic markers simultaneously, it is not simply because they are typified in terms of region, it is because they signify an unmistakable American individualism.

Figure 4

Residing somewhere between melancholy resignation and an affirmation of American values, it is no wonder, then, that *TINE* occupied unfamiliar territory for viewers at the time. Adding to this, a potentially uncomfortable narrative of colonization is also present despite the outward narrative of progress and democracy. Strand had lived periodically in New England, but *TINE* nonetheless navigates Strand’s own integration into a landscape both familiar and alien to him. The issue is not necessarily that Strand considered himself another “settler”, simply that he is astute about the importance of the Puritan experience as an antecedent for something quintessentially American, namely the struggle to integrate and appropriate foreign territory. In this respect, despite the affirmative value of many of the textual extracts, other extracts indicate a long history of internal strife, from the subjugation of Native Americans to the return of run-away slaves. While such histories are blatant examples of the effects of a ruthless colonization, other extracts, the self-effacing poetry of Dickinson, Melville’s anxious letters to Hawthorne, are more subtle examples of self-doubt and fear. If the desire to appropriate territory is a fundamental part of New England history, the inevitable anxiety that accompanies it – *TINE* seems to say - has both regional and psychological ramifications. By choosing New

England as his American swansong, Strand thus both implicates and distances himself from the profoundly ideological ramifications of appropriation and colonization on a wider level. It is no coincidence that Strand will later chose a series of locations for his collaborative photo-texts, such as The Hebrides in *Tir a'Mhurain* (1962), *Ghana: An African Portrait* (1976) and *Living Egypt* (1969), for whom a colonial past colors the present. In *Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village* (1955) Cesare Zavattini's interviews with the locals contextualize the somber portraits by Strand, linking the issue of regional identity directly to a collective history of territorial strife.¹⁷ The fact that Strand's photographs of the people marked by these events seem strangely placid in the face of historical turmoil and aggression nonetheless says as much about his own limitations as an ethnographer, as it does about his abilities as a photographer. Despite Strand's self-professed interest in the politics of documentary photography, his tendency to universally render his subjects dignified, and timeless in their beauty, inevitably places certain restrictions on the images as complex ethnographic studies. Even though Strand had an uncanny ability to collaborate with writers immersed and conversant with the culture portrayed, the regional studies remain problematic in terms of what may or may not constitute documentary verisimilitude.

If ethnography is not the chief impetus behind *TINE*, a type of photographic colonization is nonetheless present, and it provides an additional and crucial link to the legacy of 17th century immigration signposted throughout *TINE*. With its overly puritan

¹⁷ Paul Strand and Cesare Zavattini, *Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village* [1955], in English (New York: Aperture, 1997). For more on the interaction between text and images in *Un Paese* see: Elena Gualtieri (ed), *Paul Strand Cesare Zavattini: lettere e immagini* (Bologna: Bora, 2005).

contextualization of a region and its people, *TINE* is also a narrative about finding oneself metaphorically in the wilderness. If we take the colonizing effect of photography as enabled by the appropriation of its subject matter, by the re-organizing of places and people in terms of typography and sections, *TINE* itself continues a process that goes back to the originators of the American dream centuries before. Likewise, while the Transcendentalist desire to merge the thing seen with its proper name and designation is given a distinctly visual angle in *TINE*, it is also a marker for more subtle form of appropriation, a linguistic version of the documentary impulse that Strand was familiar with; the impetus to own ones surroundings by naming and photographing them. In Part III 'Fine Auroras' Emerson articulates how the urge to name and identify is linked, as always, to nature and place:

'Adam in the garden. I am to new name all the beasts in the field and all the gods in the sky. I am to invite men drenched in time to recover themselves and come out of time, and taste their native immemorial air.'¹⁸

Emerson's invitation to "come out of time" gives us a sense of *TINE* as a spiritual rather than ethnographic vision of New England. Transformed through Emerson's delight in renaming his surroundings, the sacred and the secular combine here through a distinctly

¹⁸ Paul Strand and Nancy Newhall, *Time in New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 136. Originally delivered as a lecture on 'Education' 1847 re- printed in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, eds. Gilman, Orth et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982), Vol. 4, 41.

vernacular vision, it is the ‘native immemorial air’ that allows Strand’s unassuming church front to be as sacred or secular as the entrance to a cottage, the voice of the minister as holy or profane as that of his neighbor. Similarly, Newhall’s description of “the shuttered white church” and the “worn doorlatch”, rather than signs of dilapidation indicate the potency of vernacular architecture. In Strand’s photograph of a framed doorway of a house, it is the distinctive façade and not whether someone has just entered or left, that is crucial.

Leaving the door ajar for multiple interpretations is another indication that the photographs in *TINE* are as much about intimated as actual presences. If the door is literally left ajar in New England, it opens up a series of interpretations of which the political is merely one possibility. In the last section of *TINE*, the private letters of Sacco and Vanzetti are followed by the image of a large plant closely cropped, the texture of the leaves matt and silvery. The letters are preceded by a gravestone from 1868 a harbinger of the execution awaiting the two correspondents.

Figure 5

Such symbolic alignments of text and imagery enable something other than a ‘history’ of New England, and while the photographs are fixed here by the writing to an actual political context (in this case Sacco and Vanzetti as ‘honorary’ New Englanders), the images themselves once again move away from the specifics of the text. By bookending the letters with images of plants and gravestones, Sacco and Vanzetti are taken ‘out of time’, they too are somehow timeless in New England.

For the cinematographer and artist Hollis Frampton, Strand's regional studies were, above all, about time and the ontological nature of photography itself:

'Strand has returned often to his accustomed sites, and two adjacent photographs, from Vermont, for example, may be dated thirty or forty years apart. Predictably, they differ from one another no more than they might if made on consecutive days. ... The meaning is quite clear. Still photography has, through one and another stratagem, learned to suspend or encode all but one of our incessant intuitions: I refer to what we call time. Paul Strand seems consciously intent, in his presentation of his work as in the work itself, on refuting time. It seems expressly forbidden that the problem shall ever arise.'¹⁹

The twin strategy that Frampton refers to: the suspension and encoding of photographic material through a lack of information, touches at the heart of Strand's enterprise and possibly at the limitations of Newhall's. In *TINE*, to suspend or encode entails, as the words indicate, two different things. If we take suspend to indicate a halt to meaning regenerating, then encode, paradoxically, imbues something with meaning. For Frampton, a strange cancelling out effect takes place in Strand's photographs. Objects are suspended in time – and maybe this is what *TINE* really implies – and simultaneously imbued with symbolic meaning. Nonetheless, the attempt to stop time in New England is doomed to failure, meaning will always regenerate itself, much like the many photographs of plants that survive changing times and political regimes only to re-emerge. Even if, as Frampton points out: 'Strand might photograph the whole terrain of the world' the issue of change cannot be circumvented. In this respect, Strand's use of

¹⁹ Hollis Frampton, 'Mediations around Paul Strand' [1972] in *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video: Texts, 1968-1980* (Visual Studies Workshop, 1983) 134.

objects emblematic of continuation and survival make him paradoxically somewhat of an un-documentarian.²⁰ Like a still painter, he is interested in the formal and timeless aspects of the objects photographed, whereas Nancy Newhall's textual choices are all about change, about liberation, and the articulation of ideology, even if that ideology is problematic.

For other critics, the co-existence of a politicized narrative with an aesthetic that appears to illuminate some essential timeless truth poses a serious moral problem. For others, it proves that Strand's work is, indeed, timeless and as such worthy of canonization. For Alan Sekula, documentary photography of the American scene continues to be 'caught between the conditions of a kind of binary folklore', in which the rendition of specifically regionalized subjects – regardless of whether termed indigenous, real, folkloric, or vernacular - is always 'embroiled in an expressionistic structure'.²¹ No matter how much the documentary aesthetic pretends to be neutral, to be 'real', it inevitably ends up empathizing with its subject.

Even if, in this case, Strand operates within the limits of an acceptable level of empathy, his aesthetic masks, according to Sekula, an often untenable celebration of abstract humanity divorced from any real political agency. One could argue that in *TINE* the celebration of a folk region doomed to extinction is mourned but not countered in any

²⁰ The persona of Strand as a politically concerned activist sits rather uncomfortably with the photographer whose argument with Ansel Adams in the 1960s was precisely about artists and elitism. Strand insisted that Adams's choice of large print runs, a decision in line with Adams's desire to democratize photography, was unethical. By taking high prices for his own limited editions, according to Strand, he was signaling univocally that photography was, indeed, art.

²¹ Alan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' in *Thinking Photography*, ed. by Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 87.

way, a charge one could levy against many of Strand's later regional studies as well. While for Sekula, this amounts to a de-politicization of the documentary process, for some Strand scholars Strand's ability to render a palatable version of abstract humanity in which the folkloric is made synonymous with authenticity and truth, proves that he is, indeed, a great photographer. According to Milton Brown in one of the seminal collected works of Strand, *Paul Strand, a Retrospective Monograph 1971*:

'Strand believes in human values, in social ideals, in decency and in truth. These are not clichés to him. That is why his people, whether Bowery derelict, New England Farmer, Italian Farmer, French artisan, ... are all touched by the same heroic quality – humanity. To a great extent this is a reflection of Strand's personal sympathy and respect for his subjects. But it is just as much the result of his acuteness of perception, which finds in the person a core of human virtue and his unerring sense of photographic values that transmits that quality to us.'²²

For Brown, Strand's subjects are heroic figures – mythologized to such an extent that their actual social and economic backgrounds become inconsequential. Brown's quote exemplifies the paternalistic camera that Sekula is weary of, a vision in which the subjects ultimately don't need their own subject hood as long as they are discernibly Strand's "people". Another problem with the paternalistic camera is that it oftentimes fails to take into account the dynamics between image and text. In simply looking at Strand's images in isolation, Sekula ignores the fact that the photographs compete at

²² Milton Brown, "Photography Year Book 1963" in *Paul Strand, a Retrospective Monograph 1971* (New York: Aperture, 1971), 370.

some level with Newhall's extracts, and that this, in turn, unsettles both the editor and photographer's authorial status in ways that inherently politicize the photographic process.

Strand's morose heroism (a term coined by his long term collaborator in the 1930s, Harold Clurman) is another reason why Strand shies away from creating any overtly emotive alignments between the images and text. There are, for example, numerous textual extracts that deal with the issue of slavery and emancipation (W.E.B. Dubois's 'I Dream of a World' is one of the penultimate extracts), but no images that portray actual African-American faces.

There is, of course, a fine line between what we might call Nancy Newhall's more cautious optimism and Strand's 'morose heroism'; a heroism that seems quite suited to the puritanical context of the book overall. The signposting of a religious history in the very last image, shown in figure 1, of an austere looking New England church is no coincidence in this respect. The white wooden church, manufactured by and for the people, signifies a respectful homage to vernacular culture in nearly every documentary project of the 1930s but contrary to similar photographs (by Walker Evans for example), Strand's church is ominously decentered; the dark sky contrasted with the whiteness of the church fits with Newhall's description of it as a "terrifying ideal". As is usual for Strand, we have no sense of whether this church is in temporary repose or long abandoned.

To end *TINE* with an image of a church is of course to acknowledge the religiosity inscribed into the very fabric of New England. Nevertheless, even in something as

visually canonical as a church the issue remains oblique. Is this the funereal end of *TINE*? Is it an image that embodies a sacred rather than secular vision of the “spirit” of New England? In the section entitled ‘Foothold’, first New England Primer from 1648, a biblical primer for the instruction of children is reprinted from A to Z:

A In Adam’s Fall We sinned all

B Heaven to find The *Bible* Mind

C *Christ* Crucified For Sinners died

Here the alphabet is defined in terms of a sacred discourse, one cannot learn the building blocks of language without going through an instructive rota of biblical material. In the same way that a biblical primer constitutes the foundations for a later more secular American discourse, Strand’s images, paradoxically, also seem to herald back to a time when the sacred was present in the everyday. The photograph that precedes the alphabetic primer is, in fact, the “worn doorlatch” referenced by Newhall, weather beaten and gnarled by age, it forms a recognizable cross. After the primer there is an image of a fern, partly shaded and lit by diffused sunlight. Thus while Strand’s plants mimic the Emersonian marvel at nature, the plants, while native to the region are by no means exclusive to it. Their true impact lies not in their regionalism, but in their continued survival. Man may be temporal, but time in New England is the same for these organisms, regardless of historical change and political exigencies.

In fact, the images of nature, the sense of an organic design throughout the book makes it difficult to delineate between the vernacular designs on wooden implements, doors and

hinges, and the natural forms that have inspired those designs. Once again, an Emersonian alignment between word and image, tool and environment, is in some ways re-enacted here, even if it is curiously devoid of the artisans who created that alignment in the first place.

If we return to Sekula's argument, that Strand's documentary aesthetic creates a potentially problematic form of folklore, then *TINE* could be critiqued for presenting a defunct idea of a democratic America, an America desperately trying to prove that fascism cannot encroach on its territory. As readers, we want Strand's version of New England to be more than an idyllic construction, but the question remains: what is the book's actual intention then? The combination of text and photographs is simply too politically obtuse, too questioning of its own iconicity to make for something entirely legible in an ideological sense. For Frampton, Strand's artistic aspirations were one of the reasons why he retreated into a form of aestheticism numbed to its true political potential. As previously mentioned, there is an argument to be made that Strand's later regional studies are perfected examples of a photographic attempt to arrest time, an attempt commenced but never completed in *TINE*. In studies of the Sudan, The Hebrides, Strand's aestheticism is largely left unchecked by the text that accompanies it. For all of Newhall's gentility in terms of acquiescing to Strand's superior abilities as an artist, it is worth noting – in comparison - just how instrumental the textual extracts are in *TINE*. Where *TINE* differs from Strand's later regional studies is in its attempts to make something timeless, in a visual sense, coincide with a distinctly recognizable narrative of democracy and faith in a historical sense.

One such example is the extract from Anne Bradstreet's poem 'Spirit to Flesh' (1650) –

toward the end of the Wilderness section. In here flesh, ‘the unregenerate part’ is admonished to “disturb no more my settled heart, for I have vowed, and so will do, thee as a foe still to pursue. Sisters we are, yea, twins we be, yet deadly feud ‘twixt thee and me”. For Bradstreet the unregenerate soul is the soul who has not yet conquered the material world, whose spirit – as Bradstreet puts it – remains twinned with the worldly. This dichotomy also lies at the heart of a puritan poetic and it is this duality, between the spiritual and the worldly, between a discernible past and an uncertain future, which is expressed through the synthesis, as well as ambiguity, of image and text in *TINE*.

In the end, then, *TINE* must be seen as an indication of Nancy Newhall’s desire to merge the past with the present, and to present the culture of New England as a truly collective, democratic *and* personal experience. In Strand’s photographs, attempting to stop time, to exist outside and beyond the texts accompanying them, we discern a fittingly puritanical form of “morose heroism” and a growing sense of nostalgia for an America he was soon to leave behind.

Bibliography

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941.^[1]^[SEP]

Milton Brown, ed. *Paul Strand, a Retrospective Monograph 1971*, New York: Aperture, 1971.

Beaumont Newhall, *Focus – Memoirs of a life in photography*, New York: Bulfinch, 1993.^[1]^[SEP]

Nancy Newhall, ‘The Caption: The Mutual Relation Between Words/Photographs’ in *From Adams to Stieglitz – Pioneers of Modern Photography*, New York: Aperture, 1999.^[1]^[SEP]

Calvin Tomkins, ‘A Profile of Paul Strand’ in *Paul Strand: Sixty Years of Photographs*, New York: Aperture, 1976.^[1]^[SEP]

Hollis Frampton, ‘Mediations Around Paul Strand’ in *Artforum*, Feb. 1972. Reprinted in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton* ed. by Bruce Jenkins, London: MIT Press, 2009.

Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work, ed. Maren Stange, intro. Alan Trachtenberg, New York: Aperture, 1990.^[1]^[SEP]

Paul Strand, 'The Art Motive in Photography' in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* ed. Christopher Phillips, New York: Aperture, 1989.

The Turn Around Religion: American Literature, Culture and the Work of Sacvan Bercovitch, eds. Nan Goodman and Michael Kramer, London: Ashgate, 2011.