Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Arthur Rothstein, 1964 May 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Arthur Rothstein on May 25, 1964. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

RICHARD DOUD: This is an interview with Arthur Rothstein in New York City, May 24, 1964. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: I'd like to preface this first-do you have the microphone on now? -I just wanted to say at the beginning that none of what I say is for publication.

RICHARD DOUD: Absolutely.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: All right, that's understood. None of this material will be printed in any form or used in any form without my permission.

RICHARD DOUD: The tape will be transcribed for the Archives.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: O.K.

RICHARD DOUD: If I need my permission-

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, I would like to see it before it becomes part of the Archives.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: This is part of the procedure, yes. It will be transcribed and a copy sent to you for whatever you want to change.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Because you know in transcribing tape recordings there are frequently misstatements or quotations attributed to people that they in effect didn't make, so I've always liked to preface these remarks with a statement like that.

RICHARD DOUD: A good point. Well, I'd like to start then with your background interest in photography. How did you first develop an interest in picture taking? I understand you were sort of working along this line back in pre-New Deal, as a student. You were a medical student, I believe, or something along this line.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, let me tell you what the facts were so that you won't be believing anything, you won't be assuming anything. The facts were that I had gone to Columbia College. Before going to Columbia College and during high school I was very interested in photography as a hobby, and it had been a very active hobby of mine. I had my own dark room in the basement of my home and I experimented with various techniques. I had photographs exhibited in pictorial salons even as a teenager, and it was a very consuming interest for me. When I went to Columbia I founded the Columbia University Camera Club and I became very active in photography-as an amateur endeavor-at Columbia University. There were a number of other students who were similarly interested and we had this club, and we had little exhibitions. I was responsible for inviting Mr. Steichen to Columbia to give a talk. I used photography also as a means of supplementing my tuition, and I had many little projects that I worked on. I did photography for students who needed them for theses and dissertations, and I was quite active in using photography in the publication. I was a member of the Jester staff. I was also the photographic editor of the Columbian, which was the annual. All during this time I had intended to go to medical school. I was taking pre-med courses, majoring in Physics and Chemistry. However, the Depression came along; this was in the '30's, the early '30's, when things were very black for everyone because of the Depression. It didn't look as though it would be possible for me to go to medical school-tuition was very high and financial problems came up. We didn't have the wonderful scholarship set-ups that we have today and I didn't quite know what I was going to do during my senior year. I met Roy Stryker and Rex Tugwell and they had a very interesting photographic project that they wanted me to operate for them-a project involving the pictorial
history of American agriculture. I commanded a small task force of students under the National Youth Administration auspices, and we assembled lots of photographs which I copied with my Leica, made prints and turned them over to Roy. Roy deposited them in a file cabinet for future use in this book that he and Tugwell were planning to produce, but which, unfortunately, they never did produce. Just about this time, during my senior year, Tugwell started becoming very active in the New Deal, as one of the New Deal professors, you remember the original Brain Trust, and became the Resettlement Administrator. He invited Roy to come down to

Washington and make a history of the Resettlement Administration. When Roy got to Washington he decided that the best way to show the accomplishments of the Resettlement Administration would be through visual means, because Roy was a man who was visually oriented. Long before people were talking about visual communications he was practicing visual communications. Roy was a firm believer in the power of pictures and that the best way to record something and explain something was through the use of photographs. Roy was not a photographer, but he was a man who knew a lot about photographs, and he was a great believer in the content and the subject matter of the photograph having meaning. So he offered me a job as a photographer for the Resettlement Administration. Naturally, in those days jobs were hard to get and I jumped at the chance. I thought at the time I would be a photographer for a year or so and make a lot of money working for the government and then go back to medical school. But I never got back to medical school. Instead of that I found that photography is really such a fascinating thing that I just wanted to continue with it, and I've been doing it now for thirty years.

RICHARD DOUD: One of the breaks of fortune, I guess. It's sort of interesting to me, your first impressions of what you'd do. You were the first photographer hired for Resettlement administration. Well, what did they tell you you would be doing, and did you do what-? I mean, did it work out the way they said it was going to?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: yes. Well, to me it was a great educational experience. I was a provincial New Yorker. I was born right in the middle of Manhattan Island. I was not only born in New York City, but I went to school in New York City and I even went to college in New York City. So, coming from this, you might say, very provincial New York background, it was a wonderful opportunity to travel around the country and see what the rest of the United States was like. Also, there was a kind of feeling of great excitement in Washington in those days, the feeling that you were in on something new and exciting, a missionary sense of dedication to this project, of making the world a better place to live in, making the United States a better place to love in. There was a kind of evolutionary process. It was quite definite that photographs were important in making this historical record of the Resettlement administration's activities. Roy Stryker, at the very beginning, had some pretty definite ideas as to what he wanted. He was tremendously interested in rural America and he operated this photograph section more like a seminar in an educational institution than a governmental agency, which made it all very interesting. Roy made everyone who worked with him, including me, read a great deal. We were constantly given books to read, new books that Roy had picked up that he felt were applicable to our work, and we had long discussions; we would have discussions sometimes until one or two o'clock in the morning. Roy loved to phone people at night-

RICHARD DOUD: He still does.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: He was a great catalyst and a great stimulator, and he made people think about their work. Now as far as the photography is concerned, Roy was not too much concerned with the actual photographic technique. In the beginning he left a good deal of it up to me. I ordered equipment; I worked with the photo lab people; I helped design the photographic laboratory. Russell Lee was also a great technician and he and I did a great deal of work on the actual mechanics of photography. Roy, I think, also benefited a great deal from having two people who were already in the government and who were tremendously interested in photography and in Roy's work: Ben Shahn and Walker Evans. Now these men were a little farther advanced in the field-they already had reputations. Ben was a well-known artist at that time and Walker Evans was an accomplished photographer with a very definite sense of style. Both of them contributed a great deal to my own development as a photographer in those days, because they had very definite approaches, and it was not just a question of making a picture, but making a picture that had meaning. They made me very aware of the elements that go into photography-that go beyond just the content of the picture-the elements of style, of individual approach, of being able to see clearly, being able to visualize ideas, and I'm quite sure that these two people did more for my development as a photographer than any two photographers that I could think of at that particular stage. Of course, I would imagine that as I've gone along in my career there have been many people who have influenced me; certainly now I'm involved in an entirely different kind of work, in photojournalism. They were not concerned at all with photojournalism. They were interested in photography as a fine art.

RICHARD DOUD: You were there-you saw this thing grow the way it eventually grew. Could you tell me how they actually selected the photographers who were to do the work? Was there any sort of screening process, or-

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Not really. It just sort of happened. There were some people that were already there. For example, I was hired fresh out of college by Roy. When I arrived we found that there was another organization that was being attached to the Resettlement Administration, an organization called Suburban resettlement Administration. This suburban thing already had a photographer working for them named Carl Mydans. So Carl Mydans became one of our group. Ben Shahn and Walker Evens were there sort of doing things on a free-lance or odd job basis. Ben was more interested in assembling photographs that could be used as notes for his paintings, a technique that he still uses today. Dorthea Lange had been working for the state of California on related projects-migrant projects, and so forth. She became attached to Roy's organization in an attempt to consolidate all these photographic activities. Then, for example, John Vachon became a photographer. He had

been a file clerk and he was interested in photography. He was filing pictures, pictures made by other photographers. I took him out on his very first photographic assignment and he developed into a photographer with a very definite approach and a definite style of his own. We're very fortunate to have him here as a member of the Look photographic staff. Who else did we have in that group? We had a number of people there that just kind of happened. For example, there was Paul Carter who was there because he was the brother of John Franklin Carter, the Director of Information for the Resettlement Administration. Well, there was a fellow named Jung. Theodore Jung, who was-who had been hired as a kind of artist originally, and he wanted to try his hand at photography. Roy was very willing to let anybody who wanted to take pictures, take pictures. You know, he'd let them borrow a camera and the lab would process their film, and if they became interested enough in photography to work at it and if they did a good job, he was delighted. So we acquired a number of people that way. Who else did I omit? Marian Post, for example, Marian Post came down there to Washington. She had a sister who lived there and she had been a photographer on one of the Philadelphia newspapers. She was very anxious to work for Roy-a very attractive girl-very energetic, and she brought a lot of enthusiasm to the work and contributed a great deal.

RICHARD DOUD: Where is she now?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: The last I heard from her, she and her husband were in Pakistan as part of a State Department-he had some sort of a State Department job.

RICHARD DOUD: She's still taking pictures?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Not really now. She talks a lot about going back into it, but she has a lot of children to worry about.

RICHARD DOUD: Makes a difference. How did Russel Lee get into this thing? He was from the Midwest.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Yes. Well, Russ came out here. At that time he was-I don't quite understand what the contact was, whether he came to Washington through his first wife, Doris Lee, who did some work, I believe for the government, or through some of the painters. Russ was originally interested in art, in painting. He has a very interesting background. He went to a military school and was trained as an engineer, which gave him that mechanical background. He was interested in art and it wasn't until later that he became interested in photography. But the combination of this engineering and science and art background made him an ideal photographer.

RP: Do you remember what your first real field assignment was for this thing, and how did you go about starting out? You were a sort of pioneer, I think, and I'm interested in how you felt about actually taking off into the field since you say that you're sort of a provincial New Yorker. It must gave been sort of a "great unknown" to you. What did you do to get ready for this?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, there were great advantages, of course, in being a provincial New Yorker, because everything seemed fresh and exciting. Now the first assignment, if I remember correctly, was in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. We had a group of people there that were being moved out to make way for a national park, Shenandoah national Park, and these people were all people who lived in the hills and the hollows of the Blue Ridge Mountains not far from Washington, about eighty miles from Washington. I went out there and was in a cabin on the top of a mountain for a few weeks, walked around and became acquainted with these people. At the beginning they were very shy about having pictures taken, but I would carry my camera along and make no attempt to take pictures. They just got to know me, and finally, they didn't mind if I took a few pictures. I took quite a few unusual pictures at that time using a Leica camera and a technique that is almost a standard. A technique that I developed out of necessity all by myself which I call the "unobtrusive camera," the idea of becoming a part of the environment that the people are in to such an extent that they're not even aware that pictures are being taken. And I did this in 1935 on the first assignment that I did for the Resettlement Administration. I didn't do it deliberately or consciously; I did it out of necessity. It was the only way I could get these pictures, you see. The purpose of the project was to photograph these people who were going to be moved out and photograph them in such a way that you had some idea of how they lived and what they did, because their entire way of life was going to be destroyed. They were going to be taken out of this environment and moved into shiny new houses where they would no longer have the picturesque quality that they had living in the hills. This record that I made I think served a very useful purpose. It showed how a certain group of people in the United States lived at a particular time, and they no longer exist. I think that it has a great deal of value. Some of the pictures I made were good enough to be considered fairly fine examples of photography. But before I went out I had long discussions with Roy Stryker about what I was going to do and what I was going to show. Roy was the one who made me aware of the fact that there is a great deal of significance in small details. He made me aware of the fact that it was important, say, to photograph the corner of a cabin showing an old shoe and a bag of flour; or it was important to get a close-up of a man's face; and it was important to show a window stuffed with rags. He made me conscious of all these things, and I just went out and did them. I enjoyed doing

them, and in the process of doing them I developed a certain sense of design and order and composition, and combined that with the use of a miniature camera, which at the time was only six or seven years old. Using the small, unobtrusive camera, and doing all these things, I came up with at that time-what seemed at that time-to be remarkable photography.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, now, this seems to be an ideal Resettlement Administration job you were doing here. This is showing, more or less, what Resettlement was actually doing. It seems to me that later on, so many of the projects you people undertook, so many of the photographs you took, dealt not specifically with what Resettlement was doing, but dealt with a way of life -that didn't necessarily change due to Resettlement. In other words, you started going out and doing projects of segments of America that went down and perhaps eventually went up or stayed down.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, that's true. Now what you're talking about is a later development, the way in which the whole farm Security Administration project evolved over the years. You're getting beyond the first assignment now.

RICHARD DOUD: Right.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, as it went on over the years, Roy became more and more fascinated with making a pictorial record of life in the United States. He wasn't just satisfied with the Resettlement administration-he wanted to photograph everything in the United States. He was interested in everything, anything, all details, everything of significance, some things that were of no significance. He did a lot of editing of the pictures, there were lots of pictures that he went through and didn't put in files. In the Library of Congress you'll find strips of 35 millimeter film with holes punched in the middle of them -occasional negatives that Roy didn't think were suitable for the files, not to be printed for one reason or another-maybe they were duplicates, maybe it wasn't the best. This is a technique that we don't do today, even here at Look magazine. We save everything here that the photographer has shot. But Roy was a very selective person. He was indiscriminate and selective at the same time.

RICHARD DOUD: Strange combination. What puzzles me is how, working in a government agency, he could get by with going so far afield from the specifications of this particular project, of the job he was supposed to do, and-

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, he had very good support from Tugwell.

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Tugwell was a powerful man in the Administration and because of that support, he was able to do a great many things that other people couldn't do. Also, Roy's personality was such that he was able to kind of push his way through all of the red tape that existed in the government, and he accomplished a great deal more than any person that would just sit back, willing to allow themselves to become a part of the bureaucracy and as a result, he was able to get a lot of things done. It's a tribute to the force of this man that he was able to accomplish all he did, because you know how difficult it is to get things done in the government. Here he was, doing things-pioneering ventures, and he did it through the sheer force of his personality.

RICHARD DOUD: He still has it, as far as that goes. He's a very dynamic person. You mentioned some aspects of your first assignment. I was wondering if you'd care to say a little bit about some of the assignments that you were on that stand out particularly in your memory, some of the ones that impressed you, perhaps, more than others, that were significant for some reason.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, of course there was still this one assignment that will always be one that I will remember. It was the one that resulted in my making the famous "Dust Storm" photograph-a photograph that has probably been reproduced more than any other picture in the files.

RICHARD DOUD: I dare say it has.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: And it's a photograph that I'm very proud, even at this date, to have made, and when you realize that I made this in 1936, twenty-eight years ago, and it still holds up twenty-eight years later, to me it's an interesting commentary on the success of some photographs. This was an assignment that had been given to me by Roy-to go to the Dust Bowl, to Oklahoma, Kansas, to Texas, to those area that were being devastated by drought, that were suffering from wind erosion. You may remember the stories in those days about the black blizzards that swept across the plains and even darkened the sky in New York City.

RICHARD DOUD: I've seen them.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, it was a dramatic catastrophe in American agriculture. Strangely enough, it was a very

difficult thing to show in pictures, but I lived in the Dust Bowl for several months and went out every day and took pictures. In the process, one day, wandering around through Cimarron County in Oklahoma, which is in the panhandle of Oklahoma, I photographed this farm and the people who lived on the farm. The farmer and his two children, two little boys, were walking past a shed on their property and I took this photograph with the dust swirling all around them. I had no idea at the time that it was going to become a famous photograph, but it looked like a good picture to me and I took it. And I took a number of other pictures on the same property. And then I went on to some other farms and took those pictures. This particular picture turned out to be the picture that was quite famous. It was a picture that had a very simple kind of composition, but there was something about the swirling dust and the shed behind the farmer. What it did was the kind of thing Roy always talked about-it showed an individual in relation to his environment. Of course this is the sort of thing that painters from time immemorial have been trying to do-to show man in relation to his environment. You know the old axiom that " Art is the expression of man," so here, if this has any art, it's because it's an expression of man.

RICHARD DOUD: It certainly is. Well, would you like to say anything for me about another picture you took that caused as much controversy as this particular picture here won acclaim-that skull photograph?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes. Well, the skull photograph was not so much a photograph that created controversy because of the nature of the picture, but the way in which it was used. Now that's a different thing entirely. The Dust Storm picture never created controversy-it had the same function that Jackson's photographs of the national parks had. Jackson came back to Washington with these beautiful landscapes and showed what the country was like out West, and this helped create legislation to preserve these landscapes and these properties as national parks. Well, when my picture of the dust storm was printed widely, over and over and over again, it made people realize that here was a tragedy that was affecting people-it wasn't just affecting crops, but it was affecting people-the relationships between the dust storms and the migrations of people out of this part of the United States and the way it was affecting them individually. This photograph had a great deal of influence on people in the East, for example, who had no contact and no sense of identity with this poor farmer walking across the dusty soil on his farm in Oklahoma-it gave him a sense of identity. And it helped me put a lot of these soil-conservation practices in, and provide legislation for soil conservation to remedy these conditions. So this picture was not controversial; it was informative-the dust storm picture. In the beginning, it was a record; after that it became a news picture, it then became a feature photograph, eventually it became a historical photograph, and now it's considered a work of art in most museums. It's a picture that went through a kind of evolutionary process all by itself. It has a life of its own.

RICHARD DOUD: That's very interesting.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Now the skull picture, on the other hand, I thought was a good picture when I made it. I was really resorting to some exercises in photography. Just as a photographer might take, like Steichen took a cup and saucer, and he photographed it with different kinds of lighting, from the sides, from the back and so forth, and he made all sorts of exercises with it. Well, I found myself in South Dakota on cracked earth where there was a skull, and I made a lot of photographic exercises using the skull-the texture of the skull, the texture of the earth, the cracks in the soil, the lighting, how the lighting changed from the east to the west as the sun went down. I spent a good part of the day taking pictures of it, near a piece of cactus, on grass-you know-and experimenting with it. I sent all these pictures in to Washington. I was on this long trip, which took many months out through the West. Roy was always permitting picture editors from the Associated Press and other agencies to go through the file and if they saw anything they liked, they were to take it and print it. Unknown to me, and perhaps even unknown to Roy, this picture editor, Max Hill with Associated Press (he dies quite some time ago) extracted the photograph. Since he knew nothing about the West, to him this was a symbol of the drought. The fact is that it had been made in May and the fact that these arroyos are to be found even to this day in any part of the West, and the fact that you can find skulls of steers and cows and jackrabbits and rabbits, and so forth, all over the plains meant nothing to him. He just liked this picture probably because I lavished so much photographic artistry on it, you see. And so he sent it out as an example of the drought. This was months later, months after I'd made the picture. The drought was becoming serious around June and July. Well, there, too, nothing would have happened probably if the editor of the Fargo Forum had not picked up this picture, serviced by the Associated Press, Fargo Forum was a member of the Associated Press, and said, "Now this is a real example of fakery." As far as he was concerned, it was a fake photograph. He didn't know that I had made the picture in May and that the picture had a caption on it that I hadn't contributed, that it was sent out by the Associated Press, not by the government! He didn't know any of these things. As far as he was concerned, here was a government picture that was a fake. Propaganda. And of course the Forum was, like most newspapers of the time, opposed to the Democratic Party and to the New Deal. He wrote a big front-page editorial, just as Roosevelt was coming through Bismark, North Dakota, and printed a special edition of the Fargo Forum with this picture on the front page and called it a fake-New Deal Propaganda-there was a lot of talk about that in those days-and put this on the train for all the correspondents to read. It just happened that I was in Bismark, North Dakota, at the time this came through. One of the correspondents asked me if I had made this picture and I agreed that I had. So he immediately sent a message back to Washington and got somebody to start digging through the files. They found a lot of other pictures that I had made, and this of course became a great joke.

Cartoonists drew pictures of me wandering all over the United States with a skull, planting it here and planting it there, but the fact is that this was the farthest thing from my mind. I had not taken the picture in the first place as an example of New Deal propaganda; I had taken a picture of something that existed, and may even exist today. I had not taken the picture with the idea of it being used as a symbol of the drought, although it did show the drought, I mean it was dried earth and a skull. And this thing snowballed to the point there were columns written about it, stories in Time Magazine, and Westbrook Pegler wrote a humorous little satirical piece; some people came to the defense of this picture and other people attacked it. Meantime I evaded everybody and went off for a vacation in Minnesota.

RICHARD DOUD: To me, at least, this one example shows how this whole business could be misunderstood or misconstrued. Do you think that at the time, by and large, the public, that is through the newspapers and through the various pictorial outlets, do you think that what you people were doing was being appreciated in the sense that it was being presented? Do you think that most people felt that you were showing an accurate picture of, say, hard times in rural America, or the problems facing the country through rural conditions, and this sort of thing?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, actually, I'm in no position to judge how people felt at the time, because I was too busy taking pictures.

RICHARD DOUD: I see- you were sort of away from the reaction.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: I was away from it. I didn't know what the reaction was. I spent very little time in Washington. I was out in the field most of the time. Sometimes I'd be gone for seven or eight weeks at a time, and I had no idea of knowing what the reaction was. I did know that the pictures were used a great deal. Now I think the reason they were used a great deal was because first of all, we were covering subjects that were of great interest. Secondly, we were covering them with a great deal of skill, and spending more time producing interesting pictures than the average news photographer could. And three, the pictures were available free of charge.

RICHARD DOUD: That's important.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Which was very important. In other words, if you wanted to have a picture of what a migrant worker looked like in California, you couldn't send a photographer to California. You could, but it would be a costly and expensive operation. On the other hand, you could go to Washington and get one out of the files taken by a great photographer, Dorthea Lange, and print that.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: So the pictures were used widely. I think the pictures were all honest. There was a great deal of honesty in these pictures. Roy was a great believer in the integrity of a photograph. He would never countenance any kind of fakery in the photograph, and this is all the more surprising in view of the skull picture, you see. But you see that was not Roy's fault-that was the Associated Press. The Associated Press sent this picture out, creating the wrong impression-sent it out of context. It's just like you might take a quotation, take a few words out of it, and give it an entirely different meaning. Here they took a picture out of a collection of pictures and gave it an entirely different meaning.

RICHARD DOUD: Isn't it true that with most pictures, the picture itself is a fairly neutral statement, but it's how it's used or the captions that make it, either pro or con?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: This is exactly the power of the picture, the great importance of the whole field of photojournalism. And the reason why it's so important to a photographer to be basically an honest person is because the photographer has a great deal of responsibility to the readers. Just as a writer has to write honestly and truthfully about what he sees and thinks and does, a photographer has to make pictures that are honest and truthful.

RICHARD DOUD: You people, from what I know of you at least, were honest people. What other qualifications do you think that, say, the six or eight of you fellows who were more prominent at the time have in common, other than really an honesty towards photography?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, I think we had a great social responsibility. This is one thing that we all have in common. We were dedicated to the idea that out lives can be improved, that man is the master of his environment and that it's possible for us to live a better life, not only materially, but spiritually as well. We were all tremendously socially conscious. This had nothing to do with photography, but it was evident in everybody involved in this project, from Roy right on through- even to the secretaries.

RICHARD DOUD: I talked with a couple of them about it-

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: They were all inspired with a kind of missionary zeal-a dedication for social improvement. I think this is the one thing that we did have in common, that transcended all of the other activities.

RICHARD DOUD: This common feeling seems to me a sort of creed, at least at the time, a rather "family" atmosphere among all you people. It's a very unusual relationship to find, at least in a government organization.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, it's what they call an esprit de corps. It was a spirit. This esprit de corps, I think, this feeling of all being directly involved and participating, also contributed a great deal to the success of the whole operation. People weren't just doing a job mechanically; they were doing it with a sense of enthusiasm and excitement.

RICHARD DOUD: Did you really feel at the time you were doing this, did you have this feeling of actually documenting the nation at this time, or was this a little bit further along when you could see the whole file coming together as a "national scene," perhaps? Did you really know what you were going to wind up with in the end?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: No, I don't think so. I don't think it was planned at the beginning with this degree of-it wasn't planned as a definitive approach to document the entire nation. I think this kind of evolved-

RICHARD DOUD: Like Topsy, it just grew.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: It just grew.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I was wondering, you mentioned earlier that Walker Evens and Ben Shahn contributed particularly at the beginning of your work with Farm Security. Is it possible to assess, in any way, what your association with photographers like Russel Lee or Carl Mydans- is it possible to tell whether or not they influenced you, or how they influenced you?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, let's take Carl Mydans. Carl Mydans was there for a relatively short period of time. I believe he was there only about a year and a half, or two years.

RICHARD DOUD: I think so, yes.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Now, the one thing that he did contribute, as far as my small association with him, because I didn't spend too much time with him, was the sense of journalistic approach, because he was basically a journalist. He was a reporter from the very beginning. He used the photograph only as an adjunct to his writing. All of his stories, even to this day, are a combination of words and pictures. The one thing that he did make me realize was that words are important, and that words and pictures are a very effective form of communication, but the words are just as important as the pictures. This is something that I've learned since, and it's been reinforced through my work here at Look Magazine. As far as Russ was concerned, Russell Lee also arrived a little later on the scene, about '37, I think it was, '38, somewhere around there, was that it?

RICHARD DOUD: I'm not sure of the date; I know he was a latecomer.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: The main interest in my relationship with Russ was mainly a technical one. We used to have long discussions about developers and experiment with techniques, and lenses, and new ideas in the technical aspect of photography. So Russ's contribution was kind of as a colleague in the technical end of the operation. I think that his-I think that Russ was a great technician. He had a sense of perfection that many of us didn't have.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned earlier that since you were in the field a good bit of the time you weren't too conscious of the actual acceptance of what you were doing, that is the effect of the pictures and all. Could you give me some idea of what you feel is the real value of this group of photographs now? I'm sure it has a different value now than it had then.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Yes. I think that it has many values. It has, first of all, value as a historical record of the times. It shows how people lived on the farms and in the small towns, at that particular time in our life. I don't believe that you could find a record put together anywhere that equals this. Secondly, I think that it contributed a great deal to new ideas in expressing thoughts visually through photographs. Many new techniques of visual communication were pioneered here. I mentioned one, for example, on the very first assignment that I had, which has now become a great thing; it's called "decisive moment," "the exact instant," "the unobtrusive camera" "fading into the wallpaper." People make a big thing of it now as if they just discovered it. But you have to remember that I didn't do it for the first time, either. Dr. Eric Solomon did it in the twenties with a little Ermanox camera. He photographed Mussolini at the League of Nations with a small camera, not the Leica, but a camera that predated the Leica. This type of photography has now become an accepted technique by photojournalists, by magazine photographers and news photographers. And also that it was a recognition of the

photograph as an art form. This particular project made it quite clear to everybody that photographs have the same value and the same artistic qualities as good drawings, as paintings, as pieces of sculpture; that they can be examples of fine art. They aren't all necessarily fine art, but then an awful lot of drawings and pieces of sculpture and works of music aren't fine art, either. But it is possible to produce fine art through the camera. This was done on a large scale in the Farm Security Project. And now, today, I think that this project stands as an inspiration to others who may want to do the same thing someday. That perhaps every twenty-five years we should have a record of what the United States is like, what life is like in the United States. That a new generation has come along, and maybe we need a new generation of photographers going out and showing what it's like today, in our world of missiles and space capsules and television and all of those things that exist today that we didn't have thirty years ago.

RICHARD DOUD: Sort of along this line I have a personal problem with photojournalism, if you want to call it that. There's a good deal of interest, as you know, in the problem of poverty in Appalachia, and people have begun to take a good many people of depressed areas through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and so on. Somehow, these pictures are not reaching me the way the pictures did that you people took twenty-five or thirty years ago. I'm concerned that it might simply be that I'm sort of comparing, perhaps, in favor of you people.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: No, I think that what happens is, well, it's the business of, "You should never go back." You never go back again, you always go forward, but never backwards. There wouldn't be much point, for example, in my trying to make photographs the way Julia Margaret Cameron did-portraits of famous people. I should develop my own technique, my own way of doing things. It would be foolish to go out and try to make landscapes the way William Henry Jackson did. I don't want to go back and take pictures as I did thirty years ago. I want to take pictures the way things are today, using modern techniques and modern approaches, and a modern point of view, a contemporary point of view. So if somebody goes to Appalachia and he makes pictures of- to evoke in you a reminder of the same photographs we made in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, of poor people living in cabins, and you say, "Well, I've seen that somewhere before," then it already loses it's impact. It's lost its value. On the other hand, if someone were to go to Appalachia and use the modern techniques of photojournalism, the modern techniques, for example of trying to convey emotions through photographs, the sort of thing that we didn't do in those days as much as we do today, and using modern techniques of photography, the use of available light, the use of color, for example, not color for a picturesque quality, but color in the monochromatic sense, where you heighten the values that exist in the scene-if the photographer were to do that and come up with a set of pictures, then you wouldn't say," Well, these look like the same pictures that were made by the farm Security Administration thirty years ago." You'd say," Well, here's an exciting set of pictures that gets across an idea." And that, I think, is the difference.

RICHARD DOUD: Even at that I think what is being done today should, perhaps, reach me. In other words, what I'm trying to say is that the type of thing being done with Appalachia is not reaching me in any sense of the word. The pictures just don't have what it takes to evoke a response in me; and had you people been doing this type of thing, I don't see how you could have been successful in making the public aware of what was going on. I can very easily flip over the pictures of poverty in Appalachia because I don't think they're saying, in strong enough terms, that here is a need and something should be done about it. And I wonder why, or is the problem strictly with me?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Maybe the photographers and the people who have gone out to do this haven't given it enough thought, or put in enough time. One, or maybe both. We used to spend a lot of time thinking, and we used to spend a lot of time taking pictures. Today we do things in a big hurry.

RICHARD DOUD: This could be it.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: I've just returned from a trip to the Soviet Union where I traveled tens and thousands of miles through a vast country, and I don't pretend to know anything about the Soviet Union after thirty days there. But there are lots of people who come back from a week in the Soviet Union and they're giving lectures.

RICHARD DOUD: Maybe this is the whole problem-it's just not enough preparation and not enough knowledge of their subject to really make these pictures of importance and impact. Well, I'll try to rush along here a little bit. Everyone sort of tends to look back with a glow on the good things that happen in the past. I was wondering if you could comment on what you think might have been some of the shortcomings of the Farm Security Project. What wasn't run right? What could have been done better? What was bad about this whole thing, or was it an idyllic situation?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: No, it was far from idyllic. As a matter of fact, we had long discussions; we were great believers in constructive criticism. And we discussed many things that were-well, it's kind of hard for me at this point to think of what probably a monumental barrier thirty years ago and today if you look back on it, it might seem kind of petty. Well, there were many things about it that I'm sure we criticized, and there were many things that were wrong, many personalities that clashed, and some of them still do today. And it was not an

idyllic set-up, by any means. By and large it worked, and that was the important thing. I couldn't put my finger on any one thing at this time that would indicate a major improvement in the operation. We had a good laboratory for processing films; we had excellent printers. If today some of the prints weren't washed sufficiently, and they faded, well, there's one of the things that's wrong. But who knew at that time, you know? If Roy Stryker, in editing the pictures, did not include in the files some that perhaps today we might consider great masterpieces, I wouldn't know. Maybe his judgment was right at the time; maybe in looking over the things that could have been in there he may have overlooked some pictures that were good, I don't know. In any case, somebody has to make decisions, and as the leader of the project Roy had to make decisions and he did. I think that we were given remarkable support by the government. There were a lot of petty annoyances, like the time I tried to collect $2.40 on a travel voucher and I got into a long series of correspondence with the General Accounting Office that lasted seven months, but this was part of the bureaucracy of government. Most of the time things went very well. I would say that one thing that might have improved the organization and the productivity would have been to have teams go out, rather than individuals. If we had writer-photographer teams a great more work would have been accomplished by having two people go out-one to record things in words and the other to record things in pictures, and they could have reinforced each other. Perhaps the results would have been more meaningful. I find going through the files that a lot of pictures have very scanty captions and that the captions and that the captions are not really indicative of everything that went on. The way that the captions were written, the photographer would come back and go through stacks of pictures and take his notes out, trying to reconstruct things, you know. And it seems to me that if we had had a system where someone had been along right there on the spot, writing down names, taking quotations, what is this person actually saying? A great deal of Dorthea Lange's work is much more effective because she took her husband Paul Taylor along on most of her trips and Paul acted as a reporter, so she had a real top-notch reporter, you see. I think that that would have been one major aid to the project. Otherwise, I can't think of anything else. Perhaps a better use of the pictures could have been made. But there, too, there was always the problem of stirring up Congress and getting Congressmen mad because the pictures were being used. It was the opposition to the newspapers who resented the idea of the government sending out pictures no matter how good they were, that were free, so there were problems there, too. But I think the pictures could have had wider circulation at the time, although they did get wide circulation, it could have been used more effectively.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, if you have time, I'd like to turn this over and ask a couple more questions.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

RICHARD DOUD: This calls for a strictly personal opinion. Perhaps you may not consider it important, but you mentioned that this experience with Farm Security contributed a couple of real things to you, one through your association with other photographers, another in getting you more or less out of New York, helping perhaps to overcome some of your provincial attitudes and all, and I'm always interested in what is the most significant thing you learned about America and Americans, traveling the way you did, and being in the situations, and meeting the type of people whom you met. What one factor about Americans could more or less sum up an American quality, or is there such a thing?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: well, it's pretty hard for me to answer that in terms of the way things were in 1930, 1935, only my concept of Americans then might have been different from my concept of Americans today.

RICHARD DOUD: It probably was. I think it should be, in a way.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: And putting it back in those years I found that a kind of individualism existed among the people, and inability to conform, desire to be the master of their own fate. This is a sort of trait I think that even to this day exists among Americans. They're not docile people, and I may be coloring my impressions because I've just returned from the Soviet Union, but Americans don't do what you expect them to do. Each man is an individual, and the one thing I found in traveling through the United States was that every man and every woman was different. They all come from different backgrounds and different nationalities. There was no homogeneous quality about Americans, and it was a fascinating experience to learn this.

RICHARD DOUD: I dare say it would be.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: And I still think it exists today. I think we're losing it, I think we're becoming more homogeneous, with jet travel and with television, newspapers all being printed pretty much the same way and reading the same way, and the collapse of the small town, and better transportation facilities. A funny story that you hear in New York will be in Los Angeles within a few hours; a style that appears on a model in New York will be in Des Moines, Iowa, within a few days-we're becoming more and more homogeneous. In those days, in the thirties, to me there was a tremendous contrast, a tremendous difference in different parts of the United States. It was a fascinating thing to spend a month on a cattle ranch in Montana, for example, and see how people live there. It was a fascinating thing to spend time on a cotton plantation in the South, and see how the cultures of the people vary down there too. So I think that the one thing that did impress me at the time more than

anything else was the great Individualism of the American people.

RICHARD DOUD: Now I have a question that may not be that easy-it may be easier. I was interested in how your approach or your philosophy of photography differs as a photographer for a national magazine like Look from your approach as a Farm Security photographer. Understandably, there's a different end result in mind, but do you view photography differently today than you did? Yes, I think so. I think of photography today-you're talking about the photography that I do for Look?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, the photography that I do for Look and Crowles Communications-because I'm now involved in other publications and other projects as well-all of the photography that I do now is designed for publication. Every picture that I take is taken with the idea that the picture is going to be printed somewhere. It's going to be printed on a page and it's going to reach a vast, tremendous audience. Now this is an entirely different kind of photograph and it's a different concept from the photography that I did when I worked for Resettlement Administration, because there, the pictures were taken not for publication. They were not taken with the idea that they were going to be printed. They were taken as a historical record. The emphasis was on the quality of the photography as a means of getting across information and at the same time preserving a certain amount of artistic interpretation, using the fine arts aspect of the photographic medium to explain and show what like was like in that particular part of the country. We're not interested in that approach here. We're interested only in the picture as a means to an end. In the case of the Resettlement Administration the picture was the end-that was it. Once the picture got in the files, that was the end. The idea was to get pictures in the files. We don't care about files here; the files to us are just a place to store things. The thing we are interested in now at Look, at Venture, Family Circle, the 3-D photographs that I make, all of the various types of photography that I'm doing now-we're interested, and I'm interested, in the pictures that are going to reach a vast audience and that will be printed by the millions and the photograph is just the means to the end. The end is the printed page.

RICHARD DOUD: Which approach was the most personally satisfying to you as you were working? In which case did you feel you were contributing more to photography?

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Well, I think that if you can influence large groups of people through your photography, it's a very satisfying thing.

RICHARD DOUD: This is what you can do now.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: This is what I can do now.

RICHARD DOUD: Good. Well, I'd better let you go then. I want to thank you very much. I think you've made a real contribution.

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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