

Frederick Sommer is one of the most interesting photographic artists of our time. His name is not a household word, like Ansel Adams or Edward Weston. Sommer developed from a different direction, outside the mainstream of American photography as it emerged during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. He has produced an extremely varied but comparatively small body of work. Moreover, he makes very few prints of each negative, so his work has been collected by a limited number of individuals and museums. Compared with more popular photographers, Sommer has had an underground reputation, a reputation of such strength that it transcends ordinary respect.

The legendary position he now occupies in the hierarchy of modern photographers developed slowly over a period of many years. During the 1940s and 1950s, very few people knew his name. Only a handful of photographers and museum curators responded to Sommer's unusual work. His reputation grew larger in the sixties and early seventies with his first retrospective exhibitions and major publications. During the 1980s, he became better known, thanks to a number of large exhibitions that toured cities from coast to coast. After decades of quiet isolation in Arizona, Sommer has become, to many, a mythological hero. He is now widely regarded as an elder of Surrealist photography in America, a shaman of the silver salts, an alchemist of the mercurial vapors.⁵

Sommer was born in 1905 in Angri, Italy, near Naples. His mother was Swiss. His German father was an horticulturist (and later a landscape architect) who was fascinated by the tropics and moved his family to Brazil in 1913. First they lived in São Paulo, then in 1916 the family settled in Rio de Janeiro. Frederick proved to be a very gifted young man, fluent in five languages. He worked in his father's office and experimented with photography. At the age of sixteen, he won an important architectural prize. In 1923, at the age of eighteen, Sommer designed an award-winning municipal garden in Rio.

He planned for a profession in some form of architecture. As an artist-philosopher, he had grown up with both a love for rich emotional states and a deep respect for logic. The rest of his life would be focused on how to integrate these two sides of his awareness in dynamic equilibrium. Eventually, Sommer developed a powerful philosophy of "poetic logic" but only after many years as a restless spirit engaged in the quest for truth, or as he expressed it, "walking about the world, searching for something we carry within ourselves."⁶

In 1925 he moved to Ithaca, New York, where he attended Cornell University, receiving an M.A. in Landscape Architecture in 1927. In Ithaca, he met Frances Watson, his future wife. From 1927 to 1930 he practiced his new profession as a landscape architect and an urban site planner in Rio. Then he contracted tuberculosis.

The year 1930-31 was a year of profound psychological transformation. The Shadow of Death passed through Sommer's awareness. He did not know

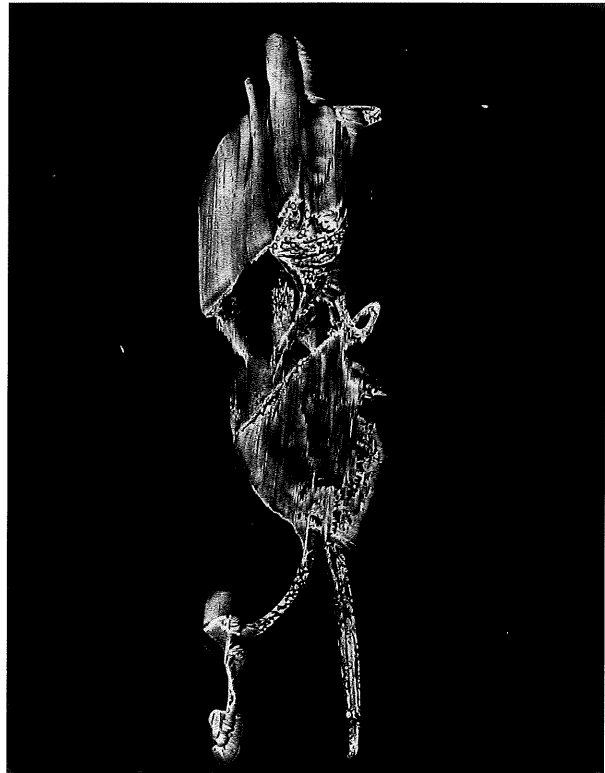


Fig. 15 STENDHAL, 1959. Gelatin silver print.
Museum purchase.



Fig. 16 *LIVIA, 1948. Gelatin silver print. Museum purchase with funds provided by Eastman Kodak Company.*

people could survive tuberculosis, and considered his days numbered. Frances informed him that people could survive and proposed a course of action. When they left South America in 1930 for rest and recuperation in the clean, dry climate of Arosa, Switzerland, he was an architectural artist. When they returned to North America in August 1931, he had become a pictorial artist. That was unusual. Even more unusual was his decision to commit himself to the integration of the pictorial arts.

While in Europe Sommer encountered all of the radical changes that were taking place in modern architecture, design, painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts. When Frederick and Frances arrived in Barcelona, they were stunned by not only the emotional power of Gaudi but also the cool, clear logic of the Barcelona Pavilion by Miës van der Rohe. Spending the first half of 1931 in France and Italy, he absorbed what had happened during the last phases of Post-Impressionism in the hands of the Fauvists and the Expressionists, and the revolution of the Cubists. Among the Cubo-Futurists he was especially impressed by the dynamic plastic forms of Boccioni as exhibited in the *Jeu de Paume* and later by the dynamic philosophical playfulness of Marcel Duchamp. He was most impressed by the large Matisse exhibition at the *Galerie Georges Petit*. Sommer admired both Matisse's power as a colorist and the unqualified fluidity of his spontaneity. "Most artists need to 'warm up' before they can move spontaneously," said Sommer. "Not Matisse."⁷

Profoundly stimulated by these experiences, Sommer began concentrating on the art of flat surfaces: painting, drawing, and photography. In Europe, Sommer bought his first camera and started to explore the arts of the picture plane and, particularly, their interrelationships.

Unlike most modern artists, Sommer never decided to practice only one visual medium. In time, the work of the photographer would become his primary craft but he saw no reason to stop practicing painting and drawing at the same time. No other artist of his generation in America has done more to integrate the use of so many media so brilliantly. In the process, Sommer expanded the traditional boundaries of photography. He had a great deal of time to think about what he wanted to do and how he wanted to do it. Returning from Europe and needing a dry climate, the decision was made to settle in Arizona where the Sommers still live. That is where he spent

the 1930s, working in all of his media, reading a great deal of art criticism, art history, and philosophy, and staying in touch with ongoing developments in the natural sciences.

When he decided to concentrate on photography as his primary tool, it was a thoughtful, informed decision. Sommer is one of the most widely read artists of the 20th century and one of the most articulate. In 1935, Sommer felt it was important to visit another well-informed, highly articulate artist-philosopher, Alfred Stieglitz. They spent the better part of a week together, often talking for hours at Stieglitz's gallery, *An American Place*, in New York City. It was a very rich experience for Sommer. O'Keeffe liked Sommer's small drawings and thought Stieglitz should exhibit them. Stieglitz did not think he could, saying they should be exhibited by someone who could stay with them for years, whereas he was no longer able to do that.

They spoke a good deal about art and life in general and the art of non-objective painting of the kind Sommer was doing during the 1930s, primarily highly structured watercolors. They also talked at length about the meaning of Modernism for modern artists. Stieglitz stated that the life of the true modern artist involves an unqualified commitment to "total awareness."⁸

Sommer left *An American Place*, affirmed in his own thinking about art and photography. He already had been deeply impressed by the photographs of Edward Weston. Sommer first saw Weston's work in 1933 in the book by Merle Armitage, *The Art of Edward Weston*, 1932. As Sommer later wrote, Weston's "decisive and sensuous use of the tone scale had given his photographic surfaces an impact new to art."⁹

However, it was not until 1936 that Sommer and Weston met in Santa Monica, California. It was the beginning of a warm friendship. They exchanged work, drawings for photographs. It was then that Sommer began to think about using the 8 x 10 format. In December 1938, after a visit by the Westons to Prescott, Sommer bought a large-format camera and immediately went to work with his new tool.

Except for a handful of remarkable portraits, the work of Sommer's first period was primarily landscape and still life photographs. Those categories were traditional, but the images were radically new. After years of thinking about how to photograph the desert landscape that surrounded him in a way that would be expressive of how he felt about his environment, he decided to photograph it without horizons. "I found



Fig. 17 *ARIZONA LANDSCAPE, 1943. Gelatin silver print.*
Museum purchase.

that I was mapping an interior landscape."¹⁰

Except for military and commercial aerial photographers whose purpose was not artistic, no photographer before Sommer had looked at the landscape this way. These "details" of the desert landscape, starting in 1941, have no boundary lines and thus suggest extension toward infinity. There is no central focal point. With no edges fixed for the cone of our vision, the eye moves in continuous motion over an endless field containing a multiplicity of focal points. Because Sommer changed the structure of what we are looking at and how we are looking at it, he has forced us to see not with our ordinary mode of visual perception but with a more intuitive mode.

In short, the very structure of these images disorients us, forces us beyond mere logical response. Many people become uncomfortable when seeing these photographs for the first time. The same is true when most people look at an Abstract Expressionist painting of the kind made by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Tobey, and Lee Krasner during the 1940s. To be "at ease" when looking at such abstract works requires that one be comfortable with ambiguity itself.

Sommer's work with full-field imagery predates most of the painters by several years. Direct influence has yet to be established. However, many American Abstract Expressionists were in close touch with the Surrealists. Arshile Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, et al. were deeply involved with the Surrealist circle. The possibility of influence is strong.¹¹ During 1943 and 1944, Surrealists in New York were talking about Sommer's work and publishing it in their New York magazine *VVV*. Sommer and many other Americans and Europeans who matured during the 1940s were writing a dynamic new chapter in the history of the iconography of infinity.

At least as remarkable for many were his "still life" photographs of dead creatures: jack rabbits, coyotes, horses, and chicken parts. These photographs are startling for many reasons. Images of things dead are startling in themselves, as are the dense details captured by a large-format camera used up close. Sommer selected each desert animal at a point in the eternal cycle of life and death when most of the evidence of life has disappeared, but vestiges of fur and skin remain. In some strange way, these living beings are there but not there. What we see participates in more than one level of reality, in a way that calls to mind the phantasmagorical work of Albrecht Dürer and Hieronymus Bosch. These images also call to mind

lines from one of Sommer's poems:

*There are physical indicators
when something metaphysical
is happening.*

*We are intrigued
by the metaphysical
at the critical distance
to a dream.*¹²

Sommer's chicken photographs force us to think and feel about multiple levels of reality in a different way. When Sommer first showed his chicken and landscape photographs to Max Ernst and Man Ray at a Hollywood party in 1941, they were startled. Here were images both real and surreal, totally natural yet "fiercely mythic."¹³ These feathered creatures did not die a "natural" death as the coyotes did. The hand of man caused this death, in an age-old ritual of killing to eat. Ernst and Man Ray were deeply moved by these powerful presentations of the mythologic. They recognized a kindred spirit in Frederick Sommer. Ernst and Sommer became friends. The friendship grew closer during the nine years they were neighbors in Arizona. Sommer had reservations about some members of the

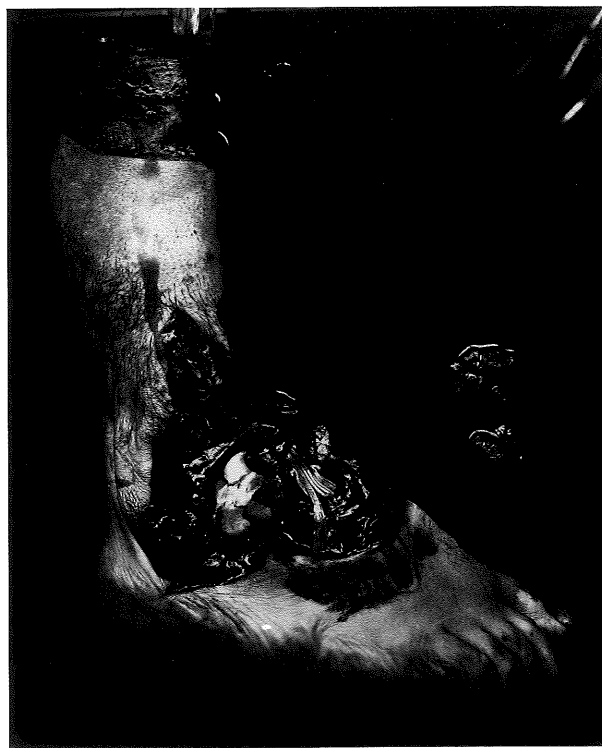


Fig. 18

AMPUTATED FOOT, 1939. Gelatin silver print.
Museum purchase.

Surrealist circle. But he thought of Ernst as "... a great artist, whose vision has the angelic restlessness of Solomon, frightening to the facile partisans of thought or of instinct."¹⁴ In 1943 Ernst visited Sommer's home in Prescott and selected works for the Surrealist magazine, *VVV*. In 1944, two of Sommer's landscape photographs and four of his drawings were published in *VVV*. Respect for his work was such that he was invited to participate in the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1947.¹⁵

In 1946 Sommer began work on a new series of interrelated themes using both found objects and various types of collage and assemblage in the tradition of Dada-Surrealism. Among the best known photographs in this style are "The Giant" and "Venus, Jupiter & Mars" of the late 1940s; "The Thief Greater Than His Loot" of the 1950s; and "Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John" of the 1960s. Gerald Nordland, the museum director who organized the first two Sommer retrospectives in 1965 and 1968, has written a well-informed overview of this period in Sommer's work:

Like others in his generation of United States artists, Sommer was intrigued by the adventures of Surrealism, and perhaps because of his language skills and family identifications, felt closer to this movement than did many native artists. His meeting with Max Ernst served to reinforce this interest and his contacts with Europe and his wide-ranging reading in French, German and Italian gave him an awareness unusual in the United States of that day. He became even more aware of chance and the juxtaposition of unlikely or contradictory materials, and he studied his own work for levels of meaning not immediately accessible. He had always embraced spontaneity, having said, "I don't have to read the *I Ching*, everything is the *I Ching*." The "Found Painting" was a board the artist saw, part of a loading platform outside a Chinese grocery store in Prescott. He "found" it, just as did Marcel Duchamp find the bottle rack "ready-made." Sommer says, "What difference is there between what you find and what you make? You have to make it to find it. You have to find it to make it. You only find things that you already have in your mind." Sommer has found and recorded the perfect illustration of Leonardo's stained wall, with its capacity to excite the imagination to countless fulfillments

on the surface and beneath it. It is a work of Surrealism as real and as valid as a painting by Max Ernst or Tanguy. It is Sommer's work even though his greatest effort was to secure the owner's agreement to have it exchanged for a new board. This was the sensitivity which made it possible to carry his work forward into more astonishing combinations. "I know that photography has a way of handling some things well and I make more of these available than I could find in nature. If I could find them in nature, I would photograph them. I make them because through photography I have a knowledge of things that can't be found." This is the way that Fred Sommer talks about his collage or assemblage photographs and the tiny world he has built of these illusive, dramatic, allegorical images.¹⁶

During the late 1940s and early 1950s he generated a remarkable series of walls and other "abstract" all-over compositions. They put a new type of perspective on the urban context of perception.

A decade after beginning that Dada-Surrealist series, Sommer began an equally extraordinary and entirely different group of photographs during the second half of the 1950s. The decade of the 1950s was an era of Abstract Expressionism. Most of the artists who became Abstract Expressionists after World War II previously worked under the influence of Surrealism. Sommer's development was as natural as that of many other painters and printmakers in America and Europe. These two movements are so related that some historians describe the later style as Abstract Surrealism. To create the abstract works of this period, Sommer used a number of unusual techniques, often without using a camera. Beginning in 1956, the first set of negatives was made with oil paint on cellophane. Suspended between two glass plates and placed in an enlarger, the painted cellophanes were then printed like ordinary negatives.

The second series, started in 1961, was made with smoke on cellophane. In 1962 he started his work with smoke on glass, and paper cut by hand. Some of these techniques were used by the San Francisco photographer Francis Bruguière in the 1920s and 1930s, but Sommer says he was not aware of that. In any case, the remarkable thing is what Sommer did with these techniques. The most abstract works are related to both the abstract paintings of the era and the photographs of Sommer's friends, Henry Holmes Smith and Aaron Siskind.



Fig. 19 *FIGHTING CENTAUR*, 1952. Gelatin silver print.
Museum purchase.

Sommer's figurative work of this period, such as "Paracelsus," holds its own against any of the painted, printed, or sculpted figures of the era by Oliveira, or Giacometti, or De Kooning. At the same time, the overall proportions of "Paracelsus" are as classical as the proportions of Michelangelo or the Greeks. Both types of sensibility are operating here: classical and contemporary, both the "divine order" of Classic and Alchemical philosophy, and an abstract expression of the quivering surfaces of visible reality.

Most of Sommer's work with "applied" techniques during this later period were more abstract. These compositions, fabricated with paper and paint and the smoky dust of flaming candles, have, as their subject matter, luminosity. His prints give us an image of the rhythmic currents of solidifying light. This is not the light seen by our ordinary eye, but the light of otherness that is discussed by Paracelsus, the "father of modern Alchemy."¹⁷

As an artist, poet, and composer, Sommer prefers to suggest rather than define. However, it is clear from his work, from his many published words, and from the testimony of people who know him that Sommer's lifetime commitment to "total awareness" has resulted in an understanding of the universe as a multi-dimensional reality in which metaphysical realities permeate physical realities. The purpose of Sommer's work is to express and share this understanding.

Van Deren Coke, the noted curator and historian of photography, summed it up this way: "Sommer has long felt that religion in the twentieth century requires different and more powerful images to rekindle the sense of mystery that stirred people in the past. By means of photography, he believes reality can be made poetic and thus engender a fresh symbolism. . . ."¹⁸

During the first half of his life as a photographic artist, very few were moved by Sommer's "fresh symbolism." Very few had an opportunity to see his work. During the second half of Sommer's artistic life, the sociology of appreciation changed dramatically. During the 1940s and 1950s, his audience was extremely small, not much wider than the readership of *Aperture*. His reputation began to grow during the 1960s and early 1970s when his first retrospective exhibitions were organized, and he published his first book, *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics*, 1972. Nevertheless, he remained on the outside edge of public awareness, as the photographic establishment focused on various kinds of "realism" rather than the world of the mythological metaphor. His work was not illustrated in the most popular histories of photography read by Ameri-

cans during the decade between 1965 and 1975: Beaumont Newhall, Peter Pollock, and the editors of Time-Life Books.

During the decade between 1975 and 1985, that situation reversed. That decade was an era in which the general public became more interested in mythology. Sommer's reputation grew. He was given a place of honor in the new histories of photography: Cecil Beaton and Gail Buckland (1975); Lee Witkin and Barbara London (1979); Naomi Rosenblum (1984); and the revised Newhall (1982). In *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present*, 1984, written by Jonathan Green, Sommer's name is on seventeen pages.

From the point of view of contemporary historians, Sommer is not only the most important Surrealist photographer in America, but also a primary influence on major photographers of the next two generations. The power of Sommer's "fresh symbolism" has been felt in two contemporary traditions. Many of the "urban landscape" photographers of the sixties and seventies have used the aesthetic structure of Sommer's endless landscapes of the 1940s: a cool, even eye perceiving scattered knots of life. Professor Green describes Sommer as the primary architect of that perceptual structure, even though Sommer himself has been surprised by how younger photographers have used this perceptual structure like a lens, through which to look at ordinary life in the modern urban world.

The power of Sommer's metaphors has also been a major influence on the Symbolist tradition in post-war photography, an equally important lineage of master photographers that includes Minor White, Henry Holmes Smith, and Jerry Uelsmann. Each of them has acknowledged his deep appreciation of Sommer as a profound artist-philosopher.

This artist-philosopher wants to move us toward remembering that we all can attain an awareness that is a dynamic balance of the logical and the intuitive, the kind of balanced awareness that is the common goal of Alchemy, Sufism, Taoism, Tantra, and Zen.¹⁹ Whether he is working as an abstract artist, arranging anatomical constructions, making photographs of classical statuary, or creating radiant images of semi-classical nudes, Sommer is reminding us that the luminosity of otherness is coexistent with our corporeality; that we are all beings of light. ■

Lanier Graham (American, b. 1940), former curator of Prints and Books at the Australian National Gallery, specializes in the graphic arts of the modern era. His book, *The Spontaneous Gesture: Prints and Books of the Abstract Expressionist Era*, was published in Australia in 1987 and in the United States by the University of Washington Press in 1989. His forthcoming book, *The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Catalogue and Raisonné*, will include this essay.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Edward Steichen, in conversation with Lanier Graham, Grace Mayer, Pete Peterson, and James Mathews, Museum of Modern Art, 11 September 1965.
I am very grateful to Stephen Aldrich, Naomi Lyons, and especially to Frederick and Frances Sommer for verifying the facts and quotations cited in this essay.
- ² For Sommer's work as a colorist, see the last monograph in the following chronological bibliography.
- ³ The history of modern landscape gardening begins with Villa Lante, and other villas of this 16th-century style, when the classic principles of architectural design were applied to landscape planning once again, as they had been in the ancient world.
- ⁴ Frederick Sommer, in conversation with Lanier Graham, Prescott, AZ, 19 November 1989.
- ⁵ Alchemy can be defined in many ways. Sommer, after reading the first draft of this manuscript, defined an alchemist as "a master of the combinatory arts." Sommer, in conversation with the author, Prescott, AZ, 19 November 1989.
- ⁶ Frederick Sommer, quoted in Cecil Beaton and Gail Buckland, *The Magic Image: The Genius of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1975), p. 211.
- ⁷ Frederick Sommer, in conversation with the author, Prescott, AZ, 19 November 1989.
- ⁸ Sommer elaborated in conversation with the author, *ibid.* A shorter recollection of this week with Stieglitz was recorded by Leland Rice in *Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five: A Retrospective* (Long Beach: The Art Museum, California State University, 1980), p. 8.
- ⁹ Frederick Sommer, in Minor White, ed., *Aperture*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1962), n.p.
- ¹⁰ Frederick Sommer, quoted in Douglas Davis, "Interior Landscapes" in *Newsweek* (2 June 1980), p. 82.
- ¹¹ The work of the New York School during the early 1940s is not as well studied as the famous work of the late 1940s. Many connections are still being established. For a Sommer-Tanguy relationship, see James T. Soby, *Yves Tanguy* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), which reproduces a Sommer photograph of an "endless landscape."
- ¹² Sommer's poem, "Where Images Come From," from which these seven lines are taken, was published in Frederick Sommer, *The Mistress of This World Has No Name* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1987), p. 13.
- ¹³ Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Abrams, 1984), p. 73. Green uses this very appropriate phrase in his discussion of the presentation of Sommer's work in *Aperture*, 1956, 1957, 1960, 1961, and 1962.
- ¹⁴ Frederick Sommer, *Aperture*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1962). Reprinted under Sommer's 1946 portrait of Ernst in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and New York Graphic Society, 1982), p. 286. As for his reservations, Sommer said the following in conversation with the author: "No matter what the truth is, art historians will associate me with Surrealism. But the situation should not be over-simplified. On the positive side, the Surrealists stimulated many American artists during the forties. On the other hand, the Surrealists had weaknesses. Some did not accept the consequences of their own moves. They were anti-aesthetic. In their work, they often set off sparks, but they did not light fires. There's certainly nothing wrong with being inspired by the world of dreams and the unconscious. But if the artist himself is not grounded in reality, the effect of the image does not come back to earth. A transitory visual stimulation does not constitute a great work of art." Prescott, AZ, 19 November 1989.
- ¹⁵ This fact is noted in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, with an essay by Dawn Ades, (New York: Abbeville Press, Inc. with Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1985), p. 232. On the same page of this book, the first book to survey photography of the Surrealist era, it states that Sommer contributed to *View*. That statement is not correct. *View* was one of the liveliest New York periodicals of the early 1940s, along with *VVV*. This quarterly began in September 1940 and continued until April 1943 focusing on Surrealist artists in America. Special issues were devoted to Duchamp, Ernst, and Tanguy. Sommer read this magazine, and still has a few issues, but he did not contribute to *View*. Sommer did contribute to *VVV*, which was edited by David Hare with Breton, Ernst, and Duchamp as editorial advisors. Inspired by the French *Minotaure* (1933–39), *VVV* began publication in June 1942 and ended in February 1944. Along with normal amounts of poetry and prose, these magazines were richly illustrated with work by all kinds of visual artists. Such illustrations in magazines by and for artists form a particularly interesting chapter in the history of photography.
- ¹⁶ Gerald Nordland, *Frederick Sommer* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia College of Art, 1968), p. 9.