

REREADING ALFRED STIEGLITZ'S *EQUIVALENTS*

By

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To my family

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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The *Equivalents* series by Alfred Stieglitz has been read from different perspectives. In this thesis I propose that the *Equivalents* series can be interpreted as an opposition to traditional tropes of the landscape, and should be understood as being mediated by Stieglitz's biography and personal experiences, through the style of portraiture and its relation to the landscape, film, and the leverage provided by his earlier series of photographic works. Stieglitz's own role as curator and his interpretation of straight photography shaped the formal styling of the series. By taking into account these mediating forces and by considering the grammatical structures of the images within the *Equivalence* series, the viewer can make numerous inroads into Stieglitz's logic of the symbol.

Based on both a hermeneutical and grammatical reading, Stieglitz's logic of the symbol iterates a visual language and gives rise to a specific contextualization. It is necessary for the viewer to take into account the grammatical and the hermeneutical. While the subject matter of the photographs in *Equivalents* is secondary to the grammatical structuring of the series, it underpins or makes the structuring possible. The structure of the series and the fact that the photographs are filtered through the photographer's biography complicate the simplistic transcendental nature intended. The *Equivalents* stands in stark contrast to earlier and more

direct photographs by Stieglitz. Many interpretations have been given of Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, most of which are based on an aesthetic of the symbolic and symbolist theories of the sign. These interpretations revolve around the various theories of transcendence, synesthesia, correspondences, direct experiences, and other cultural productions during the same period as the *Equivalents*. By coalescing these similar ideas, inroads are made into Stieglitz's later works, particularly the *Equivalents*.

In this thesis, I will discuss Stieglitz's biography, American literary and cultural influences at the time and their relation to the *Equivalents*. I will then discuss the ideas of transcendence and spirituality in the *Equivalents*. Finally, I will discuss how the grammatical structures and materiality of the series and how this reflects Stieglitz's complex understanding of the sign, as I interpret it.

CHAPTER 1
REREADING ALFRED STIEGLITZ'S *EQUIVALENTS*

Introduction

I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in 40 years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life—to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter.¹

—Alfred Stieglitz

When Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) wrote, “my photographs were not due to subject matter,” he was not eliminating the role of subject matter in his *Equivalents* series, 1923-1934, but negating it. The subject matter in the *Equivalents* series is secondary to the grammatical structuring, however an understanding of it is necessary as the subject matter underpins or makes the grammatical structuring possible. The structure of the series and the fact that the subject matter and formal qualities are mediated through his biography complicate the transcendental nature that many interpretations propose. These interpretations of Stieglitz’s *Equivalents* series focus on an aesthetic of the symbolic or propose the *Equivalents* as a remediation of Symbolist theories of the sign. Previous interpretations revolve around the various theories of transcendence, synesthesia, correspondences, direct experiences, or other cultural productions during the same period as the *Equivalents*. By coalescing these ideas and giving attention to the grammatical structures, inroads can be made into Stieglitz’s later works, particularly the *Equivalents* as this series represents a particular logic of the symbol.

In this thesis, I will discuss Stieglitz’s biographical, American literary and cultural influences at the time of production and their relation to the *Equivalents*. The events in

¹ Alfred Stieglitz. “How I Came to Photograph Clouds,” *Stieglitz on Photography: his Selected Essays and Notes*, (New York: Aperture, 2000), 237

Stieglitz's life and the cultural circumstances influenced the production of the *Equivalents*, especially in relation to portraiture and music. Through the influence of Romantic literary figures like Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Strand, and Marsden Hartely, Stieglitz formed his own logic of the symbolic, which is evident in the *Equivalents* series. I will also discuss the grammatical structures and materiality of the series and how this reflects Stieglitz's logic of the sign, as I interpret it.

The Equivalents

The *Equivalents* series is a series of approximately 337 first generation silver gelatin prints on postcard stock paper. The primary subject matter of the series is clouds. The largest collection of the series is located at the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, D.C. Throughout his lifetime, Stieglitz edited, reprinted, and discarded many of the photographs in his portfolio.² An ardent critic, especially of his own work, Stieglitz was constantly trying to perfect his portfolio by keeping it up to date with his current aesthetic tastes and reprinting his critically acclaimed works. Often times, he would undertake extreme purges of works, particularly after severe periods in his life. Upon his death, Stieglitz's second wife, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), gave the NGA 1642 of his 2500 photographs, including the approximately 337 that belong to the *Equivalents* series, 1922-1934. Considered the Key Set, the 1642 photographs that O'Keeffe donated to the NGA represent Stieglitz's progression as a photographer.³ The photographs included in the Key Set represent a wide range of techniques and processes that

² Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz | the Key Set, the Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Photographs*. (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), XL.

³ The 1642 photographs by Stieglitz at the NGA are now known as the Key Set. The Key Set is the most comprehensive collection of Stieglitz's photographs, and the catalogue is the closest to an overall catalogue *raisonne*. The total number of *Equivalents* photographs varies, but the number is approximately 330, according to the NGA. Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz | the Key Set*, XLII.

Stieglitz used over the course of his career. However, it is important to bear in mind that this portfolio, the Key Set included, is a biased collection of photographs. It is a selection of photographs that O’Keeffe and he chose to represent the photographic legacy of Stieglitz.

Started in 1923, the *Equivalents* series is a continuation of the themes and styles established in two prior series—*Music—A Sequence of Ten Photographs*, 1922, and *Songs of the Sky*, 1922-23. Most of Stieglitz’s later works are rooted in his principle of equivalency. This principle of equivalency is a system of substitution and exchange on the level of the symbolic. Stieglitz based his principle of equivalency on the ideas of correspondences most prominently used by Kandinsky and other European artists of the beginning twentieth century. Stieglitz’s principle of equivalency was very similar to the conception of music as a transcendental experience. Stieglitz strove for this direct interpretation, or transcendent experience of emotions in his visual media. To achieve this he created a visual language that would be able to translate the symbolic moments in the work of art into universal human emotions. This principle is in both of the earlier works, particularly when the direct linkage to music is taken into consideration. Like his series, *Georgia O’Keeffe*, 1917-1937, the subject matter is limited, but by comparing it to the two earlier series, the viewer can gain further insight into the *Equivalents* series. What separates the *Equivalents* series from other series by Stieglitz is its tight sense of subject matter, large number of photographs, and complex arrangement and ordering of the series.

Sarah Greenough wrote, “The ideas embodied in [Stieglitz’s] early 1920’s photographs, especially those of clouds, have little or nothing to do with Lake George specifically, and everything to do with Stieglitz’s understanding of the nature and function of art and

photography.”⁴ The nature and function of art, for Stieglitz, is inherently symbolic. Any referentiality, or allegorical nature within the works is either not important, or is subsidiary to the symbol. This series also demonstrates how Stieglitz still pushed the boundaries of the medium. While the intentions of the images are strikingly similar, the size and orientation of the camera and photographs in the two earlier series varies slightly from *Equivalents*. The beginning of the *Equivalents* coincided with Stieglitz shift to from an eight-inch by ten-inch camera to the use of a five-inch Graflex camera. The camera allowed him more flexibility to aim the camera skywards and capture shots of only the clouds or the tops of poplars—a kind of subject matter that dominates the *Equivalents* series.⁵ Stieglitz is one of the first photographers to aim his camera towards the sky, and he is doing so with a viewfinder, not the compact 35mm camera that was coming into popular usage during this period.

The *Equivalents* series is comprised of smaller groups based on exhibitions or sets of photographs arranged in an alphanumeric system. Oftentimes, Stieglitz arranged photographs within multiple groups, sets, and even series, thus making their individual meaning arbitrary in relation to the placement. As Greenough states, “His aim was not to distill the essence of clouds, but to transform them into an abstract language of form expressive of his subjective state.”⁶ Stieglitz’s deliberate arrangement of the photographs into sets, I would argue calls for a revision to Greenough’s statement. That the “abstract language” created by Stieglitz needs to incorporate the physical photographs themselves. Stieglitz’s understanding of the grammatical structuring of language is evident in his compiling and arranging of the *Equivalents* series. His arbitrary

⁴ Sarah Greenough “Alfred Stieglitz’s Photographs of Clouds.” (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1984), 1. Sarah Greenough is the chief curator of the photography department at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and is perhaps the leading expert on Alfred Stieglitz and his photography.

⁵ Ibid. 155.

⁶ Ibid 2.

repetition of photographs to create a rhythm or a universal emotion within the various sets, like words in a sentence, points to a complex understanding of language and sign. These photographs are to be transparent visual representations, or a visual language, of universal emotions, like visual equivalents to music; however, Stieglitz's own biography and the physical format of the photograph mediate the transparency.

Early Life and Landscape

Stieglitz stated in regards to the *Equivalents* series, "I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in forty years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life—to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter."⁷ In order to gain an understanding of that philosophy, there first needs to be an understanding of Stieglitz's philosophy of life and his biography. Most of Stieglitz's work is inherently self-referential, as evidenced in his choices of subject matter. In a sense, Stieglitz's subject matter was his life. His biography can be selectively told through his photographs of his friends, family, and environs over the years. In terms of the *Equivalents*, his biography shaped the nature of those particular universal emotions he was trying to convey. I will begin with his life before the creation of *Equivalents*, in order to establish their original context.

Stieglitz was born January 1, 1864 in Hoboken, New Jersey. He spent repeated summers throughout his life at his family's home on Lake George.⁸ Lake George was already an established locale within the literary and cultural life of America. This specific location is the site for numerous landscape and portrait photographs taken by Stieglitz from approximately 1900

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Katherine Hoffman. *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light*. (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004),10.

until the end of his career in 1935, and is the only location for the *Equivalents*. With its scenic position in the Adirondacks, Lake George inspired such literary figures as James Fennimore Cooper, who took inspiration from scenic vistas of the lake for his infamous novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*.⁹ Artists, politicians, and the upper-class society of New York, such as Benjamin Franklin, Calvin Coolidge, and Theodore Roosevelt, had all flocked to the lake as far back as the colonial era.¹⁰

Stieglitz took hundreds of photographs of Lake George and the landscape of the Adirondacks throughout his lifetime. Not only was Lake George the site of his summer home, it was also the site of his studio.¹¹ Stieglitz shot most of his surviving portraits, the Georgia O’Keeffe series, numerous landscapes and still-lives, and the *Equivalents* series at Lake George. This has resonances within the American landscape tradition. The role Lake George has played in American history places the dialogue of these images squarely in an American tradition. Lake George was also a source of inspiration for the Hudson River School and Luminist painters of the mid to late nineteenth century.¹² Like Stieglitz, Romanticism influenced the Hudson River School’s aesthetics. Both Luminist painters and the Hudson River School used the sublime within the landscape to capture an essence of God or transcendentalism. Lake George represented an opposition to the manmade and mechanized environment of New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. This manmade environment and the machine itself were themes in Stieglitz’s photographic corpus since the turn of the century, and were the driving theme of

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Stieglitz did rent darkrooms, but until 1929 he did not have his own studio in New York City. Consequently he did most of his photographic works at the Lake George studio. In 1929, with the financial assistance of the Strands, Stieglitz was able to purchase An American Place, which was large enough for a gallery and a studio. (Ibid).

¹² Ibid.

American art and literature during the early twentieth century.¹³ Artists and the literati interpreted the idea of the machine as the driving force of America, and the signifier of early American Modernism.

In striking opposition to those landscape based photographs, stand the *Equivalents*. While the *Equivalents* embrace clouds, trees, and horizons, as their subjects, the subject matter is divorced from the physical location through their production. Thus, by working in opposition to an existing trope—the landscape of Lake George—Stieglitz was able to locate his series in relation to the established American art cannon. This is important because Stieglitz’s goal was to establish an American art form—one that was distinct from Europe. Stieglitz’s ties to Lake George and its environs can also lead the viewer to allegorical references of his biography.

His biographers tell us that the artist’s fascination with clouds started as a child, yet it was not until 1923 that he pursued the idea of photographing just clouds.¹⁴ From an early age, Stieglitz demonstrated an interest in meteorological subjects as evidenced by his childhood diary and those canonical images from the turn of the century, such as *Winter, Fifth Avenue*, 1893.¹⁵ It was in Europe that Stieglitz first started to photograph and study clouds and light.¹⁶ These earliest images were the formal basis for his *Equivalents* series, and other landscape photographs. The photographs that still survive are strikingly similar in style to photographs that would come later in his career.¹⁷

¹³ We can point to the machine in the works of Francis Picabia, Georgia O’Keeffe, and the Stieglitz circle. We can also garner this from works by Paul Strand and Charles Scheeler, where the developed landscapes, from agriculture to the city, were the focus of their works.

¹⁴ Greenough, “Alfred Stieglitz’s Photographs of Clouds.” 152

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light*, 12.

¹⁷ Stieglitz would go on to destroy many of these early photographs. Of the very few that survive, most were reprinted years later. *Paula—Sun Rays* and *The Steerage* are just a few examples of these reprints.

An example of Stieglitz's early landscape photography is *On Lake Thun, Switzerland*, 1886. The dramatic capturing of the sun bursting through the clouds, and the grandeur and magnitude of the light and clouds that frame the mountains sitting on the horizon, is reminiscent of nineteenth century landscape painters' capturing of a sense of the sublime—more so than his later images. Stieglitz's cropping of *On Lake Thun, Switzerland* breaks the image into thirds—a trademark compositional strategy in his landscape and street images—with the mountains creating a horizon and thrusting skywards. In the image, it is as if the mountains are breaking the overcast clouds, as well as the horizon of the lake, creating a sense of the sublime within the nature of the mountains and the contrasting calm of the light. Repeated in the sunlight is this sense of the sublime. The sun's rays seem almost ethereal in their scale and tonal range within the image. They transcend the image, bestowing a sense of magic or religious encounter upon the quietness of the lake.

The sublime elements that are present in the photograph with *On Lake Thun, Switzerland* are present in many of the photographs in the *Equivalents* series. The *Equivalents* from 1926, in particular images 1170 and 1171 from the Key Set, are very sublime images with the horizon all but blackened out, the rays of light bust out from behind the clouds. The sun highlights the edges of several of the clouds and completely consumes others in total white. Today the viewer would recognize a cinematic sense of the sublime present in these photographs. Today's viewer also can sense the religious kitch that this type of sublime imagery has taken on—a transcendent moment with only the image of Jesus Christ lacking. The tonal range of the photographs, while predominately dark, is wide in scale. Again, like *On Lake Thun, Switzerland*, he sectioned the photographic frame of the clouds into thirds. These images can find similar pairings within the later prints of *Songs of the Skies*, 1924 where the blackened horizon forms a balancing to the

darkened clouds. Yet, the *Equivalents*, 1926 work in opposition to *On Lake Thun, Switzerland*. In *On Lake Thun, Switzerland*, Stieglitz has highlighted the geographic location by framing the image when the light hits the mountains and shore. By darkening the horizon, the specific site of the *Equivalents* from 1926 is hard to discern. Using contrast, Stieglitz has decontextualized these photographs.

By choosing clouds as the subject matter of *Equivalents*, Stieglitz's images are in an indirect dialogue with his earlier works and with the American canon of landscapes. This is important because it validates his ideas of an explicitly American art tradition by using a purely American source of imagery, but it also shows that he is in a continuous dialogue with a long-standing artistic trope in the American art tradition. While *Equivalents* is not about clouds, there are particular connotations to his earlier works and to the American artistic canon that arise through his choice of imagery.

Portraits as a Formal Style

Another repeated trope that is evident in the *Equivalents* series is the style of portraiture. As I will discuss later in this paper, Stieglitz began to shoot clouds in response to a criticism made by Waldo Frank (1889-1967). "Waldo Frank ... wrote that he believed the secret power in my photography was due to the power of hypnotism I had over my sitters."¹⁸ Dared by comments made by Frank, Stieglitz sought to photograph something that was beyond his ability to hypnotize. Yet, he continued many of the formal features of his portraits. Through the adaptation of the portrait style, with this particular subject matter, Stieglitz put pressure on the portrait style in ways that other photographers had yet to do. This is most notable in his

¹⁸ Alfred Stieglitz. "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," 235.

Equivalents from 1927 of poplar trees. The photographs from this period that are in the Key Set contain ten photographs of poplars printed in 1927. This grouping of photographs twists and turns the placement of the poplar. Framed so that they dominate the image like many of his portrait sitters, Stieglitz personified the poplars. They do not blend in with the sky, but the sky is the neutral background, which Stieglitz posed behind the poplars. The eventual blackening or darkening of the poplars is interesting to note. As if they are fading into blackness, like an eventual death. Only to be bathed fully in light by the end of the ten photographs. The previous staging of the photographs into sets the viewer to read a narrative not necessarily present in the photographs. That the viewer eventually begins to read the images in terms of rhythms and movement in the groupings either established by Stieglitz—or later O’Keeffe—and those that the viewer creates.

The viewer can find a precedent for the poplars as personifications or symbolic representations of sitters in the set *Portrait K.N.R., No.1-6* also known as *Songs of the Sky CI-6*. Stieglitz took this series of six photographs as a portrait of his friend, Katharine N. Rhoades. In a 1924 New York Times review of the images, “‘*Songs of the Sky and Trees*’ is a portrait of a friend of this artist, scientist, and philosopher, expressed through sky and tree, a tree that dances and sparkles in the first plates becoming in the last print a thing of dignity and completeness.”¹⁹ One can assume that traits of Rhoades that Stieglitz were trying to capture. Not only are they given close study against a neutral ground as discussed above, similar to many of his portraits they are taken from a lower angle. Thus, these intentional formal effects give his sitter a sense of dignity, and imposing dominance with in the frame. Here in the 1927 photographs of the poplars, it is the same grounding and positioning of form. Through these photographs, a person

¹⁹ Greenough, *the Key Set*, 521 Originally excerpted from New York Times, 9 March, 1924 sect 8, 10.

is equivalent to a tree, all authorized by his title and signature. The essence of the sitter is perhaps captured in that sense subject matter is an external veil which the symbolic must suffer, and at the same time, transcending the nature of the portrait style.

Referencing Biography

The *Equivalents* series is the result of two previous series dealing with the same subject matter. When framed within this progression—from *Music—A Sequence of Ten Cloud Photographs*, 1922, to *Songs of the Sky*, 1923, and ending with *Equivalents*—the final series can be seen as embodying references to Stieglitz himself. Here, Stieglitz’s biography mediates the universal. Once interpreted as self-referentiality, the subject matter undermines the notion of universality that the images seek. This referentiality in the *Equivalents* series is similar to the abstract portraiture of several Stieglitz painters—like Demuth and Hartley. In his previous series, *Songs of the Sky*, Stieglitz made several portraits of friends and family using clouds as subject matter.²⁰ This turn to portraiture is not surprising, given that the larger portion of his corpus consists mainly of portraits. The kinds of substitutions, exchanges, and equivalency that Stieglitz captured in the work give us a picture of his own biography.

Loosely grouped together, *Songs of the Sky* is a series of smaller sets of photographs. Often the photographs are of clouds and trees, but several are not. For example, one image is a cropped shot of a horse’s rear flanks (*Spiritual America, Songs of the Sky A₁*, 1923). Here, Stieglitz is playing with referent and referred. The horse’s flanks are not literally America, but through the referential nature of allegory, Stieglitz creates an image of what was *Spiritual America*—machismo harnessed. This also calls into question why Stieglitz categorized this

²⁰ Two series in particular are *Portrait of Georgia, No. 2*, and *3*, 1923, and *Portrait—K.N.R., No. 1-6*, also known as *Songs of the Sky C 1-6*.

photograph as a part of *Songs of the Sky*. The titling and categorization seem arbitrary in this case, since there is nothing that would directly tie the subject matter, or even the allegorical nature, to the more symbolic nature of those in the majority—that is, until Stieglitz’s own self-referentiality is taken into consideration. This photograph shows that it is in the arbitrary relationship to titling and the photographic subject where the equivalent occurs for Stieglitz.

Selections from *Songs of the Sky* that make this clear are two photographs titled *Portrait of Georgia, No. 2*, and *No. 3*, 1923. The first photograph in the *Portrait of Georgia* series, *Portrait of Georgia, No. 1*, is a direct portrait of O’Keeffe. She is the subject, standing tall and stoic in a three-quarter profile with her face turned directly towards the camera. She is dressed in her standard black outfit (black jacket or cape with a black bowler’s hat). The background, most likely the sky, is two-thirds dark grey (almost as dark as her hat and jacket) with white clouds at the top and edges of shadowy trees grounding the bottom of the image. The angle of the shot is from below and the contrast is high, perhaps due to the direct sunlight hitting her face. Her face becomes an illuminating center, with the tip of her shirt collar and her ears as the brightest white. The shapes Stieglitz creates by capturing O’Keeffe—or the abstract style that is iconographic of O’Keeffe—in such high contrast repeat in the other two images where the subject matter turns to clouds.

The photographs *Portrait of Georgia, No. 2* and *No. 3* are intriguing counterpoints for *Portrait of Georgia, No. 1*. Both photographs use clouds that are backlit by the sun as their subject matter. Stripped of the title and *Portrait of Georgia, No. 1* was not in play, the reference to O’Keeffe would be all but lost. The meaning belongs within the realm of language and signification for Stieglitz within this portrait series of O’Keeffe. The knowledge of O’Keeffe is necessary for the viewer to independently interpret all the images. Stieglitz knew that the

connection between subject matter of a photograph and its meaning is arbitrary, yet dependant. The relationship between what is represented and what is shown is a linguistic relationship. Just like in any sign, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Therefore, we can see in his images from *Songs of the Sky* a theoretical underpinning that is the basis for *Equivalents*.

The use of portraiture and self-representation is just as prevalent in *Equivalents* as it is in the *Songs of the Sky* series. The darkness that consumes the photographs *Portrait of Georgia, No. 2* and *No. 3* again becomes a dominant feature of the photographs in *Equivalents* that were taken in 1929, the year that O’Keeffe first went to Taos, New Mexico. *Equivalents, Set C₂ Nos. 1-5, 1929*, is a classic example of this self-reflexivity explicitly related to O’Keeffe. The set of photographs is striking in its similarity to O’Keeffe’s usage of line and abstraction in her own floral paintings from around the same time, such as *Black Iris, 1926*. Both artists are using nature as their subject matter. They are cropping in on the subject to the point of abstraction. Their works are comprised of expressive lines, tones, colors, and suggestion. In all of these photographs, Stieglitz uses a high level of contrast due to the direct sunlight. This contrast burns out the shape of the sun in all but one of the photographs. Because of the abstract lines, shapes, tones, and the negating of the sky-ness of the subject, the viewer begins to read the image just like an O’Keeffe painting. O’Keeffe’s set is so definitive for its use of a centrally located oval shape that reads very feminine, if not vaginal.

Experience and Transparency

By promoting modern art and photography through small gallery exhibitions, major museum exhibitions, and fine-art publications, Stieglitz created a viewership in New York and

the United States at large.²¹ The approach that Stieglitz promoted was one of elitism and artist aesthetics, which came to stand in contradiction to the liberal stance of the photographers of the WPA and the social documentary style that took hold in the 1920's after the rise of the photo magazine.²² For Stieglitz, art was a visual language that was dependant on the viewer's experience; this is unlike the Works Progress Administration of the 1930's and the rise of photojournalism, which sought to use photography as a visual tool of communication.

In Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, he was able to achieve a level of transparency through the medium. According to Stieglitz, the "true meaning" of the photograph was the symbolic meaning "True meaning... comes through directly, without any extraneous or distracting pictorial or representational factors coming between the person and the picture."²³ These were harmonious and transcendent moments that Stieglitz felt his photographs of clouds conveyed; however, experience undermines the transcendent qualities. Stieglitz's work, throughout his corpus, is dependant on the experience of the photograph. In the *Equivalents*, the viewer is supposed to interpret a universal emotion through the experience of viewing the photograph. However, Stieglitz's intentions underwrite his personal experiences. As described above in the *Equivalents C₂ No. 1-6*, the photographs and their arrangement was dependant upon his personal experiences in 1929. The viewer may not emphasize with these particular emotions that Stieglitz experienced and tried to make symbolic in these photographs.

Some of the last activities at "291" and in *Camera Work* were devoted to the photographer Paul Strand (1890-1976), a straight photographer known for his crisp formal shots. This medium

²¹ Trachtenberg, Alan, "Camera Work/Social Work," *Reading American Photographs: Images to History*, Matthew Brady. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 169.

²² Ileana B. Leavens, *From "291" to Zurich: the Birth of Dada*. (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1983) 10.

²³ Alfred Stieglitz. "How I Came to Photograph Clouds," 238.

specific style consisted of truthfulness to the photographic elements that straight photography championed, like transparent depiction. As Charles Wolfe notes in *Lovers of Cinema*, “Straight photography stressed equally a faith in the materiality and integrity of a pro-filmic field and the power of the photographic image to abstract from that field an acutely drawn, clarified image.”²⁴ Even during his Pictorialist mode, Stieglitz’s images consisted of a strong geometric arrangement, which could have accounted for his easy transition from Pictorialism to straight photography. Influenced by the transparent nature of Strand’s photographs and through his compositional strategies of unusual points of view, Stieglitz changed his style from Pictorialism to the more avant-garde style of Straight photography. Strand’s framing of the photograph specifically influenced Stieglitz, as he was able to decontextualize the subject matter and create an abstract composition. The viewer can note Strand’s technique demonstrated in his photograph, *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*, 1916. This photograph is of a table and a wall, but Strand captured the contrast of light and the shadows cast across the space. The pattern of light and dark tones, the unusual point of view, and tight framing abstract the space and turn the transparent image into an abstract experience. In his abstract images of clouds, Stieglitz stayed true to this medium specific conception and was able to work under the pretenses of abstract modernism by making the transparent clouds abstract through photographic editing strategies like cropping.

The literal chronology the photographs of the *Equivalents* series were taken in was not of high importance to Stieglitz, however the experience of duration and narration is key to experiencing this series. Unlike the singular photographs by Strand, Stieglitz’s large-scale series creates duration through the seriality presented in the series. After the images are printed and

²⁴ Charles Wolfe. “Straight Shots and Crooked Plots: Social Documentary and the Avant-Garde in the 1930s” in *Lovers of Cinema*, ed. Jan-Christopher Hovak (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1995) 238.

arranged thematically, narration arises through the rearrangement of the photographs. The narration of each grouping creates formal repetitions in the photographs. Only through these groupings does rhythm or formal repetitions arise. The context of any one photograph in the series gives specific meaning to the photograph, even if the meaning of the individual photograph is arbitrary.²⁵ The narration occurs through the nature of the curator that is sympathetic with the viewer and the photographs staged as sets and in exhibition groups. An ideal viewer is one that is sympathetic and involved with Stieglitz's overall biography and photographic project. Coming to the forefront of the knowledgeable viewer when reading the *Equivalents* is an interpretation that is tied to the biography of Stieglitz, vis-a-vis the formal elements of the photographs.

The narrative rhythm that occurs in the photographs is comparable to that of a film reel. Film was coming into its own as an artistic medium during the 1910's and 1920's. In his work, Stieglitz was not only making a statement on what art photography was, but he was also commenting on the singularity of the photograph versus the flowing seriality of the film's image. While Stieglitz was not generally an avid film viewer, Strand and Charles Scheeler's (1883-1965) film *Manhatta*, 1921, may have influenced him as judged by the shared interest in images of gaseous forms. *Manhatta's* focus on the urban environment and steam creates an interesting parallel to the naturalistic, romanticized clouds in Stieglitz's *Equivalents* series.

In *Manhatta*, Strand and Scheeler use images of steam from rooftops and ships to portray a growing—almost living—Manhattan. With its depictions of rising skyscrapers and busy ship traffic, a strong connection is forged with Stieglitz's later series of 80 photographs of skyscrapers under construction. However, the focus on steam, or manufactured clouds, throughout the film

²⁵ This is very much like phonemes and words of a sentence. The sign or word shifts and only takes on a "concrete" meaning in specific contextualization—that of the sentence.

and how the steam seemingly echoes the film score (or maybe it is the music that echoes the steam) is related in the opposition seen in the more natural rhythms of *Equivalents*. Other connections support the suggestion that Strand and Scheeler's film could have influenced Stieglitz. Clearly, Strand and Scheeler's Straight photography, marked by its geometric formal arrangement, sharp focus, and lack of diffused lighting, had a deep impact on Stieglitz's work. Seen through this lens, Stieglitz's photographs become sad memories of a bygone era through the natural and romantic state of clouds in comparison to the manufactured steam seen in the imagery of Scheeler and Strand's film.

Music and a Visual Language

Music was seen as a medium with few boundaries, capable of reaching toward a new realm of abstraction.²⁶

—Katherine Hoffman

The *Songs of the Sky* and *Music—A Sequence of Ten Photographs* explicitly point to music as a parallel to art. For Stieglitz, music was a large part of his education from an early age, and it would be through ideas drawn from music that Stieglitz would develop into an approach to pictorial transcendence and would incorporate playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's notion of correspondences. Other artists also relied upon notions of correspondences and equivalency. As Katherine Hoffman notes in her critical biography of Stieglitz, *Stieglitz: a Beginning Light*, "this notion of song and its connection to spiritual expression seemed to find its roots in rhythms of the American soul and landscape, particularly in the 1920's and 1930's. American writers such as Sherwood Anderson in *Mid-American Chants* (1918), or Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself"

²⁶ Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* 47.

(1855) or “Song of the Open Road” (1856)” used music and song as inspiration for fiction and poems²⁷

In addition, the influence of European approaches to music, including Baudelaire’s is apparent in Stieglitz’s philosophy on life. According to Stieglitz, “Baudelaire saw all things as potential symbols of a transcendent reality.”²⁸ Stieglitz—along with the painter Marsden Hartley—was also deeply influenced by Kandinsky’ who articulated the existence of “correspondences among color, sound, and emotional states.”²⁹ An additional source of inspiration in this regard, was Wagner’s usage of leitmotifs. For Stieglitz, “the leitmotifs gave Wagner more opportunities to deal with ideas, or links between ideas, such as the unspoken thought of a character on stage.”³⁰ In Wagner’s the subtle shifts in musical tonalities, Stieglitz found a direct inspiration for Stieglitz’s notions he explored in *Equivalents*.³¹

Stieglitz’s photographs of clouds are inherently symbolic, like music notes they are signs. Rosalind Krauss proposes that the symbolism present in Stieglitz’s work is a “symbolism as an understanding of language as a form of radical absence—the absence, that is, of the world and its objects, supplanted by the sign.”³² Stieglitz presented his photographs as independent units; they were arbitrary and disconnected from a historical context, and the context of the everyday. Reconfigured to new meanings through series of linkages and repetitions the photographs form

²⁷ Ibid., 301

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 45.

³¹ Ibid., 46.

³² Krauss, Rosalind. “Stieglitz/Equivalents” *October*, Vol. 11, Essays in Honor of Jay Leyda. (Winter, 1979), 140.

specific rhythms and patterns that are inflected by Stieglitz's biography and speak this socio-cultural moment. In effect, he built a formal system that cut off history and of a world where the marks of the symbol are absent. In this sense, biographical aspects are crucial, the works must be interpreted in relation to broader cultural practices, and those practices engineered by the Stieglitz circle.

Stieglitz was not alone in engaging a symbolic mode of artistic production. The artists within the Stieglitz Circle had a deep mistrust of written and spoken language within the visual arts. The usage of verbal or written signification was not adequate for visual practices. As Hartley noted, "A true art needs no speech—it speaks for itself."³³ Like a direct transcendental experience of music, the work of art should not be mediated through a third level of representation—written language. For the Stieglitz circle, a "true art" was one that could exist only in itself and should not require explanation or translation. If an art employed visual language, it would be a language of the symbol of pure experience. Although an image might refer to texts, they were not to be taken as explanatory. Thus, any of the works within the Stieglitz circle reference Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and other American poets.

This creation of a visual language is literally demonstrated in the artwork of Charles Demuth. Instead of capturing likenesses, Demuth combined objects, signs, and names to evoke the subjects in his series of *Poster Portraits*. *The Figure Five in Gold*, 1928, is a prime example. The theme of the number five comes from a poem by Carlos Williams about seeing a fire engine pass in the street. Instead of painting a portrait of the poet's likeness, Demuth painted a combination of signs that evoke the work by and inference Carlos Williams himself. The blocks of red are representative of the fire engine; the words "Bill" and "WCW" are direct signs of

³³ Hole, Heather, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, and Marsden Hartley. *Marsden Hartley and the West: The Search for an American Modernism*. (New Haven; Santa Fe, N.M.: Yale University Press; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. 2007), 121

Carlos Williams. This abstraction is essential to the formation of correspondences or equivalency.

Machine and Symbol

The impact of the camera in the nineteenth century was based on its powers of description and generalization: it summed up experience, presenting a normative vision of the world that could enter the common memory as a facsimile of reality, an imitation founded on typological representation; it extended the individual's power of vision, and it provided models—images ready to the mind's eye—for thinking about the world.³⁴

—Miles Orvell

The theory of the camera as a producer of “a facsimile of reality” which developed during the end of the nineteenth century, is challenged through the abstract images produced by Stieglitz. . While Stieglitz's early photographs like *a Bit of Venice*, 1898, has sources in the works of F. Holland Day and other Pictorialists, yet already in this work, the viewer can read a specific intentionality in the point of view. *Bit of Venice* is a Romanticized view of a street in Venice. Carefully selected, the point of view emphasizes the idealistic qualities of the scene. Stieglitz's later “approach emphasized the photographer's eye, his particular angle on the subject, whether detailed close-up or aerial view.”³⁵ It also made the photograph a product of a machine, as opposed to a “facsimile of ‘normal’ vision.”³⁶ This is echoed in the sentiments of Stieglitz, as seen in the portrait of Stieglitz by Picabia, *Here, This Is Stieglitz Here*, 1915. Picabia's captures Stieglitz's failed attempt to inspire Americans through art and photography. With the raised lens and the deflated bellow below, the camera is impotent. The motorcar brake, in red, is in motion, as if signaling the futile continuation of Stieglitz's beliefs and methodology.

³⁴ Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture 1880-1940*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 198.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

The script with which Picabia spells “IDEAL” is an antique, outdated script, one that is found in manuscripts than in modern literature and periodicals. This follows the iconography of Stieglitz—that has an old preacher or prophet. It also captures the photographer as an extension of the machine.

The power of the photograph lies in the fact that it is produced by and through a machine, leaving it to function “as an instrument of revelation, changing our way of thinking about, and seeing the world. In proclaiming its duality as a way of seeing what was at once scientific and artistic, photography assumed a special importance in twentieth century culture, becoming a symbol of a kind of vision that is central to the culture of authenticity.”³⁷ As critics and contemporary photographers noted in 1921, Stieglitz’s aesthetics lay in “the camera as a machine that was tuned to the new age.”³⁸ Stieglitz used the camera not only as a recording device, but also as an interpretive device that allowed him to develop authentic insights and profound truths. The authenticity of the photograph allowed Stieglitz to occupy the position of genius creator. Through his use of the machine, he produced a photograph that could register a symbolic truth, even if the machinery itself was a contradiction to the nature depicted within the photograph.³⁹

One challenge was to overcome the hard facticity of the camera/machine and the need for deeper truths of the soul. For Stieglitz, modernity as embodied in New York City, lacked a soul in the Romantic sense.⁴⁰ Paul Rosenfeld concurred with this assessment, writing “Stieglitz is hinting at an intentional synthesis of machine and man of exactly the sort that he was about to

³⁷ Orvell, *The Real Thing*, 198-99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

³⁹ Orvell continues, “But significantly the rhetoric of photographic discussion remained surprisingly consistent, revolving around the persistent goal of representing some more intense, more authentic reality, beyond mere replication, something closer than ‘realism’ to ‘the real thing’ itself.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

become identified with.”⁴¹ The tension between machine imagery and the pursuit of universal insight, again points back to the portrait by Picabia with its failed synthesis of Stieglitz and the camera. Miles Orvell notes that Walt Whitman was a force “standing behind this conception of photography,” as science and art fused together. Pushing Whitman’s influence even further, Orvell states that it was “Whitman who was increasingly invoked as the great precursor of modernism, the artist who had vivified facts, whose transcendent vision was rooted in materiality. And if Whitman was a central inspiration to American artists during the years between the wars (including writers), Stieglitz himself was Whitman Reborn.”⁴² Rosenfeld borrows from Whitman when he describes Stieglitz’s organic aesthetic, “in which a circuit is created between the world and the eye.”⁴³ This proclamation of Stieglitz being “Whitman Reborn” squarely fits Stieglitz within the Romantic sentiment and ideology. It is here that a tradition of an American art form is already in existence. For example, “Stieglitz, in the 1930’s, was regularly being placed in the lineage of original American Artists, the great pantheon of organic functionalists”⁴⁴ This lineage would include artists like Louis Sullivan, Whitman, and Emerson.

Contradictions lie within Stieglitz’s strong dislike of industry and capitalism that fueled American modernization at the turn of the century. This modern form or stylization demonstrated through artists like Francis Picabia and Charles Demuth. These and other American artists, championed by Stieglitz, were adopting the rhetoric of the machine in their artistic forms. Walter B. Kalaidjian states, “The futurist imagery of American industry had

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 204.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

served the New York Dadaists in the 1910's in their rebellion against the kind of European modernism exhibited at the 1913 Armory Show."⁴⁵ This rhetoric also guided the subject matter of the Stieglitz circle, the artists that Stieglitz avidly promoted from the 1910's to the 1940's. Picabia pointed to his arrival in New York as the epiphany "through that machinery, art ought to find a most vivid expression."⁴⁶ Stieglitz embodied these new mechanical forms through his promotion of new photographic equipment and techniques in *Camera Work* (1903-1917).⁴⁷ Stieglitz's support and promotion of an American art form taking the shape of the machine is yet another paradox in his work. Once at the height of culture, industrialization changed the social construct of New York and American values. Yet, as materialism increased, it became contrary to Stieglitz's Romantic ideals of art aesthetic being separate from capitalism

Concerning the Spiritual in Art

Synesthesia, equivalency, transcendence and correspondences all share common traits and are all aesthetics of the symbol and theories of the sign that provide inroads to Stieglitz's understanding of the sign and of his notion of equivalency. At the turn of the twentieth century, these ideas linked to a kind of spirituality that thought to be present within the transcendent nature of art. The arbitrary titling and arrangement of *Equivalent*s comes into light when looking at specific sets within the series. According to the Key Set at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., the sets varied throughout. One of these double-labeled sets is *Songs of the*

⁴⁵ Walter B. Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodernism Critique*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 147.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid..

Sky XX_{2.5}/Equivalents XX_{2.5}, 1923 or 1929.⁴⁸ The first set is missing and it is not related to the set with the same *XX* titling from 1929.⁴⁹ Even with the uncertain dating, the viewer can gain a sense of arbitrary placement if given the dual titles, or if presented with a large-scale exhibition. If viewed within the smaller set, however, the images seem very purposefully ordered in a specific context. The meaning of the individual photographs becomes secondary to the arrangement of the pieces. This is very much like phonemes within a verbal or written grammatical language. Formally, all four photographs of this set are similar in structure. The darkest parts of the photographs are the sky, which punctuated highlights of cumulous clouds against the dark background. The clouds are backlit by the sun, giving the photographs a range of dark and light tones in the shadows and highlights of the clouds. The displacement via cropping of the photographs hides the fact that these are clouds, until the viewer notices the hint of a circle—the sun. Once the clouds are interpreted—if they are recognized at all—the photographs become very disorientating. The sky during the day is now as dark as night. What was once up is now forward. The viewer instantly feels a sense of vertigo or the sensation of soaring throughout the set. The repetition of forms creates a pulse that gives rhythm and movement to the set, but only as a set does this rhythm arise. Moving from *XX₂* to *XX₃* and so on, the viewer can sense the movement, which is just as disorientating as the placement of the clouds at eye level.

In this small set, the viewer becomes aware of the paradoxes that are present between the subject matter and the formal elements. The photographs are approximately three by four inches; this small size makes the images incredibly intimate. These photographs are designed for

⁴⁸ Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz / the Key Set*, LXVII.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 698.

a single viewer at a time. The large scale of the mat that surrounds the very elegant prints enhances the smallness of the photographs. This intimacy is at once contradicted by the grandeur and jubilation of the cumulous clouds. The clouds are too big for the space, and instantly, the framing and cropping is intangible. The flatness of the actual photograph is in a paradoxical relationship with the space that is perceived within the capturing of the clouds.

Do the varied titles—*Songs of the Sky* or *Equivalent*s—change the meaning for the viewer? One difference is the direct implication of music in *Songs of the Sky*; however, there are still notions of transcendence apparent in both titles. Intertwined in the Stieglitz circle and in art theories at the beginning of the twentieth century were the ideas of equivalence and the transcendent qualities of music. This was most prominently noted in the work of Wassily Kandinsky, who was the most influential on Stieglitz’s development of art theory.

The dislocation of transparent representation of subject matter is deeply tied into the understanding of what “equivalent” means. Greenough states that to the artists affiliated with Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery, the term “equivalent” was similar to the Symbolist idea of synesthesia.⁵⁰ Hartley says an equivalent is “a sign or symbol for the ideas of spirit.” Hartley’s definition was repeated throughout the works of the Stieglitz Circle, but it was not unique to them. In 1912, Stieglitz was the first to translate Kandinsky’s theory of equivalence, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, from German to English in *Camera Work*. Kandinsky believed that abstract forms, lines, and colors could expound corresponding inner states, emotions, and ideas.⁵¹ For Kandinsky, clarity and obscurity were represented by the colors white and black. Through their contrast, a static feeling on the level of silence was achieved. White represented absolute silence that was

⁵⁰ Ibid., XLII. “Synesthesia—the possibility of suggesting one thing by means of another.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

hopeful, and black represented death, the hopeless silence. For Stieglitz, this contrast signaled music, a visual repetition of rhythm and movement that was silent. Thus, the transition from *Songs of the Sky* to *Equivalents* is not what makes these images arbitrary. The meanings that shift through each photograph, and how the photographs shift in context, are what give the series its arbitrary feeling.

In their works, the members of the Stieglitz circle tried to capture equivalents of their inner experiences and psychologies. These inner experiences, or symbolisms, were more important to the nature of the photograph than the subject matter depicted. “In looking at my photographs of clouds,” Stieglitz concluded, “people seemed freer to think about the relationships in the pictures than about subject matter for its own sake.”⁵² The relationships that he is pointing to are these constructions of sets that create a narrative rhythm. By opening up the photograph, Stieglitz was not only making a parallel to art, but was allowing for less transparent meanings to form through the imagination of the viewer.⁵³ Through this interaction between the photograph and the viewer, a personal, almost spiritual, meaning arises. Whether the narrative is one of transcendence, as Stieglitz claimed, or one of purely formal relationship is dependent upon the subjectivity of the viewer.

As Kristina Wilson points out, the photographs were made with a “period-specific concept of spirituality derived from Transcendentalism and Theosophical ideas, such as the intertwined nature of bodily experience and spiritual knowledge and the loss of oneself in an oceanic cosmos at the moment of enlightenment.”⁵⁴ This concept of spirituality in the *Equivalents* series was

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Here, we could fall back to Coleridge and his notion of the imagination being the agent through which transcendental action occurs.

⁵⁴ Kristina Wilson. “The Intimate Gallery and the ‘Equivalents’: Spirituality in the 1920s work of Stieglitz” *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (Dec., 2003).746.

something that Stieglitz himself stated when he made the famous announcement that he “photographed God.”⁵⁵ In this statement, we could also see that the agent of transcendence is the genius of the photographer.

Spirituality was not only present in the photographs, but was integral to Stieglitz’s philosophy as a whole. In his manifesto for the Intimate Galleries, he alluded about how art guides viewers to a spiritual state. Wilson states, “Ultimately, although the ideal behind [Stieglitz’s] theories was of an expansive moment of elevated awareness of the world, his multifaceted tactics tended to seem coercive, demanding mental submission rather than fostering genuine mental openness.”⁵⁶ This idea of “demanding mental submission” is derived not only from the small size of the photographs, but also the environment in which they are seen.

Almost as if he was dared by comments made by Waldo Frank, Stieglitz sought to photograph something that was beyond his ability to hypnotize. If nature were divine, then surely Stieglitz could not control it. This petulant response resorted back to his views of rebellion and experimentation, but was only made possible by his Romantic belief in the transcendent power of nature. This idea also touched upon the connections of photography and nature. Photography has long been thought to be nature’s pencil. Here, Stieglitz was taking part in a continuing dialogue between nature and photography, a link that is heightened when the viewer returns to the subject matter within the *Equivalents* series.

The first in a long line of cloud photographs is the small series, *Music—A Sequence of Ten Photographs*, 1922. This series was created in response to major criticisms of his work that was shown in a large solo exhibition in 1921 at the Anderson Galleries in New York, New York. The

⁵⁵ Ibid. Connections can be made between Stieglitz’s announcement and Coleridge’s idea of the imagination opening up the binary of the divine and the written word.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 747-48.

criticism stemmed mainly from art critic Henry McBride, but also came from several major literary sources, including Waldo Frank. McBride charged Stieglitz's photography with being "essentially aristocratic and expensive... His impressions are printed luxuriously upon the rarest papers to secure a richness of effect that must always lie beyond the appreciation of the multitude."⁵⁷ McBride was right on Stieglitz's philosophy was to create priceless imagery for a select few who he deemed good enough.

Transcendentalists popularized the belief that "natural wilderness contains within it evidence of the divine workings of God."⁵⁸ More specifically, American Transcendentalism held that every object "symbolized both material and spiritual existence."⁵⁹ However, Wilson is quick to point out that Stieglitz never directly cited Transcendentalists. She states, "His affinity with their tradition is revealed in both his willingness to privilege a spiritual interpretation of landscape painting at his gallery and his own rhapsodic love of the Lake George landscape."⁶⁰

This spirituality stemmed from the increasing role of transcendentalism within American society. Following World War I, tenets of rationalism and humanism were challenged by the horrific violence of mass, mechanized war. Americans started to look to writers and spiritual sources to become reconnected with humanity and spirituality. Emulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, transcendentalism was primarily concerned with the loss of the spiritual in everyday 20th twentieth century life.

⁵⁷ Greenough, "Alfred Stieglitz's Photographs of Clouds." 138

⁵⁸ Wilson, "The Intimate Gallery and the 'Equivalents'," 748.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. According to Wilson, his letters regarding Lake George often read like Thoreau or Emerson. Waldo Frank was a friend and active transcendentalist who often made the comparison of Stieglitz to transcendentalist beliefs.

The Symbolic

When looking at *Equivalents*, the viewer should be transported from a particular experience to a universal feeling—an almost Zen-like state. For example, in *Equivalents C2 nos. 1-5*, the viewer should be moved to a feeling, perhaps of loss, through the rhythms of dark tones and contrasting whites that are repeated throughout the five photographs. The images are abstracted through cropping and soft focus. In several photographs, even the sun is eliminated, making the photograph only about tone, line, movement, and contrast. Through the photographs' vertical orientation, the viewer can lose his or her own orientation to the ground and, therefore, is free of any direct correlations of place and time.

One can gain further insight into the meaning of Stieglitz's work by looking at Coleridge's theory of the symbol—"the product of organic growth of form."⁶¹ The symbol present here is particular to the American Romantic movement, and is a figure of presence linked to the transcendental. Genius, which is limited by the individual (in this case, the artist), taps directly into a truth moment. It is through the work of the genius that an individual truth is translated into a general truth, a transcendental moment. Here, I would posit Stieglitz as the genius who translates through his photographs individual moments, which can or cannot lead to moments of universal truths. This transcendence occurs through the imagination of the viewer.

Art for Stieglitz was a vehicle for the symbolic. Stieglitz needed to work in a symbolic mode if he was to work in an American style. The symbol is total, single, and has a universal

⁶¹.Paul DeMan. "The Rhetoric of Temporality," *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 191.

meaning.⁶² It is through the valorization of symbol at the expense of allegory that the Romantic period is marked. Allegory gave rise to obvious fictions intended to impart moral understanding—it requires the literal meaning to be inherent within the image just as much as the symbolic meaning. By contrast, this sifting notion of the symbol coincides with the growth of an aesthetic that refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of experience. In the *Equivalents* series, and any of Stieglitz’s later works, the viewer is meant to experience the photograph, instead of noticing its materiality or mediation of a representation. Through the symbol, the viewer is able to connect a particular instance or moment to a totality of the human experience.⁶³

Stieglitz believed that abstraction was another way to reach enlightenment. In addition, “Stieglitz himself believed that realism was an essential tool for conveying spiritual ideas. Stieglitz saw spirituality not as an intellectualized abstract state, but as intimately linked with the awesomeness of one’s embodied existence.”⁶⁴ Stieglitz’s view of spirituality was very similar to how Walter Benjamin saw symbolism within a work of art. Stieglitz and Benjamin were developing these ideas of spirituality and symbolism from transcendentalism.

Gramatical Structures

The Stieglitz photographs of these later years are basically one thing said many ways. Prints of the clouds, landscapes, friends, are closely akin to each other.⁶⁵

—Doris Bry

⁶² Christian Metz. “Photography and the Fetish.” Ed. Carol Squiers. *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*. (Seattle: Bay Press. 1990), 189.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶⁴ Wilson, “The Intimate Gallery and the ‘Equivalents’,” 755.

⁶⁵ Doris Bry. *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer*. (Boston: distributed by New York: October House, 1965), 17.

There is a shared methodology in the later years of Stieglitz's photographic works. The skyscrapers, the poplars, the apples, and the clouds all share qualities that were not overtly present in his work before 1917. These shared elements are repeatedly noted. Doris Bry attributes these similarities in the photographs to Stieglitz's "feelings at a particular time than [to] their subject matter."⁶⁶ This attachment to transcendentalism and Symbolist ideas dominates the dialogue of these photographs. While there is evidence of these ideas in play, there are also issues having to do with organization and arrangement that point to other sources of influence that have consistently been overlooked when interpreting *Equivalents*. Unlike his singular photographic work before 1917, the works created later consist largely of series. The object captured by the camera is elevated to the status of fetishized subject with seriality. However, with this series, it is not what the camera is capturing—clouds—but the actual prints them. Clouds are not the objects at hand, the printed photograph, and the immateriality captured therein is fetishized.

The title, *Equivalents*, implies two objects that are equitable, but the photographs only present half of the equation. There is an inherent lack in the *Equivalents* series. As Christian Metz argues, "The spectator has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame, but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming the shape of this emptiness."⁶⁷ Yet, by its emptiness or lack of presence, the other half of the equation is ever present—"insisting on its presence as *excluded*..."⁶⁸ In this series of photographs, Stieglitz has specifically framed the images as lack. As with many of the aforementioned photographs, he captured the sky, which can read as full (of clouds) or lack of subject. For instance, the sky as

⁶⁶ Bry, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer*, 17.

⁶⁷ Metz, "Photography and the Fetish," 155.

⁶⁸ Metz, "Photography and the Fetish," 155.

lack comes into play when common adjectives like “vast” and “empty” are used to describe it. By titling the photographs *Equivalents*, Stieglitz is forcing the viewer to think outside or off-frame to what is lacking in-frame. By castrating the other end of the equivalent equation, Stieglitz creates a fetish—one that is repeated several hundred times. Its repetition reinforces its fetishization.⁶⁹

Within *Equivalents*, the viewer can read the lack of control within the image via experiencing the photograph first hand. Many of the photographs contain no horizon line and are re-orientated, all of which adds to the sense of free falling or vertigo that these images instill. Rosalind Krauss mentions this sense of vertigo in her article, “Stieglitz/Equivalents.” In her article, Krauss gives a purely formal reading of the grammatical structuring of the series. Krauss argues that Stieglitz’s *Equivalents* are art because of the cropping and subsequent divorcing the image from any relationship to the ground. Through this divorce of subject matter and context, abstract qualities arise that disorientate the viewer. While this is true for the majority of the images, it does not accurately characterize the entire series. For instance, the images of the poplars and their formal relationship to Stieglitz’s portraits undermine the power of this argument. Moreover, by negating the historical contextualization of Stieglitz’s *Equivalents*, Krauss relegates the subject matter to oblivion. The subject matter underpins the formal structuring of the series. The two elements are intimately tied in the *Equivalents* series.

Krauss elaborates that the vertical of the clouds “calls to mind both our need for orientations and our customary means of achieving it by recourse to a horizon that will organize and confirm our relation to the earth.”⁷⁰ The viewer recognizes the clouds, yet through this

⁶⁹ Metz, “Photography and the Fetish,” 155-56. Metonymically the photograph alludes to the lack of a subject or context. Metaphorically it is equivalent to the penis.

⁷⁰ Krauss. “Stieglitz/Equivalents,” 129.

recognition, becomes more disorientated because the clouds are no longer connected to their familiar context. This was achieved in *Equivalents* post 1927, where the ground is completely removed and the tonalities of the poplars are more of an abstraction of tones rather than images of trees. The thoughts of finding memory or a feeling of disorientation are connected to the formal attributes of the photographs themselves. The fact that the viewer looks for something to locate him or herself in the relationship of ground and sky and is not able to find it on the cheap postcard stock paper—instead of silver gelatin or platinum prints—is rather intriguing. The icon of memorabilia transformed into reminiscence.

For *Equivalents*, Stieglitz took a readily accessible subject (the sky), used a populist format (postcard stock), and transformed them through the medium of photography into a more elevated status—the art object. Postcards were perhaps one of the most popular photographic formats of the early twentieth century. Until the 1930's, when more populist alternatives of photography arose, the postcard was a cheap, easily accessible, and highly collectible form of communication. Stieglitz once said, “Clouds were there for everyone—no tax as yet on them—free.”⁷¹ Part of this commentary shadowed by the fact that Stieglitz was on the verge of bankruptcy after the failure of the 291 Gallery. Before *Music—A Sequence of Ten Photographs*, Stieglitz was notorious for using the palladium printing process, which was one of the most expensive photographic printing processes at the time. After receiving the criticism from his last exhibition, Stieglitz was determined to make a point. He responded by making these next images on the least elite paper possible—postcard stock. Highly collectable and numerous in subject matter, postcards were, perhaps, an early companion to the common snapshot. “The United States Post Office reported that from June 1907 to June 1908 more than 667 million postcards, many of

⁷¹ Stieglitz, Alfred, “How I Came to Photograph Clouds,” 235.

them picture postcards, were sent.”⁷² Kodak even manufactured the Folding Camera 3A, a camera specifically made for laypeople to photograph their own picture postcards.⁷³ Thus, with the given popularity of the postcard shortly before the 1920’s, Stieglitz’s usage of postcard stock to print his images should not be taken lightly.

By using postcard stock, Stieglitz was making a definitive statement. Whether that statement was tongue in cheek or earnest, the fact that he went from using one of the most expensive forms of photography—the palladium print—to one of the most banal, was a very calculated move. Yet, Stieglitz short-circuited this usage of populist materials and subject matter through his philosophy of what constituted a finished photograph. Stieglitz mounted all of his photographs, including the *Equivalents*, to very specific dimensions. For Stieglitz, the photograph was not finished until mounted. Because of this, the viewer cannot easily read that the print is on postcard stock unless he or she can handle the actual mounted print. This is not surprising to find, since Stieglitz believed that art was higher than material goods—it was to be separate from the material world.

Stieglitz regularly cropped images in the initial production negatives; however, he often recropped and reoriented the photographs to produce two images from one. This cropping and reframing of the photographs plays on the viewer’s previous experience, by requiring the viewer to mentally fill-in missing features and to complete partial forms. The photographs are small and capture expansive depth, however once the viewer recognizes the subject matter, their previous knowledge of the sky as expansive makes the photographs all the more intimate, an intimacy that borders on claustrophobia in several cases.

⁷² Mary Warner Marien. *Photography: A Cultural History*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams), 171.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

The other shared quality in the later series is Stieglitz's consistent focus on the arrangement and composition. Several of the photographs are tilted on the corner, making the photograph a diamond rather than a rectangle. While many of the photographs of O'Keeffe share a complete dependence on the cropping of the negative in the production of the photograph. Stieglitz's continued focus on the materiality of the photographs short circuit and support the transcendent qualities that the photographs are to convey. Through cropping and rearrangement, the photographs achieve a level of abstraction through decontextualization that straight photography cannot normally achieve. The cropping is at once instantly noticeable - directing the viewer's attention away from the transcendent meaning—and necessary.

CHAPTER 2 CONCLUSION

There are many ways to read or inroads that can be made into the *Equivalents* series. The *Equivalents* could be approached as an opposition to traditional tropes of the landscape, and influenced by his biography and personal experiences. They can also be approached through the style of portraiture and its relation to the landscape, film, and through the leverage provided by the earlier series. Stieglitz's own role as curator and through his interpretation of straight photography shaped the formal styling of the series.

The average viewer is not able to have the historical information at hand when viewing the series in a typical museum context. This begs the question as to whether *Equivalents* is successful or still relevant if the contextualization of the works is different 80 years later. While relevancy is a subjective issue, I do not think that *Equivalents* has the same impact today, now that Stieglitz's life and issues of Romanticism are no longer at the forefront of our cultural understanding. Issues of exhibition presentation compound questions of contemporary interpretation. Stieglitz was very particular as to how his photographs were to be shown. It does appear that, due to the arbitrary nature of the subject matter, Stieglitz's curatorial practice ultimately underlined the contextual understanding of these photographs. Without documentation of their original exhibition contexts, can the contemporary viewer garner an interpretation of *Equivalents* as originally intended?

I ask these questions after describing the layering of *Equivalents* because these issues arise after the formal structuring and cultural contexts are understood. In most cases, *Equivalents* is shown using Stieglitz's framing guidelines as interpreted by the curator at hand, not as

Stieglitz himself would have curated. At the Minneapolis Institute of Art, there is only a single photograph shown from the *Equivalents* series. Showing a single photograph, instead of a set, changes the nature of the interpretation of the photographs, as they are meant to be seen as a plurality.

To refer back to Stieglitz, the viewer should “think about the relationships in the pictures than about subject matter for its own sake.”¹ Subject matter alone is not enough to support the structuring of these images. The *Equivalents*, and perhaps most of his later works, need to be seen in a specifically structured context—in the series or sets ascribed by Stieglitz. Through their plurality arises a more complex understanding of Stieglitz’s work. It is difficult to state specifically how the *Equivalents* were intended to be viewed, as there is very little documentation of Stieglitz’s curatorial practice and the arrangements of his exhibitions of these works. However, if an expanded notion of the *Equivalents*—one that incorporates a reading of the material structuring—than a clearer reading is possible.

¹ Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz / the Key Set*, XLII.

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