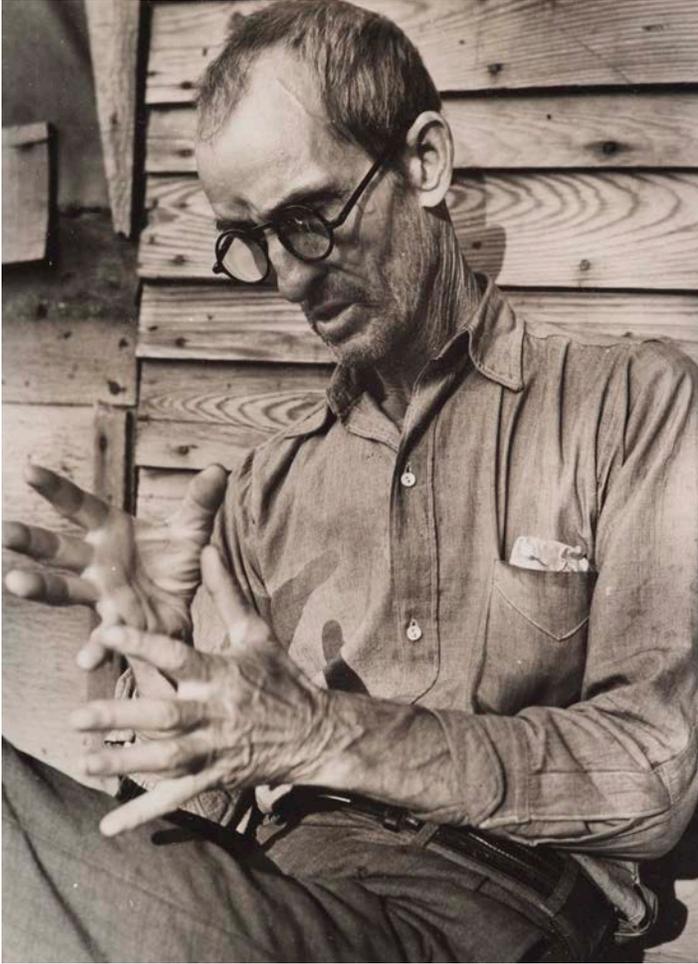# Sid Grossman

English

Photography, Politics, and the Ethical Image

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In 1936, as the United States grappled with the end of the Great Depression, Sid Grossman (b. 1913, New York; d. 1955, Provincetown, Massachusetts) along with Sol Libsohn cofounded the Photo League, a pioneering group of young, idealistic photographers who set out to document poverty and issues of social inequality in New York. The league's history originates from the Workers Film and Photo League, which was founded as an initiative of Workers International Relief (WIR), an organization that since the early 1930s supported photographers who circulated left-wing press imbued with films and photographs of workers' activities as an instrument for radical social change. Following the break of the Workers Film and Photo League into distinct groups, Grossman and Libsohn joined forces to form the Photo League.[1]

Encompassing a school, a studio with darkroom rental, and an exhibition space, the league's location at 31 East 21st Street developed into a popular hub for amateurs and professionals who were passionate about the medium of photography. They met regularly to learn, share their work, and discuss possibilities for activating social reform through photography. The league was perceived as one of the most radical, active, and innovative centers for photography of its time. Its work was circulated through a range of left-wing publications, but also through the collective's own newsletter, *Photo Notes*, a zine-like bulletin that the groundbreaking American photographer Edward Weston once called "the most progressive photography magazine in the US."[2] During its 15 years of existence, the Photo League welcomed hundreds of members and invited various lecturers, including respected photographers W. Eugene Smith, Weegee, Helen Levitt, Robert Frank, and Ansel Adams.

Many classes were given by Grossman himself; as a teacher, he taught his students to present something more than the documentary image—he drove his students to present their own ideas overlaid with the reality they observed and captured. Living by the philosophy that "art must have a moral imperative," he insisted on using his camera as a tool to achieve his ideals while also developing personal and philosophical perceptions of his surroundings.[3] This philosophy was not only applied to his personal works, but also extended through his teachings. An example of this approach is found in the class description in the syllabus of an upper-level course: "The student is taught to see himself in relation to photography, photography in relation to society."[4] Although he was often described as demanding, brutal, and opinionated, his teachings did not include lectures and strict technical instructions, but instead were composed of practical classes that reinforced a sense of independence, allowing his students to develop their own voices through artistic exploration.

Through *Photo Notes*, classes taught by promising photographers, exhibitions, and group projects, the Photo League deepened its commitment to social activism. One example is the *Harlem Document*, a project initiated by member Aaron Siskind that produced an iconic visual record of Harlem during the Great Depression. Grossman and Libsohn worked on a similar series titled *Chelsea Document*, in which the photographers worked directly with the Chelsea Tenants' League to identify problems and substandard living conditions in the area. They observed and captured the neighborhood as old buildings transitioned to housing projects, large luxury apartments, and industrial buildings. Views from tall rooftops, such as *Chelsea (cityscape)* (1938), capture the density of the area and the state of the buildings, while other photographs zoom in on the daily lives of individuals.

In the summer of 1940 Grossman extended his socially driven work beyond the city while traveling to the Dust Bowl region of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri to photograph farmers and union activities. Although these images clearly document the rural livelihood of individuals and families, they also possess various aesthetic qualities. It is known that he manipulated his prints in the darkroom; for example, in images of the union organizer and farmer Henry Modgilin, Grossman changed the tone in the photo negative to clarify the subject's surrounding space and dramatize his eloquent face, body, and gesturing hand.[5]

1 Hanne Christiansen, "The Photo League: Remembering the Radical NY Collective That Brought a Social Conscience to Street Photos," Dazed, July 11, 2013, http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/16536/1/the-photo-league. 2 Ibid. 3 Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: from the New Deal into the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 73. 4 Ibid., 76. 5 Ibid., 81.

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Modgilin is caught in spirited conversation, possibly about the hardships of rural life. The same interest in employing manipulation to shift the meaning of an image is seen in *Arkansas Mt. Family* and *Untitled (children in kitchen)* (both 1940); in the latter, the photographer effectively cropped the image to highlight the children in the composition. Grossman's camera was used on this trip to capture ordinary individuals surviving financial hardships, however his attraction to the working-class labor unions and his associations with known Communists later brought him under the FBI's radar.

FBI surveillance increased over time, but without Grossman's knowledge it was already affecting him in the mid-1940s. Although he was eager to join the army and fight for his country in Europe, the Army Intelligence Bureau was leery of his allegiance with the Communist Party. He was instead stationed in Panama and spent 1945–46 as a public relations photographer for the Sixth Army Corps.[6] Between safe and low-stress assignments, Grossman was presented with an unexpected freedom and had plenty of leisure time to travel within the region, read, and experiment with the ample equipment provided. It was in 1945 that he produced a rich body of work, which included photographs taken of the famed Festival del Cristo Negro (Black Christ Festival) held every year on October 21 in Portobelo, Panama. These photographs capture a night procession of the black wooden statue of Christ and were produced with a Speed Graphic 4x5 camera and a single flash. During this period in Central America, Grossman moved the camera in different and sharper angles, the prints were heavily manipulated, and the graininess and blurriness of images, at first controversial, were eventually well received. Away from New York and its socially oriented discussions, Grossman explored his own artistic expression. As Keith F. Davis noted, "when left entirely to his own conceptual resources, the rationale for his pictures became more private, intuitive, and psychological. . . . The reality of things still mattered, but the most profound meanings were now a matter of psyche rather than society."[7]

The return to New York following World War II marked Grossman's most productive years, in which he continued to explore movement and other aesthetic qualities in famous series, such as *Coney Island* and *Mulberry Street.* The end of the 1940s also marks the beginning of the Red Scare phase, when McCarthyism gathered momentum in the United States against socialist, fascist, subversive, and Communist organizations. Long-suspicious authorities declared the Photo League, among other organizations, a subversive organization in a list published by Attorney General Tom C. Clark in 1947. The league suffered great consequences, from a drop in membership to members no longer being hired for photographic work. However, it was not until two years later that a testimony from Angela Calomiris made a huge impact on Grossman's career—she was a friend, a member of the Photo League, and, most surprisingly, an FBI informant. During a trial in which she was asked to testify against Communist leaders, Calomiris named Grossman as the person who persuaded her to join the Communist Party. The shock of this betrayal compelled him leave the league in 1949, and, two short years later, the organization disbanded. Immediately following the testimony, Grossman began to spend summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, studying painting with Hans Hofmann and opening a photography school. Although he continued to photograph, the focus of his work from this period shifted from socially driven photographs toward the flora and fauna of Cape Cod. This change was dramatic; unlike the earlier photographs, his postwar works emphasize a new aesthetic preoccupied with the photographer's participation in the moment. They exude a sense of hope and optimism, a characteristic often found in post–World War II American photography.

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6 Ibid., 92. **7** Keith F. Davis, *The Life and Work of Sid Grossman* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2016), 97.

Sid Grossman: Photography, Politics, and the Ethical Image
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Biography

Sid Grossman (b. 1913, New York; d. 1955, Provincetown, Massachusetts) was an American photographer, teacher, and social activist. He attended the City College of New York and cofounded the Photo League (1936–51), whose purpose was to use photography as a tool to effect social change. Grossman was also the editor of the Photo League's monthly publication *Photo Notes*. His work has been included in exhibitions at Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; and the Jewish Museum, New York. His work is in numerous public and private collections, including Pérez Art Museum Miami; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum of Modern Art; the Jewish Museum; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Images

Cover   *Chelsea (cityscape)*, 1938. Gelatin silver print, 3 3/4 x 5 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jeffrey Hugh Newman

2   *Untitled (man in spectacles)*, 1940. Gelatin silver print, 9 5/8 x 7 3/8 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Simon and Bonnie Levin

3   *Arkansas Mt. Family*, 1940. Gelatin silver print, 10 1/2 x 11 3/8 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Simon and Bonnie Levin

4   *Untitled (children in kitchen)*, 1940. Gelatin silver print, 7 3/4 x 7 1/2 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Steven E. and Phyllis Gross

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