

Environmental portraits

August Sander: Rheinlandschaften photographs by August Sander text (in German) by Wolfgang Kemp Schimer, Mosel Muchen/40 plates/\$20.00 (hb).

With the current interest among many artists in subject matter and its systematic treatment, the work of August Sander both requires closer scrutiny as a possible influence on those artists, and is more easily understood as today's concerns and sensibilities grow closer to his. For these reasons alone, a new collection of unpublished work should be noteworthy. But the landscapes presented in **August Sander: Rheinlandschaften** are the more remarkable for the light they shed on his own art, and that of his and our contemporaries.

When the German master's well-known attempt at recording examples of the whole of twentieth-century humankind was halted in 1934 by the Nazi confiscation of his book, **Antlitz der Zeit** (not only did his work give equal stature to all classes, races and political persuasions, but he had helped his fugitive son, Erich, to produce Communist leaflets photographically), the landscape work he had started around 1920 became his only artistic outlet. Yet until the appearance this year of **Rheinlandschaften**, the only readily accessible reproductions of his last efforts were the six pictures squeezed into Gunther Sander's biographical appendix to **Men Without Masks** (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973. The original, German, edition was published in 1971.)

The landscapes in the 1971 book have routinely been ignored in discussing Sander and his work and influence — and not without reason. The pictures seem to be included almost as an afterthought, and they are very few, as opposed to the 270 or so portraits. While most of them are quite beautiful /pretty, only one might be said to have that same analytical quality — the concern for the individual example as representative of a larger class — so important to the portraits. Even this photograph (of a single plant centered against a background of limited variety and tonal range) is absorbed into its context of quiet forest scenes. Judging by **Men Without Masks**, Sander was a portraitist who, denied the inspiration and stimulation of his grandiose project, mellowed into a middle-aged backpacker meandering through the woods in search

of rest, relaxation and intimate pictures of nature.

The "Rheinlandschaften" which we are presented in the new book prove once again how much the editing of a person's work has to do with our perception of it (not that we needed further proof). For an alternative description of the photographer is suggested here — one which would show a greater consistency of purpose, vision and technique. Most of the 40 photographs have the same detached, unemotional quality which gives the portraits much of their power. All of them were made in the same part of Germany, and most seem to fit together as a deliberate study of the area (in fact, the last four images in the book show the same scene in fall, summer, spring and winter). This, of course, is much the same kind of activity as his cataloging of types of people. But perhaps the most important difference is that these are not idealized bits of nature strictly cropped out of a stand of trees, but broad expanses of river, land and sky in the most basic of compositions.

It is, in large measure, such technical considerations as composition, point of view and framing which point up the contrasts between Sander's work and that of other landscapists of the same era, and by examining their craft we can gain an understanding of their essential differences artistically. For instance, where Ansel Adams gives us the uniquely grand rock face or mountain, and accentuates that grandeur with every technique available to him, Sander shuns the unique for the typical, almost invariably either centering his subject, or presenting it in horizontal layers of foreground, middle ground and background. Where Alfred Stieglitz very selectively photographs only those subjects and parts of subjects which he feels he can use to express his emotions and thoughts, Sander concentrates on gathering representative samples, forming a collection which he hopes will give an accurate idea of the whole upon which it is drawn. Where Albert Renger-Patzsch or Edward Weston seek beauty of form in the commonplace and call attention to these forms by totally isolating them, Sander invariably stands back, consciously making use of the fact that an object is described largely by its environment. We see this, in a whole series of photographs, in his handling of a particularly seductive basalt formation. The rhythm of light and shadow, the columns of rock, the regular hexagons piled one on another would be enough to drive almost anyone to abstraction. Yet in each of the six images Sander insists that we recognize the subject for itself.

While we can find European antecedents for the conceptual framework of



August Sander, "Basaltsteinbruch im Stiegeengebirge," from **August Sander: Rheinlandschaften**

Sander's art in the systematic recording of all of Europe and the world by various national and international companies (Frith, Valentine, MacPherson, Alinari, etc.), it is to such Western American photographers as W.H. Jackson and especially Timothy O'Sullivan we should look to find parallels in imagery. This is not to suggest that Sander had any idea of who O'Sullivan was, but simply to point out that their similar concern for conveying the essence of an entire land led to a similar, unemotional, unspectacular style.

Jackson, O'Sullivan, et al. were often government employees engaged in the science and business of making geological surveys. As such, their way of working was dictated, to some extent, by the job they were hired to do. August Sander, on the other hand, was a relatively sophisticated modern who knew some of the most advanced art and artists of the day. His choice of subject over form or personal expression was a highly conscious one. Only recently have artists again begun to understand such a choice and to make it for themselves.

Here the bugbear of objectivity (lurking in the background since the examination of Volker Kahmen's **Art History of Photography** in the September issue of **Afterimage**) again intrudes upon our discussion. Can August Sander be said to be, in a very important sense, "more objective" than other photographers of his day — more, even, than Renger-Patzsch and Weston, who claimed objectivity as a standard? If we take "objective" and "scientific" ("a quasi-scientific systemic awareness," to use Kahmen's more complete phrase) to be synonymous, the answer must be "yes." And while one may argue (correctly, of course) that the current vogue of objectivity in art (or this particular brand of objectivity) will pass, it is an understanding of that aim in the work of Sander and of the artists who now follow his lead which we can gain from a unprejudiced look at the deceptively simple landscape photographs reproduced in **Rheinlandschaften**.

A final thought: in every supposedly coherent collection there is the anomal-

ous photograph which refuses to fit a reviewer's pat rationale. There are several in this book, the most blatant being "Drachenfels im Herbst," a gothic bit of romance complete with moody skies, bare-limbed trees and a castle on a hill. (While the cover tells us that all the photographs were made between 1929 and 1946, the German text (I'm told) does not date the picture.) While we can say that its inclusion is, again, a function of editing, we are left with the question of what was excluded, and how the photographs edited out might affect our thoughts about the work.

— Charles Desmarais

Bumper crop

Landscape

by Marcia Resnick
Marcia Resnick/31 photographs/price not available.

See

by Marcia Resnick
Marcia Resnick/35 photographs/price not available.

Tahitian Eve

by Marcia Resnick
Marcia Resnick/9 photographs/price not available.

The seeds of Marcia Resnick's recent National Endowment for the Arts grant have borne fruit in the form of three self-published books, and she is to be congratulated for the quality of the crop and thanked for letting us all share. The books, which summarize her most recent work, are each a provocative mixture of a concept framed ideologically by the book's title and realized visually by sequential repetition, a description which unfortunately makes her work sound like that of a conceptual artist's like Ed Ruscha, even though it is not at all similar. Conceptual artists generally use photography for demonstrating their ideas, and their photographs are pre-

August Sander, "Abendstimmung bei Bingen, 1929"

