

Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture

A NEW SENSE OF RELATEDNESS

Barbara Morgan

EDITOR: We experienced Barbara Morgan's photographs through slides projected onto a screen, along with her speaking about them. In this process we learned something of the influences in her life which inspired her, shaped her development, and made it possible for her to grow into an extraordinary artist, and a socially aware, generous, creative human being. When it came to publishing her Lecture here, we realized the technical impossibility of reproducing all the many pictures she showed on that occasion. To give our readers some feeling of the impact of viewing her art, together with her commentaries--biographical and explanatory--we have selected seven photographs, representative of several aspects of her work. We include some comments by Barbara Morgan, and in some cases by others, about her work, and a 'report' by your editor. We hope that in this way we can convey something of what she shared with us. She was introduced by Sam Bryan, Director of the International Film Foundation in New York, an organization which produces and distributes documentary films aimed at promoting better world understanding.

Charlotte Read

BARBARA MORGAN: It seems delightful to feel the presence of you all, and especially to hear Sam Bryan's mention of the past, bringing many warm memories to me. In this era of nuclear hazards and of cosmic doubt, shall we say, for my eight grandchildren, and millions of other children all over the world, I have the deepest concern. I am eighty years old and I intend to do all I can to, I hope, spark some additional survival, because I really feel we're on a threatened planet. The planet isn't responsible, we're responsible.

What I thought I'd do tonight, first, is show some of the beginning of my work. I realize now that in one sense I'm a little naive. I grew up thinking that the role of art in the world was to bring harmony, not just something pretty, or to make money, or to make your ego proud. It was to me my spiritual world. As a very young child, my whimsical-philosophical father one day picked up a little pebble and said, "Do you think this is moving? It doesn't seem to be moving," he said, "but just imagine there are millions and millions of little dancing atoms inside this little pebble. Do you think that tree over there is moving? There are millions and millions of atoms in that tree, too, and everything in the world is dancing! Even in your own hand and in your mind. Nothing in the world is still, it just seems to be." Then he would take me into the house and we would look at an illustrated article about atoms in the Scientific American. He was always challenging my mind like that, so I was learning to think not only of what I would see, but trying to imagine what's going on inside of everything.

Presentation with lantern slide photographs
October 24, 1980, The Yale Club, New York

We'd look at a bird on a limb, and watch to see if we could tell whether the bird was going to do something different, like fly. The bird would move this way and that, and my father would ask, "Why do you think he was doing that?" I said, "I don't know." "The bird wants to be sure that no other bird is coming after him," he answered. "But he does want to fly. Let's raise our fingers when we think he's about to fly." We would see him crouch and then off he would fly! If it hadn't been for such formative experiences I never would have photographed Martha Graham.

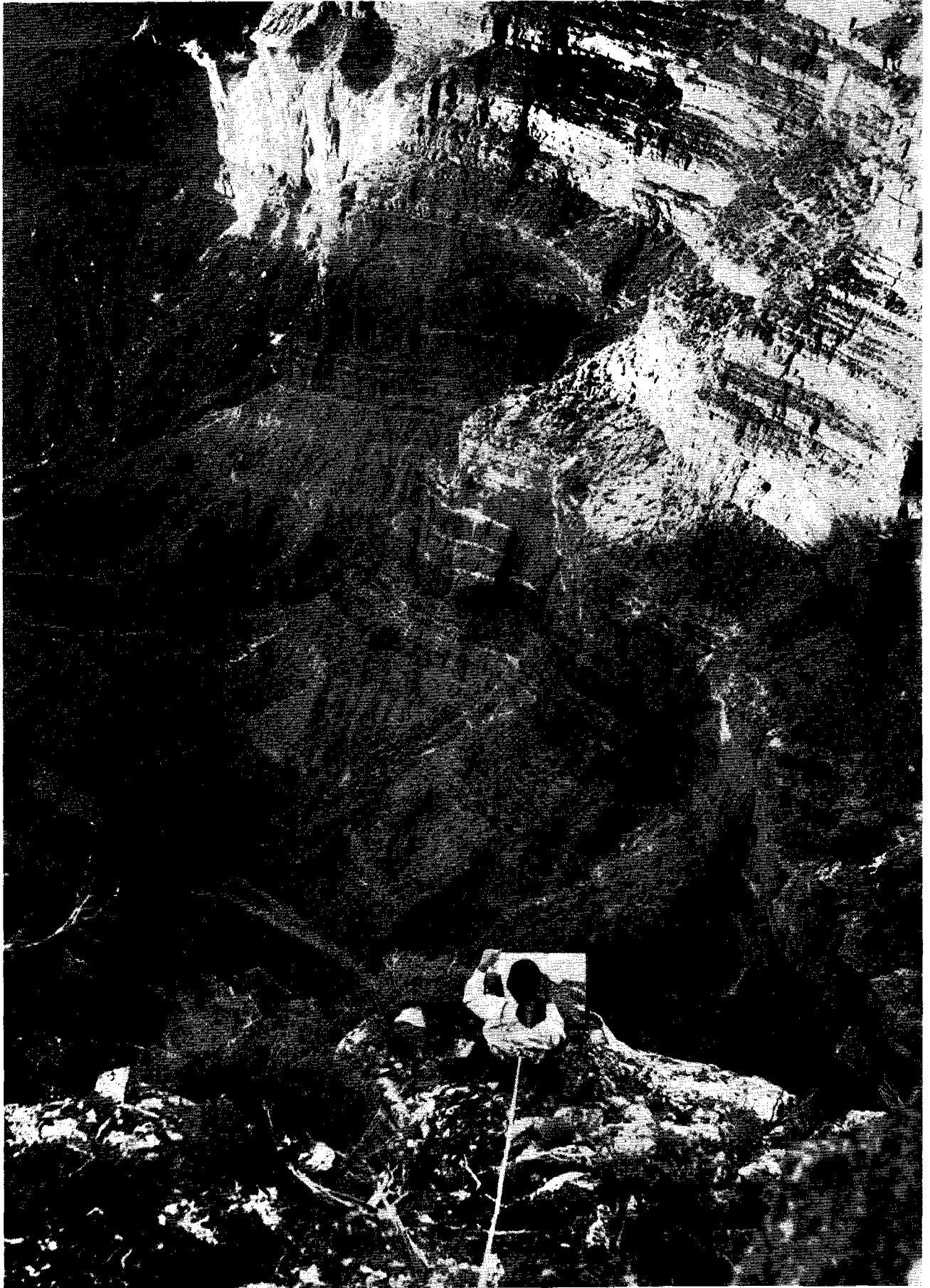
There are three special things basic to my whole life. I was always thinking of atoms dancing and everything going to the sun and birds flying, and everything in transition, so to me, there's never a static moment. But now that I envision polluting chemicals flowing into the earth, into water supplies, and tragic nuclear possibilities, I am hoping we will be able to think beyond our own ethnicity, beyond our own egocentric urges, and realize that we are all simply part of the cosmos. It's not merely reasonable, but urgent, that we should awaken our whole horizon of awareness, concern and responsibility, so that we don't mess up our planet.

EDITOR: Barbara (as she likes to be called) started the slide Lecture with a picture taken in the Grand Canyon in the summer of 1928. She went there with her writer-photographer husband, Willard, who was taking pictures with the then 'new Leica camera', and writing articles about the magnificent Southwest: Rainbow Bridge, Canyon de Chelley, the early Spanish El Penitentes, and the Hopi, Zuni and Navajo Indians. At that time she was a painter, teaching in the Art Department at the University of California at Los Angeles, so in summer vacations they went to the Southwest.

About this photograph she said, "While I would be sitting there painting for perhaps three hours, I was watching the changing angles of the sunlight creating majestic sculptural differences of form, in this overwhelmingly vast canyon. It was so utterly mysterious, that it was like a mystical experience. I felt that I began to go beyond our own human resources and I became 'part of the earth.' I could feel and imagine millions of years of change, because I was seeing the changing sunlight alter strata upon strata upon strata!"

Opposite: Barbara Morgan
painting in Grand Canyon.
Photograph by Willard Morgan, 1928

At the time the Morgans were out in the Southwest, the Indians felt that the camera was the 'evil eye', and they didn't want to be photographed. But the Morgans saw the Indian dance rituals, which would start at sunrise and continue intermittently during the day, until the sun went down in the evening. "It was such a life-unifying experience, that it literally changed our lives," she said.



"Later, when we were in New York, when Sam Bryan's father was doing a trial film of a Martha Graham rehearsal, he invited us to come with him and bring our Leica. In the little breaks, Martha and I began to talk, and when I said I had a strange feeling that there was some connection in her dancing to Indian dance rituals, she said 'Absolutely!' with deep intensity. I felt in all of her dances, just as I felt with the Indians, that their dances weren't given to show off expertise and ego, but to bring harmony and relatedness to the sun, the earth and growing life.

"In Martha Graham's dances I felt a similar dedication. It was her spiritual search and giving--through her dance--that inspired me and made me determined to make a photographic book of her dance. This was in 1935, when people desperately needed 'AFFIRMATION'."



Martha Graham: Letter to the World
Photograph by Barbara Morgan, 1940



Martha Graham: Lamentation
Photograph by Barbara Morgan, 1935

Martha Graham: Satyric Festival
Photograph by Barbara Morgan, 1935



When Barbara took photographs of dances, she always got the choreographer to tell her the original inspiration and meaning of the dance, so that she could convey the root emotion through the photographic interpretation.

When preparing to photograph, Barbara and Martha Graham would both simultaneously, silently, meditate, to 'become' the character. Both of them had early connections with Orientals who had attuned them to Esoragoto, the age-old psychological method, by which an actor, dancer, painter-photographer could 'become', and 'portray' the psychological meaning and personality of the character.



Leaf Floating in City
Photograph by
Barbara Morgan, 1970

All the time that Barbara was photographing dancers, she was also creating photomontage, which she considers a visual kind of poetry, for the combined images are like 'visual metaphors'. Peter Bunnell, in his introduction to a



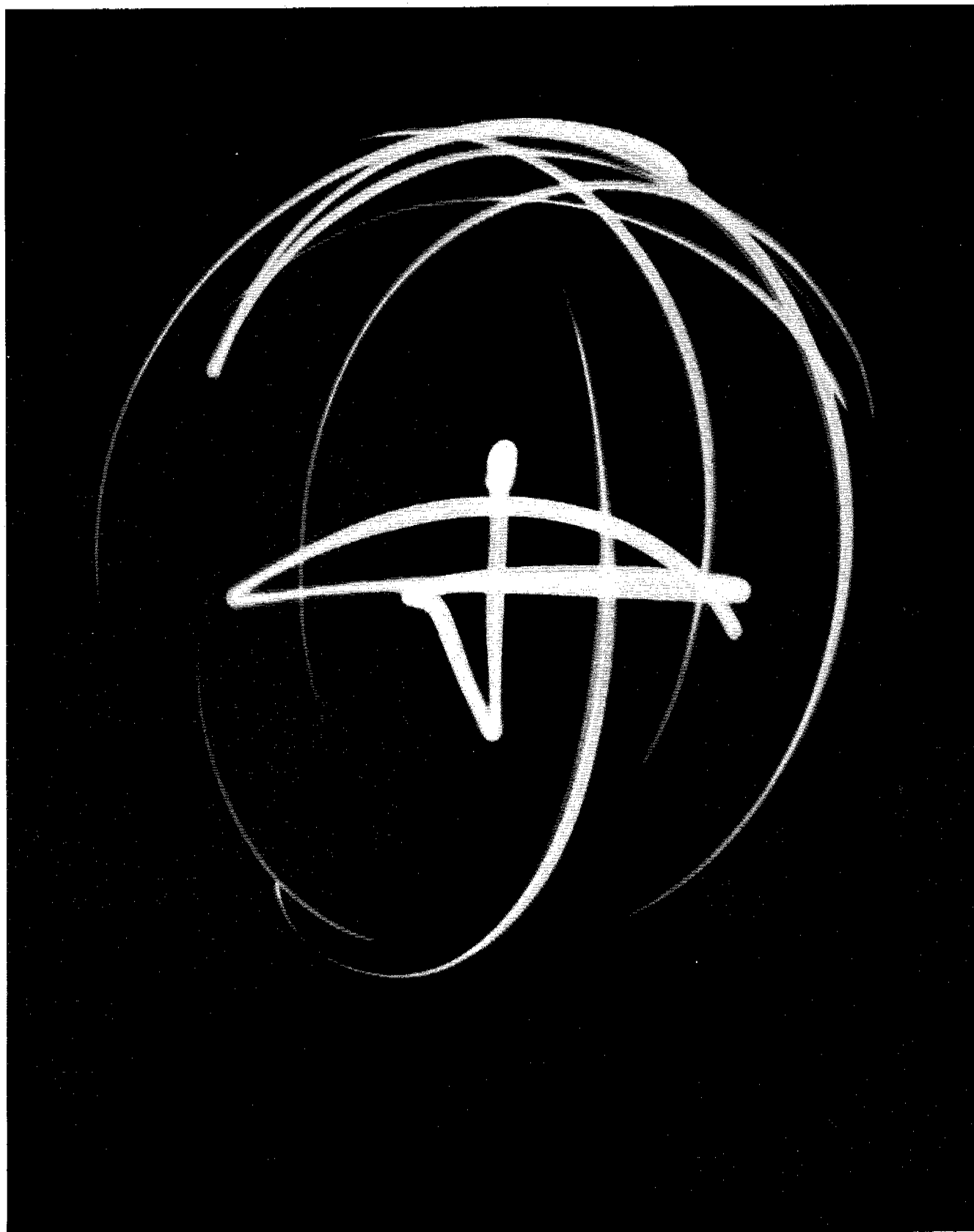
Wild Bee Honeycomb Skyscraper
Photomontage by Barbara Morgan, 1975

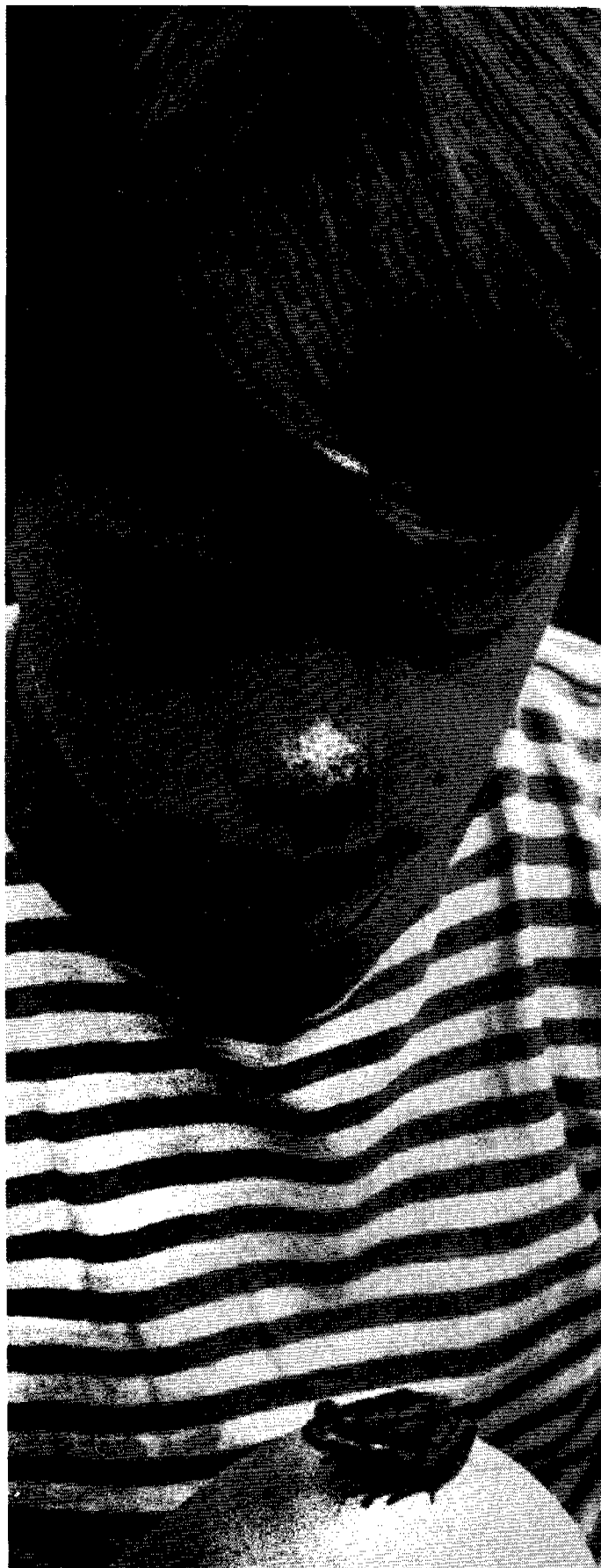
book of photographs by Barbara Morgan, writes about her photomontage: "The multiple-image system of montage allows her to combine discontinuous thoughts, observations, and ideas into a visual metaphor Writing about this form, she has said, 'As the lifestyle of the Space Age grows more interdisciplinary, it will be harder for the "one-track" mind to survive, and photomontage will be increasingly necessary. I see simultaneous-intake, multiple-awareness and synthesized-comprehension as inevitable, long before the year 2000 A.D. It is a powerful means of creating relevant pictures. I feel that photomontage, with its endless technical and esthetic possibilities, can be not only an inspiring medium for the meditative artist, but that it will increasingly serve the general public as a coordinating visual language.'" ("My Creative Experience With Photomontage," Image 14:20, December, 1971)

An experimental sideline that Barbara also developed was the photographing of moving light designs. Writing about this in Aperture, she said, "While designing the Graham book from five years' accumulation of shooting dance motion by various kinds of speed-lighting, I began to realize my debt to Light, not only for exposure, but for poetry of expression. . . . it wasn't the practical aspect alone that I was grateful for, but something far more tenuous: linking of childhood memories, desert light vibrations, and mankind's central dependence upon light from prehistoric solstice orgies and solar mysticisms to our scientific Mt. Wilson Palomar Observatory. . . . I began to feel the pervasive, vibratory character of light energy as a partner of the physical and spiritual energy of the dance, and as the prime-mover of the photographic process. Suddenly I decided to pay my respects to Light, and create a rhythmical light design for the book tailpiece. As early as 1940, I started much flashlight swinging in my darkened studio, in front of an open-shuttered camera, to build up images in time on a single negative. Technically, my idea was sparked by having seen scientific, work-efficiency movement studies photographed." (Aperture 11:1, 1964)

Samadhi (Light Drawing)
Photograph by Barbara Morgan, 1940

Opposite





Barbara was also working with Nature during this time, and her own children were becoming very interested in animals. She was realizing the need of their two boys for mountains and lakes instead of sweltering city pavements in summertime. If their two, then all children, she felt, should have a chance to enter the world of Nature. She visited an experimental children's camp (Camp Treetops) near Lake Placid. There she worked on a book of photographs on child development, trying to show the profoundly moving, sometimes difficult process of growing. She followed up photographically many of their activities and their moods, from dawn barn chores to evening bonfire singing, living along casually with the children at camp or on the trail.

Boy With Frog
Photograph by Barbara Morgan, 1948

Her main aim at the Lecture on October 24 was to show through pictures the hopeful realm of how we can become more sensitive to our universality, feeling that we are all part of the universe. "Why do we have to be so dogmatic, so greedy, so arrogant, so feeling that we're IT," she asked, "and how in this enormous universe can we be the only people here? It would seem to me instead of thinking so rigidly, we have to think what we're doing today. How will it affect people ten years or a thousand years from now? Will we destroy the earth with nuclear pollution? What are the after-effects of whatever we do? It is time that we start linking together the past and the future with the present."

She had been studying the prehistoric pictographs in Lascaux caves in France and around the world, and felt that this could give us the most intense realization that we really are all related. We would see the pregnant animals, the sun, the dwellings, and whatever animal was either loved or feared in the area where the people lived on planet Earth. We would find the similar rotational forms, circles, and ovals in all the pictographs, and the many dances. Whether they were from prehistoric Asia, Africa, or any of the continents, the pictographs and petroglyphs were so similar that we could feel "we are all a part of the rhythm of life, with its stress and relaxation."

In Aperture (1964) she wrote: "In 1959 I made a pilgrimage to Lascaux, Knossos, Delphi, the Parthenon, Tarquinia, Stonehenge, Carnac and Gaudi's Sagrada Familia . . . in order to feel a common core from past to present." During the last part of her talk, she showed pictures from a few other cultures: China, Barcelona and Southern Spain, Brittany, Paris, Norway, Roman graves and ancient Roman theatres in England. These gave the feeling of many different cultural forms, some ancient, some medieval, some modern.

"We are just little fragments within the cosmos," she said, "and we are all related because all life is related." She hoped that the realization of this relatedness would influence our feelings of responsibility for the FUTURE OF OUR PLANET.

* * * * *

THEODORE DALY (Master of Ceremonies): The presentation was so full that these pictures were worth many, many words. I want to thank Mrs. Morgan for sharing with us her creativity, her art. I know that it's had a tremendous impact on me, and I'm sure it's had a tremendous impact on this audience. I was particularly struck by such creative juxtaposition of the past and the present. What a commentary that is, and how well it presents to us a visualization of Korzybski's notion of time-binding! Here we are in the links between the past and future; I have never seen it or heard it spoken of in a more dramatic, forceful way. Thank you very much.

BARBARA MORGAN is well known as a photographer and also as a painter. A versatile and creative artist, her work displays an energy of strong rhythmic vitality. She has widely exhibited in this country and abroad for many years. She has also produced a number of books, and has contributed many articles and reviews to a variety of publications. In 1963 she participated in the General Semantics Conference held at New York University, speaking on a panel concerned with non-verbal communication. Her contribution, entitled "Aspects of Photographic Interpretation," was published in our General Semantics Bulletin Nos. 30 & 31.

Barbara Morgan was born in Kansas and grew up in southern California. She attended the University of California at Los Angeles and later joined the faculty there. During the next decade she was exposed to an enormously varied activity of painting, theater, dance, exhibiting, puppetry, and music. In 1930, five years after her marriage to Willard D. Morgan, a pioneer photographer in the use of the Leica camera and later a publisher of photographic books and technical manuals, she moved to New York. Following the birth of her two sons she seriously took up photography in 1935.

A monograph of Mrs. Morgan's work, with full bibliography and chronology, was published by Aperture in 1964. She is deeply interested in the social issues of human living. Her photographs range widely in subject matter, including nature, portraits, children, dance, light drawings, and photomontage. The dance photographs, begun in 1935 with Martha Graham and her company, have been highly valued. In 1980 she re-published her 1941 book, Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs, which was a Book of the Month Club selection.

Other books by Barbara Morgan include:

Summer's Children, A Photographic Cycle of Life at Camp

Barbara Morgan's Photomontage

Since 1935 she has been continuously exhibiting her photographs, paintings, and graphics, more recently especially the photographs. She also lectures frequently at colleges and independent workshops. She maintains her home and studio in Scarsdale.

Peter C. Bunnell, Curator of Photography, wrote in his introduction to the catalog of the exhibition of Barbara Morgan's photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1972: "Her work in dance and photomontage is perhaps the most important photographically because it marks a change in the fabric of American photography. It bridges the abstract and synthetic work developed in Germany and elsewhere in the twenties and the rigorous straightforward disciplines generally admired in this country and practiced by two of her close friends, Edward Weston and Charles Sheeler. It is also a connective between the natural environment, which for her colleagues and predecessors was the landscape, and the interest in the human world and the urban architectonic. These later concerns call for liberality of expression, and this is the foremost quality of Barbara Morgan's work."

All photographs in this paper copyrighted
by Barbara Morgan



Photograph by
Cecilia Younce
1980