



# The Shape of Things: Photographs from Robert B. Menschel



*Self-Portrait (Back with Arms Above)*, 1984  
John Coplans (1920–2003), Great Britain  
Gelatin silver print, 19 13/16 × 15"



The Shape of Things  
Photographs from Robert B. Menschel

Quentin Bajac

With an essay by Sarah Hermanson Meister

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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Director’s Foreword

In 1973 The Museum of Modern Art published *Looking at Photographs*, a volume featuring one hundred exquisite works selected by the revered curator John Szarkowski, each accompanied by an elegant text authored by Szarkowski himself. This publication has become a milestone in the history of the Museum and has helped define how we think about photography. Forty-three years later, I am delighted to present *The Shape of Things: Photographs from Robert B. Menschel*, which builds on Szarkowski’s structure to explore sixty remarkable photographs from the Museum’s collection. These works cover more than 150 years of photography—from a view of Paris taken in 1843 by William Henry Fox Talbot to a monumental landscape by Andreas Gursky from 2005—and were selected by Quentin Bajac, The Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator of Photography. The result is an engaging and lively introduction to the aesthetics and the historical development of photography.

What is astonishing is that such an outstanding survey can be assembled using works acquired with the support of a single patron. As such, this book is a tribute to the exceptional commitment of MoMA Trustee Robert B. Menschel, who, over a period of forty years, has supported the acquisition of 504 works by the Department of Photography, including a recent promised gift of 162 photographs from his personal collection. Since joining the Committee on Photography in 1977, Menschel has immersed himself in the culture of the institution. In 1987 he became a member of the Investment Committee, and two years later he was made a Trustee of the Museum. After a little more than a decade, he was elected Chairman of the Committee on Photography as well as Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees. In 2002 he became President of the Museum and helped oversee the successful completion of MoMA’s new building, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi. Three years later, he was elected Chairman of the Board, a position he held until 2007, when he became Chairman Emeritus and a Life Trustee of the Museum.

I am grateful to Quentin Bajac for conceiving this publication, which brings into focus the breadth of the collection and the history of photography that can be told through it, and to Sarah Meister, Curator in the Department of Photography, who has contributed an exceptional essay on developments in the display and collecting of photographs in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, the context in which Menschel began acquiring works. I am indebted to MoMA’s Board of Trustees for its untiring support and deeply thankful to the Committee on Photography for its generous facilitation of the acquisitions reproduced in this book, an effort led by past Chairmen, including Menschel, Peter Norton, and Richard E. Salomon, and current Chairman David Dechman. My last thanks, and deepest gratitude, are reserved for Bob himself, whose contribution to the Department of Photography is unparalleled. The images that you have helped us acquire are a wonderful portrait of yourself as a collector. Your remarkable gift will be a lasting testament to your generosity and your passion for photography.

Glenn D. Lowry, Director  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Sometime in the 1980s, John Szarkowski, then director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art, visited Robert B. Menschel at his New York apartment. Noticing a framed print by Harry Callahan—or was it by Aaron Siskind?—on the wall, Szarkowski moved closer, had a quick yet professional look at it, and then swiftly, and without asking, took the work down and put it under his arm. Turning to Menschel he said, “Bob, we have this image in the Museum’s collection, but your print is definitely better than ours—so let’s swap.” Menschel laughed, and Szarkowski walked away with the picture.

This story, as told by Menschel, gives us an idea of the trust, esteem, and friendship that united the two men and the selfless commitment that Menschel has long displayed toward the Museum, and the Department of Photography in particular. Originally from New York, a banker by trade—he entered the investment banking firm Goldman Sachs in 1954, becoming a partner in 1967—and an amateur photographer in his spare time, Menschel joined MoMA’s Committee on Photography in 1977, when several historic figures from the Museum’s early days were still members, including Monroe Wheeler, who joined the Museum in 1935 and who had been Director of Membership, Director of Publications, and Director of Exhibitions before being elected a Trustee in 1944; and David H. McAlpin, a Trustee who had been the first Chairman of the committee, in the 1940s. There were also several collectors in the group, including Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr., whose contributions to the medium are widely recognized today. Menschel was an active member of the committee for twenty years. He was Chairman from 1998 to 2002, overseeing a particularly prolific period of acquisition for the department, during which, under the guidance of Chief Curator Peter Galassi, the Museum acquired some diverse major collections, including the 341 modernist prints in The Thomas Walther Collection, the more than three thousand press photographs in The New York Times Collection, and around nine hundred works by Lee Friedlander from across his career, to name only a few notable examples. Parallel to his activity on behalf of the Department of Photography, Menschel was elected a Trustee of the Museum in 1989 before becoming President of the Board of Trustees in 2002 and Chairman in 2005. In 2007 he was named Chairman Emeritus and a Life Trustee of the Museum.

In 1978 Menschel helped the Department of Photography acquire an 1863 photograph by Lewis Carroll (p. 131). This picture, still one of the icons of the Museum’s collection of early British photography, was the first in an incredible series of works acquired through his support. Three hundred forty-two prints entered the Museum’s collection in this way over the course of almost forty years. These were either direct gifts from Menschel or from Robert and Joyce Menschel (his then wife); works acquired through Menschel’s immediate support; or works acquired through the support of two philanthropic organizations for which Menschel is a trustee: the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and the Vital Projects Fund. These extraordinary contributions were crowned in May 2016 by the gift of a large part of Menschel’s own collection of photographs, which he began assembling in the late 1960s as the market for photography was just developing in New York. Comprising the work of sixty-nine different photographers, the set of 162 images covers more than a century and a half of photography, beginning with a view of Paris made in 1843 by the British photographer William Henry Fox Talbot (p. 141). It includes works that are well known in the history of the medium—views of London by Alvin Langdon Coburn (p. 117); *The Terminal*, by Alfred Stieglitz (p. 123); *The Gay Deceivers*, by Weegee (p. 93)—as well as lesser-known works by practitioners long ignored or yet to be discovered, such as Charles Harry Jones (p. 121) and Val Telberg (p. 85). In its variety, it demonstrates a deep curiosity about photography and an attention to the photograph in its multiple aspects.



Like any personal collection, this one indirectly describes the life and tastes of the man who put it together. There is a strong presence by two individuals whom Menschel knew and whose images he collected extensively, Callahan (pp. 75 and 77) and Siskind (pp. 81 and 83), who were friends and colleagues first at the IIT Institute of Design in Chicago in the 1950s and later at the Rhode Island School of Design. In addition, the collection displays an equal interest in historical, modern, and contemporary photography, fueled by Menschel’s conviction that different periods, rather than being antagonistic, correspond with and enrich each other. Menschel began to collect at a time when the market was just beginning to rediscover historical photography, a context Sarah Meister discusses in more detail in her essay in this volume. Finally, the collection reflects Menschel’s affinities with noted contemporary photographers: those whom he knew in the 1970s, when his engagement with photography deepened and became more sustained—figures such as Roy Colmer, Larry Fink (p. 55), Siskind, and Michael Spano, who all exhibited at the Midtown Y Photography Gallery, which was founded by photographer Larry Siegel with Menschel’s support—and those who showed at MoMA and whose works were acquired by the Museum in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Jan Groover (p. 43) and John Coplans (p. 39). While MoMA was and remains his primary affiliation, Menschel has also done much outside the Museum for the institutional recognition of photography on the East Coast, strongly supporting other collections and photography departments, including New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and Light Work, a photography center at Syracuse University, where Menschel began his studies. His activity has been complemented by that of his brother, Richard Menschel, who is also a well-known philanthropist and lover of photography.

This catalogue features a selection drawn from the 504 photographs that have entered the Museum’s collection thanks to Menschel—those in the recent gift from his personal collection, those he has given in the past, and those acquired through his support. The only exception is the first picture in the book, which has come to MoMA not through Menschel’s support but rather in his honor: *Bahrain I*, by Andreas Gursky (p. 23), a photographer Menschel admires and whose work he has helped the Museum acquire in the past (p. 29).

In its format, this volume is intended as a nod to Szarkowski, whom Menschel considers to have been his mentor in photography. In 1973 Szarkowski was the author of the book *Looking at Photographs*, which features one hundred pictures drawn from MoMA’s collection, each accompanied by a one-page essay; the verve and brio of these texts, more than forty years after their publication (and through multiple reprintings), lend this work a rare, enduring freshness, in spite of the inevitable wear of time.<sup>1</sup> In making *Looking at Photographs*—which is to say, in choosing to write not on photography in general but about individual images—Szarkowski declined to write a history of the medium in favor of more modestly presenting a “picture book” that attempted to define the spirit of the collection. In the partiality and lacunae evident in the selection and in the fragmented mode of writing, devoted to the particularity of an image and not to the photographer’s entire body of work, Szarkowski willingly moved away from a linear, historical perspective and, we might be tempted to add today, from an essentialist or ontological approach. There was no attempt to define the essence of photography; the project was, rather, to highlight photographs in their uniqueness and diversity. The spirit of this catalogue is similar.

One significant difference between the two projects resides in how the plates are ordered: here they are arranged not from earliest to latest, as in *Looking at Photographs*, but in reverse chronological order. Beginning in Bahrain in 2005 and ending in Paris in 1843, this volume moves backward, presenting events in an order counter to their

occurrence in time. While it might be surprising to encounter it here, this reverse order is everywhere today. On the Internet—on social networks from Twitter to Instagram and on all the principal platforms of information—it is the most familiar order of display and one we now encounter on a daily basis; it is a mode of reading that is becoming *the* mode by default. But this book is not an effort to imitate on paper the customs of the Internet. It is instead an attempt to investigate the convention of chronological order itself, one that has been the basis of almost all forms of historical writing.

To follow a classic chronological order is to conceive of history as an evolution in which causes produce effects. Any synthetic history, even the best, is teleological, in the sense that it seeks to identify elements in the past that can illuminate what has come to pass in the present; a beginning must be found, since the end is known. The hazard lies in overestimating the importance of some events to the detriment of those that have no part in the great narrative. Our project is not a rejection of this model but rather a playful and experimental attempt to see what another kind of chronology might have to contribute—because, of course, reverse chronology is not the absence of chronology: it is another form of it.

We know that turning time backward—playing a film or video in reverse, for example—can produce unexpected, sometimes comic visual results, a fact that has long fueled the human imagination: the dead come back to life, broken glasses become whole again, a ball on the floor jumps into the hand. These experiences demonstrate, paradoxically, that reversing the order of time brings us to a new awareness of it, making room for a renewed attentiveness to laws of existence that ordinarily seem so obvious as to be beyond questioning. That is what we are aiming for in this publication.

To look at photography in this way means, first of all, to no longer think of chronological unfolding in terms of the *influence* (a catchall word) of the past over the present—a relationship of cause and effect—but rather to accept for photographers what the writer Jorge Luis Borges said of Franz Kafka: “Every writer creates his own precursors.”<sup>2</sup> That is to say, echoing the poet and critic T. S. Eliot, whom Borges also quoted, that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly, Bernd and Hilla Becher recognized their debt to a certain nineteenth-century documentary tradition, but don’t their typologies (p. 57) affect the way we now look at certain images by Charles Marville (p. 127)? Second, it is to submit that *all* history is written from the point of view of today; historical perspective, far from being deployed from the origins to the present, is often constituted in its methods like a genealogy, elaborated backward in time from the present to the past. Finally, it is to propose that the history of photography, long confined to a simple linear unfolding, should be considered instead as a space of cross-pollination and connection in many directions and at different points in time. Couldn’t we imagine photography as cyclical, as an eternal return of practices, questions, and experiments, a process reinvented by each generation with new tools? In sum, it is an attempt to free ourselves somewhat from the laws of chronology and of linear historical perspective and to suggest, modestly and after some delay, that other modes of narration are possible. As Borges suggested, it is the readings that are historic, not the artworks, in that the latter always remain the same: only readings change over time.



Endnotes

1. John Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973).

2. Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” in Eliot Weinberger, ed., *Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 365. For an acute analysis of the term “influence,” see Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

3. T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in Lawrence Rainey, ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), p. 153.



Print and Presentation: Trends in Collecting and Displaying Photographs  
During John Szarkowski’s Tenure at The Museum of Modern Art

Sarah Hermanson Meister

Of the more than five hundred photographs that have found a home at The Museum of Modern Art thanks to the generosity of Robert B. Menschel, the earliest are works by William Henry Fox Talbot and Gustave Le Gray, foundational figures in photography’s history, that Menschel acquired more than a century after they were created. The most recent are works by leading contemporary artists, such as Carrie Mae Weems and Cindy Sherman, who continue to build upon their early achievements. But a significant majority of the photographs given to the Museum by Menschel (or acquired with funds he donated) date from the mid- to late twentieth century and were purchased in the 1970s and ’80s. These are works from what was then a relatively recent history, acquired as the world was beginning to appreciate their unique value.

As a curious, bright teenager growing up in New York City, Menschel visited The Museum of Modern Art on a regular basis. He attended elementary school at P.S. 87 on the Upper West Side, where, coincidentally, Aaron Siskind was one of his teachers, although it would be many decades before the two would forge a friendship around their shared love of photography.<sup>1</sup> In 1955 *The Family of Man* made a particularly powerful impression on Menschel, then twenty-six, and on the tens of thousands of others who lined up to see the photography exhibition at MoMA. This was certainly the intent of its curator, Edward Steichen, who described the show as “a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.”<sup>2</sup> The exhibition design evoked the dynamic layouts of contemporary illustrated magazines such as *Life* and *Look*: a new print was made from each negative at a size determined by the curator and exhibition designer, to play a particular role within an overall immersive experience.<sup>3</sup> Titles and photographers’ names were mere footnotes: that kind of specificity ran counter to the intended statement of universality. Steichen had no qualms about making connections between artists with widely varied concerns or using their work to support his curatorial vision, minimizing their individual achievements. Photographers made images, but curators (in collaboration with exhibition designers) drew meaning from those images by their selection, placement, and scale.<sup>4</sup> The decisions a photographer might have made regarding the presentation of his or her original prints (title, size, and context) were distinctly secondary: Why value an old print when you can make a new one that answers a specific design requirement? It is no wonder that in this environment it was difficult to establish a market for photography among the fine arts.<sup>5</sup>

A dozen years later, when Menschel began collecting photographs, the landscape had changed considerably. At the time of *The Family of Man*, there had been approximately two thousand photographs in MoMA’s collection. In 1968 there were more than five thousand, representing a broader cross-section of achievement and greater depth in the work of historical figures.<sup>6</sup> Steichen had retired as director of MoMA’s Department of Photography in 1961. He was replaced the following June by John Szarkowski, a photographer about whose prodigious talents in writing on photography and organizing exhibitions the Museum appears to have made an educated guess. It is common to interpret Szarkowski’s tenure, in general—and his first exhibition, in particular—as a rebuttal to the practices of his predecessor. Szarkowski’s first show at MoMA was titled *Five Unrelated Photographers*; mounted in the summer of 1963, it presented the work of Ken Heyman, George Krause, Jerome Liebling, Minor White, and Garry Winogrand. In the wake of *The Family of Man*, which was still touring around the world, to insist on *un*-relatedness as the organizing principle of an exhibition might fairly be interpreted as a rebuke. But the break was not as radical as it has sometimes been characterized: it was more than a decade before Szarkowski decisively shed another defining element of Steichen’s exhibitions—the production of new prints to suit a particular display.



Szarkowski’s historical exhibitions during his first years at MoMA consistently featured prints made for the occasion: *Photographs by Lartigue* (1963), *The Photographer’s Eye* and *André Kertész* (both 1964), *The Photo Essay* (1965), *Dorothea Lange* (1966), and *Cartier-Bresson* (1968). There were, however, several exhibitions composed primarily or exclusively of vintage or early prints, among them *The Photographer and the American Landscape* (1963), Frances Benjamin Johnston’s *The Hampton Album* (1966), and *Brassaï* (1968–69). *Bill Brandt*, mounted in 1969, included only one vintage print (from the 1940s), but Brandt’s current printing preferences guided the character of the work on display.<sup>7</sup> Concurrent with his preparation for the Brandt exhibition, Szarkowski was finalizing the Museum’s acquisition of the Abbott-Levy Collection: nearly five thousand vintage prints by the French photographer Eugène Atget, comprising the contents of his studio upon his death (in 1927) in addition to several thousand duplicate prints and twelve hundred glass-plate negatives. Completed in 1968, this was a transformational acquisition, doubling the number of prints under the care of the curators in the Department of Photography. It may not be a coincidence that Szarkowski’s attention to older prints seemed to increase at precisely this moment. More and more, vintage prints were appearing in exhibitions alongside or in lieu of prints made for the occasion. In 1971 an exhibition of Walker Evans’s work interspersed new and old prints, a combination made possible by the fact that photographer Jim Dow (who was hired to make the vast majority of the new prints) used the same method and material—gelatin silver contact prints from (mostly) 8-by-10-inch negatives—that Evans had used in the preceding decades. Szarkowski observed that Evans, who was involved in the exhibition planning, “didn’t care if they were old prints or new prints, as long as he felt they were good.”<sup>8</sup>

It is not possible, and perhaps not necessary, to link these changes to transformations in the market, but it is worth noting that there was no gallery in New York dedicated to photography nor facilitating the sale of prints when Szarkowski assumed his position at MoMA in 1962.<sup>9</sup> Helen Gee’s Limelight and Larry Siegel’s Image Gallery had closed the previous year.<sup>10</sup> Alfred Stieglitz had exhibited photographs as a critical element of a broader program dedicated to modern art in several galleries that he established between 1908 and 1946, but for much of the 1960s only the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery (whose primary focus was nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting and sculpture) had a space that regularly exhibited photographs.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1969, Lee Witkin opened the Witkin Gallery on East Sixtieth Street, inaugurating an era of unprecedented longevity for New York photography galleries.<sup>12</sup> Tennyson Schad’s Light Gallery, dedicated solely to representing the work of contemporary photographers, opened in November 1971 on Madison Avenue, on the Upper East Side, and remained in operation until 1987.<sup>13</sup> Witkin and Light each enjoyed fairly constant support from MoMA, with significant purchases completed within each gallery’s opening year.<sup>14</sup> In April 1972, with essential funding from Menschel and the New York State Council on the Arts, Larry Siegel founded the Midtown Y Photography Gallery in a corridor at the Emanu-El Midtown YM-YWHA on Fourteenth Street; its programming continued until 1996.<sup>15</sup> Menschel’s personal collecting grew in tandem with his charitable support for the medium, and the same is true for his younger brother, Richard. Beginning in the 1970s, their shared interest in photography was critically important both for individual practitioners and for many of the institutions discussed in this text.<sup>16</sup>

New York auction houses had held occasional single-collection sales of photographs before this era, but it was not until February 1975 that Sotheby Parke-Bernet & Co. hosted the first in an ongoing series of regular sales in New York (Sotheby’s Belgravia sales-room, in London, had held its first regular sale of photographs in 1971). The extraordinary

success of Swann Galleries’ sale of two albums by Carleton Watkins in May 1979 prompted the gallery to establish a department dedicated to photography, with Denise Bethel as its head. Institutional momentum was gathering as well: in 1972 David H. McAlpin helped establish the first endowed history of photography professorship at Princeton University, appointing Peter C. Bunnell to the position; Light Work was established at Syracuse University in 1973, offering exhibition opportunities, residencies, and grants to photographers; in 1974 Cornell Capa opened the International Center of Photography in New York; the Center for Creative Photography was founded the following year, in Tucson, at the University of Arizona; and in 1979 there was sufficient maturity in the field to support the establishment of the Association of International Photography Art Dealers.

Before all this existed, institutions attentive to the medium encouraged personal collecting through their programs. For much of the 1960s, MoMA was the sole venue in New York where photographs were consistently on display, but there were efforts to elevate photography’s status that may seem surprising—almost quaint—more than fifty years later. A photographer named Ivan Dmitri organized six exhibitions “designed to advance the acceptance of photography as a fine art and of its practitioners as artists” through his program Photography in the Fine Arts, the first of which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in May 1959.<sup>17</sup> In 1963 Dmitri articulated his intent to establish a “Photography in the Fine Arts Sales Gallery”; this never happened, but many prints were purchased directly from the exhibitions.<sup>18</sup> Menschel still has his copy of the catalogue for the final show (on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the spring of 1967), including a price list and notations about which pictures he intended to buy. That same year, Capa mounted the first of two exhibitions titled *The Concerned Photographer*. Both were held at the Riverside Museum in New York. The first featured the work of Werner Bischof, Robert Capa, Leonard Freed, André Kertész, David Seymour, and Dan Weiner; the second, in 1968, featured Bruce Davidson, Ernst Haas, Hiroshi Hamaya, Donald McCullin, Gordon Parks, Marc Riboud, W. Eugene Smith, and Roman Vishniac. Prints from both shows were offered to raise money for the Fund for Contemporary Photography (formerly the Werner Bischof–Robert Capa–David Seymour Photographic Memorial Fund).<sup>19</sup> It was at one of these exhibitions that Menschel purchased his first photograph.

MoMA played a role in encouraging private collectors as well. In the early decades of the Museum’s history, sales of photographs, prints, and design objects were not uncommon; the goal was to stimulate broader interest and foster personal collecting. One less-than-successful sale opened a few days before the attacks on Pearl Harbor, in December 1941, doubtless an inauspicious time for promoting public interest in photography. *American Photographs at \$10* featured Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, László Moholy-Nagy, Charles Sheeler, Brett Weston, and Edward Weston. Each photographer printed an edition of ten from a single negative and received all the proceeds, although this often didn’t add up to much. In his letter to Moholy-Nagy accompanying the return of nine unsold prints, Beaumont Newhall, the Museum’s first Curator of Photography, remarked apologetically, “The sale was frankly an experiment. Perhaps we shall have better success another year.”<sup>20</sup> The Museum took a subtler approach at its Weston retrospective in 1946. A note posted at the entrance read, “Many prints in the exhibition are for sale for \$25 each. Inquire at front desk.”

Beginning in 1951, through the Art Lending Service (ALS), for a nominal fee members of the Museum could rent paintings, sculptures, watercolors, drawings, and prints, which were also available for sale. “The purpose of the service,” a press release noted in 1957, “is to encourage wider purchase of contemporary art.” These works—hung in the Museum cafeteria, framed and ready for home display—were most frequently borrowed



from the inventories of sixty New York art galleries. However, the activities of the ALS were sometimes linked quite closely with MoMA’s exhibition program: in 1969, at the conclusion of the tour of the exhibition *New Documents*, four photographs each by Lee Friedlander and Winogrand—both of whom were featured in the show—were offered for purchase by the ALS. It seems that none sold. In February 1975 Menschel purchased a photograph by Abbott through the ALS (consigned from the Witkin Gallery) for \$235. The following year Szarkowski organized *Photography for Collectors* expressly for the ALS; nearly one hundred photographs selected from New York galleries were on view in a space then reserved for members on the sixth floor of the Museum.

Menschel formalized his relationship with MoMA in 1977, joining the photography acquisitions committee at a key moment of transition: several committee members had been involved with the Museum since the founding of the Department of Photography in December 1940 (including McAlpin, Newhall, Eliza Bliss Parkinson, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, James Thrall Soby, Edward M. M. Warburg, and Monroe Wheeler), but discussions of potential new members were active; collector and curator Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr., had been invited to join in 1976. At Menschel’s first meeting there was considerable discussion of the possibility of making new prints from the glass-plate negatives that had come to MoMA with the Abbott-Levy Collection in 1968.<sup>21</sup> When Szarkowski organized, with Maria Morris Hambourg, the four exhibitions that comprised *The Work of Atget* (1981–85), these prints would be interspersed among Atget’s own when a suitable print from a desired negative didn’t exist. Twelve of them, in an edition of one hundred, were offered for sale (at \$300 each) to MoMA members and to other museums, initially in an exhibition in the Members Penthouse from November 1978 to January 1979.<sup>22</sup>

Szarkowski recognized that there might be better criteria for evaluating the quality of a print than the date on which it was made, and he used his discerning eye and the intentions of the many photographers he knew to guide him. Some artists, such as Harry Callahan or Frederick Sommer, were so remarkably consistent in their printing throughout their careers that the distinction between vintage and modern prints might be imperceptible. If Brandt came to believe that his work should be seen in high contrast and with pronounced grain, then his enlargements for MoMA’s 1969 retrospective are perhaps the truest expression of his vision. If Evans thought Dow printed his work better than anyone else, perhaps he was right. And if Atget’s own print from a given negative was flawed, why wouldn’t a curator or a collector embrace a modern print as an alternative? Yet, given the choice between a modern Atget print—even an excellent one—and an exquisite example made by the artist, there is no doubt that Szarkowski would have opted for the latter. The sweeping history he presented in his last major exhibition as director of the Department of Photography—*Photography Until Now*, mounted in 1990—was told almost exclusively through vintage prints, including more than one hundred borrowed from other collections.

Menschel, open to the possibilities of new prints and attentive to the aesthetic specificity of historical ones, has humbly noted that he learned “everything” about photography from Szarkowski. While history suggests that the perspectives of these two contemporaries evolved in tandem (they were born only four years apart), it was, of course, Szarkowski whose decisions influenced broader public perceptions of the medium. It was in the environment fostered by MoMA and nourished by the confluence of photography enthusiasts in New York in the late 1960s and beyond that Menschel built his collection, both benefitting from and contributing to the growth in the understanding of the medium as a form of art.

Endnotes

1. Anecdotal information about Robert B. Menschel has been drawn from conversations between Menschel and the author in spring 2016.

2. Edward Steichen, “Introduction,” in *The Family of Man* (New York: Maco Magazine Corporation for The Museum of Modern Art, 1955), n.p.

3. Paul Rudolph, then dean of the Yale School of Architecture, was responsible for the exhibition design. See Alessia Tagliaventi, “Photography at MoMA: Four Landmark Exhibitions,” in Alessandra Mauro, ed., *Photoshow* (Rome: Contrasto, 2014), p. 179.

4. This was also true at illustrated magazines, where photo editors, in conjunction with graphic designers, constructed their own statements from the raw material provided by photographers.

5. Three notable efforts in New York from the 1950s include Helen Gee’s gallery Limelight, open from May 1954 to January 1961; Roy DeCarava’s A Photographer’s Gallery, open from March 1955 to May 1957; and Larry Siegel’s Image Gallery, open from 1959 to 1961 or 1962.

6. These numbers and the general information presented throughout the essay about MoMA’s collection, its exhibitions, and its programming in this era are based on documentation held in the Museum’s Department of Photography files and MoMA Archives, New York.

7. John Szarkowski wrote: “In the early years Brandt’s prints were very soft—almost muddy—and described a space as solidly tangible as that of London winters in those coal-burning years. About a decade ago, his printing style changed abruptly to one depending on a harshly simple tonal scale, putting maximum emphasis on the picture’s graphic structure. Brandt now prefers his current printing style even for the older pictures.” Szarkowski, wall label for the exhibition *Bill Brandt* (September 16–November 30, 1969). MoMA Archives, New York.

8. Szarkowski, in Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995), p. 282. The exhibition also included twelve mural-size enlargements.

9. In Boston, the Carl Siembab Gallery had opened a space dedicated to exhibiting photographs in October 1959; she Lunn Gallery, in Washington, D.C., began exhibiting photographs in January 1971. See *A Photographic Patron: The Carl Siembab Gallery* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1981). Harry Lunn’s papers are housed at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

10. See note 5 and Gee, *Limelight: A Greenwich Village Photography Gallery and Coffeehouse in the Fifties. A Memoir* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997). Less has been published about Image Gallery, which held the first exhibition of Garry Winogrand’s work. In 2014 New York’s Howard Greenberg Gallery mounted the exhibition *The Image Gallery Redux: 1959–1962* (January 9–February 15), featuring photographs shown at Image Gallery.

11. The Robert Schoelkopf Gallery incorporated photographs into its programming in 1965. Its records are held in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

12. The Witkin Gallery would remain in operation through 1999. See *Witkin Gallery: 25th Anniversary Book* (New

York: Lumière Press and Witkin Gallery, Inc., 1994) and the gallery’s chronology of exhibitions, “Witkin Gallery Shows: 1969–1999,” <http://www.witkingallery.com/chronology.html>.

13. See Light Gallery Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

14. The Museum purchased more than twenty photographs from the Witkin Gallery in 1970, most notably a group of fifteen prints by Lewis Hine, a mammoth-plate albumen print by William Henry Jackson, and a recent work by Joel-Peter Witkin. The Museum purchased five works by Emmet Gowin and eight works by Aaron Siskind from Light Gallery in 1972, followed by several works each by Harry Callahan, Mark Cohen, Roger Mertin, and Tod Papageorge in 1973.

15. See Stephen C. Pinson, *Making the Scene: The Midtown Y Photography Gallery, 1972–1996* (New York: New York Public Library, 2007), exh. cat.

16. In the late 1970s, Robert and Richard Menschel partnered with Tennyson Schad and Eugene Polk to assist the photographers Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, purchasing large numbers of photographs, most of which they eventually donated to public institutions. Robert has been instrumental at MoMA but also at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (in partnership with his former wife Joyce Menschel); the National Gallery of Art; the New York Public Library; Light Work, at Syracuse University; and the Chrysler Museum of Art, in Norfolk, Virginia. Richard’s support has been equally critical to the Morgan Library, in New York; the Fogg Museum, at Harvard University; and George Eastman House, in Rochester, New York. Both brothers’ charitable reach extends far beyond the photographers and photography programs that are the focus of this essay.

17. Ivan Dmitri, in Evan H. Turner, “Ivan Dmitri’s Dream: A Juror’s View of PFA,” in Miles Barth, ed., *Master Photographs from PFA Exhibitions, 1959–67* (New York: International Center of Photography, 1988), p. 12. These exhibitions, and in particular the selection process, were widely criticized at the time. See Nathan Lyons, “PFA and Its Controversy,” in Barth, *Master Photographs*, pp. 26–29.

18. Barth, “Ivan Dmitri and the History of PFA,” in Barth, ed., *Master Photographs*, p. 23.

19. I gratefully acknowledge the essential research support of Katerina Stathopoulou, Curatorial Assistant. In the archives of the International Center of Photography, she found records indicating that prints were offered in three sizes: 8 by 10 inches, 11 by 14 inches, and 16 by 20 inches, priced between \$75 and \$225.

20. Letter, Beaumont Newhall to László Moholy-Nagy, January 14, 1942. MoMA Archives, New York.

21. These “restrikes” are contact prints on albumen paper made with a few (intentionally noticeable) differences. Whereas Atget carefully trimmed the edges to avoid wasting precious gold toning, these new prints, produced by Chicago Albumen Works, have wide, even margins. Each bears a blind stamp at bottom right that reads “MOMA/1978/CAW.”

22. MoMA’s Atget restrikes were produced at the end of what Newhall and Van Deren Coke accurately predicted would be “the decade of portfolios,” in their June 1971 editorial note for *Image* (vol. 14, no. 3: 1), as quoted in Molly Kalkstein, “Inside the Box: Photography and the Portfolio Format” (master’s thesis, Ryerson University, 2013), 16, <http://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA:2585>.



Essays and Plates

Quentin Bajac



What are we looking at here? Photography? Drawing? Painting? A computer-generated image? Hybrid images are increasingly part of our daily lives: we’re regularly confronted with pictures that are part photograph and part something else—often something indefinable. This hybridity is complicated by the fact that photography is still perceived as a tool that captures reality, despite the erosion of its authority as a medium of objective truth and, since the advent of digital technology, the massive shift in the way images are produced and the roles they play in the world.

Andreas Gursky took part in that shift; he may even be one of its main catalysts. Since the early 1990s his work has been animated by the tension between an objective, documentary approach (the tradition from which he emerged) and a mixed practice that blends the analog (in shooting) and the digital (in the processing and retouching of the image)—dealing implicitly with photography’s reexamination of its relationship with the real.

*Bahrain I* represents (we can’t say that it *pictures*) the International Formula One raceway in Sakhir, a desert region of Bahrain, which was inaugurated the year the image was made. Gursky used computer software to combine, in the manner of photomontage, various pictures of the racetrack taken from a helicopter. With its horizon line and sky, the image seems like a traditional aerial view. “Even if a picture is completely invented or built, it’s necessary that you could imagine that it’s a realistic location or place,” Gursky said in 2009. “I am not happy if the picture looks completely surreal. Even if I am working with montage, I want that you don’t see it.” Yet how much claim to verisimilitude does this image make? Any viewer slightly attentive to detail—and detail is highly visible in the original large-format print—would see that this is a carefully composed picture. The curious perspectival effect is accentuated by the vertical orientation of the image (upending the landscape genre’s “natural” horizontal orientation), as roads that lead nowhere create an impossible course. In *Bahrain II*, a variant of this photograph, Gursky further emphasized the anti-natural and graphic effect of the composition by leaving out the sky and horizon altogether.

Yet, in a parallel that’s common in Gursky’s work, *Bahrain I*—in its point of view and its framing—is similar to the commercial and promotional photographs of the raceway published around the same time, many of which seemed equally constructed. In the 2000s Gursky became interested in what could be called the “contemporary imaginary” of certain places on the Arabian Peninsula, specifically Bahrain and Dubai. These places are consumed by a relentless fever for construction and development, and computer-generated imagery is ubiquitous. It is used as a promotional tool: presenting miragelike cities rising out of the sands, these synthetic images annihilate the critical faculty, giving a credible face to every possibility. Gursky pushes the cursor only a little further, freeing his picture from the constraints of plausibility.



Andreas Gursky (German, born 1955)  
*Bahrain I*. 2005

Chromogenic color print, 9' 10 7/8" × 7' 2 1/2" (301.9 × 219.7 cm)  
Acquired in honor of Robert B. Menschel through the generosity of Agnes Gund, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, Ronald S. and Jo Carole Lauder, and the Speyer Family Foundation, 2007



Ambiguity makes this image difficult to read. If we had to describe it quickly, we might say that it's a landscape. Then we might notice that the smoke in the distance, in its artificial character, seems to contradict the splendor of the natural scene. Finally, inspection of the original print (six times larger than this reproduction) would reveal an unusual detail: curious containers filled with stones in the foreground, at left, bearing painted inscriptions. A quick glance at the title gives us the beginning of an explanation: Twentynine Palms, in the Mojave Desert in Southern California, is the home of the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. "Mortar impact": no doubt a military exercise.

Like the previous photograph, this picture presents an alluring vision—but it's a vision of a different kind. To make *Bahrain I*, Andreas Gursky manipulated the image profoundly; An-My Lê, on the other hand, has limited herself to a rigorous photographic grammar, barring any serious modification of the image after the shot was taken. Lê maintained a strict respect for the negative, which, as in all the works in this series, she made using a large-format, 5-by-7-inch camera, as is standard for topographical photography both old and new.

How do you reinvent the genre of war photography? How do you photograph war in a new way? After a request to accompany the U.S. army in Iraq was refused, in 2003 Lê was granted permission to observe American military exercises in preparation for the deployment of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan; at Twentynine Palms, she photographed daytime and nighttime military maneuvers, policing operations, and soldiers at rest and at debriefings. Of all the images in the series, *Mortar Impact* is among the most enigmatic. The absence of any direct human presence reinforces the power of the landscape, its detail captured and magnified by the photograph's large format. The use of black and white accentuates a stylization that the title makes even more explicit: we see a mortar impact, but the blow seems silent and the result is almost pyrotechnic. Working in opposition to a documentary photography aesthetic in which proximity to the subject and the event is the measure of success, Lê chose a certain distance. In that sense, this picture has more in common with nineteenth-century war photography or the centuries-old tradition of military painting.



An-My Lê (American, born Vietnam 1960)

29 Palms: *Mortar Impact*. 2003–04

Gelatin silver print, 26½ × 38¼" (67.3 × 96.7 cm)

Robert B. Menschel Fund, 2005



While Bernd and Hilla Becher became known for their typological images of individual industrial structures, they also made pictures that we might term “overviews.” They didn’t show these photographs publicly until late in their careers, when, in 2002, they devoted a book to them—*Industriellandschaften (Industrial Landscapes)*, produced in German by the legendary publisher Schirmer/Mosel—and included them in monographic exhibitions at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum and at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. The Bechers’ industrial landscapes remind us, if we need reminding, that photography is a matter of framing: the same subjects are pictured in the typological series but are contextualized very differently. In the latter pictures, structures are framed as tightly as possible, almost cut out of their surroundings (see, for example, the image on p. 57). In the overview images, such as this one, they appear as if in an establishing shot in a film, inscribed in the territory and positioned in relation to each other.

The typological pictures are constrained by strict and invariable rules, but the overviews are composed merely “with the elements distributed in such a way that they don’t hinder one another,” as the Bechers wrote in *Industrial Landscapes*. Most of these pictures were taken from above, like a panorama, a form that the writer and critic Roland Barthes, in his essay “Paris Not Flooded,” described as having the power “to organize space as a juxtaposition of functions,” underlining its didactic dimension. Indeed, the Bechers’ landscapes show a desire to reconstruct through the overview shot a reality the photographers had dismantled through the tight framing of the typological views—in short, to complement the analytical, detailed gaze with a synthetic gaze, creating pictures that could almost be montages of the typological images placed side by side. Made in Duisburg—the center of German iron and steel production, where the Bechers worked regularly starting in 1963—this image combines some of the photographers’ favorite individual motifs: blast furnaces, their characteristic elaborate forms visible in the background; cooling towers, with their tufts of white smoke; and, at right, an enormous cylindrical gasholder. The overview shot places these structures in their immediate environment and in relation to the broader urban fabric. It is a profoundly interdependent habitat, interlaced with the lines of communication essential to its functioning. Moving from isolated parts to an organic whole, the subject of this picture might truly be called an industrial complex.



Bernd Becher (German, 1931–2007), Hilla Becher (German, 1934–2015)  
*Duisburg-Bruckhausen, Ruhr Region, Germany. 1999*  
Gelatin silver print, 19<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 24" (49.1 × 60.9 cm)  
Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel, 2008



Auto raceways in Bahrain and Monaco, the Tour de France, the Engadin ski marathon, the Winter Olympics in Albertville, France, or, here, horse racing in Hong Kong: a lot of ground is covered in images by Andreas Gursky. He has always enjoyed recording sporting events, although he has done so in very different registers—from the graphic, almost abstract mode of *Bahrain I* (see p. 23) to the more narrative dimension on display in this picture.

As is common in Gursky’s work, the image offers us both *too much* to see and *nothing* to look at. It is a very broad overview, captured from above, folding plenty of detail and visual interest into a flattened composition that is essentially a succession of horizontal lines. From the figures and colors in the crowd, the lit-up signs, and the raceway staff lining the track, to the windows of the housing complexes in the distance and the architectural elements scattered in the hills, the viewer’s eye is solicited everywhere. But, ultimately, nothing is happening—or very little. Gursky shows us an empty racetrack, with no horses or jockeys in view; they have been relegated instead to a small rectangle at left—the screen on which the race is being broadcast.

Gursky has often used this tactic, picturing an image within an image. This mise-en-abîme dispenses with a single point of view: the race is both visible and out of sight at the same time. Here, as in several of his sporting compositions, reality is mediated, relayed but also transformed by screens conveying the essential information. This is common at large sporting events; the public, though present as the game unfolds, is at the same time riveted by the display screen—a feature of our contemporary condition. If you consider photography as a form of writing with pictures, then Gursky’s image is a description in which the giant screen features as an embedded narrative element—the story of the race in the midst of being run.



Andreas Gursky (German, born 1955)  
*Sha Tin*. 1994  
Chromogenic color print, 70 7/8" × 7' 8 1/2" (180 × 235 cm)  
Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel, 1995



“Photography is less and less a cognitive process, in the traditional sense of the term, or an affirmative one, offering answers, but rather a language for asking questions about the world.” This definition of photography, given by the Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri in 1989, corresponds to the work of Carrie Mae Weems: she photographs in the investigative mode that Ghirri describes.

In 1993 Weems was in Djenné, Mali, one of the ancient cities of West Africa and a commercial and cultural hub famous for its mud-brick architecture marked by the influence of Islam. She had arrived there after a long journey up the West African coast, from Elmina Castle, in Ghana, to the island of Gorée, in Senegal, during which she photographed places linked to the slave trade. While the images she made in Africa are closely related to a deeply emotional human history, they are nevertheless completely devoid of the human figure. Was this Weems’s way of avoiding objectification in the face of a subject charged with feeling? Or because of the impossibility of putting a face to an anonymous history? Or from a sense that the places speak for themselves? The pictures she took in Djenné are in keeping with the rest. With their descriptive aspect enhanced by their title, the photographs in *The Shape of Things* trade in metaphor: they are architectural images that ultimately tell us of the human.

Weems has kept the exotic and the picturesque at bay here: the pictures feature a certain frontality, a proximity to the subject, and an attention to surface that communicate the very specific materiality of the local architecture. The apparent fragility of the raw clay, its particles catching the light, is magnified by the care accorded to the print. The choice of black and white, associated with stylization and immutability, eliminates the anecdotal and seems to suspend time: in their subject as well as their aesthetic, these photographs are hard to date. The square format introduces further ambiguity: it distances the image from the architectural view or landscape, taking it in another direction—toward the portrait.

Weems was sensitive to the anthropomorphic and gendered dimensions of the architecture of Djenné: the feminine nature of the doorways and columns, the phallic structure of the towers topped with domes. “Seeing these buildings and trying to get a handle on their meaning were the raw materials for imagining and creating a visual/textual myth,” she has said. Starting with the timeless and almost generic quality of the images and their sexual, sensual dimension, Weems has invented a fable of origins, a new myth of creation, taking the opportunity to interpret gender difference in her own way.



Carrie Mae Weems (American, born 1953)  
*The Shape of Things*. 1993  
Gelatin silver prints, left: 26 7/8 × 26 15/16" (68.3 × 68.4 cm), right: 26 15/16 × 26 7/8" (68.4 × 68.3 cm)  
Gift of Robert B. Menschel, 2007



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