

Contemporary Photography at MoMA

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From the opening of The Museum of Modern Art, in 1929, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., its first director, then twenty-seven years old and inspired in particular by the example of the Bauhaus, thought it might be a good idea to include photography among the techniques represented: in a draft for a brochure he envisioned that “In time the Museum would probably expand beyond the narrow limits of painting and sculpture in order to include departments devoted to drawings, prints, and photography, typography, the arts of design in commerce and industry, architecture (a collection of *projets* and *maquettes*), stage designing, furniture and the decorative arts. Not the least important collection might be the *filmotek*, a library of films.”¹ The final version of the text does not take up this multidisciplinary vision but points out more prudently that “In time the Museum would expand . . . to include other phases of modern art.”² And yet the following year, in 1930, the first photograph entered the collection: one taken by a young Walker Evans, showing a sculpture by Willem Lehmbrock. It was the institution’s twenty-third acquisition, and it was followed in 1933 by one hundred pictures of Victorian architecture by the same photographer. Eight years later, in 1938, Evans was the first photographer to be given a solo exhibition and a publication. Finally, in December 1940, the Department of Photography was officially created and its curatorial direction conferred to Beaumont Newhall, an art historian from Harvard, like Barr, and the Museum’s first librarian.³

Given the considerable growth of amateur photography in the United States, an increase in images appearing in the press, and the ever-stronger integration of the medium in avant-garde practices, the professed goal of the department, which had settled into the new building by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, was to define photography as an artistic form for an American audience. Assembling a collection, organizing exhibitions in New York and elsewhere in the country (especially at schools and universities), publishing catalogues, holding conferences, and making resources in the library and study center available to the public were all part of this effort. A presentational brochure for the department summed up these aims: “In short, the Department of Photography will function as [a] focal center where the esthetic problems of photography can be evaluated,

where the artist who has chosen the camera as his medium can find guidance by example and encouragement and where the vast amateur public can study both the classics and the most recent and significant developments of photography.”⁴ And although the first photography exhibition organized by MoMA was indeed a historical and commemorative exhibition covering the first century of photography (*Photography: 1839–1937*, in 1937), the exhibition programming of the first two decades—under directors with very different personalities, Beaumont Newhall (aided by his wife, Nancy), from 1940 to 1947, and the photographer Edward Steichen, from 1947 to 1962—did indeed put forward the “most recent and significant developments of photography”: three-quarters of them included living photographers and current themes. Such engagement with contemporary work and attachment to living photographers and artists extends to the present day, in various contexts and with a variety of sensibilities, despite the gradual institutionalization of the medium and the extension of the chronological period covered: barely a century in 1940, almost double that today.

With contemporary work the Newhalls tended to highlight personal styles, favoring monographic exhibitions, including Paul Strand, in 1945; Edward Weston, in 1946; and Henri Cartier-Bresson, in 1947. Steichen, on the other hand, made the thematic exhibition the spine of his programming, in exhibitions that advanced photography as a tool of communication and of the masses, in installations and displays influenced by mass-media publications such as *Life* magazine. The most striking example of his approach remains *The Family of Man*, in 1955. Still, from time to time, he made room for exhibitions that focused on singular works, conveying his great sense of discernment: *Newly Purchased Works by American Photographers*, in 1950, and *Always the Young Strangers*, in 1953, both presented American “samplings from the beginnings of a new decade in photography”; *Five French Photographers: Doisneau, Izis, Ronis, Brassäi, Cartier-Bresson*, in 1951, and *Postwar European Photography*, in 1953, did the same for Europe (fig. 1).⁵ At the same time, he began a series of exhibitions with the somewhat lofty title of *Diogenes with a Camera*, that were devoted to recent works and intended to highlight “how the art of

¹ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in Harriet S. Bee and Michelle Elligott, eds., *Art in Our Time: A Chronicle of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), p. 29.

² *Ibid.*

³ On the history of MoMA’s Department of Photography, see Christopher Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” *October* 22 (Fall 1982): 27–63. See also Peter Galassi, “Two Stories,” in Galassi, *American Photography, 1890–1965, from The Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), pp. 26–39.

⁴ Department of Photography brochure, December 1940. Department of Photography files, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁵ Press release for *Always the Young Strangers*, February 26, 1953. MoMA Archives, New York.



Fig. 1
Installation view of *Postwar European Photography*, organized by Edward Steichen, May 27–August 2, 1953, with works by Robert Frank

Fig. 2
Installation view of *New Documents*, organized by John Szarkowski, September 14, 1967–January 6, 1968, with works by Lee Friedlander

photography added to our knowledge of the truth” by presenting the work of (mostly) living photographers, American as well as foreign, such as the young W. Eugene Smith, Robert Frank, and Lucien Clergue.⁶

Succeeding him at the head of the department in July 1962 was John Szarkowski, a thirty-six-year-old photographer (with two books of his own work under his belt) who would remain there for thirty years. When the Museum expanded in 1964, it was given an exhibition gallery designated for presentations on the history of photography as told through the works in the collection (then around seven thousand images), as well as a well-appointed study center with a library intended for students and photographers. Photographers were encouraged to drop off their portfolios to be seen and considered by the department, which returned them without commentary. Szarkowski considered this system, with its lack of dialogue, “very unsatisfactory” but acknowledged that “half the exhibitions we do of younger photographers are the direct result of our looking at unsolicited portfolios.”⁷ As the chronological period covered by the Museum continued to grow—which might have restricted the amount of space allotted to contemporary work—and a market for historical photography began to form in the early 1970s, especially in the United States, Szarkowski nevertheless continued to engage with contemporary work, giving the majority of exhibitions to active photographers. At the same time he profoundly modified this engagement from that of his predecessors, in both its form and the type of photography he championed. He greatly reduced the number of thematic exhibitions, which he considered too didactic, and instead favored those that highlighted personal itineraries and individual signatures. His first exhibition, in 1963, was titled *Five Unrelated Photographers*, a subtle and symbolic way of indicating a break with his predecessor, and proposed something that would be, as he allowed, “more about photographers than about moral or philosophical position.”⁸ In contrast with the traditional, densely hung displays dear to Steichen, Szarkowski preferred to install photographs in the same manner as paintings and drawings: mounted in passe-partouts and framed, on white walls with more space between the images, thus asserting photography as an art rather than a medium of communication.

In another contrast with Steichen, Szarkowski was an eloquent and charismatic advocate of a conception of photography that was close to the tenets of modernism and informed by Clement Greenberg’s writings on painting. In an era of new crossovers and connections between photography and the other visual arts, Szarkowski undertook to define and promote a “pure” (or straight) contemporary photography that relied on its own cardinal virtues (the act of framing, the relationship to reality, the quality of light) and displayed a certain documentary transparency. This conception presages Szarkowski’s unease with large formats and reveals his predilection for black and white, though he would sometimes show contemporary work in color, by artists such as Ernst Haas, in 1962; Marie Cosindas, in 1966; Helen Levitt, in 1974; and, of course, William Eggleston, in 1976.⁹ This tradition of documentary style is anchored in the work of Eugène Atget—whose archives Szarkowski bought for the Museum from Berenice Abbott in 1968—and Evans, who died in 1975 and to whom he devoted a major retrospective in 1971. Its main heirs, Szarkowski believed, were Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, all three of whom were featured in the exhibition *New Documents* in 1967 (fig. 2). Szarkowski called them “documentary photographers” and believed them motivated by “more personal ends” than those of the preceding generation, sharing “the belief that the world is worth looking at, and the courage to look at it without theorizing” (qualities that also suggest Eggleston, Joel Meyerowitz, and Nicholas Nixon, among others).¹⁰ At a time when the practice and history of photography were making their way into academia, Szarkowski stubbornly defended an antitheoretical and nonacademic approach, which he described—betraying a taste for provocation—as “the easiest of the arts”: “Putting aside for today the not very mysterious mysteries of craft, a photographer finally does nothing but stand in the right place, at the right time, and decide what should fall within and what outside the rectangle of the frame. That is what it comes down to.”¹¹

Throughout his career, with more than fifty contemporary exhibitions taking place under his direction, Szarkowski scarcely deviated from this concept of contemporary photography, keeping

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Press release for *Diogenes with a Camera*, May 21, 1952. MoMA Archives, New York.

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John Szarkowski, in John Gruen, “The Reasonably Risky Life of John Szarkowski,” *Art News* 77, no. 4 (April 1978): 68.

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Ibid.

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“Photographic paper is not beautiful. It looks like something made in a plastics factory—just a shiny surface. . . . Big photographs have that problem to deal with. Some deal with it more successfully than others. But it is a real problem.” Szarkowski, in Nicole Krauss, “Everywhere Felt but Nowhere Seen,” *Modern Painters* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 61.

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Press release for *New Documents*, February 28, 1967. MoMA Archives, New York.

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Szarkowski, “Introduction to Lee Friedlander,” *Colony News* (MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, N.H.), 16, no. 1 (Fall 1986).

himself at a remove from the experimental practices of various photographers as well as from the artistic avant-gardes of the times. Among the rare exceptions were *A European Experiment*, in 1967, featuring the (sometimes abstract) work of three French and Belgian photographers (Denis Brihat, Pierre Cordier, and Jean-Pierre Sudre), and, the same year, the Surrealist photomontages of Jerry Uelsmann. In 1978 he organized *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* around the poles of photography as a window on the world, the pure and documentary vision of the medium that was dear to him (with work by Arbus, Friedlander, Stephen Shore, Winogrand, and others); and photography as a mirror or a more introspective and narrative concept (with work by Robert Heinecken, Robert Rauschenberg, and Uelsmann).

Szarkowski's American tropism, however, should be placed in the broader context of MoMA's general acquisition policy from the early 1960s: the institution, long accused of not granting enough room to living American artists, shifted its focus as the art market's center shifted definitively from Paris to New York, and the Department of Photography followed suit.¹² Certainly retrospectives of non-American photographers were organized in those years, for artists including Jacques-Henri Lartigue, in 1963; André Kertész, in 1964; Brassai, in 1968; Cartier-Bresson, in 1968; Bill Brandt, in 1969; and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, in 1971, all of them still living at the time. But the goal of these exhibitions was a historical reading of their work, showing their photographs from the interwar or immediate postwar period in order to claim them a posteriori as modernists; meanwhile the exhibitions of artists of the following generation were almost completely limited to Americans. Between 1962 and the late 1980s, the exhibitions devoted to contemporary non-American photography can be counted on one hand: to *A European Experiment*, mentioned above, we can add *New Japanese Photography*, in 1974, and a small exhibition of works by Josef Koudelka, in 1975. It would not be until the end of the 1980s that international contemporary photography would begin to be shown, between 1987 and 1991, in the first exhibitions of the *New Photography* series, which presented work by Paul Graham, in 1987; Patrick Faigenbaum, in 1988; Michael Schmidt, in 1988;

and Thomas Florschuetz, in 1989, as well as the exhibition *British Photography from the Thatcher Years*, in 1991.

In the Department of Photography, Szarkowski's vision was complemented during his tenure by other curatorial voices that sometimes ventured far from it. The most distinctive was that of Peter C. Bunnell, a curator from 1966 to 1972, whose two principal exhibitions, *Photography and Printmaking*, in 1968, and *Photography into Sculpture*, in 1970 (fig. 3), reflected an idea about photography that was open to other artistic disciplines such as printmaking and sculpture. Exhibitions from outside the departmental orbit in the 1970s revealed other photographic sensibilities: *Information*, organized by Kynaston McShine in 1970, included conceptual works with a strong photographic presence, by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Victor Burgin, Douglas Huebler, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Long, and Robert Smithson. The *Projects* exhibitions, begun in 1971 to show "current researches and explorations in the visual arts," included both photographers and artists using photography—a distinction that was just beginning to be made and insisted on; the series featured *Pier 18*, in 1971, and works by Friedlander, in 1972; Klaus Rinke, Liliana Porter, and Eleanor Antin, in 1973; Levitt, Sonia Sheridan, and Keith Smith, in 1974; the Bechers, in 1975; Ger van Elk, in 1975; Michael Snow, in 1976; Peter Campus and Allan Ruppersberg, in 1977; William Beckley and Hamish Fulton, in 1978; Louise Lawler, in 1987; Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, in 1988; Bernhard and Anna Blume, in 1989 (fig. 4); and Lorna Simpson, in 1990.¹³ Thus the Museum's attitude toward contemporary photography was more diverse than various histories of the department have advanced.

In the 1970s, when museums interested in photography were rare, Szarkowski was on the one hand identified by the press as "the ultimate analyst, catalyst, codifier, critic, proselytizer, patron and protector of the medium"; on the other hand, because of his media and public exposure, he was also an object of censure.¹⁴ The department's policies, especially those regarding contemporary art, were criticized by artists, journalists, and academics who admonished Szarkowski for the monolithic nature of his programming and his overly formalist and outmoded approach. The historian John

¹² These complaints went as far back as 1940, when the American Abstract Artists held their "How Modern Is The Museum of Modern Art?" protest.

¹³ Press release for *Projects: Keith Sonnier*, May 24, 1971. MoMA Archives, New York. See also Eva Respini and Drew Sawyer, "A 'New Prominence': Photography at MoMA in the 1960s and 1970s," in Mary Statzer, ed., *The Photographic Object* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Michael Demarest, "The Arts," *Avenue*, April 1977, p. 22.



Fig. 3
Installation view of *Photography into Sculpture*, organized by Peter C. Bunnell, April 8–July 5, 1970, with works by (left to right) Dale Quarterman, Robert Watts, Robert Heinecken, and Michael de Courcy



Fig. 4
Installation view of *Projects 16: Bernhard and Anna Blume*, organized by Lisa Kurzner, May 13–June 20, 1989

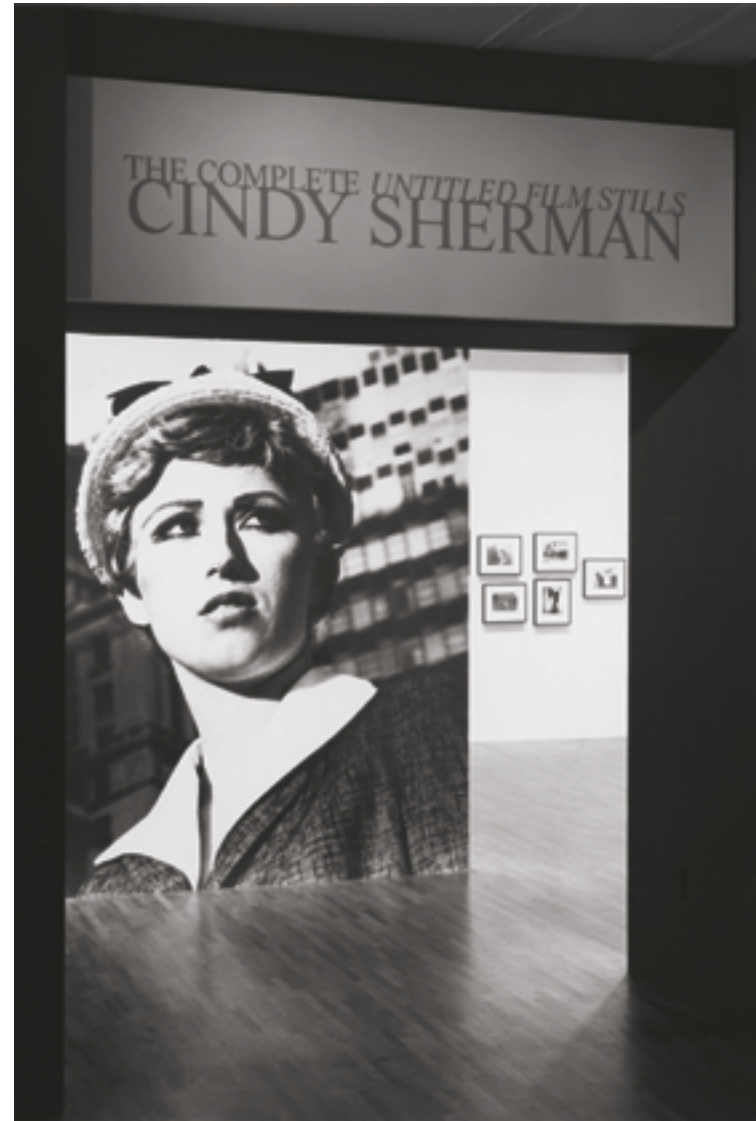


Fig. 5

Installation view of *More Than One Photography: Works since 1980 from the Collection*, organized by Peter Galassi, May 14–August 9, 1992, with works by (left to right) Robert Frank, Carl Pope, Michael Schmidt, Anselm Kiefer, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres (on floor)

Fig. 6

Installation view of *New Photography 2013*, organized by Roxana Marcoci, September 14, 2013–January 6, 2014, with works by (left to right) Brendan Fowler, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, and Josephine Pryde

Fig. 7

Installation view of *Cindy Sherman: The Complete "Untitled Film Stills,"* organized by Peter Galassi, June 26–September, 2, 1997

Tagg, in his 1988 book *The Burden of Representation*, called Szarkowski's writings and exhibitions a way of continuing "a programme for a peculiar photographic modernism."¹⁵ It was partially in response that Peter Galassi's first exhibition as the department's new chief, in 1992, was titled *More Than One Photography* (fig. 5). Actively drawing from all the Museum's collections, not just photography, Galassi showed very contemporary work from the previous decade in all its diversity and in all its forms, from the straightforward portraits of Judith Joy Ross to the embellished photocollages of Gilbert & George, from the most attached to the history of photography to the most integrated into contemporary art. For Galassi the greatest challenge was indeed to "deal with both traditional photography and with the younger photographic traditions that had developed since the 1960s within contemporary art."¹⁶ "At the time," he acknowledged, "these two domains of photography were quite separate and indeed quite hostile to each other. We have done our best over the past fifteen years or so to engage both of photography's worlds and to encourage them to get to know each other." Galassi's tenure also brought a more pronounced international perspective, with contemporary solo projects by non-Americans, including David Goldblatt, in 1998; Andreas Gursky, in 2001; Barry Frydlander, in 2007; the Bechers, in 2008; Graham, in 2009; and Boris Mikhailov, in 2011.

In the 1980s, as more and more institutions and galleries became as interested in photography as they were in what was beginning to be referred to as "contemporary art," the main channel for contemporary photography at MoMA was the *New Photography* exhibitions (fig. 6), made up primarily of noncollection works. The first such exhibition, organized by Szarkowski in 1985 and intended to be an annual event, featured work by Zeke Berman, Antonio Mendoza, Ross, and Michael Spano. Szarkowski hoped thus to place contemporary creation at the center of the department's programming: "*New Photography* will occupy twice the space of our former one-man series, and will show three or four photographers whose work—individually and collectively—seems to represent the most interesting achievements of new

photography."¹⁷ It has been a window on the Museum's approach to photography, and it continues to be one of the very few regularly occurring contemporary series at the Museum. To date the series has presented more than a hundred artists, divided almost equally between Americans and non-Americans and covering a broad photographic range according to the different sensibilities of various curators.¹⁸ Many of the photographers and artists represented in this volume were first shown at MoMA in a *New Photography* exhibition, which also provided the occasion for their first works to be acquired by the Museum.¹⁹ The series has encompassed framed prints, images on screens, commercial books, self-published books, zines, posters, photo-based installations and videos, and site-specific works, and it will continue to present all the different forms that the photographic image can take.

A similar diversity, in both approach and artists' nationalities, characterizes the department's acquisitions of other photographic works over the last twenty years: from a narrative and mise-en-scène approach (the complete series of *Untitled Film Stills* by Cindy Sherman, acquired in 1995 [fig. 7]) to more documentary-style practices (more than a thousand prints by Friedlander, representing the whole of his career, purchased in 2000), as well as experimental work (forty-two images made by Sigmar Polke in the 1960s and 1970s and purchased in 2011) and conceptual work (the Jan Dibbets archive, made up of 398 contact sheets, given by the artist in 2014). At the same time, thanks to the Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP) project, a global research initiative launched in 2009, and to the Latin American and Caribbean Fund, the representation of Eastern European and Latin American artists in the collection has greatly improved. All in all, many of the gaps and omissions in the Museum's contemporary holdings have been filled by an acquisition policy that continues to favor living artists and photographers, in conformance to Barr's vision in 1933 of the permanent collection "as a torpedo moving through time, its nose the ever advancing present, its tail the ever receding past."²⁰

¹⁵ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ Galassi, in Rosalind Williams, "Photography Considered Art from the Beginning of the MoMA," *Revista tendencias del mercado del arte*, June 2009, p. 90.

¹⁷ Press release for *New Photography 2*, June 1986. MoMA Archives, New York. There were no *New Photography* exhibitions, between 2000 and 2004 (when the Fifty-Third Street building was under construction and the Museum relocated to Queens) and in 2014. Starting in 2015, the thirtieth anniversary of the first exhibition, the cycle will resume on a biennial schedule, in a larger space and showing more works by more artists.

¹⁸ Between 1985 and 2013, the *New Photography* exhibitions presented ninety-eight artists of eighteen nationalities: American (fifty-one), Brazilian (one), British (eight), Canadian (two), Chinese (three), Cuban (one), Dutch (three), French (three), German (eleven), Icelandic (one), Iranian (one), Israeli (two), Japanese (two), Polish (one), South African (four), Spanish (one), Swiss (two), and Ukrainian (one).

¹⁹ Among them Uta Barth, Walead Beshty, Thomas Demand, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Rineke Dijkstra, Paul Graham, Lisa Oppenheim, Barbara Probst, Michael Schmidt, and Toshio Shibata, to name only a few.

²⁰ Barr, in Bee and Elligott, *Art in Our Time*, p. 39.