



Charlotte Cotton

The Photograph as Contemporary Art

Third Edition

249 illustrations, 212 in color

 **Thames & Hudson world of art**

For Issi, mum and dad

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I. Sarah Jones,
The Bedroom (I), 2002.

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Introduction

Nearly two centuries after the technology was first invented in the 1830s, photography has come of age as a contemporary art form. In the 21st century the art world has fully embraced the photograph as a legitimate medium, equal in status to painting and sculpture, and photographers frequently display their work in art galleries and illustrated fine-art monographs. In light of these exciting developments, this book is intended to provide an introduction to and overview of the field of photography as contemporary art, with the aim of defining it as a subject and identifying its characteristic features and themes.

If there is a single, overarching idea of contemporary photography in this book, it is the wonderful pluralism of this creative field. The selection of nearly 250 photographers whose work is illustrated in these pages aims to convey a sense of the broad and intelligent scope of contemporary photography. While it includes the handful of well-known photographers who hold permanent residence in the pantheon of contemporary art, it intentionally treats contemporary art photography as fundamentally diverse in both form and intent, involving the cumulative efforts of many independent practitioners, most of whom are not well known outside their immediate spheres of practice. Every photographer represented here shares a commitment to making their own contribution to the physical and intellectual space of culture. In its most literal interpretation, this means that all of the photographers in this book create work that is intended to be displayed on gallery walls and in the pages of art books. It is important to bear in mind that most of the photographers are represented only by a single image, invariably selected to stand for their entire body of work. The pinpointing of one project from a photographer's oeuvre belies the full range of his or her expressions and underplays the plural possibilities that photography offers its makers, but it is a necessary simplification in the context of this book.

2. Daniel Gordon,
Anemone Flowers and Avocado, 2012.



The majority of contemporary art photographers working today have undertaken undergraduate and graduate art-school education and, like other fine artists, are crafting work primarily for an audience of art viewers, supported by an international web of commercial and non-profit galleries, museums, publishing houses, festivals, fairs and biennials. In the wake of this increase in professional infrastructure for photography as contemporary art in the twenty-first-century, it is no surprise that critical discussion now tends to centre on the consolidation and qualification of the field, rather than on rethinking it conceptually. While the idea of photography as a necessary and expected aspect of contemporary art practice has strengthened significantly in the new millennium, however, the issues that influence the subject of photography as contemporary art are increasingly those of image-making at large. They include the ways in which we use purely image-based communication in our daily interactions, in social media and photo-sharing platforms, for instance; the opportunities for amateurs to self-publish photobooks following the revolution in digital printing in the early twenty-first century; the rise of citizen photography in journalism, particularly for online publications; new camera technologies, such as the ability to fuse still- and moving-image capture; and the evolution and application of computer coding in data visualization. These new facets of image-making impact not only on the visual languages and the modes of dissemination for photography as contemporary art, but also push us to become more specific about what qualifies as artistic photographic practice in light of the new ubiquity of photography in everyday life. In this context, it becomes more evident that contemporary art photography is driven by the astute and active choices of its makers, whose works maintain the brilliantly dialogical nature of an art form within the ever-shifting wider photographic landscape.

The chapters of the book divide contemporary art photography into eight categories. These categories, or themes, were chosen to avoid giving the impression that it is either style or choice of subject matter that predominantly determines the salient characteristics of current art photography. Naturally, there are stylistic aspects that connect some of the works shown in this book, and there are subjects that have been especially prevalent in the photography of recent years, but the themes of the chapters are more concerned with grouping photographers who share common ground in their motivations and working practices. Such a structure foregrounds the ideas that underpin

contemporary art photography before going on to consider their visual outcomes.

Chapter 1, 'If This Is Art', considers how photographers have devised strategies, performances and happenings specially for the camera. It is given its place at the beginning of the book because it challenges a traditional stereotype of photography: the idea of the lone photographer scavenging from daily life, looking for the moment when a picture of great visual charge or intrigue appears in the photographic frame. Attention is paid here to the degree to which the focus has been preconceived by the photographer, a strategy designed not only to alter the way we think about our physical and social world but also to take that world into extraordinary dimensions. This area of contemporary photography grew, in part, out of the documentary photographs of conceptual art performances in the 1960s and 1970s, but with an important difference. Although some of the photographs that appear in this chapter play off their potential status as casual records of temporary artistic acts, they are, crucially, destined to be the final outcome of these events: the object chosen and presented as the work of art, not merely a document, trace or by-product of an action that has now passed.

Chapter 2, 'Once Upon a Time', concentrates on storytelling in art photography. Its focus is in fact more specific, for it looks at the prevalence of 'tableau' photography in contemporary practice: work in which narrative has been distilled into a single image. Its characteristics relate most directly to the pre-photographic era of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western figurative painting. This is not because of any nostalgic revivalism on the part of the photographer, but because in such painting an established and effective way of creating narrative content through the composition of props, gestures and the style of the work of art can be found. Tableau photography is sometimes also described as 'constructed' or 'staged' photography because the elements depicted and even the precise camera angle are worked out in advance and drawn together to articulate a preconceived idea for the creation of the image.

Chapter 3 gives the greatest consideration to the idea of a photographic aesthetic. 'Deadpan' relates to a type of art photography that has a distinct lack of visual drama or hyperbole. Flattened out, formally and dramatically, these images seem to be products of an objective gaze in which the subject, rather than the photographer's perspective on it, is paramount. The works represented in this chapter are those that suffer the most from

a reduction in size and print quality when presented as book illustrations, for it is in their dazzling clarity (all of the photographs are made with either medium- or large-format cameras) and large print size that their impact is felt. The theatricality of human action and dramatic light qualities seen in many of the works in Chapter 2 are markedly absent here; instead, these photographs have a visual command that comes from their expansive nature and scale.

While Chapter 3 engages with a neutral aesthetic of photography, Chapter 4 concentrates on subject matter, but at its most oblique. 'Something and Nothing' looks at how contemporary photographers have pushed the boundaries of what might be considered a credible visual subject. In recent years, there has been a trend to include objects and spaces that we might ordinarily ignore or pass by. The photographs shown in this chapter maintain the 'thing-ness' of what they describe, such as street litter, abandoned rooms or dirty laundry, but are conceptually altered because of the visual impact they gain by the act of being photographed and presented as art. In this respect, contemporary artists have determined that through a sensitized and subjective point of view, everything in the real world is a potential subject. What is significant in this chapter is photography's enduring capacity to transform even the slightest subject into an imaginative trigger of great import.

In Chapter 5, 'Intimate Life', we concentrate on emotional and personal relationships as a collective diary of human intimacy. Some of the photographs have a distinctly casual and amateur style, many resembling family snaps taken with Instamatic cameras with the familiar colouration of machine-made prints. But this chapter also considers what contemporary photographers add to this vernacular style, such as their construction of dynamic sequences and their focus on unexpected moments in everyday life, events that are distinctly different from those the average person would ordinarily capture. It also looks at other seemingly less casual and more considered approaches to representing the most familiar and emotionally resonant of subjects for a photographer.

Chapter 6, 'Moments in History', covers a large amount of ground in highlighting the use of the documentary capacity of photography in art. It starts with what is arguably the most counter-photojournalistic approach, one that is loosely termed 'aftermath photography'. This is work by photographers who arrive at sites of social and ecological disaster after they have been decimated. In the literal scarification of the places depicted,

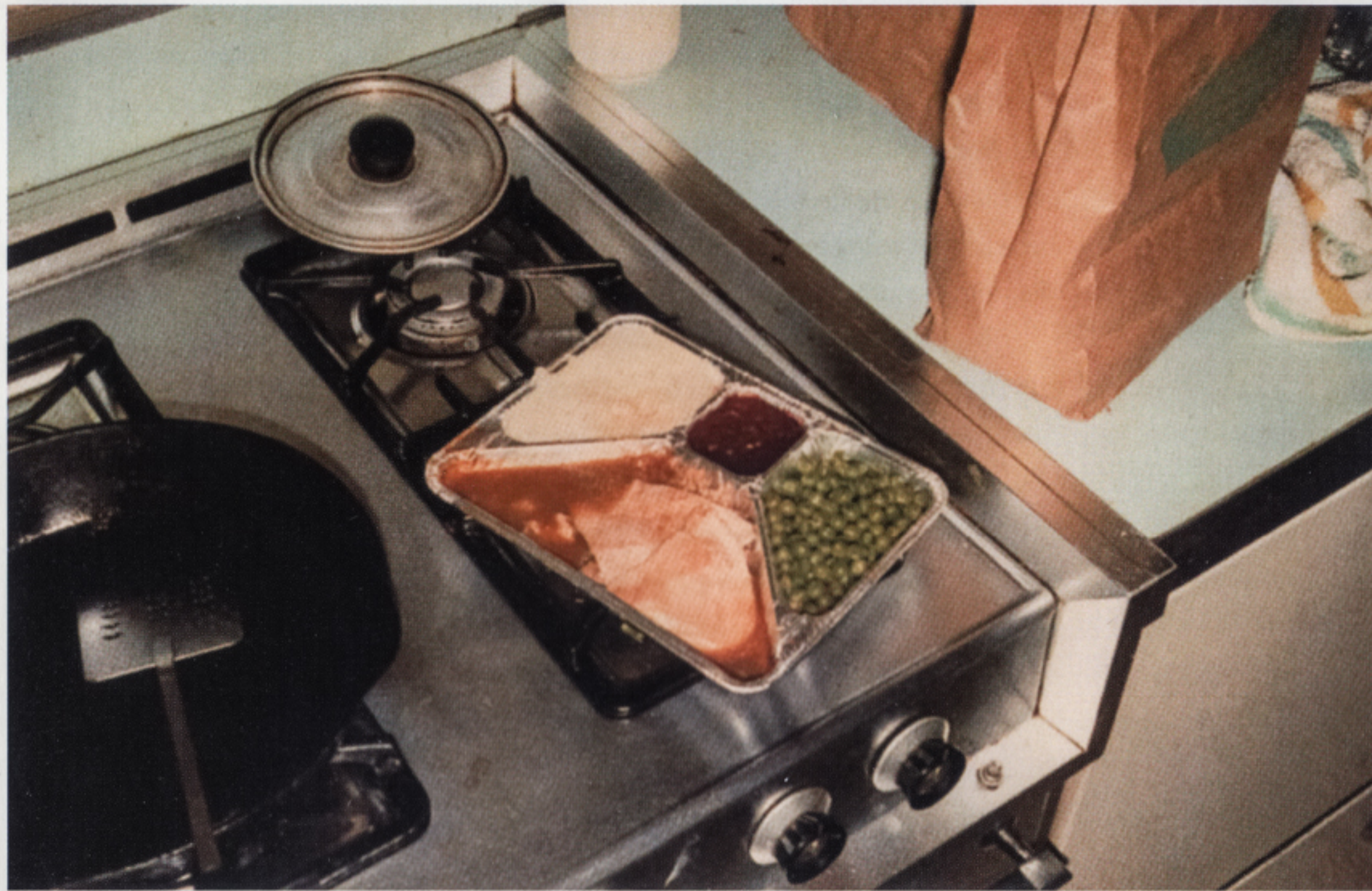
3. William Eggleston, *Untitled*, 1970.

Eggleston's influence on contemporary art photography has become recognized as central, not least because of his early validation of the use of colour in the 1960s and 1970s. Considered the 'photographer's photographer', he continues to publish and exhibit internationally, his repertoire being constantly re-evaluated in the light of art photography's increasing profile over the past thirty years.

contemporary art photography presents allegories of the consequences of political and individual upheaval. The chapter also investigates some of the visual records of isolated communities (whether isolated by geography or by social exclusion) that have been shown in art books and galleries. At a time when support for intensive documentary projects destined for the editorial pages of magazines and newspapers has waned, the gallery has become the showplace for such documentations of human life. This chapter also touches upon bodies of work in which either the choice of subject or the photographic approach counters or aggravates our perception of the boundaries of documentary-led photographic conventions.

Chapter 7, 'Revived and Remade', explores a range of recent photographic practice that centres on and exploits our pre-existing knowledge of imagery. This includes the remaking of well-known photographs and the mimicking of generic types of imagery such as magazine advertising, film stills or surveillance and scientific photography. By recognizing these familiar kinds of imagery, we are made conscious of what we see, how we see and how images trigger our emotions and shape our understanding of the world. The implicit critique of originality, authorship and photographic veracity that is brought to the fore here has been





4. Stephen Shore,
Untitled (28a), 1972.

a perennial discourse in photographic practice and one that has had especial prominence in photography of the last forty years. This chapter also looks at instances in which photographers have either revived historical photographic techniques or created archives of photographs. These examples invigorate our understanding of past events or cultures, as well as enriching our sense of parallels and continuities between contemporary and historical ways of seeing.

The final chapter, 'Physical and Material', focuses upon photography in which the very nature of the medium is part of the narrative of the work. With digital photography now a ubiquitous aspect of daily experience and communication, a number of contemporary art photographers have made conscious decisions to highlight the physical and material properties of photography and how they currently operate within the rarefied spaces of galleries and museums. Other artists are imaginatively responding to the changing modes of photographic dissemination that proliferate in our digital epoch. The photographs illustrated in this chapter draw attention to the many choices that a photographer must make when creating an artwork. For some the main choice has been to use analogue technologies (that is, older film-based and light-sensitive chemical processes) rather than the digital image-capture and post-production techniques that are now

standard, while others are using photography as just one element of their practice: for instance, as components of installation and sculptural work. Chapter 8 concludes by considering innovative ways in which contemporary art photographers are creating images designed to be viewed on internet platforms and handheld screens, *alongside* their other works of art intended exclusively for art galleries. Some are also capitalizing on the increased opportunities for self-publishing that have emerged in the wake of the digital revolution. These versatile photographers epitomize the newly flourishing creativity of photography as contemporary art.

Photography as contemporary art in the twenty-first century is strongly influenced by the momentum of the contemporary art market and by the impact of digital technologies on both the production and dissemination of images. Yet at the same time contemporary art photographers are also inspired by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of their medium, frequently utilizing it as an imaginative prompt for their work, in particular the experimentalism of European avant-garde photography of the early twentieth century and the 'photography of the everyday' reenvisioned by American art photographers in the mid-1970s.

The use of colour photography, rather than black-and-white, has dominated contemporary art photographic expression since the mid-1990s. It was not until the 1970s that art photographers who used vibrant colour – which previously had been the preserve of commercial and vernacular photography – found a modest degree of critical support, and not until the 1990s that the use of colour became standard practice. Most prominent among the many twentieth-century photographers who contributed to this shift were the Americans William Eggleston (b. 1939) and Stephen Shore (b. 1947). Eggleston began to create colour photographs in the mid-1960s, and in the late 1960s started to work with colour transparency film (colour slide film) of the same kind typically used for photographing family holidays, advertising and magazine imagery. At that time, his adoption of the colour range of commonplace photography put him outside the established realms of fine art photography. In 1976, however, a selection of photographs he had created between 1969 and 1971 was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, comprising the first solo show of a photographer working predominantly in colour [3]. It is an oversimplification to argue that one exhibition (albeit at MoMA) could singlehandedly change

5. **Alec Soth,**

Sugar's, Davenport, IA, 2002.
Alec Soth photographs cross the pictorial genres of landscape, portrait and still life. In his images, he uses the neutral aesthetic so dominant in photographic practices of recent years, while also referencing the heritage of the use of colour in art photography since the 1970s, especially in the faded interiors he depicts.



the direction of art photography, yet the show was an early and timely indicator of the force that Eggleston's alternative approach would have.

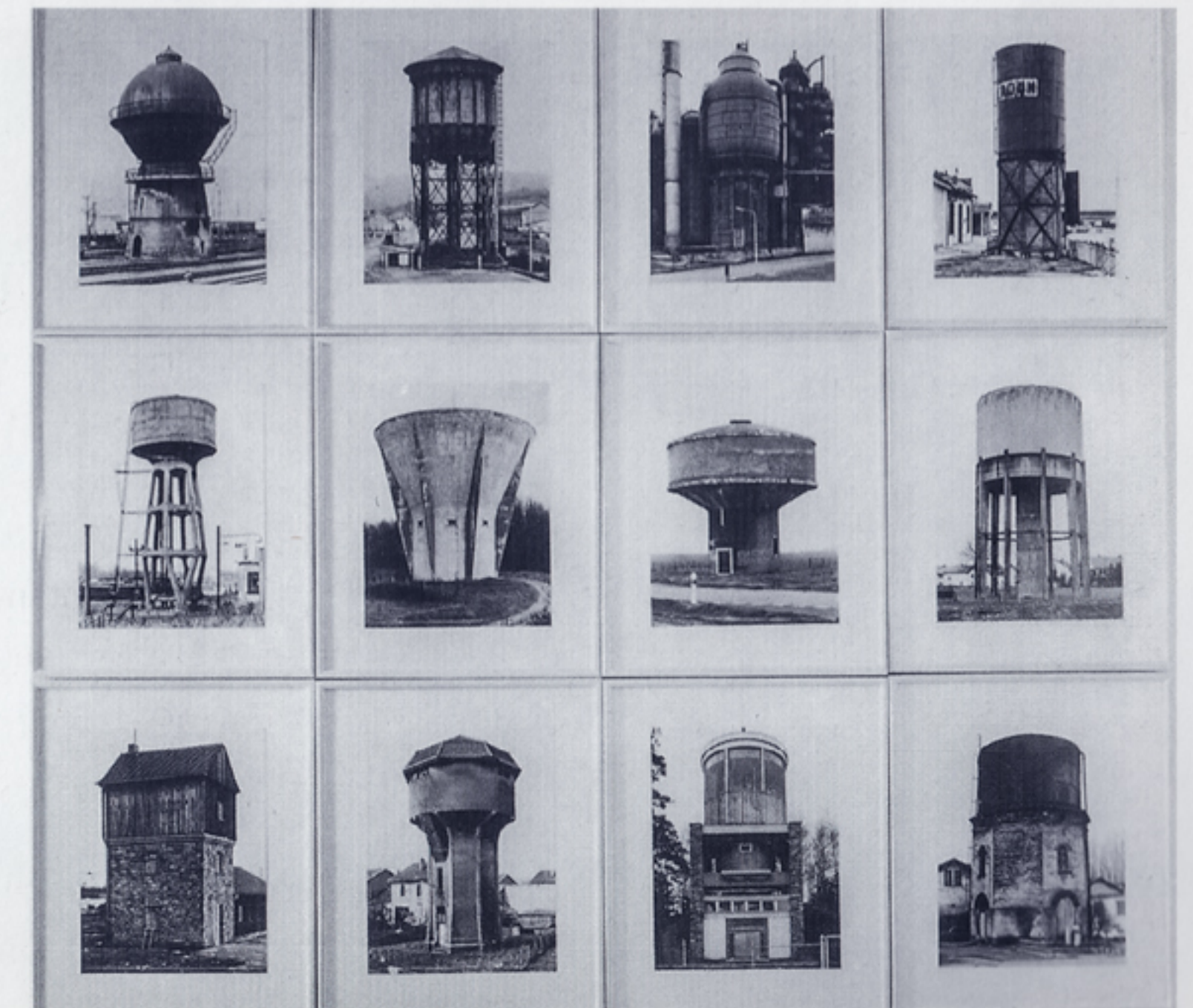
In 1971, Shore photographed the main buildings and sites of public interest in Amarillo, Texas. To underscore his subtle portrayal of Amarillo as a generic American town, Shore had the photographs printed as ordinary postcards. When he did not sell many of the 5,600 cards he had printed, he put them in existing postcard racks in all the places he visited (some were sent back to him in the mail by friends and acquaintances who had spotted them). Shore's fascination with and simulation of photography's everyday styles and functions continued in 1972, when he exhibited 220 photographs, made with a 35mm Instamatic camera and shown in grids, of day-to-day events and ordinary objects cropped and casually depicted [4]. Shore's early explorations of colour photography as an artistic medium were not well known or

widely accessible until his book *American Surfaces* was published in 1999 and went on to have great influence on the next generation of contemporary art photographers.

Eggleston and Shore's greatest contribution has been in opening up a space within art photography to allow a more liberated approach to image-making. Younger artists have followed in their footsteps, including the American photographer Alec Soth (b. 1969) [5]. His series made on journeys along the Mississippi River, depicting the people and places he encountered along the way, is clearly part of Eggleston's legacy. (Soth visited Eggleston as part of his exploration of the American South.) That said, Soth's photographs also contain elements of the 'deadpan' aesthetic discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the conventions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century portraiture, demonstrating that contemporary art photography draws on a range of traditions, both artistic and vernacular, and reconfigures them.

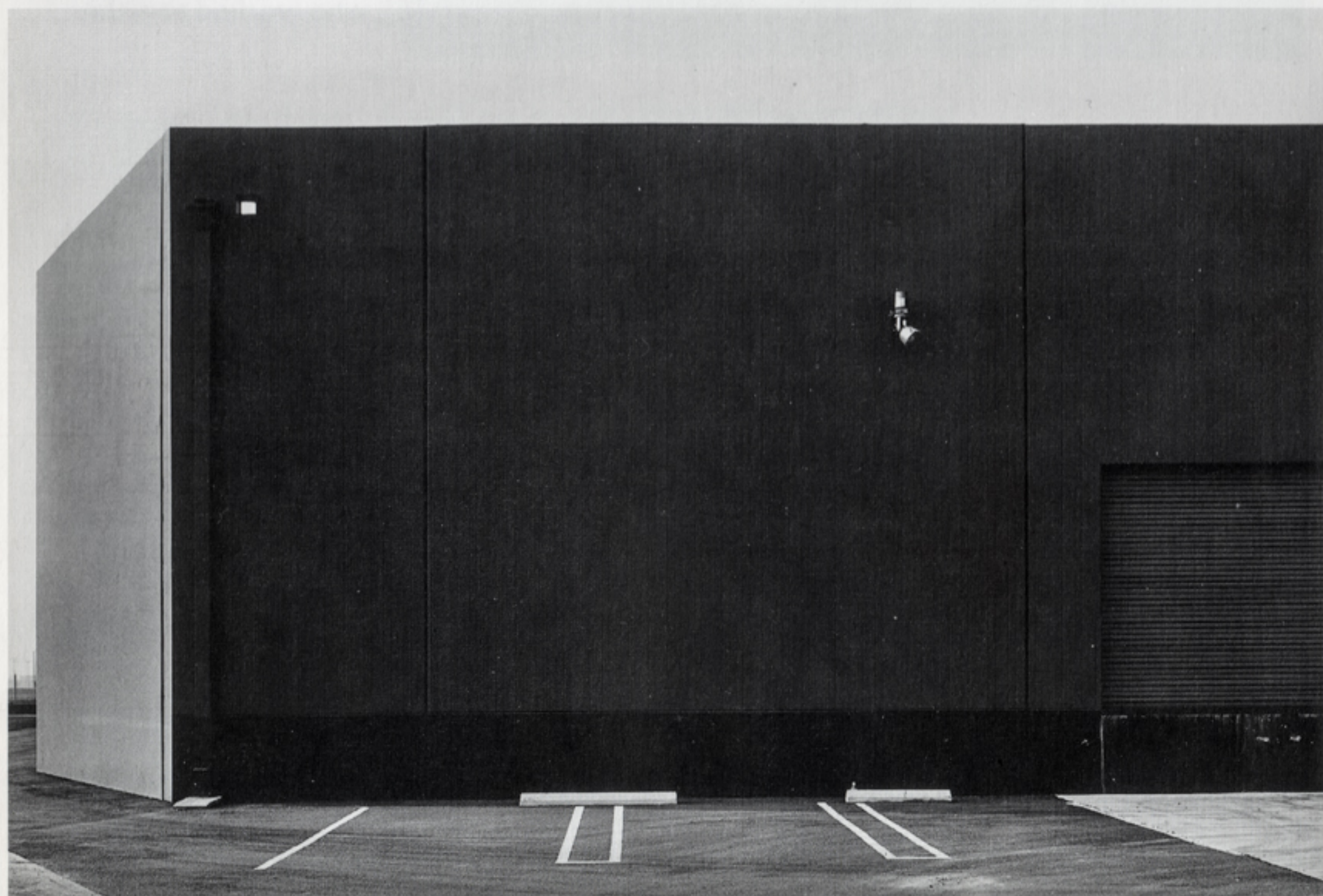
The exhibition 'New Topographics: Photographs of a man-altered landscape', curated by William Jenkins and first shown at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, in 1975, is now recognized as an early survey of some of the most critically important and influential photography of the late twentieth century. The exhibition included the work of German duo Bernd (1931–2007) and Hilla Becher (b. 1934) [6], who worked together

6. **Bernd and Hilla Becher,**
Twelve Water Towers, 1978–85.
Through their sustained documentation of vernacular architecture and their tutelage of some of today's most prominent art photographers, the Bechers have had a resounding impact on contemporary ideas and practice. Their typologies of buildings have most often been shown on a modest scale and in grids, emphasizing the variety and specificity of the structure types they represent.



from the mid-1950s onwards. Their austere grids of black-and-white photographs, specifically those depicting American architectural structures such as gas tanks, water towers and blast furnaces, have deeply informed the aesthetics and conceptual approaches of contemporary art photography. The Bechers' black-and-white images may appear to stand in stark contrast with the colour work of Eggleston and Shore (who was also included in the original 'New Topographics' exhibition), but there is also an important connection: like Eggleston and Shore, the Bechers have been instrumental in adapting vernacular photography to function as part of a considered artistic strategy, with the intent of infusing art photography with visual connections to history and everyday life. Their photographs serve a dual function: they are unromantic documents of historic structures, yet their unpretentious and systematic recording of architecture recalls the use of taxonomies in conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. The Bechers have also played an important role as teachers at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where their students have included future leading practitioners such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand and Candida Höfer, whose work can be found later in this book.

7. Lewis Baltz,
Southwest Wall, Vollrath, 2424 McGaw, Irvine, from The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California, 1974.



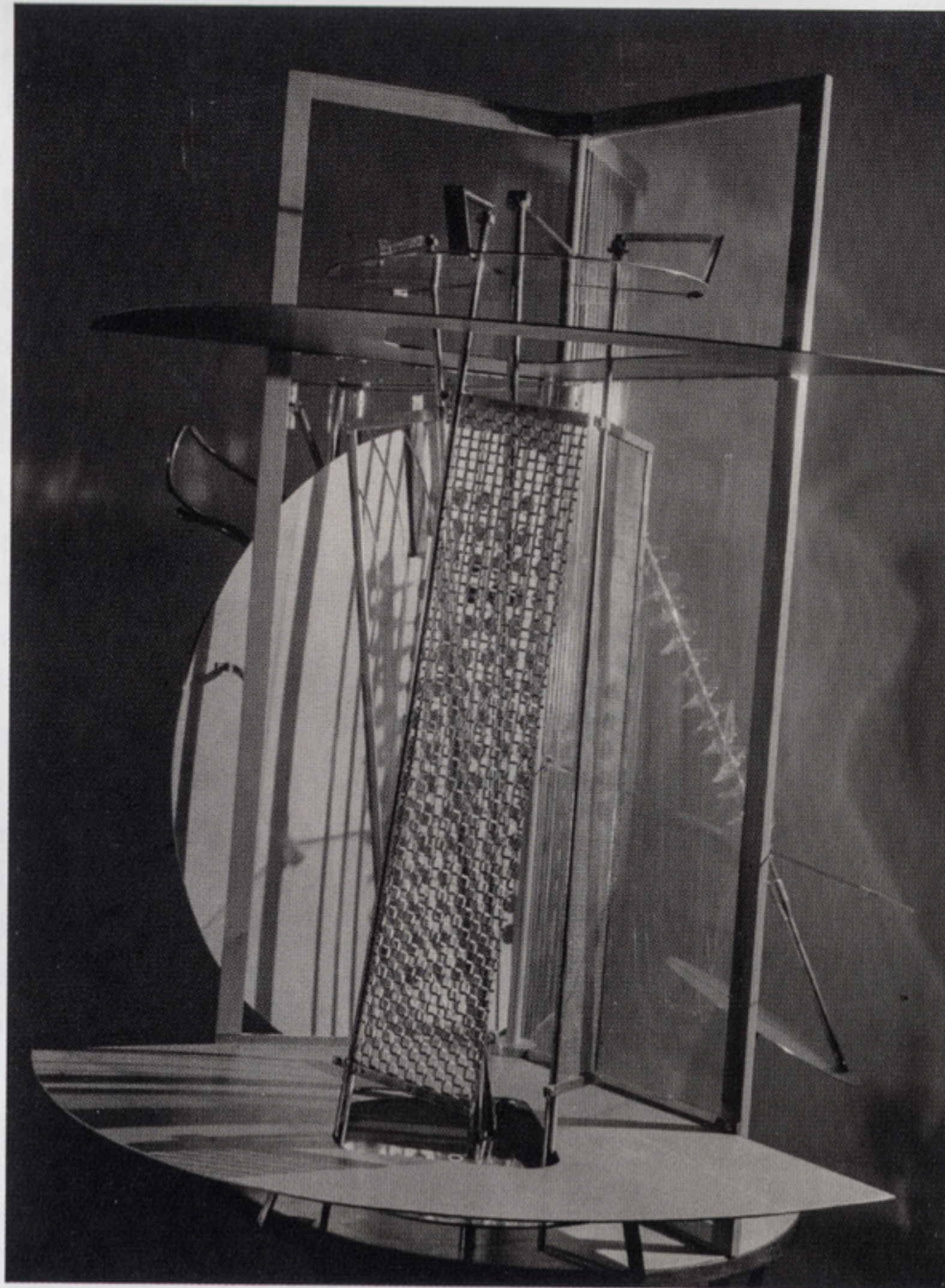
The 'New Topographics' exhibition brought together a range of work that represented the diverse concepts, technologies and formal approaches at play within the pioneering contemporary landscape photography of the 1970s. Lewis Baltz's portrayal of the near-obliteration of the Californian landscape in his photographs of the construction of a sprawling industrial park in Irvine, California, was perhaps the most wry and double-edged out of all of the selected artists' work [7]. Using a 35mm camera, Baltz masterfully created a series of austere photographs of the anonymous pre-fabricated industrial structures, purposely invoking what by the early 1970s were the pared-down formalist clichés of Minimalist sculpture and painting. With similar resonance, Robert Adams (b. 1937) captured intense observations of the encroachment of tract housing, shopping malls and light industry onto the monumental landscapes of Colorado that offered an epic narrative of the American West and the impact of post-war capitalism.

The inclusion of most of the aforementioned photographers in the canon of late twentieth-century masters has come about only relatively recently as a result of the wider availability of their work through new publications and exhibitions, in conjunction with the ongoing reassessment of photography by the art world. The twenty-first century has also been an era for the reappraisal of other histories of photography: geographical surveys of photographic practice from the Southern hemisphere, for instance, as well as imaginative presentations of anonymous and vernacular photography from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have cumulatively created a much more rounded understanding of the historical richness of photography.

The influence of the history of art upon present-day contemporary art photographers also reflects the current fascination in wider contemporary art with early twentieth-century avant-garde practices, which have encouraged the trend for reassessing the language and ambitions of modernist art. This interest in avant-garde experimentation has made László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) an especially important figure. Moholy-Nagy's artistic practice encompassed painting, sculpture, film, design and experimental photography in the spirit of European art movements such as Dadaism and Russian Constructivism, and epitomized the pluralistic practices associated with the German Bauhaus School. Among the works most often cited by contemporary art photographers are Moholy-Nagy's black-and-white photographic darkroom

8. Lázló Moholy-Nagy.

Lightplay: Black/White/Gray, c. 1926.



experiments, in which he created visions that did not simulate human optical perspectives, and his mobile construction of the 1930s, posthumously entitled the Light-Space Modulator [8], which generated kinetic patterns of light and shade. Moholy-Nagy's work with photographic and light abstraction was the forerunner to the 21st-century abundance of both abstract photography and artwork that fuses photography with sculpture (see Chapter 8).

The influence of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), the originator of Dadaism, over modern and contemporary art remains pervasive in the twenty-first century, and his collaborations with photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) and Man Ray (1890–1976) [9] resonate strongly within the field of contemporary art photography. In essence, Duchamp and his collaborators used the photograph as a device to generate a visual charge and

9. Man Ray and Marcel

Duchamp, *Dust Breeding*, 1920.



automatically assign artistic meaning to its subjects. Photography in this context operates very much as the tool of the Duchampian readymade: it creates a default, manufactured object borrowed directly from daily life. At a point in the history of art when the idea of photography as a conceptually valid contemporary art medium has been accepted beyond any shadow of a doubt, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a revival of interest in work from an earlier time when photography was a liberated artistic economy of means.

While the expanding and rethinking of the history of photography continues to influence contemporary art photography, the second decade of the twenty-first century has ushered in an era of incredible confidence and experimentation within this field of artistic practice. It is distinctly different from the late twentieth-century process of validating photography as a widely recognized, independent art form through its stylistic and critical alignment with traditional art forms, especially painting. Now that photography's identity as contemporary art has been accepted as fact, the stage is set for new and exciting turns in its development.