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David Bate

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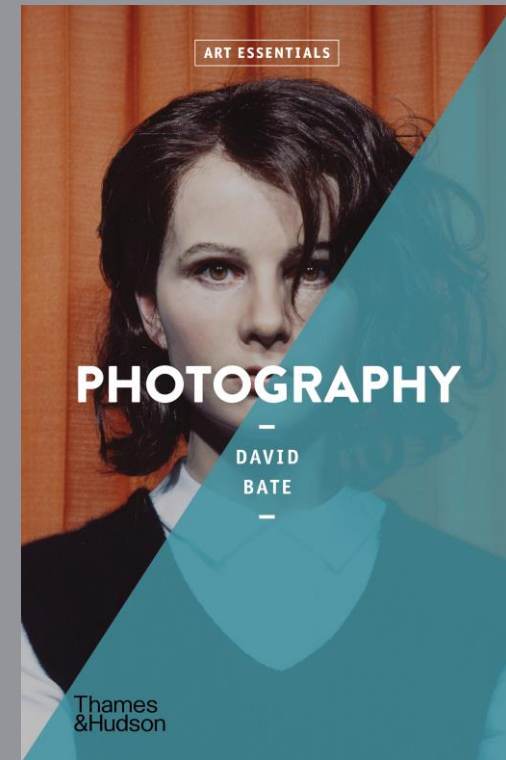
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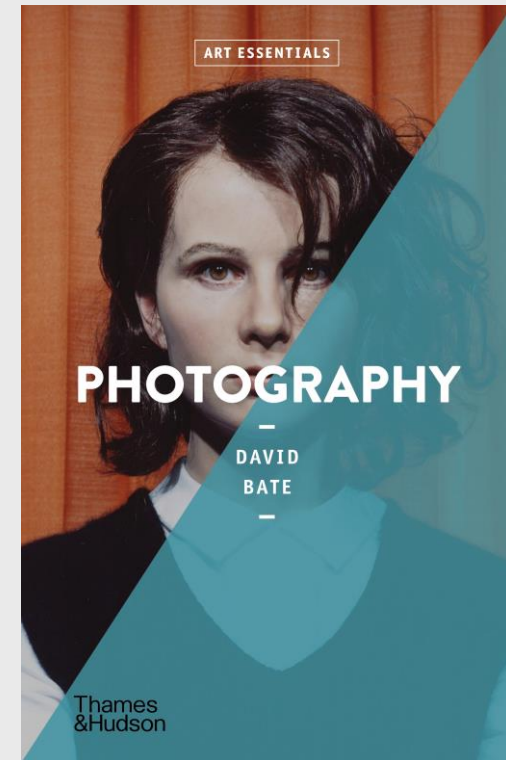
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Provisional

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CONTENTS

6 INTRODUCTION

9 NEW ART: PIONEERS 1822–1900

- 12 Joseph Nicéphore Niépce &
Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre
14 Anna Atkins
16 Augustus Washington
18 Charles H. Fontayne
and William S. Porter
20 The Great Exhibition
23 Frances Benjamin Johnston
24 William Henry Fox Talbot
26 Oscar Gustave Rejlander
27 José Martínez Sánchez
28 Felice Beato
30 Julia Margaret Cameron

33 PICTORIALISM

- 36 *Camera Work* magazine and 291 Gallery
41 Harold Cazneaux
42 Gertrude Käsebier
43 Bolette Berg
& Maria Hoeg

45 NEW OBJECTIVITY, MODERNISM AND AVANT-GARDE

- 48 Eugène Atget
49 Ilse Bing
50 James Van Der Zee
52 Alexander Rodchenko

- 53 Claude Cahun
54 'Film und Foto' Exhibition
58 August Sander
60 Brassai
62 Kiyoshi Koishi
64 Edward Steichen
66 *Exposition Internationale
de la Photographie*
68 International
Surrealism Exhibition
72 Dorothea Lange
73 Man Ray

75 FROM THE SECOND WORLD WAR TO AFTER

- 78 Thérèse Bonney
80 Henri Cartier-Bresson
81 Lee Miller
82 Tsuneko Sasamoto
84 Otto Steinert
85 Ruth Orkin
86 'The Family of Man'
88 Imogen Cunningham

91 NEW MODERN AND CRITICAL DOCUMENTS

- 94 Nobuyoshi Araki
95 Robert Frank
96 'New Documents:
Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander,
Garry Winogrand'
99 William Eggleston

- 100 Mike Mandel & Larry Sultan
101 Bill Owens
102 Luigi Ghirri
103 Nan Goldin
104 'Three Perspectives on
Photography: Recent
British Photography'
108 Miyako Ishiuchi
109 Francesca Woodman

111 CONCEPTUAL

- 114 Edward Ruscha
115 John Baldessari
116 Keith Arnatt
117 Sophie Calle
118 Annette Messager
120 Lorna Simpson
121 Gillian Wearing

123 POSTMODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

- 126 'Pictures' exhibition
129 Barbara Kruger
130 Cindy Sherman
132 Andres Serrano
133 Laurie Simmons

135 CONTEMPORARY ART PHOTOGRAPHY

- 138 Jeff Wall
140 Gabriele Basilico
142 Adam Fuss

- 144 Hiroshi Sugimoto
146 Wolfgang Tillmans
148 Alec Soth
150 'Pictures by Women:
A History of Modern
Photography' exhibition
154 Sameer Tawde
155 Oscar Muñoz
156 Shao Yinong & Mu Chen
157 Farah Al Qasimi
158 Zanele Muholi
160 Letha Wilson
162 Andreas Gursky
163 Dayanita Singh
164 Rineke Dijkstra
165 Rinko Kawauchi

- 166 **Glossary**
172 **Further Reading**
173 **Index**
175 **Picture Acknowledgements**

JOSEPH NICÉPHORE NIÉPCE & LOUIS-JACQUES-MANDÉ DAGUERRE

France, 1765–1833 & 1787–1851

INVENTORS OF THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHS



Joseph Nicéphore Niépce was a French physicist and inventor (he invented an internal combustion engine) and the first person known to have *permanently* fixed a camera image made with light. He used a cocktail of chemicals on pewter and then glass and called the process heliography (sundrawing). Niépce also invented a method of reproducing the image and presented it to the Royal Society in London in 1827.

In 1829 he partnered with Louis Daguerre, the Parisian painter and showman, to develop the process by reducing the exposure time required to make the image. When Niépce unexpectedly died in 1833, Daguerre continued their work with the exposure time reduced from eight hours to 20–30 minutes. Daguerre named the revised process after himself, the 'daguerreotype' process, and then sold the invention to the French state in 1839, the year widely considered as the official date of the invention of photography. Within a year the daguerreotype had spread across the world. In that same year William Henry Fox Talbot, an English linguist and scientist, announced his own invention of a negative/positive image process, which was also named (by Sir David Brewster) after the inventor, as a talbotype.

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce
View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826

This is the first known picture to be made with a camera obscura and recorded by a photographic process. The object has had a difficult life, battered and disfigured over time (see the two bumps at the bottom of the image). Nevertheless, the image sufficiently retains the fascinating capacity of the photographic process to create an illusion of resemblance.

Despite the different names and processes, the word 'photography', derived from the Greek words 'photos' (light) and 'graphein' (draw), was coined in the 1840s to describe all of them, whatever process is used.

Both the processes invented by Daguerre and Fox Talbot used silver compounds, and both were improved by others and developed throughout the nineteenth century. Eventually both positive and negative technologies were transferred to celluloid and formed the basis for mass-produced film photography during the twentieth century. The popularity of film-based photography was eroded when electronic imaging began to be rapidly improved in the 1980s and eventually replaced the dominance of chemical processing with 'digital' computer processing towards the end of the twentieth century. The smart phone and the internet accelerated the demise of film photography. Today, many of the earlier processes have a particular charm and beauty and are often revived by artists in contemporary art photography.

Very few of Niépce's picture have survived. The most well known are a view through his window and a still life composition. Daguerre was already a successful academy painter in Paris, but this is overshadowed today by his daguerreotype invention.

Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre
Boulevard du temple, 1839

Daguerre's photograph of the Boulevard du temple, Paris, France, in 1839 is the first photograph to register a human presence, seen here as the trace of a man having his shoes cleaned, which clearly lasted long enough for his silhouette to be registered in the picture (at least ten minutes). This interesting fact should not overshadow the innovative point of view of the picture. Looking down towards the street was a viewpoint also to be taken up by the Impressionist painters.



GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER

USA, 1852–1934

IMPORTANT PICTORIALIST PHOTOGRAPHER



Gertrude Käsebier is one of several women photographers admired and published by Alfred Stieglitz but subsequently neglected by historians of photography. Her photographs appeared multiple times from the first issue onwards in Stieglitz's prestigious *Camera Work* magazine. She was clearly a key figure for Pictorialism in the USA. Like Julia Margaret Cameron in England, Käsebier started photography later in life, but quickly became an expert in the process and was prolific in making photographic images. She notably photographed Native Americans in her New York Fifth Avenue photography studio, after seeing them in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1898. Today there is much suspicion about the 'authenticity' of such photographs of Native Americans, because these individuals were performers who had to navigate the complex public image of themselves that they had already been given by popular American culture. Käsebier tries to show them on an equal footing, but the original viewers of these images may not have been so neutral.

Gertrude Käsebier
Charging Thunder (Lakota Sioux) and wife, 1900
20.32 x 25.4 cm

Käsebier had pictured mostly women and children in her studio work but persuaded members of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show to be photographed there too when they came to New York. Charging Thunder is said to have stayed on in the UK after touring there in 1903. He worked in a circus and died in Manchester in 1929.

BOLETTE BERG & MARIA HØEG

Norway, 1872–1944 & 1866–1949

INNOVATIVE STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHERS

Bolette Berg & Maria Høeg
In the Boat, 1894–1903

In different versions of this scene the two figures of Marie Høeg and Bolette Berg swap roles, but here Berg holds the oar while they both smoke a cigarette. The obvious artifice of the photographed scene as 'rowing in a lake' makes the momentary pause for the cigarette even more unexpected.

Bolette Berg and Maria Høeg were photographers who earned their living from studio portraiture of local people in Horten, Norway. However, they also developed their own significant collaborative practice, staging scenes with each other in clearly fictional studio settings. Their images are not so much portrayals of themselves, but enacted fantasy scenes that clearly counter many of the contemporary puritanical social assumptions about women and femininity. Even if cross-gender dressing was fashionable at this time for parties and theatrical events, these photographs suggest a more intimate set of questions about the self: Who am I? What would I look like as a man, a woman posing as a man, or a woman acting like a man? 'Might there be a third sex, in which both identities are rolled into one?' was indeed a question of that time.



ANDRES SERRANO

USA, b. 1950

FASCINATED WITH CONTROVERSIAL THEMES RELATING TO THE BODY



Andres Serrano's pictures have often caused controversy by dealing with taboo topics such as the depiction of sex, death, and bodily fluids. One was even made notorious by senator Jesse Helms, who tore it up on the American Senate floor. Serrano has made picture series of homeless people and of the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan. Sex scenes, semen, urine, blood and corpses are all rendered in separate series, each one in beautiful, often saturated colours. The sacred and the profane are frequent themes, but merged together, showing hidden conflicts in culture, between the social idealization of the body and the actual needs of a body, between what we like to imagine certain things are like and what they do actually look like. In a way Serrano's beautiful photographs enable people to look at things that are otherwise seen as intolerable – a burnt body, a sexual act, blood – and expose the viewer to their own discomfort when confronted by these things. Looking at pictures of a homeless person in an art gallery, for example, is on the one hand seen as a taboo because of the power dynamic between the viewer and the homeless human figure, but then Serrano makes the photograph so big that the homeless person looks down at the spectator. The dispossessed is given possession of their photographic image.

Andres Serrano
Moses, from the series
'Immersion', 1990

Serrano was one of the first artists in 1990s art photography to make 'subject' body substances (blood, semen and urine) into something paradoxically beautiful. In this photograph the biblical figure of Moses (actually a small reproduction of Michelangelo's *Moses* sculpture) is submerged and photographed through urine. Serrano famously did the same with other religious replicas in the series.

Laurie Simmons

USA, b. 1949

EXPLORES IDENTITY, GENDER AND REALITY THROUGH STAGED AND FICTIONAL SCENES

Laurie Simmons shot to recognition as part of the 1970s 'Pictures generation' whose work took materials from popular culture and cinema and used them to pose questions about their relation to our actual lives. Her work has developed through different uses of photography and even into film projects, but the works consistently offer questions about the status of images whilst maintaining their sense of visual pleasure.

Laurie Simmons
Woman Leaning Back,
1976

The early photographs by Laurie Simmons take the playful objects of a child's doll house and turn them into an adult film noir. These early scenes are shot in a bleak monochrome, riven with the aesthetics of psychological conflict in the domestic space of motherhood, even though these are children's toys.



Laurie Simmons
Tourist: Parthenon, 1984

Simmons quickly moved on to work in colour during the 1980s and all her later works manifest humour and a clear parodic enjoyment of artifice. In the 1984 series *Tourist*, the gaudy colours and obvious clash with realism in the 'staging' of the pictures show a postmodern scepticism about the authenticity of experience in tourism.





CONTEMPORARY ART PHOTOGRAPHY

-
How to be global and
local at the same time?
-

Contemporary art photography is thoroughly trans-national if not yet completely global, but what exactly does the term 'contemporary' actually mean? 'Contemporary' usually refers to things that exist at the same time, in the present or 'now'. Yet this does not really explain why contemporary has become a key concept in art today.

The term contemporary began to appear and gain use in the 1990s to replace the increasingly fatigued terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism'. Contemporary seems to offer a more affirmative conception of the dissolution of modernism than using the prefix 'post' to define it as simply 'after modernism'. Contemporary seems more self-reflexive, open and fluid, a term that might recognize the dynamic patterns, ebb and flow of different currents of practice across different parts of the world. In the 1990s the development of new biennales, festivals and symposia around the world also did much to 'de-centre' the old dominant North American and European art narratives and recognize a more multi-polar cultural world. Even if these remained fringe at times there has been an increased diversity of horizons, practices and potential engagement with art forms from other regions: the vast different cultures across Asia and Africa, the Middle East and South America. Today such geo-cultural diversity is often framed in terms of the global south or global north, as a way to positively displace the old east/west values associated with European imperialism and colonial-era narratives dominant in nineteenth- and twentieth-century history.

It is no coincidence that all these shifts (no matter how slow, fast or erratic they are perceived to be) towards a multi-polar and global view of culture have come at the same time as the massive popularity of global travel and the invention of the internet. As major museums, commercial galleries, festivals, biennales and related cultural organizations started to put their galleries and events online, the awareness of different local/global interests, concerns and practices has rocketed. These new independent social media platforms have also led to new independent practices that eventually intersect with established ones. The photographic image has a central role in all of these spaces, both for the visual dissemination of new developments (as a widely recognized and understood visual mode of communication) and as an independent and accessible media for making contemporary art.

So-called 'post photography' and 'expanded photography' are symptoms of the mutating technological conditions of photography and our new 'contemporary' cultural world, where old media are folded into new ones and the rule of cultural eclecticism is that

Previous:

Alec Soth
*Sleeping by the
Mississippi, 2003*

Soth's photographs often seem to combine several different types of photography into a single image: portraits and landscapes, objects and spaces, fiction and documentary, narrative and stasis, and cinema and photography. These natural assemblages make the global spectator active.

there are no rules, except the ones you construct from bits of old ones. 'Photography' today can be sculpture, a performance, a data field, a printed image, a screen display or all of these mixed with bits of old genres and media, printed on a flat surface, a 3D object or virtual screen image. The old boundaries of art are broken, but reappear, revised and revived in different ways.

For some people, contemporary art suggests a new tendency towards a singular globalized normative art, driven by market values. Yet precisely the opposite argument can be made because, as the art and photography market becomes ever more global, so do its customers and audiences, and we cannot assume that the same taste exists in different cultures and all parts of the world.

Photography and video in particular became more essential to art exhibitions and curatorial practices. In this respect, the whole idea of postmodernism paved a path for 'contemporary photography'. As a new category emerging since the late 1990s 'contemporary art photography' has absorbed all the dismantling of the previous values that postmodernism shattered, yet also managed to reintegrate modernist aesthetics.

KEY QUESTIONS

How has photography helped to 'de-centre' global art?

If you 'can do anything now', does it still really matter whether we call something 'photography' or 'art'?

KEY READING

Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004

Erina Duganne, Heather Diack and Terri Weissman, *Global Photography: A Critical History*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020

Robert Shore, *Post-Photography: The Artist with a Camera*, London: Laurence King, 2014

JEFF WALL

Canada, b. 1946

LARGE-SCALE BACK-LIT STAGED PHOTOGRAPHS
DEPICTING 'ORDINARY' LIFE

Jeff Wall's work first became known because of his distinctive use of large-scale backlit photographs. The novelty of these was that as photographs they competed with the tradition of large-scale saturated colour paintings and the large-scale backlit illuminated screens of street advertising billboards. Within this format Wall developed a new method for making his photographs, drawing on cinema, painting and photography. He employed actors who he directed to play the roles of ordinary people and used ordinary street locations (mostly in his native Vancouver) as the backdrop. In this cinematic directorial mode, he then used a large-format camera to photograph the actors in the scene, self-consciously merging the aesthetics of the photojournalistic 'in situ' with the concept of a pictorial tableau and its grandeur, reminiscent of history painting but adapted to address the realism of everyday contemporary life.

The effect of high-quality photographic definition on these highly theatrical constructions gives them what Wall calls a 'near-documentary' effect. The scenes look realistic because they are drawn from scenarios of everyday experience, yet their production values are reminiscent of Hollywood cinema and they sometimes use subject matter that might be more familiar to an art historian. This combination of these different traditions and forms into a new pictorial logic renders Wall's works complex and sometimes alarming, because they have something that can not be resolved about them. Drawing on German playwright Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect', Wall aims to 'distance' the spectator from (too much) emotional identification with scenes. He does this by leaving traces of artifice in the works, so actors might look a little too perfect in their pose, too detailed or 'idealized' in their roughness or elegance. These details confront the spectator with their own assumptions about what is real and what is important as subject matter.

Jeff Wall
Mimic, 1982

Wall has re-staged an unfortunately common enough event, a racist insult on the street. Although the photograph is staged, the high verisimilitude of Wall's technique compels the viewer towards the image, to face what is happening.



**BERNI SEARLE**

SOUTH AFRICA, b. 1964

Born in Cape Town, Berni Searle uses moving images and photography to register performances that represent both personal and cultural dimensions of identity, linked to the particular history of South Africa. Her photographs draw on the geographic iconography of South Africa as a land, a material and a motif, alongside the cultural representational systems at work in art history, displacing them into new configurations and relations. Such a logic reflects the complex and often difficult history and current social and political relations in contemporary South African culture.

Berni Searle
On Either Side, 2005

Berni Searle has developed socially engaged work through including different media. In this photograph, she incorporates spices (such as turmeric, and paprika) into the work.

VALÉRIE BELIN

FRANCE, b. 1964

A student of art and philosophy, Valérie Belin is one of the best known photographers in France today. Based in Paris, she produces photographic works that seem to always draw together different aesthetic and historical traditions of photography and art in such a way that they are seamlessly fused together and confuse the viewer's perception of what they are looking at. The question of whether something is real or fake is clichéd, but Belin has managed to make her works occupy the space between that old opposition. The obvious sense of artifice in the first glance at Belin's portraits is challenged by the question that arises on second glance: what and who am I looking at?

Valérie Belin
Untitled, 2003

Valérie Belin's work enjoys the idea of the photographic face as something manufactured, as a kind of façade.

