The Photograph as Contemporary Art

Charlotte Cotton

222 illustrations, 192 in color

Thames & Hudson world of art
We are at an exceptional time for photography as the art world embraces the photograph as never before and photographers consider the art gallery or book the natural home for their work. Throughout the history of photography there have always been promoters of the medium as an art form and vehicle for ideas alongside painting and sculpture, but never as many or as vocal as there are today. To identify 'art' as the preferred territory for their images is now the aspiration of many photographers.

The aim of this book is not to create a checklist of all of the photographers who merit a mention in a discussion on contemporary art, but to give a sense of the spectrum of motivations and expressions that currently exist in the field. It will work as a survey, the kind of overview you might experience if you visited exhibitions in a range of venues, from independent art spaces and public art institutions to museums and commercial galleries, in major art centres such as New York, Berlin, Tokyo or London.

The chapters of the book divide contemporary art photography into seven 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 more prevalent in the photography of recent years, but the themes of the chapters are more concerned with grouping photographers who share a common ground in terms of their motivations and working practices. Such a structure foregrounds the ideas that underpin contemporary art photography before going on to consider their visual outcomes.

The first chapter, 'If This Is Art', considers how photographers have devised strategies, performances and happenings especially 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 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 out of, in part, the documentary photographs of conceptual art performances in the 1960s and 1970s, but with an important difference. Although some of the photographs shown 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.

The second chapter, ‘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 can be found an established and effective way of creating narrative content through the composition of props, gestures and the style of the work of art. 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.

The third chapter 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 the product of an objective gaze where the subject, rather than the photographer’s perspective onto 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 two are markedly absent here; instead, these photographs have a visual command that comes from their expansive nature and scale.

While chapter three engages with a neutral aesthetic of photography, chapter four 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 may 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 five, ‘Intimate Life’, we concentrate on emotional and personal relationships, a kind of 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 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 six, ‘Moments in History’, attempts to cover the greatest amount of ground in its highlighting of the use of the documentary capacity of photography in art. It starts with 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, contemporary art photography presents allegories of the consequences of political and human upheaval. The chapter also investigates some of the visual records of isolated communities (whether this is geographical isolation or 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 photographic approach counters or aggravates our perception of the boundaries of documentary-led photographic conventions.

The final chapter of the book 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 and shape our emotions and understanding of the world. The implicit critique of originality, authorship and photographic veracity that is brought to the fore here has been a perennial discourse in photographic practice and one that has had special prominence in photography of the last forty years. This chapter also gives some examples 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 or continuities between contemporary and historical ways of seeing.

You will notice that many of the photographers and works in this book could have fitted into chapters other than those in which they actually appear. This is partly because none of the photographs, of course, was created with our chapter headings in mind; more importantly it points to the fact that the work is a culmination of a variety of different ideas, experiments and motivations that have been distilled into single principles or concepts for the purpose of the book. It is also worth keeping in mind that many of the photographers are represented only by a single image, which has been chosen to stand for an 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 realities and plural possibilities that photography can offer to its makers.

This introduction also acknowledges the decision to minimize the space given to the work of earlier photographers who helped establish photography as an art form. First and foremost, the intention of this book is to focus on the state of art photography today rather than on how or why we have reached this moment.


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.

There is also a wariness of what their inclusion would suggest about contemporary practice — that it is developmental — as emerging out of a continuous history of photography. The idea that contemporary art photography is ultimately self-referential and in dialogue only with the history of art photography is simply not the case.

That said, there are, however, a number of photographers who have become figureheads of contemporary art photography. The groundwork conducted by artists such as William Eggleston (b. 1939) [3] and Stephen Shore (b. 1947) [4, 5] in the 1960s and 1970s to establish colour photography over black and white as the main vehicle for contemporary photographic expression is very important. So, too, is the early conceptual and artistic use of vernacular forms of photography, epitomized by the work of Bernd (b. 1931) and Hilla Becher (b. 1934) since the late 1950s [6]. This book is at pains not to fetishize contemporary art photography into categories of style or photographic heritage. But it is important to recognize that the precedents and challenges set by such practitioners are the reference points within the history of photography that continue to resonate with particular force in contemporary practice.

The second point is concerned with the increased degree of media and gallery interest in photography. While contemporary
art photographers now gear the presentation of their work for its reception in gallery spaces and art collections, even twenty years ago that was neither the assumed context nor the realistic aim, in terms of institutional and financial support, for many practitioners. For that reason, the work of, for example, Seydou Keita (1921–2001), David Goldblatt (b. 1930) or Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925–72)[7–9], which sits outside the most traditional canon of photographic history, only came to the fore when art photography rapidly began to expand its remit and had a more confident presence in the 1990s.

It was not until the 1970s that art photographers who used vibrant colour — which until then had been the preserve of commercial and vernacular photography — found a modest degree of support, and not until the 1990s that colour became the staple of photographic practice. While many photographers contributed to this shift, two of the most prominent — as mentioned above — were the Americans William Eggleston and Stephen Shore.

William Eggleston began to create colour photographs in the mid-1960s, shifting in the late 1960s to colour transparency film (colour slide film), the kind that is used domestically and commercially for photographing family holidays, advertising and magazine imagery. The magic of these photographs was their compositional intrigue and sensitive transformation of a slight subject or observation into a compelling visual form[3]. At that time, Eggleston’s adoption of the colour range of commonplace photography was still considered to be outside the established realms of fine art photography. But in 1976, a selection of photographs he created between 1969 and 1971 was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first solo show of a photographer working predominantly in colour. It is an oversimplification to argue that one exhibition could change the direction of art photography, yet the show was an early and timely indicator of the force that Eggleston’s alternative approach would have. Thirty years on, his reputation has never been higher. Still considered a leading ‘photographer’s photographer’, he has been the subject of major books and exhibitions around the world, and he continues to make important contributions to the field. In 2002, The Los Alamos Project was published as a book and as a series of portfolios of dye-transfer colour prints. The original concept for the project was grand by any standards: two thousand images, taken during road trips between 1966 and 1974 and then printed without captions or commentary in a set of twenty volumes. The project was inspired by a journey Eggleston had made with his friend the curator Walter Hopps, who had pointed out the gates of the Los Alamos laboratories near Santa Fe, New Mexico, the site where the atomic bomb had been developed and once the home of a reform school attended by the writer William Burroughs (1914–97). The timing of the publication of The Los Alamos Project, almost thirty years after it was photographed, reflects the continual growth in the appreciation of art photography’s history. Not only is there greater scope for emerging photographers to experience critical acclaim for their work, but there are also possibilities for established practitioners to represent and re-evaluate earlier work within a more sympathetic climate.

Stephen Shore received critical notice for his photography at a precociously young age. When he was fourteen, Edward Steichen (1879–1973), then chief curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art and one of the dominant forces in photography throughout the first half of the twentieth century, purchased three of Shore’s prints for the Museum’s collection. In the late 1960s, he made a black-and-white photographic record of the time he spent in Andy Warhol’s (1928–87) Factory, and in 1971, he co-curated an exhibition of photographic ephemera (such as postcards, family snaps, magazine pages) called ‘All the meat you can eat’. In the same year, he photographed the main buildings and sites of public interest in a small town in Texas called Amarillo. His subtle observations on the town’s generic qualities were made apparent when the photographs were printed as ordinary postcards. Shore did not sell many of the 5,600 cards he had printed; so, instead, he put them in 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). His involvement with and interest in pop art, and a fascination with and simulation of photography’s everyday styles and functions, influenced Shore’s coming to colour photography in the early 1970s. In 1972, 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, 5]. Like Eggleston’s The Los Alamos Project, Shore’s early exploration of colour photography as a vehicle for artistic ideas was not commonly known or accessible until relatively recently, when it was published in a book called American Surfaces (1999).

Eggleston’s 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, such as the American photographer
Alec Soth (b. 1969). His series made on journeys along the Mississippi River [1], which depicts 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 in evidence in chapter three, and even the conventions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century portraiture, demonstrating the fact that contemporary art photography, while acknowledging its own history, draws on a range of traditions, both artistic and vernacular, and reconfigures them rather than simply emulating them.

One of the most important influences on contemporary art photographers is the work of the German couple Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their austere grids of black-and-white photographs of architectural structures such as gas tanks, water towers and blast furnaces [6], taken since the late 1950s, may appear to stand in contrast with the sensibilities of Eggleston and Shore, but there is an important connection. Like them, the Bechers have been instrumental in rephrasing vernacular photography into highly considered artistic strategies, in part as a way of investing art photography with visual and mental connections to history and the everyday. Their photographs serve a double function: they are unromantic documents of historic structures, while their unpretentiousness and systematic recording of architecture sits
within the use of taxonomies in conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. The Bechers have also played an important role as teachers at the Kunsthakademie in Düsseldorf. Among their students were such leading practitioners as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand and Candida Höfer, whose work can be found later in the book.

What the Bechers, Shore and Eggleston also share is that they all enjoyed only a modest degree of appreciation at the moment their early, speculative work first made an appearance. And while they have maintained, over the years, a great influence on younger practitioners through exhibitions and publications, it is important to note that their legacy has become apparent only in the last fifteen years because of the emergence of a commercial market for photographic prints and an interest from academic, publishing, museum and gallery quarters. Many of those photographers we now consider to be the cornerstones of late twentieth-century photographic expression have come to be recognized as such only relatively recently as a result of the ongoing reassessment of photography by the art world.

The Malian Seydoux Keita was one of the first African photographers and has worked in Bamako in Mali since the 1940s. Praised by writers and curators in recent years, his photographic portraits of local people in his studio [7] have a graphic beauty and simplicity, as well as a distinctive narrative content in the postures and props used to construct the photographic identities of the sitters. Keita’s presence in the Western art world highlights the interest in expanding the definition of what constitutes a gallery-based experience of photography. The validation of Keita’s photographs comes from two burgeoning desires: to retrieve a photographer’s oeuvre from relative obscurity and place it in the limelight of art; and to reappraise a vernacular archive (since Keita did not create his photographs for galleries but commissioned portraits) of socially and culturally pertinent imagery. Similarly, the photographer David Goldblatt [8], who began photographing his native South Africa in the late 1940s, aspired through the pages of magazines to bring international attention to the impact of apartheid. Goldblatt’s photographs, depicting the endemic racism of everyday life in South Africa, were rarely considered dramatic enough for photojournalistic purposes. Nonetheless, Goldblatt continued to work in this way, his photographic style shifting over the decades as the country and the forms of documentary photography changed. Although he did exhibit his pictures and

7. Seydoux Keita.
Untitled (Fleur de Paris), 1959.
Keita’s portraits first gained international art-world attention in the 1990s. The process of re-evaluating photography’s histories, and the increased possibilities of exhibiting and publishing photography, have meant that the work of a number of non-Western photographers such as Keita has come to the fore in recent years.

Loki Kgatilloe at his house, bulldozed in February 1984 by the government after the forced removal of the people of Magopa, a black-owned farm, which had been declared a ‘black spot’, Wonderkop district, Transvaal, 21 October 1986.
wrote about South Africa and his perceptions of documentary photography, it was not until recently that the art world properly acknowledged his contribution to the portrayal of the country’s turbulent history.

In recent years there has also been an interest in historical photographers whose work was consciously ambiguous and highly personalized, and independent of the popular trends of photography. In 1970, the American photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard created a series called *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* [9], which featured photographs mounted and captioned in the style of a photo album. Meatyard’s wife Madelyn played the part of Lucybelle Crater in all but the final image, at which point Meatyard himself adopted her persona. The other figure in the photographs was played by one of Meatyard’s friends.

The construction of the images in terms of the poses, dress and locations of the figures varies very little from family snaps, and their ordinariness is disturbed by the strange masks worn by the sitters. Made from transparent plastic, and with a suggestion of their actual features showing through, these masks make the characters appear distorted and aged. An optician by trade, Meatyard received little critical acclaim for his experimental work during his lifetime, and it was not until the early 1990s that the significance of his idiosyncratic combination of emotional and conceptual elements was appreciated. Now, however, Meatyard and the other practitioners mentioned above are seen as some of the most important pioneers of art photography. Their work reveals some of the possibilities of the medium and leads the way for the artists of today.