

**AMERICAN
PHOTOGRAPHY**

Exhibition Facts

Duration	24 August – 28 November 2021
Virtual Opening	23. August 2021 6.30 PM on Facebook-Live & YouTube
Venue	Bastion Hall
Curator	Walter Moser
Co-Curator	Anna Hanreich
Works	ca. 180
Catalogue	Available for EUR EUR 29,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at

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Opening Hours
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American Photography

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The exhibition *American Photography* presents an overview of the development of US American photography between the 1930s and the 2000s. With works by 33 artists on display, it introduces the essential currents that once revolutionized the canon of classic motifs and photographic practices. The effects of this have reached far beyond the country's borders to the present day.

The main focus of the works is on offering a visual survey of the United States by depicting its people and their living environments. A microcosm frequently viewed through the lens of everyday occurrences permits us to draw conclusions about the prevalent political circumstances and social conditions in the United States, capturing the country and its inhabitants in their idiosyncrasies and contradictions. In several instances, artists having immigrated from Europe successfully perceived hitherto unknown aspects through their eyes as outsiders, thus providing new impulses.

The photographers encountered their motifs while on road trips or in metropolises, the dynamics of which they captured in snapshots of unprecedented dynamism. Via Pop Art, purportedly banal insignia of consumerist culture made their way into treacherous coloristic compositions. Sober documentations and conceptual mises-en-scène show human abysses or failed endeavors to achieve prosperity. They represent a critical deconstruction of the American dream, which is characteristic of so many positions presented in the exhibition.

The exhibition comprises examples from the Albertina's rich photographic holdings. Since the foundation of its Department of Photography in 1999, our museum has succeeded in compiling one of the most prominent collections of American photography around the globe. In the present case it is complemented by principal works from one of the world's most renowned private collections, the one of former US ambassador to Austria Trevor D. Traina. The loans made available by him ensure a thematic expansion and concentration.

1. Portraits as Mirrors of Society

With her biting, humorous, and sometimes voyeuristic images of social life, Lisette Model renewed American documentary photography in the 1940s. Born into a Viennese family, Model emigrated to New York in 1938, where she soon became a key figure on the city's art scene. She photographed the socially deprived on New York's East Side, eccentric upper class characters, and nightclubs frequented by immigrants. Model captured them spontaneously in partly harshly flat-lit snapshots viewed from below, which she subsequently cropped in the darkroom. Her direct language was style-forming. As a teacher, Model established an influential postwar tradition of portraiture questioning social norms and conventions through a subjective look at different lifestyles. Also carrying around a portable flash, Larry Fink, having attended her courses, described the interactions of New York's high society as a theatrical and satirical play from the 1970s onwards.

Model's most well-known student was Diane Arbus. She translated the inspirations received from her teacher into formally austere photographs, depicting both social outsiders and ordinary people mostly from a frontal view, centered, and in medium format. Whether Arbus lends visibility to the nature of her models by means of empathy and sensitivity or stages them voyeuristically as the socially "other" is the subject of an ongoing discussion. What speaks in favor of the first aspect is that Arbus was friends with some of those portrayed and depicted them over longer periods of time, but also that the protagonists were aware of the photographer's presence and that they played to the gallery to a certain extent.

Richard Avedon

In addition to fashion, commercial, and reportage photographs, Richard Avedon has left a comprehensive oeuvre of portraits devoted to people from various strata of society. In the 1950s he developed his typical approach of capturing faces from close up against neutral backgrounds. The reduced visual language and even, yet harsh lighting allowed him to focus on the facial expressions and gestures thus enhanced. In the course of the preparations for his exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 1970, he compiled the *Minneapolis Portfolio*, comprising photos ranging from beat poet Allen Ginsberg to actress Marilyn Monroe to politicians and presidents like Dwight D. Eisenhower. The collaboration between the photographer and his models resembled a spontaneous performance in which Avedon exhausted the acting talents of those portrayed. A famous picture from 1952 shows Charlie Chaplin with his hands imitating a devil's horns. With this provocative gesture Chaplin, who was suspected of sympathizing with the communists, responded to the political repressions of the McCarthy era, which soon forced him into his European exile.

2. Social Landscapes

Whether roaming the metropolises on foot or driving through the individual states by car, photographers explored the United States in extensive series of pictures. Concentrating on the relationship between the people and their living environments in their intuitive photographs, they depicted the country in its cultural, economic, and social aspects. In the context of profound socio-political changes and a renegotiation of American identity, the tradition of the so-called “American social landscape” became a highly relevant concept of the 1960s. The artists regarded their pictures not as means of objective reproduction or social reform but as a possibility of appropriating contemporary life on a personal level. Lee Friedlander transformed street scenes with the aid of reflections in shop windows, thus creating formalistic and enigmatic compositions. Garry Winogrand froze passers-by through angled horizons at instants of dynamic movement. Moreover, he documented the stagings of public events for the mass media, such as the launching of a rocket to the moon. The equally spontaneous photographs of William Klein and Robert Frank from the 1950s proved enormously influential for this practice. If Klein’s pictures represented the political atmosphere of the postwar period in the form of latent violence and banal consumerism, Frank, with his landmark project *The Americans*, radically broke with the United States’ idealized self-image.

Robert Frank

A highlight in Robert Frank’s output is his series entitled *The Americans*, which he made on three road trips through the United States in 1955/56, and which was published as a photobook in 1958/59. Frank’s ambitious project, inspired by Walker Evans’ pioneering book *American Photographs*, aimed to be a “visual study of civilization.” The Swiss photographer, who had emigrated to the United States in 1947, recorded a society characterized by racism, religion, patriotism, consumerism, and the leisure industry from an outsider’s perspective. The image of the United States conveyed by his bleak pictures is in stark contrast to how the country presented and perceived itself. Although his work was heavily criticized, Frank’s subjective pictorial language and mostly intuitive practice lastingly revolutionized reportage and street photography.

Walker Evans

In the mid-1930s, Walker Evans worked as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration, documenting the impact of the deep economic crisis on the living conditions of farmers. In his pictures he describes a country marked by economic and social change. Parts of these photographs he used for his landmark photobook *American Photographs*, which appeared in 1938 and because of its diverse contents was to become an important

source of reference for photographers of generations to come. In his photos, Evans describes different social groups, a typically American everyday culture with its objects, signs, and commercial art, as well as traditional anonymous architecture. Resorting to these motifs, the artist deals with the country's social structure, thereby establishing the topos of the social landscape.

3. Topographies

The new understanding of a socially constructed landscape went hand in hand with a critical review of classical landscape depiction. Sublime and pristine nature was a means rich in tradition for the visualization of national ideals. The settling of unmapped expanses turned out a central motif of the frontier myth. If Timothy H. O'Sullivan or Ansel Adams captured the secluded wilderness in dramatic pictures, the New Topographics photographers revolutionized this approach in the 1970s. In sober photographs critically eyeing civilization, they show unspectacular landscapes shaped by man. They respond to the phenomenon of the suburbs, virtually mushrooming at the time and also making their way into art as vernacular architecture. At the crossroads of Minimalism and Land Art, Lewis Baltz renders bleak settlements and industrial districts in an analytical pictorial language. They evoke the nuclear threat of the Cold War and the effects of the technologized and industrialized consumerist society of the postwar years. Robert Adams reversed the idea common since pioneering days of unlimited landscape resources. *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range* sheds light on the destruction of Denver and its surroundings through uniform buildings.

In 1975, the now-legendary exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at the International Museum of Photography in the city of Rochester was the first to assemble the protagonists of this new practice. Next to Baltz and Adams, Stephen Shore was represented there as a color photographer. Using a large-format camera, he depicted trivial everyday architectural objects functioning as structuring planes and linear elements of his formalistic compositions.

4. Visions in Color

Nowadays a means of expression taken for granted, color was long frowned upon in artistic photography, as it was primarily associated with advertising and fashion, from which "serious" art photography sought to keep its distance. Only from the 1960s onwards did the practitioners of New Color Photography begin experimenting with color as a stylistic device. It turned out that motifs and compositions familiar from black-and-white photography could not simply be translated into color but had to be invented from scratch. Color film required longer exposure times, and pictures developed with these costly and sophisticated technologies had a completely different appeal.

William Eggleston's exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1976, which reviewers partly commented upon polemically, proved groundbreaking for the establishment of color photography. Eggleston captured ordinary motifs from unorthodox perspectives, cleverly highlighting them through formally self-contained expanses of color. Lastingly impressed by this approach, Joel Sternfeld employed color photography for carefully conceived tableaux reminiscent of classical painting. Between 1978 and 1986 he documented increasingly touristic and environmentally endangered landscapes during his travels across the United States using a large-format camera. Society in its leisure activities was also an interesting theme from another point of view: Mitch Epstein photographed such sanctuaries of society as camping sites, which were about to disappear in the context of an ever more strictly regulated working environment.

Alec Soth

In his series *Niagara* and *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, Alec Soth devoted himself to such symbol-laden places as the region around the Niagara Falls, a destination popular with honeymooners, and the variously interpreted Mississippi River. Soth combined portraits with images of trivial everyday objects and ordinary buildings. His pictures allow us to draw conclusions about personal living environments and social structures but also exhibit the ecological damage and banal conformity brought about by tourism. By focusing on the destructive influence of man on nature, Soth follows in the footsteps of Joel Sternfeld, who began demystifying idealized scenery in brilliant color photographs as early as the 1970s.

5. Autobiographical Documentation and Filmic Fiction

Identity, sexuality, and autobiography were central themes of postmodernist photography throughout the 1980s. Under these new aspects, photographers elaborated on the previously prevalent topoi of the social landscape and color. Apart from strategies of reportage, photographers increasingly relied on conceptual approaches. Through role-play and a carefully planned *mise-en-scène*, the artists staged scenes borrowed from film whose chromatic brilliance contrasts with the photographs' serious subject matter. With the line between documentation and fiction having become blurred, photography's alleged realism and familiar ideologies and narratives are critically questioned. Whereas Nan Goldin still photographed her milieu populated by social outsiders in direct snapshots, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, her former fellow-student, meticulously prepared his photographs: at real places around Santa Monica Boulevard, he had male prostitutes pose in extravagantly lit settings. In the captions of his pictures he not only recorded the name, age, and hometown of the models employed, but also the sum they demanded for their sexual services. Other photographers similarly devised a disillusioning anti-image of the American dream through a mixture of fact and fiction. Larry Sultan examined the themes of the small family, class

affiliation, and the aspiration to achieve prosperity in portraits of his parents, whom he placed in stage-like settings through artificial light in the suburban environment of San Fernando Valley.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia – Heads

In his series *Heads* (2000/2001), shot in New York's Time Square, Philip-Lorca diCorcia photographed unsuspecting passers-by with the aid of a flash mounted on a scaffold. Each time someone passed a previously defined spot, the photographer made a picture from far away using a telephoto lens. The flash plunged the faces into dramatic chiaroscuro, thereby isolating them from the surrounding crowd of people and exhibiting their individual features. One of the persons thus photographed in clandestine felt this to be a violation of privacy and took the photographer to court. Although diCorcia won the case, it is a telling example of the complex relationship between personal rights, voyeurism, and artistic license inherent in street photography.

Nan Goldin

Nan Goldin's snapshot-like pictures revolve around her own milieu as a central theme. The camera always ready to hand, she has documented her living environment, populated by drag queens, transsexuals, and artists, over several decades. She was one of the first photographers to deal with AIDS, which then meant breaking a taboo. Different from conventional documentary photography, her models are not exclusively defined through the disease. *In her series, shot between 1991 and 1993, of the couple Gilles and Gotscho, the illness of one of the partners is clearly present. But by combining hospital images with pictures from an earlier period, the focus is on how to cope with the loss of a close person.*

Goldin's direct, raw, and compositionally and technically imperfect style continues to be influential. Ryan McGinley resorted to this practice in the 1990s for his documentations of youth culture. He took similarly diary-style photos of friends and lovers having sex, consuming drugs, or bathing in the nude, thus characterizing them in terms of their hedonistic lifestyle.

John Coplans

Coplans, a former art critic, editor of the magazine *Artforum*, and director of the Akron Art Museum in Ohio, took up photography at the age of 64. In large-sized, serially conceived images he concentrated on the depiction of his own naked body, mercilessly documenting its process of aging over the years. With the aid of an assistant releasing the shutter, as well as a video camera and a screen by which he was in control of perspectives and settings, Coplans

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staged his body in seemingly absurd poses. Moreover, he defamiliarized it through fragmentation and extreme close-ups. Coplan's work is to be seen in the context of feminism, Actionism, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which went hand in hand with a new approach to the representation of the human body and investigations into such themes as gender, sexuality, disease, and age. By rendering a withering and "grotesque" body, Coplan rejected the familiar stagings of masculinity and social ideals like juvenility and perfection.

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman's complex role-plays have their roots in an analysis of popular visual culture. In her *Untitled Film Stills*, created from 1977 onwards, she embodies stereotype female figures borrowed from B movies or films d'auteur by Alfred Hitchcock and Michelangelo Antonioni. Her quotations question the representation of women in the media for a primarily male audience on the one hand and authorship and the supposed uniqueness of a work of art on the other. In the role of clowns, Sherman irritates viewers through bizarre disguises inspired by horror films and suggesting mysterious personalities hiding behind these masquerades.

Gregory Crewdson

As if he were a movie director, Gregory Crewdson stages enigmatic scenes against the backdrop of the suburbs or film sets with the participation of actors and technical specialists. Crewdson has reversed suburbs, normally associated with safety and idyll, into the opposite through the photographs' atmosphere of menace and loneliness. By capturing bleak scenes in the bright colors of commercial and fashion photography, the artist generates a contradiction suggesting emotional abysses behind the tempting surface of small towns.

Tina Barney

In her large tableaux, Tina Barney showcases scenes from the life of her widely ramified upper-class family on the American East Coast. Although her pictures are spontaneous products, the boundary between documentation and *mise-en-scène* is fluid: over the years, she captured family members and friends immersed in their daily activities, which Barney asked them to repeat and reenact, with her large-format camera. Through their rituals and attitudes, Barney portrays their social milieu and its representational codes, at the same time leaving open, however, to what extent the social role-play was deliberately directed at the camera.