SHAPE OF LIGHT: 100 YEARS OF PHOTOGRAPHY & ABSTRACT ART

2 MAY – 14 OCT 2018

ROOM 1

Please return to the holder
CONTENTS

Room 1 ......................................................................................................................... 3
Room 2 ............................................................................................................................ 13
Room 3 ............................................................................................................................ 24
Room 4 ............................................................................................................................ 38
Room 5 ............................................................................................................................ 52
Room 6 ............................................................................................................................ 67
Room 7 ............................................................................................................................ 78
Room 8 ............................................................................................................................ 92
Room 9 ........................................................................................................................... 104
Room 10 ......................................................................................................................... 122
Room 11 ......................................................................................................................... 138
Room 12 ......................................................................................................................... 153
Credit .............................................................................................................................. 165
ROOM 1
SHAPE OF LIGHT:
100 YEARS OF PHOTOGRAPHY & ABSTRACT ART

Why should the inspiration that comes from an artist’s manipulation of the hairs of a brush be any different from that of the artist who bends at will the rays of light?’ — Pierre Dubreuil

The world we see is made of light reflected by the things we look at. Photography records this light, holding and shaping these fleeting images. **Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art** explores the history of artists who have worked with light to create abstract work. These photographers prioritise shape, form and expression over recognisable subject matter. Some use the camera lens to transform reality. Others work with photographic materials to create images with little obvious reference to the real world.

**Shape of Light** reveals photography’s role in a wider history of abstraction. The photographic artists in the exhibition have engaged with advances in abstract art across a range of art forms; from painting and sculpture, to film and installation. At times these photographers have responded to new discoveries by their peers working in different media. Occasionally they have pre-empted them.
Throughout the exhibition key paintings and sculptures reveal the changing relationship between photography and abstract art. We start in a period when the essential qualities of painting, sculpture and photography were clearly distinct. We end with art from today, at a time when artists no longer define themselves by their choice of medium. They are free to shape light however they choose.
Alvin Langdon Coburn 1882–1966

**Vortographs** 1917
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Wyndham Lewis 1882–1957

**Workshop** c.1914–5
Oil paint on canvas

Alvin Langdon Coburn 1882–1966

**Vortographs** 1917
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum. X36703
Tate. Purchased 1974. T01931
Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum. X36702, X36707, X36706

Alvin Langdon Coburn’s ‘vortographs’ are the result of experiments carried out with fellow American, writer Ezra Pound. Pound was a member of the vorticists, a group of artists founded by Wyndham Lewis in London in 1914. The group set out to create art that expressed the dynamism of the modern world. They used hard-edged angles and
diagonals to suggest the geometry of modern machinery and the urban environment, as revealed in Lewis’s painting, *Workshop*.

Coburn attempted to translate the energy of vorticism into photography. He invented a device called the ‘vortoscope’. It used mirrors to create a prism that fractured the photographed surface, producing kaleidoscopic effects. In the resulting photographs objects and figures are broken down from different and simultaneous points of view until the subject disappears completely.
German artist Marta Hoepffner studied painting and graphic design before turning to photography in the 1930s. She was interested in the relationship between abstract art and music and many of her titles make reference to artists and composers. In *Homage to Kandinsky* Hoepffner draws on the work of Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian artist and theorist who believed painting should aspire to be as abstract as music.
The shapes, lines and grids that make up Hoepffner’s photograms recall the colourful geometric forms in Kandinsky’s *Swinging*. She created the work by laying stencils on photographic paper before exposing it to light. The shapes and lines created appear to directly quote the compositional elements included in Kandinsky’s 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane*. Both artists create a sense of dynamism and movement in their compositions, suggestive of the rhythms of modernity.
Piet Mondrian 1872–1944

**Composition C (No.III) with Red, Yellow and Blue** 1935
Oil paint on canvas

German Lorca born 1922

**Mondrian Window** 1960
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Lent from a private collection 1981. L00097
German Lorca. X70235

This image by Brazilian photographer German Lorca draws on the history of modernist photography, using the camera to produce sharply focused images with an emphasis on the formal qualities of the medium. The title, however, makes direct reference to the work of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. The photographer invites us to look beyond the photograph as document to consider the work in relationship to an abstract painting.

Lorca believes that ‘photography happens to the photographer, and he makes it happen’. He did not simply discover a window with panes of glass that mimic the strict geometry of horizontals and verticals in Mondrian’s compositions. It is the photographer’s careful choice of perspective, cropping and lighting that creates an image that evokes a Mondrian painting.
Georges Braque 1882–1963

**Mandora** 1909–10
Oil paint on canvas

Pierre Dubreuil 1872–1944

**Interpretation Picasso: The Railway** c.1911
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Purchased 1966. T00833

This photograph by Pierre Dubreuil was made in the same period as George Braque and Pablo Picasso’s experiments with cubism. The French photographer referenced the painters in his titles suggesting a direct relationship with the cubist style. Invented around 1907–08, cubism was a revolutionary new approach to representing reality. Picasso and Braque brought different views of subjects together in the same picture, resulting in paintings that appear fragmented and abstracted. By breaking objects and figures down into distinct areas, or planes, the artists aimed to show different viewpoints at the same time and within the same space, suggesting their three dimensional form.
Dubreuil achieves this fragmentation through photographic processes, challenging the medium’s ability to objectively represent reality. A photograph of a train printed on a diagonal is broken down into a complex arrangement of transparent overlapping geometric planes. Dubreuil achieved this effect by repeatedly placing a rectangular form on the surface of the print.
ROOM 2
CAMERA WORK

Unless photography has its own possibilities of expression, separate from those of the other arts, it is merely a process, not an art. — Alfred Stieglitz

In 1903, American photographer Alfred Stieglitz launched Camera Work, a journal promoting photography as a fine art. Two years later Stieglitz opened 291, a gallery in New York with the same aim. Both Camera Work and 291 provided a platform for debate about photography and modern art. Encouraged by fellow photographer Edward Steichen, Stieglitz began promoting work by European painters and sculptors. He showed photographs alongside these works in other media, including sculptures by Constantin Brancusi, like the one displayed here. Stieglitz hoped to encourage audiences to ‘discuss and ponder the differences and similarities between artists of all ranks and types’.

The relationship between different art forms influenced Stieglitz’s views on photography and the direction it might take. Following an initial commitment to images that created painterly effects, he began to take photographs which embraced qualities essential to the medium. These sharply focused, high contrast images reveal the form and structure of his subjects. This approach became known as ‘straight photography’. Photographers like Paul Strand pushed
this further. In Strand’s compositions everyday objects are no longer immediately recognisable; he called these images ‘abstractions’. In 1917, Stieglitz dedicated the last issue of *Camera Work* to Strand, whose photographs came to exemplify this new direction.
The Steerage is often referred to as the first ‘modernist’ photograph. Stieglitz took the image in 1907 but it was first published in 1911, in an issue of Camera Work devoted to this ‘new’ style of photography. The image depicts men and women in steerage, the lower-class section of a steamboat.

Stieglitz described his encounter with the scene and his compulsion to photograph it: ‘I was spellbound. I saw shapes related to each other - a picture of shapes, and underlying it, a new vision that held me...I had but one plate holder with one unexposed plate. Would I get what I saw, what I felt? Finally I released the shutter. My heart thumping. I had never heard my heart thump before. Had I gotten my picture? I knew if I had, another milestone in photography would have been reached. Here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.’
Alfred Stieglitz published 50 editions of *Camera Work* between 1903 and 1917. The luxurious quarterly photographic journal was designed by American photographer Edward Steichen. It featured a grey-green cover with art nouveau style typeface.

The publication was known for its high quality photogravures, a process that involves photographically transferring an image on to a metal plate before etching it into the plate and printing from it. Stieglitz believed photogravures were best placed to reproduce the complex tones and detail of a photograph. He printed from original negatives wherever possible so *Camera Work’s* photogravures could be considered original prints.
Edward Steichen 1879–1973

**Between the Walls, New York** c.1922
Photograph, palladium print on paper

X67838
Edward Steichen 1879–1973

**Bird in Space** 1926
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

This photograph depicts Constantin Brancusi’s *Bird in Space* 1926. Steichen bought the sculpture from the artist’s Paris studio and shipped it to the United States in 1927. Following its arrival, the work was involved in a court case which questioned its status as art. American law permitted artworks to be imported free from taxes, but to qualify they had to be ‘imitations of natural objects’. Officials did not feel *Bird in Space* looked enough like a bird and classified it under ‘Kitchen Utensils and Hospital Supplies’. Brancusi challenged this in court and Steichen testified as part of the proceedings. The judge ruled in Brancusi’s favour stating, ‘There has been developing a so-called new school of art, whose exponents attempt to portray abstract ideas rather than to imitate natural objects.’


X67854
Romanian-born sculptor Constantin Brancusi is known for his extreme simplification of form. He understood the importance of photography in documenting and publicising his work and tightly controlled the images of his sculptures. His interest in photography began in when he met Man Ray in Paris in 1921. Man Ray encouraged Brancusi’s photographic practice. He helped him purchase equipment and set up a darkroom in his studio.

Brancusi photographed many of his works himself. He positioned his sculptures in his studio to create complex compositions that used light, shadow, reflection and contrast to reveal new readings of his art. For Brancusi these photographs were more than documentation of his sculptures, they were works of art in their own right.

Tate. Purchased 1973
T01751
Ira Martin 1886–1960

**Abstraction #2**

**Abstraction #1**

1921
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

X67160-59
In the summer of 1922 Stieglitz began taking photographs of the skies above his summer residence on Lake George in New York State. Over the next eight years, he made more than 300 of these cloud studies. He titled the series *Equivalents*. The purpose of these photographs was not to capture the forms of the clouds. He saw these works as an equivalent of his emotions, a metaphor for his ‘inner resonances’. In this sense Stieglitz’s images are non-representational and often discussed as abstractions. Stieglitz claimed: ‘I know exactly what I have photographed. I know I have done something that has never been done… I also know that there is more of the really abstract in some “representation” than in most of the dead representations of the so-called abstract so fashionable now.’

X71603-6
Paul Strand 1890–1976

**Abstraction, Porch Shadows, Connecticut** 1916
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

X67173

Paul Strand 1890–1976

**Abstraction** 1916
Photo-etching on paper

X67172
NEW VISION

We have – through a hundred years of photography and two decades of film – been enormously enriched… We may say we see the world with entirely different eyes. — László Moholy-Nagy

In the 1920s artists began to use the camera lens to present a new vision of the world. This new way of looking emerged in Russia through the work of figures such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, and in Germany through the methods of the Bauhaus. Opened in 1919, the Bauhaus was a revolutionary school of art. Like similar groups working in Russia it aimed to bring art back into contact with everyday life. It encouraged its international students and teachers to work together. All art forms were treated as equal, and artists and designers worked across different media. The status of photography was elevated to that of painting and architecture. Many viewed it as the ideal medium of modernity.

Hungarian artist and theorist László Moholy-Nagy was one of the Bauhaus’s most influential teachers. A painter with no formal photographic training, he was introduced to the medium by his wife, the photographer Lucia Moholy. Together they set out to create an independent photographic language. They recognised the medium’s ability to capture the emblems of modern life, from skyscrapers
to the inner workings of machines. Their images incorporated strong effects of light and shadow to reproduce the world in sharp detail.

Moholy-Nagy encouraged experimentation in the darkroom and took photographs that played with perception through extreme angles, tilted horizons and fragmentary close-ups. This exploration of techniques and processes spurred a generation of photographers to break old habits of visual representation. By looking closely and exploring new perspectives their images hovered at the limits of abstraction, presenting a new vision of the modern world.
Willy Zielke 1902–1989

Glass Abstraction VIII
Staking of Glass Plates I

1929
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57959, X57961

Aleksandr Rodchenko 1891–1956

Lumber 1930
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer
X67161
In vitrine

**Photo-Eye: 76 Photos of the Period 1974**
Edited by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold
Published by Thames and Hudson, London
Facsimile

**60 Photos: László Moholy-Nagy 1930**
Published by Klinkhardt & Biermann, Berlin

Tate. Purchased with funds generously provided by the LUMA Foundation and with the assistance of Tate Members, Art Fund, Tate Americas Foundation, Tate Photography Acquisitions Committee, Tate Latin American Acquisitions Committee, Tate Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee, Tate Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee and Tate Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee. X69488
Aenne Biermann was a self-taught German photographer. Her photographic career began in 1926 when she was commissioned to create scientific photographs of geological specimens. These close-up, direct studies marked a turning point in her photography. She soon became associated with the new objectivity movement, a group of photographers who shared her sharply focused approach. In 1930, art historian Franz Roh chose Biermann as the subject of the second (and final) volume in his ‘Fototek’ series. **60 Photos: Aenne Biermann** secured Biermann’s place in the photographic discourse of the period.

Private Collection, London
X69486
Clockwise from top left:

Judith Karasz 1912–1977
Material Structure 1931

Jaroslava Hatlakova 1904–1989
Untitled 1936

Walter Peterhans 1897–1960
Fabric c.1930

Josef Sudek 1896–1976
Carpet c.1930

Iwao Yamawaki 1898–1987
Untitled (Textile Abstraction) c.1930–3

Peter Keetman 1916–2005
Record 1936

6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper
Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2014. P80991
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X58008, X53819
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57953, X57969
A photogram is a photographic print made without a camera by laying objects onto photosensitive paper and exposing it to light. The technique is as old as the medium of photography itself. The first ‘photogenic drawings’ date back to the 1830s. In the 1920s photographers began to investigate old processes and the photogram proved fertile ground for experimentation. Artists were drawn to the effects of negative imaging and the ability to create unusual juxtapositions of objects and materials. The resulting images made identifiable objects strange and created new opportunities for abstraction in photography.
László Moholy-Nagy 1895–1946

**Untitled 1922–5**
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Musuem Folkwang, Essen
X67977, X67980, X67979
László Moholy-Nagy 1895–1946

**K VII** 1922
Oil paint and graphite on canvas

This painting by Moholy-Nagy reveals his interest in constructivism. Painted in Berlin in 1922, the ‘K’ in the title stands for the German word konstruktion (construction) and draws on the constructivist ideals of pure technical mastery and the organisation of materials.

Moholy-Nagy’s painting features overlapped geometric shapes and experiments with transparency through colour. The composition closely relates to his attention to line, shape and form in his photographs of the modern city and the careful arrangement and layering of objects in his photograms.

Tate. Purchased 1961
T00432
László Moholy-Nagy 1895–1946

**Photogram** c.1925
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X53807

László Moholy-Nagy 1895–1946

**Untitled 1922–8**
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Museum Folkwang, Essen
X67982, X67985, X67986
Florence Henri 1893–1982
**Abstract Composition** 1928–9
**Window** 1928
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Germaine Krull 1897–1985
**Metal** 1928
2 photo-etchings on paper

Tate Library. From Z07854. X69491, X69489
Margaret Bourke-White 1904–1971
**NBC Transmission Tower** c.1934

Aleksandr Rodchenko 1891–1956
**Balconies** 1925
**Pine Trees** 1927
**Radio Station Tower** 1929

Werner Mantz 1901–1983
**Untitled (Staircase)** 1928

Germaine Krull 1897–1985
**Staircase** c.1930

6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

The Sir Elton John Photography Collection. X59542
Wilson Centre for Photography. X68583-4
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X67845, X57985
László Moholy-Nagy 1895–1946

**View from Berlin Radio Tower** 1928–30
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Theo van Doesburg 1883–1931

**Counter-Composition VI** 1925
Oil paint on canvas

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X53808
Tate. Purchased 1982. T03374

**PERSPECTIVE**

In 1920s, 35 mm celluloid cinema film started being used to create photographs. Companies such as Leica exploited these technological developments to produce compact cameras that were capable of producing high quality enlargements. These new cameras gave photographers greater freedom of movement. They started experimenting with perspective and photographers such as László Moholy-Nagy began adopting a ‘bird’s-eye’ and ‘worm’s-eye’ view of the modern city. Photographs taken from the top of radio towers or looking up at buildings scraping the skies celebrated architectural innovation and presented the modern world in new and surprising ways.
OBJECTS AND CONSTRUCTIONS

I think that, instead of producing a banal representation of a place, I’d rather take my handkerchief out of my pocket, twist it to my liking, and photograph it as I wish. — Man Ray

The photographs in this room were made in the 1920s and 1930s and use objects to produce photographic abstractions. In these still life arrangements surprising combinations and close up views make everyday objects strange. These artists also defamiliarise subjects by deconstructing the photographic print through collage and photomontage. Such techniques emphasise the volume, shape and form of familiar things. In doing so they encourage us to focus on their abstract qualities.

Several images shown here were made without a camera. These photograms or ‘rayographs’ are created by laying objects directly on to photosensitive paper. Identifiable items are mixed with mysterious forms to create strange abstractions that look unlike anything we might find in the world around us. Other images were created by photographing compositions constructed from paper and everyday objects, their arrangement playing with scale and spatial awareness.
These photographs have visual connections with the collages and sculptural reliefs of artists such as Jean Arp. In the 1930s, Arp made work using abstract forms that resemble nature. The photographers in this room use natural forms to create abstractions. By presenting objects as fragments, traces, signs, and memories, they move beyond their medium’s ability to reproduce reality. Instead these artists explore photography’s capacity to create new realities through the manipulation of light, chemicals and paper.
Clockwise from wall text

Edward Steichen 1879–1973

**Untitled (Cigarettes and Matches)** 1920s
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57908
Luo Bonian 1911–2002

**Untitled** 1930s
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Luo Bonian is known for his kaleidoscopic collages. He cut his pictures into triangles before arranging them in geometric patterns. The graphic subjects of his original prints, which included leaves, iron fences and shadows, are broken down into unrecognisable fragments.

Luo was a banker and part of the growing photography community in China in the 1930s. As an amateur, Luo was free of the restrictions imposed on professionals who had to market their work. He lived in Hong Kong and Shanghai. These cosmopolitan cities provided Luo with access to international journals, touring exhibitions and photoclubs. He experimented with Chinese pictorial tradition alongside styles emerging from contemporary photographic practice in Europe and North America.

*Courtesy of the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing X68569, X68572*
El Lissitzky 1890–1941

**Proun in Material (Proun 83) 1924**
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57978

Oskar Nerlinger 1893–1969

**Tonseala (Tonal range) c.1928**
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

X67876
Jaromir Funke 1896–1945

**Abstraction c.1924–7**
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

X67877

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Manuel Álvarez Bravo 1902–2002

**Paper Games c.1926**
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Wilson Centre for Photography
X43779
Francis Bruguiere 1879–1945

**Untitled** c.1927
**Untitled** c.1925
**Untitled** c.1930
**Light Rhythms C3** c.1930

Jaroslav Rossler 1902–1990

**Untitled (Composition with dish), Portfolio 4** 1923
**Light well, Prague, Portfolio 4** 1923–4

6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper
Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum. X67874, X68461–2
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57935
der’Art Moderne / Centre de Création Industrielle. X67914
der’Art Moderne / Centre de Création Industrielle, X67913
Luigi Veronesi 1908–1998

*Untitled (Spiral)*

Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government from Massimo Prelz Oltramonti and allocated to Tate 2015. P13677
Kira Hiromu 1898–1991

**Circles plus Triangles** c.1928
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X67878

Karol Hiller 1891–1939

**Heliographic Composition XXIV** 1938
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

X67239

Jean Arp 1886–1966

**Constellation According to the Laws of Chance** c.1930
Painted wood

Tate. Bequeathed by E.C. Gregory 1959
T00242
Nathan Lerner 1913–1997

**Lightbox Experiment 6 (Eggs & String)**

**Paper on string** 1938

2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Gift of Mrs Kiyoko Lerner, 2014

(AMVP 4155), (AMVP 3966). X67870, X67872
Hans Finsler 1891–1972

Two Eggs Positive c.1925
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57954
Man Ray 1890–1976

**Rayographs** 1922–7
4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Although American artist Man Ray is associated with the surrealism movement he never became a formal member. His artistic practice included painting, assemblage and photography. He was a successful portrait and fashion photographer and pioneered innovative photographic techniques. Man Ray was known for his experiments with photograms. He titled his works ‘rayographs’ or ‘rayograms’ after himself. His application of the process drew on his surrealist sensibilities. For Man Ray the excitement lay in the transforming everyday objects so they lost their status as useful items. His approach to camera-less photography stood in contrast to Moholy-Nagy’s more rational simplification of shape and form. Man Ray’s combinations of objects often created absurd juxtapositions and he exposed paper several times to add further complexity to his compositions.

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. X70499, X70497-8
Courtesy of Curating Muse Foundation. X70788
Christian Schad 1894–1982

**Untitled Schadograph No.16** 1919
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57894
ROOM 5
FINDING FORM

My only aim was to express reality, for there is nothing more surreal than reality itself. If reality fails to fill us with wonder, it is because we have fallen into the habit of seeing it as ordinary. —Brassaï

In 1924 French poet André Breton published the first Surrealist Manifesto. Surrealism hoped to revolutionise human experience by rejecting a rational vision of life in favour of one that valued the role of the unconscious and dreams. Its writers and artists found beauty in the unexpected, the overlooked and the uncanny.

The movement embraced photography of all kinds, from found images to conscious abstractions. Photography offered the opportunity to look closer at the world, uncovering the latent surrealism in everyday life. In the hands of surrealist artists, photography was liberated from the ordinary task of description. Their images rendered familiar subjects strange and revealed unexpected resemblances.

The photographs shown here find form in darkroom experiments and create abstractions through the distortion of the human body. These artists employed mirrors and
extreme cropping, painted with chemicals, produced photograms and used double exposures. The resulting images encourage us to engage the creative powers of our imagination.
Clockwise from wall text

Brassaï 1899–1984

Involuntary Sculptures
1932, printed c.1960
4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

In 1933, Hungarian-French photographer Brassaï published his photo-essay, ‘Involuntary Sculptures’ in surrealist journal Minotaure. The publication features photographs by Brassaï alongside captions written by surrealist artist Salvador Dalí. Brassaï’s images included a rolled-up bus ticket, toothpaste and a curled soapflake. Captured close-up and in strong light Brassaï’s photographs present these everyday items as monumental sculptures. Unrecognisable as the everyday items from which they were constructed, these images demonstrate the transformative nature of photography. They draw on surrealist interests in estrangement and resemblance and challenge the notion of photography as a mere mirror of reality.

Philippe Ribeyrolles - Mandataire de l’Estate Brassaï
Succession
X72002, X72004, X72006, X72005
Brassaï 1899–1984

Nude c.1933
Nude 1934
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Purchased, 2006 (AMVP 3209). X68131
Musée National d’Art Moderne / Centre de Création Industrielle.
X68130
André Kertész 1894–1985

**Distortion 200** 1933
**Distortion 88** c.1933
**Distortion 118** 1933
**Distortion 60** 1933

4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Wilson Centre for Photography. X68582, X68580
Centre Pompidou, Paris. Purchased with funds generously provided by Yves Rocher, 2011. Musée National d’Art Moderne / Centre de Création Industrielle. X67949

Imogen Cunningham 1883–1976

**Triangles** 1928, printed 1947–60
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Pierre Brahm
X61737
Joan Miró 1893–1983

Painting 1927
Tempera and oil paint on canvas

Tate. Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1971
T01318
1  György Kepes 1906–2001
   **Brush and Form** c.1939–40
   The Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson 2007 Trust. X54410

2  Emeric Feher 1904–1966
   **Untitled** c.1935

3  György Kepes 1906–2001
   **Hand 2** c.1939–40
   The Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson 2007 Trust. X54406
4  Raoul Ubac 1910–1985  
**Revealed Photo** c.1939  
Centre Pompidou, Paris. Purchased with funds generously provided by Yves Rocher, 2011. Musée National d’Art Moderne / Centre de Création Industrielle. X69273

5  György Kepes 1906–2001  
**Branches** c.1939–40  
European Acquisitions Committee and the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2013. P80557

6  György Kepes 1906–2001  
**Blobs and Circles** c.1939–40  
Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Russia and Eastern European Acquisitions Committee and the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2013. P80559

7  György Kepes 1906–2001  
**Circles and Dots** c.1939–40  
Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Russia and Eastern European Acquisitions Committee and the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2013. P80556
8  Francis Bruguiere 1879–1945
   Untitled  c.1932
   Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum. X67893

9  Hannes Beckmann 1909–1977
   Untitled  c.1929–31

10 Hannes Beckmann 1909–1977
    Untitled  c.1929–31

11 Willy Zielke 1902–1989
   Photogram, Solarised  c.1930
   Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57963

12 Francis Bruguiere 1879–1945
   Untitled  c.1932
   Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum. X67893

13 Andreas Walser 1908–1930
   Photogram  1929
   Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X67895
14 György Kepes 1906–2001
   **Bas Relief** c.1939–40
   The Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson 2007 Trust. X54402

15 Jaroslav Rossler 1902–1990
   **NEG 71** 1930s

16 Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni) 1896–1974
   **Untitled** 1928–9

17 Jaroslav Rossler 1902–1990
   **NEG 71** 1930s
CHEMIGRAMS

Bringing together aspects of both painting and photography, chemigrams are made without a camera, in full light, by manipulating photographic chemicals and light-sensitive paper. Embracing chance, different effects can be achieved by altering the light that reaches the paper and by using materials such as wax, polish or varnish to block chemical reactions. The resulting images are truly abstract, produced only to be captured on film with no referent in reality. These abstract forms invite the viewer to use their imagination and interpret them as they wish.
PHOTOGRAMS

As seen in earlier rooms, in the 1920s and 1930s many photographers turned to the photogram as a means of exploring abstraction in photography. These camera-less photographs are produced in the darkroom by placing objects on photographic paper before exposing it to light. The resulting images reduce objects to two dimensional shapes and outlines often rendering them unrecognisable.

Imogen Cunningham 1883–1976

Pebbles c.1922–9
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper mounted on cardboard

X69268
Bill Brandt 1904–1983

**East Sussex Coast** 1958
**East Sussex Coast** 1960
**Nude, Baie des Anges, France** 1959
**East Sussex Coast** 1960
**Nude, Baie des Anges, France** 1959
**Baie des Anges, France** 1958

6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Bill Brandt Archive
X68565, X68568, X68571, X68567, X68570, X68563
BODIES

The images shown here create abstractions from the human body. These artists distort flesh through the use of funhouse mirrors, extreme camera angles, severe cropping and the manipulation of limbs to create unusual shapes. These photographs of contorted figures resemble the kind of objects found in surrealist paintings and sculptures and encourage us to search for resemblances in other organic objects. These twisted, truncated forms are far from portraits of the models whose bodies have been photographed. Instead these photographers treat their human subjects like inanimate objects focusing on shape, line and texture.
ROOM 6
DRAWING WITH LIGHT

I wanted to experience light in the same way you’d experience a brush and pigment and learn how to apply it. —Nathan Lerner

The word photography comes from ‘phōtos’, the Greek for light, and ‘graphē’, meaning drawing. From the first announcement of the medium in 1839, photographers have used light as a tool of graphic expression. The photographs shown here harness the medium’s essentials: photosensitive chemicals trace the movement of light and the duration of exposure on to paper.

These works draw on ideas of automatism, creativity that is not consciously controlled. The surrealists believed that by applying chance to mark making artists could be released from the constraints of rational thought and become free to express their unconscious. In the 1940s experiments in automatism took place across different media. Action painters such as Jackson Pollock explored free movement to create works celebrated for their gestural mark making. Photographers moved their cameras and light sources to create dynamic images that embraced motion blur.

Whether through automatic drawing, the splatter of paint across a canvas or the movement of a sparkler in the night
sky, it is the human compulsion to make spontaneous gestures that links the works in this room. They demonstrate that abstraction comes as naturally to photography as it does to any other medium.
Clockwise from wall text

Hanaya Kanbee 1903–1991

Light B
Light C
Light A
1930, printed 1970s
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Presented anonymously 2015. T14390
Presented anonymously 2015. T14391
Tate. Presented anonymously 2015. T14389

William Klein born 1928

Untitled (Rotating Painted Panels), Milan 1952
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Artworkers Retirement Society
X67934
Luigi Veronesi 1908–1998

**Kinetic Study** 1941  
**Photo n.145** 1940, printed 1970s  
**Photo n.152** 1940, printed 1970s  
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper  

Tate. Accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government from Massimo Prelz Oltramonti and allocated to Tate 2015. P13678

Willy Kessels 1898–1974

**Spiraling Coil** 1930s  
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper  

X67926
Jackson Pollock 1912–1956

**Number 23** 1948
Enamel on gesso on paper

Tate. Presented by the Friends of the Tate Gallery (purchased out of funds provided by Mr and Mrs H.J. Heinz II and H.J. Heinz Co. Ltd) 1960. T00384
Middle Wall

First column, top to bottom

Nathan Lerner 1913–1997
Light Tapestry 1939
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Arthur Siegel 1913–1978
Untitled (Motion-Light Study) c.1940
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris Gift of Mrs Kiyoko Lerner, 2014 (AMVP 4153). X67924
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57895
Sameer Makarius 1924–2009
*Untitled (Luminogram)* c.1950
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Otto Steinert 1915–1978
*Lamps of the Place de la Concorde III* 1952
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Fritz Henle 1909–1993
*New York at Night* c.1945
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57980, X57560
Estate of the artist, Courtesy Kicken Berlin. X69497
Third column

Harry Callahan 1912–1999
**Chicago (light abstraction)**
1946, printed 1979–89
Photograph, dye transfer, on paper

Otto Steinert 1915–1978
**Luminogram 1** 1952
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Nathan Lerner 1913–1997
**Car Light Study – Japanese Landscape** 1938
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of J. Patrick Kennedy and Patricia A. Kennedy 2016. P14531
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57915
Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris Gift of Mrs Kiyoko Lerner, 2014 (AMVP 4154). X67925
Fourth column

Pim Van Os 1910–1954
**Light Abstraction** c.1950
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Otto Steinert 1915–1978

**Luminogram 2** 1952
**Ghost Writing** 1949
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57920, X57556, X57566

Peter Keetman 1916–2005
**Oscillation** 1952–3
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Emil Otto Hoppe 1878–1972
**Rhythm** c.1930
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Peter Keetman 1916–2005
**Experiment with Neon Sign and Moving Camera** 1953
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57920
Private Collection, Dusseldorf. X68129
Wilson Centre for Photography. X68576
F.C. Gundlach Foundation. X70109
SUBJECTIVITY AND EXPRESSION

The making of a picture will always take place in the realm of the conscious, the degree of consciousness depending on the nature of the photographer’s personality. — Otto Steinert

In the 1940s German photographer Otto Steinert became interested in the expressive potential of his medium. Steinert was part of a generation of German photographers keen to continue the ideas that had emerged from the Bauhaus before the Second World War. They called themselves fotoform and aligned themselves with modernist ideals. The group promoted innovation and experimentation with form and an emphasis on materials and processes. Brazilian photographer Geraldo de Barros developed similar ideas independently as ‘fotoformas’.

Steinert began to look beyond the formal qualities of photographic images. He felt that the creative decisions taken by the photographer – from choice of equipment, to perspective and printing technique – provided the photographic subject with new meaning and significance. In 1951, Steinert organised an exhibition to promote this way of looking. He called it Subjective Photography. He accepted any style of photograph, from cityscapes to darkroom abstractions. The exhibition featured photographers from across the world and travelled internationally.
The broad range of artists who participated reflected a shared consciousness across continents. Similar projects in other countries, touring exhibitions and international publications suggested many photographers were looking beyond the formal concerns of previous generations. Some continued to make images with a strong visual connection to modernist photographs from the 1920s and 1930s. But these new works celebrated the medium’s ability to express the subjective experiences of the photographer.
Clockwise from wall text

Top Row

Thomaz Farkas 1924–2011
Facade of the Brazilian Press Association Headquarters, Rio de Janeiro c.1945

Paulo Pires born 1928
Men Working III 1959
Manoeuvring Yard II 1961

Ivo Ferreira da Silva 1911–1986
Light and Geometry date unknown

Geraldo de Barros 1923–1998
Untitled (Telegraph Wires) c.1950s

5 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X53803, X69469, X69470, X69467
Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of the Latin American Acquisitions Committee 2016. P14628
Middle Row

Thomaz Farkas 1924–2011
Ipiranga Cinema, Snapshots, São Paulo 1945

Ivo Ferreira da Silva 1911–1986
Warp and Weft date unknown

Gaspar Gasparian 1899–1966
Peace!!! 1954

Geraldo de Barros 1923–1998
Abstraction (São Paulo) 1949

Ivo Ferreira da Silva 1911–1986
Lines Traced by the Sun date unknown

Geraldo de Barros 1923–1998
Granada, Spain 1951

6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X53805, X68496, X67932
Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of the Latin American Acquisitions Committee and
Susana and Ricardo Steinbruch 2016. P14600
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X69466
Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery,
courtesy of the Latin American Acquisitions Committee 2016.
P14627
Bottom row:

Sameer Makarius 1924–2009
Nets of Mar del Plata’s Fishermen 1956

José Yalenti 1895–1967
Undulating  date unknown

Geraldo de Barros 1923–1998
Untitled (São Paulo) Composition II 1949

Sameer Makarius 1924–2009
Kavanagh Building under the Fog 1954

4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Presented by Karim Makarius 2011. P13171
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X68497
Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of the Latin American Acquisitions Committee and Susana and Ricardo Steinbruch 2016. P14601
Tate. Lent by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of Mauro Herlitzka 2011. L02987
Fernando G. Barros

**Men and Ropes** c.1960s
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X69468

Kansuke Yamamoto 1914–1987

**The Thrilling Game Related to Photography** 1956
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper and glass on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X68615
Kaoru Ohto born 1927

**Untitled (Light Bulb)**
**Untitled (Mountain)**
**Untitled (Roof)**

1950s
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X69482, X69479, X69483
Yasuhiro Ishimoto 1921–2002
Untitled c.1950

Iwase Sadayuki 1904–2001
Concrete Edge and Water c.1940

Kansuke Yamamoto 1914–1987
Title Unknown 1940

3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Tamara Corm Collection. X70662
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X69481, X68617
Otto Steinert 1915–1978

Tiled Roof
Roof Shingles
Black Forest Slope

1956
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57561–3
In vitrine

**Subjective Photography** 1952
Published by Brüder Auer Verlag, Bonn

Tate. Purchased with funds generously provided by the LUMA Foundation and with the assistance of Tate Members, Art Fund, Tate Americas Foundation, Tate Photography Acquisitions Committee, Tate Latin American Acquisitions Committee, Tate Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee, Tate Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee and Tate Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee.
X69633

**Subjective Photography 2** 1955
Published by Brüder Auer Verlag, Bonn

Tate. Purchased with funds generously provided by the LUMA Foundation and with the assistance of Tate Members, Art Fund, Tate Americas Foundation, Tate Photography Acquisitions Committee, Tate Latin American Acquisitions Committee, Tate Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee, Tate Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee and Tate Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee.
X69634
Fritz Kuhn 1910–1967

Compositions in Black and White 1959
Photobook
Published by Gibert Jeune, Paris

Private Collection, London
X68501

Otto Steinert 1915–1978

Composition of Forms 1949
Photogram I 1947
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57552, X57553
Peter Keetman 1916–2005

**Structure Paint on Wood** 1950  
**Highrise at Night** 1958  
**Window Frame** 1937  
**Chiemsee at Breitbrunn** 1958  
**Steel Pipes, Maximilian Smelter** 1958

5 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper  
F.C. Gundlach Foundation  
X70103, X70104, X70116, X70110, X70115

Raymond Hains 1926–2005

**The two crosses**  
**The grill**

1948  
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

X69269, X69270
When a painter paints a picture it can be immediately abstract. They have no problem making abstractions. A band of paint is simply a band of paint. It is not derived from realistic photographic images. When a photographer makes nature abstract, an attempt is made to transform a realistic scene into an abstraction. — Aaron Siskind

This room presents found abstractions lifted from nature and the urban environment and repurposed for the gallery wall. Through selection, framing and emphasis of tone and contrast, photography casts a new light on the everyday. These photographs encourage us to look closer. They present peeling paint and scratched surfaces as worthy of aesthetic appreciation.

These photographic ‘found paintings’ visually connect with the tangles of line and colour associated with abstract expressionist paintings from the 1940s and 1950s. Photographers were central to the developments in American art in this period. Works by figures such as Aaron Siskind were exhibited alongside paintings and assemblages of found objects. Many noted the resemblance between images of street markings and graffiti and the gestural brush strokes of contemporary painters. However, in using the world around us to make images that highlight texture and
surface, photography retains a sense of subject that painting does not. These photographs have more in common with assemblage, the repurposing of everyday objects as art.
Brassaï 1899–1984

**Graffiti** c.1950s
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Brassaï is best known for his photographs of Parisian nightlife. In 1933 he began taking photographs of graffiti in the French capital, a series he continued for more than 20 years. These images feature representational markings depicting faces, animals and hearts alongside abstract patterns, grooves and cracks. Brassaï organised his images into nine categories: The Wall as Inspiration; The Language of the Wall; The Birth of the Face; Masks and Faces; Animals; Love; Death; Magic; Primitive Images. The photographs appealed to surrealist sensibilities. Brassaï brought attention to the overlooked and unusual and his treatment of these markings encouraged viewers to find resemblances and hidden meanings. But while Brassaï enjoyed blurring the line between reality and the surreal, his photographs still document the streets of Paris.

Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2014
P80986, P80981, P80987
Guy Bourdin 1928–1991

**Untitled** c.1950s
6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2015
P81206, P81217, P81208–9, P81229, P81204
Jacques Mahé de la Villeglé
born 1926

**Jazzmen** 1961
Printed papers on canvas

This work is made from a section of posters and advertisements stripped from the rue de Tolbiac in Paris. French artist Jacques Mahé de la Villeglé started making works using torn posters in the late 1940s. He wanted to emphasise the actions of anonymous passers-by who had torn and stripped the posters, a process that he regarded as a spontaneous art of the street. Villeglé uses original posters in his work in the same way the photographers in this room photograph found textures and surfaces. These fragments are then layered and arranged to create new compositions just as photographers frame, crop and print their images to reveal new details and unusual textures.

Tate. Presented by the Friends of the Tate Gallery 2000
T07619
Harry Callahan 1912–1999

**Chicago (abstraction)** 1951,
printed 1979–89

Photograph, dye transfer print on paper

Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of J. Patrick Kennedy and Patricia A. Kennedy 2016
P14533

Frederick Sommer 1905–1999

**Found Painting** 1949
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer
X67171
Aaron Siskind 1903–1991

**New York** 1950
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Aaron Siskind is often described as ‘a painters’ photographer’. In the early 1950s he taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina with artists such as Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg. The American photographer’s work was also exhibited at the Egan Gallery in New York, alongside paintings by Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. De Kooning is thought to have used this specific Siskind photograph when working on his painting **Woman 1** 1950.

Siskind was interested in the treatment of his photographs as art objects rather than reproducible images. He often mounted his prints on blocky Masonite hardboard, as shown in **Chicago** 1952 and **Peeling Paint** c.1950, which are both hung nearby. This treatment marked a departure from the flatness of photography’s traditional window mount and frame.

Collection of Saadi and Zeina Soudavar
X67168
Aaron Siskind 1903–1991

**Chicago 22** 1949  
**Kentucky 13** 1951  
**Los Angeles 3** 1949

3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper  
Tate. Presented by J. Patrick Kennedy and Patricia A. Kennedy (Tate Americas Foundation) 2017  
X70285, X70281, X70280
Aaron Siskind 1903–1991

**Jerome 2** 1949
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Peeling Paint** c.1950
Photograph, gelatin silver print mounted on board

**New York** 1946
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Chicago** 1952
Photograph, gelatin silver print mounted on board

**Seaweed 13** c.1940s
Photograph, gelatin silver print mounted on board

Collection David Knaus. X68573, X68577
Clockwise from top left:

Brett Weston 1911–1993

**Broken Car Window, California**
1937, printed later

**Ice Formation** 1955

**Cracked paint** 1937, printed later

**Mud Cracks** 1955

4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Tate. Lent by the Tate Americas Foundation, courtesy of Christian Keesee Collection 2013
L03516, L03514, L03517, L03510

Jean Dieuzaide 1921–2003

**Brai Landscape** 1960
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris Purchased, 1971
(AMPH 1835)
X67929
Minor White 1908–1976

Ritual branch (72N Union Street, Rochester) 1947
Metal Ornament, Pultneyville, New York 1957

2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Wilson Centre for Photography
X68592, X68591
THE SENSE OF ABSTRACTION

The many techniques and devices apparent in the exhibition are not new. What is significant is the fresh surge of interest in using familiar tools of the photographic medium to produce works whose sole function is to delight – or affront – the eye. —Grace Mayer, curator of The Sense of Abstraction

This room is a homage to and partial recreation of The Sense of Abstraction, a photography exhibition which opened at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York in 1960.

The works included ranged from ‘accidental’ abstractions to experimental photographs that sought to break new ground. The variety of images spoke to photography’s complex relationship with abstract art. In fact, some of the artists shown questioned their inclusion. American photographer Minor White wrote to curator Grace Mayer to express his concerns: ‘I feel that these photos of mine that you have chosen are not abstractions in any sense whatsoever. True they resemble paintings that go under this title, but this is coincidental, not intentional.’

The exhibition included artists from Asia, Europe and North America. Its international scope revealed both the shared interests and unique concerns of photographers across
the world. The MoMA curators grouped works with similar formal qualities and technical ambition. Several groups from the 1960 show are recreated here and a number of series are shown in the order they were displayed at MoMA. In highlighting the diversity of photographic abstraction, the exhibition paved the way for a further 60 years of experimentation.
Clockwise from wall text

On wall

László Moholy-Nagy 1895–1946
From the Radio Tower, Berlin 1928

Harry Callahan 1912–1999
Aix-en-Provence 1957

Aaron Siskind 1903–1991
Martha’s Vineyard 108 1954

Edward Weston 1886–1958
Rock Erosion, Point Lobos c.1955
Rock Erosion, Point Lobos 1935
Dunes, Oceano 1936
Pelican Wings c.1940
Shells 1927

Man Ray 1890–1976
Anatomies 1930

Lotte Jacobi 1896–1990
Untitled (Photogenic) c.1948
Minor White 1908–1976

**Frost Forms: Sound of One Hand** 1959

Frederick Sommer 1905–1999

**Configurations on Black** 7 1957

Bronislaw Schlabs 1920–2009

**Untitled** 1957

**Untitled** 1957


Tate. Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, courtesy of J. Patrick Kennedy and Patricia A. Kennedy 2016. P14528


Wilson Centre for Photography. X68586–7, X68590, X68588–9

The Sir Elton John Photography Collection. X60465

Courtesy Kicken Berlin. X68566

The Sense of Abstraction was MoMA’s third exhibition dedicated to abstract photography. It followed In and Out of Focus in 1946 and Abstraction in Photography in 1951. Photographer Edward Steichen was the Director of the Department of Photography at MoMA from 1947 to 1962. He curated the 1951 exhibition and his Personal Assistant, Grace Mayer, was one of the lead curators for The Sense of Abstraction. Mayer started her career in 1934 as Curator of Prints at the Museum of the City of New York. In 1959 Steichen invited her to work with him at MoMA.

In The Sense of Abstraction Mayer built on Steichen’s definition of abstraction as a ‘convenient handle’ to describe a broad range of photographic practice. She included work from three categories: ‘the experimental or avant-garde’, ‘abstractions produced as a stimulating exercise’ and ‘accidental’ abstract images ‘in which reportage is transformed through a strong sense of design’.
Abstraction in Photography
October 1951
Published by Foto Digest, New York, 1951

X71457

Exhibition installation view
1960, printed 2018

Exhibition installation view
1960, printed 2018


Exhibition installation view
1960, printed 2018


Exhibition installation view
1960, printed 2018

Man Ray 1890–1976

**Unconcerned Photographs** 1959
8 photographs, Polaroid print

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer
X71395, X71667–73
Atelier: Subjective Photography in Japan: 130 Works by 29 Modern Photographers, Volume 5, No. 34 1957
Published by Atorie Shuppan, Tokyo

Tate
Z08602

Exhibition installation view
1960, printed 2018

Z08636
Between 1952 and 1976, photographer Minor White edited the popular photography magazine *Aperture*, which is still in publication today. He dedicated an issue of *Aperture* to *The Sense of Abstraction*.

Much like Steichen’s position at MoMA, White’s role at the magazine gave him creative control over the presentation of his work, as well as that of his peers. Work by both photographers was included in the 1960 MoMA show.
Letter from Minor White to Grace Mayer 1960, printed 2018


Aaron Siskind: Photographer 1960
Published by Horizon Press: 156 Fifth Avenue, New York

Tate
X71593

Letter from Minor White to Grace Mayer 1959, printed 2018

Under the Sun was produced by American photographers Walter Chappell, Syl Labrot and Nathan Lyons. The publication includes texts and photographs by the three artists. In Lyons’s introduction to the book he argues that abstract photographs of nature can change the way we engage with the world around us. He claims that through selective observation ‘attention moves towards a freedom beyond fixed habits’.

Photographs by all three photographers were included in The Sense of Abstraction.
Many of the works included in *The Sense of Abstraction* used darkroom experimentation. American artist Ted Davies created images without a camera by placing ink and dyes between sheets of glass, before exposing these glass plates in the darkroom. Davies claimed, ‘This is nature too, but we have captured and recorded it in a unique way’.

Artists such as German-American photographer Lotte Jacobi and Frederick Sommer, who lived and worked in the United States, focused on the tools of the medium rather than real world objects. They used photography to consider the inner mechanisms of the world and explored the possibility of creating photography that could break free from subject matter altogether.
In response to Grace Mayer’s invitation to submit work for inclusion in The Sense of Abstraction, Man Ray sent MoMA a series of Polaroids. These ‘blurred images’ Mayer noted, ‘were caused by swinging a Polaroid camera at random around his Paris studio’. Rather than focusing on experimentation or expression, the photographs play with chance, gesture and the absurd. Man Ray passed on cropping instructions for the images but no further printing details. The museum ordered enlargements mounted on hardboard which were hung directly on the wall. The original Polaroid prints can be seen here alongside their Masonite-mounted counterparts. Man Ray called this series of images Unconcerned Photographs. Their title now evokes the epitaph inscribed on his gravestone at Montparnasse cemetery in Paris, ‘Unconcerned but not indifferent’.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist X71678, X71676, X71675, X71674, X71677, X71667, X71395
Exhibition installation view
1960, printed 2018

Wallpaper

Syl Labrot 1929-1977

**Tree Trunk** 1959, printed 2018

Facsimile

Courtesy Barbara Wilson D’Andrea and Visual Studies Workshop’
ROOM 10
OPTICAL EFFECTS

Naturally, while working in the darkroom I could not resist the magic of light, its miraculous ability to create an image of its own on photographic paper or plate – an absolute photography. How little is needed for its creation! —Běla Kolářová

Emerging in the 1960s, op art used geometric forms to produce optical effects. These works suggest movement and play with our perception of space. The photographs shown here create similar effects to those the op artists produced through paint.

These images have a direct relationship with the experiments that produce them. Photographers created optical effects in the studio and the darkroom before capturing the results on photographic paper. They manipulated light through movement, moving materials and equipment, both by hand and using mechanical means, such as turntables. By passing light through objects and filters they could change its direction and intensity. Instruments such as oscillographs, which visually record electrical currents, were used to produce images with abstract curving lines.
Many artists worked at the edges of art and technology. Photographers developed processes that attempted to remove the human element from the act of making, setting in motion processes of creation which would continue in the absence of a ‘maker’. Photography was no longer limited to reproducing images, it could generate new ones.
Gottfried Jäger, courtesy Photo Edition Berlin
X68532
Bridget Riley born 1931

**Hesitate** 1964
Emulsion on board

Tate. Presented by the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1985
T04132
Floris Neusüss born 1937

_Untitled_, from the series _Plates_ 1968
4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Floris Neusüss is a German photographer who has dedicated his career to the exploration of the photogram. In the 1960s he started creating large scale images, including Körperfotogramms, whole-body photograms.

Neusüss believes the camera-less photograph has the power to engage our imagination. He has stated, ‘Photography works as a comfort… because it reproduces what is known. The photogram denies the observer this immediate familiarity.’ Neusüss believes, ‘It is not important that people know how we made a photogram, but someone who knows may have an additional kick.’

Floris M. Neussüss / Courtesy Kicken Berlin
X71595-8
Pierre Cordier born 1933

**Chemigram 28/5/61** 1961
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Chemigram 24/8/61 III** 1961
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper
mounted on plywood

Monika Von Boch 1915–1993

Light Study (I)

Light Study (II)

c.1959
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Courtesy Kicken Berlin
X69499, X69498
Alexandre Vitkine 1910–2014

**Untitled** c.1960
6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

In the 1950s photographers began experimenting with technology to create new photographic forms. The oscillograph, a device used to record the movements and rhythms of currents, presented photographers with the ability to produce curved light patterns through electronic means. Using electronics, artists were able to create a wider variety of forms than had been possible through mechanical devices. Artists such as Berlin-born Alexandre Vitkine, a trained engineer, exploited the possibility of electronic instruments to create photographic abstractions.

Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Gift of Robert and Marc Vitkine, 2017
X70045-6, X68678, X68681, X68680, X70044
Peter Keetman 1916–2005

**Light Pendulum Oscillation** 1952
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

F.C. Gundlach Foundation
X70174, X71231-2

Bela Kolářová 1923–2010

**Untitled (Pattern of Shells)** c.1963–4
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Untitled (Pattern of Shells)** 1961
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Untitled (Pattern of Beer Caps)** c.1964
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X60995, X60983, X60998
In 1961, Czech artist and photographer Běla Kolářová encountered the statement, ‘the entire world has been photographed!’ In response Kolářová turned her attention to the darkroom. She believed camera-less photography offered greater opportunity for experimentation than documentary practice. Her first experiments in the darkroom involved everyday items which were usually considered
‘unworthy of being photographed’. Later Kolářová removed the need for objects altogether, using only light to create form. She achieved this by combining and controlling light with movement, either moving the head of the enlarger projector or by placing paper onto a moving surface.
Bela Kolárová 1923–2010

**Untitled, from Traces cycle**

*Crock from the Moon*

*And toward the cleanliness...!* / Level Delta / Tomography

*And toward the cleanliness...!* / Level Beta / Tomography

1961

4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham

X60982, X60978, X60979, X60981
Clockwise, from top left

Bela Kolářová 1923–2010

Roentgenograms of Circles 1963
Roentgenograms of Circle c.1963
Roentgenogram of Circle, Untitled 1962
Roentgenogram of Circle IV 1963
Untitled c.1968–72
Roentgenograms of Circle with Many Centres 1963

6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X60984, X60988, X60991, X60986, X60989, X60985
In the 1930s Brazilian artist Martha Boto was part of one of the first abstract art movements in Buenos Aires, the Asociación Arte Nuevo. In the 1950s she began creating structures and mobiles using transparent materials such as Plexiglas and coloured water. In 1960, she started experimenting with movement, producing works using motors and
coloured lights. Boto was particularly interested in the potential of materials that could modify, absorb and reflect light. Her experiments with movement, illumination and colour played a key role in the development of kinetic and op art.

Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Purchased, 1966 X69477
ROOM 11
MINIMALISM AND SERIES

I had no restrictions on how to approach photography. I felt free to incorporate any of these concepts into my thinking. I wasn’t breaking rules; I was actually making up my own. —Barbara Kasten

The artists in this room arrange objects, construct scenes and find order in the world around us. Produced in the 1960s and 1970s, their works reduce what we see to its essentials and prioritise form over creative expression.

Several works displayed here respond to the themes of minimalism. Minimalism claims that art should have its own reality and not be an imitation of anything else. Minimalist artists make no attempt to represent the outside world, their experiences or emotions. They want the viewer to respond only to what is in front of them. This concept can be problematic for photography, a medium that is by nature representational. Many of the photographers shown here engage with the aesthetic simplicity of minimalist art, presenting carefully selected volumes, shapes and lines.

They focus our looking on the forms within the image so that the source or subject matter becomes irrelevant. Other images engage with serial art and conceptual practices, which often involve following strict sets of rules.
to determine their outcome and composition. In adhering to processes, artists can create art without personal expression. By photographing and rephotographing their subjects, they are also able to experiment with different permutations. These works create order through repetition and highlight the form and structure of the world around us.
Barbara Kasten born 1936

**Photogram Painting Untitled 78/2 1978**

4 photograms, gelatin silver print and oil on mural paper on canvas

Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Bortolami, New York.

X70145
Barbara Kasten born 1936

*Photogenic Painting, Untitled 74/5*
*Photogenic Painting, Untitled 74/13*
*Photogenic Painting, Untitled 74/3*
*Photogenic Painting, Untitled 75/19*
*Photogenic Painting, Untitled 75/32*

1974–5
5 photographs, cyanotype print on paper

These images by American artist Barbara Kasten are cyanotypes, a photographic printing process that produces blueprints. Their title is the name photographic pioneer Henry William Fox Talbot gave to his first photograms. Kasten’s works are produced by laying sheets of paper on the studio floor. She treats the paper with photosensitive chemicals before placing textiles and sculptural works on top. She folds and moves her materials to emphasise their three-dimensional qualities. This movement creates painterly effects on the surface of the paper. Kasten calls her process ‘painting in motion’.

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham.
X70149, X70147, X70148, X70146, X68503
Jay DeFeo 1929–1989

**Untitled** 1973
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Untitled (White Spica)** 1973
3 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

The Jay DeFeo Foundation
X70137, X70136, X69448, X70135
John Divola born 1949

From the series Vandalism 1974
6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

From 1974-5 American photographer John Divola travelled across Los Angeles in search of rundown properties to photograph. Using spray paint, string and cardboard, the artist created abstract installations which he then documented. He titled the project Vandalism. It blurred the line between fiction and reality. Divola’s carefully staged interventions merged sculpture, installation and performance while his images drew on the aesthetics of forensic photography. The series questions the photograph’s role as evidence.

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X68614, X68613, X70152, X57949, X57951, X68612
Inge Dick born 1941

Black 14.6.96 14/2
Black 4.6.96 14/14
Black 14.6.96 14/42
Black 14.6.96 14/47
Black 14.6.96 19/25
Black 14.6.96 19/37
1996
6 photographs, Polaroid print

Loaned from Photo Edition Berlin. X68603
These images are from American artist James Welling’s Degrades series. The photographs are camera-less exposures created by placing photographic paper beneath an enlarger. Welling manipulated his light source using colour filters and by slowly moving a piece of cardboard to generate shadows. Welling’s images ‘degrade’ the pure colour that would be produced without his intervention. Their subtle variations of brightness and tone draw parallels with colour-field paintings from the 1950s.

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham
X57939, X57945, X57941, X57942, X57944
John Hilliard born 1945

**Seven Representations of White** 1972
7 photographs, C-prints on paper mounted on board

Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2016
P81609

John Hilliard born 1945

**White Expanse** 1974
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper and transfer script

Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2016
T14512
Jared Bark born 1944

**Untitled, PB #1005** 1974
8 photographs, gelatin silver photobooth print on paper

**Untitled, PB #1115** c.1975
14 photographs, gelatin silver photobooth print on paper

**Untitled, PB #1004** 1973
10 photographs, gelatin silver photobooth print on paper

Courtesy the Artist and Yancey Richardson, New York. X69472
Collection of Kaitlyn and Mike Krieger. X69476
Courtesy the Artist and Yancey Richardson, New York. X71665
Mel Bochner born 1940

**Photograph-Blocks (Four by Four)**
printed 2009
5 photographs, gelatin silver prints mounted on aluminium

Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. New York
X69450

Edward Ruscha born 1937

From the series *Parking Lots* 1967–2013
25 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

© Ed Ruscha, courtes of the artist and Gagosian
X68674, X70292-312, X70314-6
Carl Andre born 1935

**Steel Zing Plain** 1969
Steel and zinc

Tate. Presented by Janet Wolfson de Botton 1996
T07148
Lewis Baltz 1945–2014

**San Jose** 1972
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Houston A, Houston B** 1972
2 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

**Newport Beach** 1970
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

**Laguna Niguel** 1973
Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57919
Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2012. P80062
Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham. X57917, X57916
Lewis Baltz claimed that, ‘photography is the only deductive art, every other art that I can think of begins with the topic tabula rasa, or blank sheet of A4 paper... photography begins with a world that’s perhaps over full and needs to sort out from that world what is meaningful’.

The American photographer believed it is the job of artists to extract and record what is significant in the landscape. Through photography Baltz identified and isolated compositions found in the world around us. His careful framing and cropping produced images that reveal geometric forms and lines form our everyday environment. Baltz presents stuccoed walls, boarded windows and building bricks as minimalist sculptures. In the 1970s his photographs were shown alongside sculptures by minimalist artist Carl Andre, whose work is also shown here.
Clockwise from top left

Ellsworth Kelly 1923–2015

Doorway Shadow, Spencertown 1977
Highway Marker, Hudson 1972
Sidewalk, Los Angeles 1978
Wall, Majorca 1967
Movie Screen, Waterbury 1982
Sidewalk, New York City 1970
6 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

American artist Ellsworth Kelly is known for his paintings characterised by large areas of a single colour with sharp clear edges. Kelly’s minimalist paintings transform compositions observed in the world around us. He applied this same approach to photography, surveying the landscape for volumes and shapes created by light and shadow. Kelly found compositions in the light cast from doorways and streetlamps, or the contrast produced by different materials. Kelly stated, ‘I’m not interested in the texture of the rock, or that it is a rock, but in the mass of it, and its shadow’

Estate of Ellsworth Kelly, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery X70200 X70199, X70201, X70197, X70202, X70198.
CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACTION

How can you be a pioneer in your own time if you’re copying the successes of the past? How can you make an impact with images, when everyone sees so many? I want my images to have a contemporary context. I want them to be images for today. — Maya Rochat

The works in the final room of the exhibition range from minimal compositions that demonstrate control and order, to wild abstractions that embrace chance and accident. These abstract works encourage us to engage with the artwork as a whole, including the process of its production.

All of the artists shown here have made work following the launch of the first portable digital camera in 1975. The introduction of digital technology had a profound impact on photography’s place in the art world. Where a commitment to the purity of the process was once the key to creating art, contemporary artists have dispensed with boundaries between mediums. Digital technology offers artists a new set of tools to work with, from computer programming to innovative printing techniques.

These artists expand the possibilities of photography. They embrace ways of working that were once seen as contradictions. They use darkroom processes alongside
digital technology, question the notion of the original and copy, and follow controlled processes while accepting the accidents that come with experimentation.

For many of the artists in this room, the process of production is a performative act that becomes part of their artwork. They adopt all modes of image making at their disposal, creating work that can no longer be reduced to the title of photographic abstraction. Instead their work reveals photography’s new place in the world.
Clockwise from wall text
Clockwise from top left

Paul Graham born 1956

Ilford FP4, Untitled early work, 1976
Fuji Fujicolor HR100, Troubled Land, 1984
Fuji Fujicolor Reala Gen 2, 100asa, American Night, 2001
Konica Konica Color SR-G, 3200ASA, End of An Age, 1997

2011
4 photographs, inkjet print on paper

In 2009, while scanning photographs for a retrospective of his documentary work, Graham noticed the different structures of photographic film. The British photographer took these scans and created extreme close ups of the different brands of film used in each body of work. The magnified images reveal the grain and structure of film. These light sensitive crystals and chemical couplers form film emulsion. They are the basic building blocks of every photographic image.

Jack Kirkland Collection, Nottingham.
X57964, X57962, X57957, X57960
Alison Rossiter born 1953

Gevaert Gevaluxe Velours, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1930s, processed 2017
4 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

These camera-less photographs were created by developing expired photographic paper. The atmospheric conditions and physical damage these papers have endured over time can cause changes to their light-sensitive properties. Working in the darkroom under a safelight, American artist Alison Rossiter removes the paper from its protective packaging and places it in liquid developer. This process reveals marks that have been left on the surface of the paper by fingerprints, light leaks, pollutants and mould. Rossiter calls these images ‘found photograms’. The works shown here were produced using Gevaert Gevaluxe Papier Velours, a paper manufactured in Belgium in the 1930s. It is considered one of the most beautiful papers in the history of gelatin silver printing.

Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York
X68604
In 2013, Canadian photographer Stan Douglas created a series of photographs of distorted vertical bands of colour produced when his camera prematurely saved images. In 2016 he took this idea of digital abstraction further by employing a software developer to reverse engineer JPEG files. The file code – the building blocks of the image file – became Douglas’s raw material, and he used a mixing deck to create bands of colour and kaleidoscopic shapes. In the process of turning the infinite possibilities of digital information into a photograph hanging on a wall, the artist’s role takes on a particular significance.

Courtesy the artist, David Zwirner, London/New York and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. X70971
Private collection. X68607
Luisa Lambri born 1969

**Untitled (Bicho Invertebrado, #11)**
**Untitled (Bicho Invertebrado, #12)** 2013
2 photographs, inkjet print on paper

Italian photographer Luisa Lambri is best known for her photographs of modernist architecture. She commented, ‘when I look at buildings what I am really trying to find is a personal relationship with them, something that goes beyond the image we know of them. I look for the most intimate and vulnerable places in the building’.

These photographs are from her series on modernist sculpture. In these images she documents Lygia Clark’s titles her geometric aluminium sculptures *Creature*, or ‘bicho’ in Portugese. Lambri focuses on the hinges of the sculptures, which were designed to be moved and manipulated by the viewer. She documents the play of light on these highly reflective surfaces, creating new lines, angles and shapes.

*Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London X70150, X70635*
Sigmar Polke 1941–2010

**Untitled (Uranium Green) 1992**
10 photographs, C-print on paper

These photographs by German artist Sigmar Polke were created by placing chunks of uranium on photosensitive plates for weeks at a time. This process left traces of radiation on the surface of the photosensitive material, making the usually invisible radiation visible. The radiation is recorded as glowing orbs of luminescent colour. By allowing his materials to determine his process Polke challenges the authorial power of the artist.

The Estate of Sigmar Polke / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn 2017
X68595
Daisuke Yokota born 1983

_Inversion_ 2015
Photographs, gelatin silver print

Japanese photographer Daisuke Yokota compares his working methods to those of an electronic musician. He mimics sound layers with ‘visual noise and interference’, blurring all traces of the original image. He investigates the chemical reactions in traditional darkroom techniques as well as the manipulation of digital data. Yokota claims, ‘There are no stories in my work. There is only what the viewers find within it for themselves. I am more interested in exploring time and multiple possibilities that exist in reality.’

Daisuke Yokota, courtesy of the artist and Jean-Kenta Gauthier gallery
X68610
Clockwise from middle wall

Antony Cairns born 1980

E.I. CTY1 2018
45 e-ink screens in acrylic frames

These photographs by British artist Antony Cairns were taken at night in some of the busiest cities in the world. His subjects include London, New York and Tokyo. These environments are made strange by the absence of the usual crowds of people and Cairns’s complex developing process. The artist uploads his images onto e-readers. He uses a current in the devices to stimulate electronic ink which creates the image. He fixes the ink permanently by removing the screens from their casing, disconnecting them from any interface and creating glitchy digital images.

Courtesy of the artist Antony Cairns and Roman Road
X68609
Maya Rochat born 1985

A Rock is a River 2018
Mesh banner, inkjet print on paper, woven cotton and other materials

Maya Rochat’s layered, multi-dimensional installations feature photographs, painted surfaces and projections. The Swiss artist’s photographs are fragmented pictures of digital textures, geological forms and organic matter. Rochat explains her approach: ‘Each person has an experience that’s unique – just by being there, you are activating the show… the people, are changing – each moment is there just for you, and then it’s gone. You can’t really document it. It’s also a way of sharing what happens when you make an image – you have these apparitions that appear in the moment. If it’s too fixed, I feel a little bored. It’s not the end result, it’s the process.’

Courtesy Lily Robert
X72272, X68611, X71664
In 2011, German photographer Thomas Ruff began experimenting with a new way of creating photograms. Ruff collaborated with a 3-D imaging expert to design a virtual darkroom that allowed him to choose and manipulate the size, material, colour, and transparency of the digital objects his photograms would record. The result was a digital darkroom environment which offered endless possibilities and control.

Challenging the limitations of the medium further, Ruff set out to ‘break the world record of the size for the photogram! The early photograms, from the 1920s and ‘30s, are quite small, more postcard size. I work with the large format; I like the physical presence.’

© Thomas Ruff. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London X68605, X70641

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2 MAY – 14 OCTOBER 2018

Curated by Simon Baker, Senior Curator, International Art (Photography), Tate Modern and Emmanuelle de l’Ecotais, Curator of Photography, Musée d’Art Modern de la Ville de Paris with Shoair Mavlian, Director of Photoworks (formerly Assistant Curator, Tate Modern) and Sarah Allen, Assistant Curator, Tate Modern

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Monday 25 June 18.30–20.30
Monday 1 October 18.30–20.30
In the exhibition
£28 / Concessions £23
BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE TOUR
Friday 6 July 19.00–20.00
In the exhibition
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Friday 27 July 2018 18.00–22.00
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