

Be careful what you wish for!

What has happened to photography since the 1970s – sometime between the deaths of Diane Arbus in 1971 and Garry Winogrand in 1984 – cannot easily be summarised in a simple sequential history. But one thing stands out – photography should have been careful what it wished for.

In the couple of decades before and after 1900, photography oh-so-eagerly wanted to be accepted as Art. In the decades since the 1970s, photography has, indeed, become Art: but perhaps it would be more precise to say that Art has swallowed and digested photography. Many of the famous ‘photographers’ who now produce and sell Art could more accurately be described as artists who use photography – commonly to record the art they have constructed or as a basis for further construction using graphics software. This change has involved a confluence of colour photography, conceptual art and the ‘arts of arrangement’.

In 1962 the Museum of Modern Art in New York had shown a ten-year retrospective of Magnum president Ernst Haas’s colour photography. But the real watershed was the more famous 1976 ten-year retrospective of William Eggleston’s work. While Haas’s work, according to Szarkowski, was “handsome and even inventive,” he felt it fell short of Eggleston’s later accomplishment because it was “dedicated to a basically familiar idea of beauty, one very indebted to painterly traditions.”

Eggleston, a close friend of Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and Diane Arbus, photographed – like them – ordinary, commonplace subjects. But he did it with such skilful colour composition that the pictures somehow showed the mundane world to be a place of complexity and beauty. It was, however, a world that had an edge of strangeness, and sometimes an aura of unease and impending danger. People found the pictures powerful but difficult to understand: even now, you have to resist the habit of trying to see through the photograph to find some easily recognisable object that you can pay attention to instead of looking at the photograph itself. Instead, you have to examine the picture – its form and the tight framing of the piece, the angle of view, the play of colours against each other, of light against shadow, and all the other riffs and trills of the colourist’s visual inventiveness Eggleston is intrigued by. Otherwise, you miss the imaginative possibilities of an Eggleston photograph before you even begin. As he said of his own photographs, “They’re about making art, and using film and camera and photography to do it with.”

Other photographers had also been investigating colour since the sixties. By 1965, Joel Meyerowitz was already carrying two cameras – one with BW film, the other with colour – while photographing in the New York streets. By the mid seventies he had shifted away from Cartier-Bresson-style pictures of a single locus of action with the elements beautifully arranged at the ‘decisive moment’, and was looking beyond the hook of an obvious ‘subject’ to shoot wider, more complex scenes with subtle nuances of relationship and multiple actors.

Meyerowitz continued to work on layered, complex street photographs in colour, but he also began investigating the subtleties of colour using an 8×10 view camera to photograph coastal scenes, urban landscapes and portraits. Meyerowitz showed his large-format colour photographs in Amsterdam in 1983, and Rineke Dijkstra, now an internationally-renowned photographer, has said that Meyerowitz's colour work was a "real eye-opener" for her as a student in Amsterdam in the 1980s, when she was still photographing in black and white. Indeed, Dijkstra's famous large-scale colour portraits of adolescents ('Beach Portraits' (1992–94) [click image to open gallery] readily call to mind Myerowitz photographs 'Caroline, Provincetown, 1983' and 'Eliza, Provincetown, 1982'.

The subject matter of photography was changing radically in other ways. For example, Nan Goldin started using her camera to record her personal life and the events in her surroundings with more revealing intimacy than had been previously been common. She used the air of privacy that colour photography carried from its widespread use in personal family snapshots to document everyday life, drug addiction, dependency and violence among her friends and in her own relationships. The work was published, to much critical acclaim, as 'The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, 1979-1986', a 45 minute slideshow of some 700 pictures with rock-music accompaniment.

One of the most influential photographers to use colour was Stephen Shore. He had undertaken a road trip across America in 1972, photographing a vast array of 'trivial' subjects that even amateurs would not have troubled to photograph: the rooms he stayed in; the gas stations he filled up at; the stores he shopped in; the meals he ate; drugstore shelves; open refrigerators; toilets, sinks and TV sets. He had the work printed at local drug stores, in the manner of small amateur prints. With provocative irony, he called this conceptual project 'American Surfaces'.

Shore's pictures looked artless, the random-looking subjects and angles giving them an anonymous quality; yet they were solely and uniquely determined by his subjective perspective. He explained what he was doing as follows: ". . . If you remove as much of the photographic convention as possible, what you're left with is yourself, and how you see." He was interested in the very subtle difference between this momentary subjective perception and the recording of it fixed in a photograph. He extended this investigation with large format photographs of urban landscapes. Their subject matter was determined conceptually, rather than by how 'photogenic' the urban scene was: main street intersections; the last street on the edge of town as it becomes countryside; highways; house façades. Shore photographed these utterly ordinary scenes with immense care for composition, on expensive 8×10 negatives that produced colour prints full of spectacular detail.

Like Eggleston, Shore had had a solo exhibition of his colour work at MoMA; so the 26-year-old photographer was already an established artist when in 1973 he met Bernd and Hilla Becher in New York. The Bechers were conceptual artists at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf (where, from 1976, they were to run the famous and immensely influential

Dusseldorf School of Photography). Since the late 1950s the Bechers had been photographing various industrial structures (such as water storage towers, mine winding towers, blast furnaces) in Europe and America. They exhibited these photographs as series, arranged in grids that formed “typologies”, under the title of “Anonymous Sculptures.”

Shore and the Bechers became friends, and two years later William Jenkins invited the three of them, along with Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and five other young American photographers, to participate in an exhibition at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in New York. The exhibition of pared-down, austere urban landscapes was called “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape”, and it marked a turning point in American landscape photography, and influenced the direction of photography in general and landscape photography in particular in Europe as well as America. (The exhibition was, for example, re-shown by Paul Graham in Bristol in 1981.)

All but one of the ‘New Topographics’ photographers (Stephen Shore) photographed in black and white. More significant perhaps were two facts: all but one of the artists in ‘New Topographics’ used large-format cameras – a departure from the 35mm, Leica-based practice previously common among serious photographers; and all of them were, or were to become, academics teaching photography in universities and colleges, a way of making a living that has become one of only a few ways in which serious ‘art’ photographers can assure themselves of a regular income.

Shore’s friendship with the Bechers was to prove momentous for the future of direction photography. In 1977, the Becher’s facilitated shows of Shore’s work at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and at Documenta 6 in Kassel (which included photography for the first time); and the Becher’s students went to see Shore’s work, among them many who have since become famous in their own right: Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and others. Commenting on influences on his work, Thomas Ruff said, “My teacher, Bernd Becher, showed us photographs by Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz and the new American colour photographers”.

So art photographs now are mostly colour pictures. It is also commonplace for them to be printed at immense sizes: they are designed for, and can only be shown on, a gallery wall. This idea of making photographic works on the scale of traditional history paintings originated in Jeff Wall’s work. Wall, a Canadian artist, experimented with conceptual art while an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia. He received his MA from the University of British Columbia in 1970, with a thesis entitled ‘Berlin Dada and the Notion of Context’. He then moved to London to do postgraduate work at the Courtauld Institute from 1970–73, where he studied with TJ Clark, an expert on Manet.

He started making pictures again in 1977, using large-format transparencies mounted in lightboxes, an idea borrowed from advertising. Many of his pictures are staged. The work is rather cerebral, and often refers to issues in the history of art and addresses

philosophical problems of representation. Their compositions frequently allude to the work of famous painters (and the pictures sometimes also carry grindingly obvious moral messages). Some of Wall's photographs are complicated productions involving a cast, sets, lighting and production crews and extensive digital post-production; they have been characterised as 'one-frame cinematic productions.'

Wall's work is often concerned with issues in the philosophy of art and art history – for example, about the role of intention in art, and about the relationship of the viewer to the work. He seeks to control every detail of the pictures, often by compositing them from hundreds of individual smaller photographs, taken with meticulous care and precision: one of the earliest objections to the idea of photography as art was precisely that, unlike the painter, the photographer was not able to control what appeared in every square millimetre of a picture. Hence Wall's obsessional concern with control. For similar reasons, Thomas Demand, originally a sculptor, now goes several steps further, and makes meticulously detailed paper and cardboard models of real scenes, and then photographs them.

Wall's influence has been widespread. In 1986, Thomas Ruff moved into a studio in Düsseldorf with Laurenz Berges, Andreas Gursky and Axel Hütte, and began to experiment with the large-format printing offered by the specialist Grieger lab in Düsseldorf. Andreas Gursky specifically cites Wall as an influence on his work. Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky (and Rineke Dijkstra) all have their large-scale works printed by the Grieger lab, which can produce very large prints (up to 5m x 2.4m), and uses the Diasec process to permanently mount large images on high-quality acrylic glass.

Several conceptual photographers share Wall's practice of constructing and lighting a staged scene with meticulous detail. Internationally-renowned Cindy Sherman, who started out as a painter, explained, "I was meticulously copying other art and then realized I could just use a camera and put my time into an idea instead". Sherman's work at that time – published as "Untitled Film Stills" – comprised staged scenes, using herself as model, expressive of concepts to do with gender identity; she started working in colour around 1980 (see 'Untitled #74' and subsequent pictures [Click arrows to step through gallery]). .

Other artists also draw on the language of cinema in their work, among perhaps the most famous being Gregory Crewdson (now Director of Photography at Yale University School of Art). He, too, constructs elaborately staged and lit 'film sets', using a large production crew, either in a studio or house, or sometimes closing an urban street to traffic while a set is constructed and lit. And, like Sherman, he then records the constructions with photography (though note that he doesn't actually operate the camera himself!).

Wall, Sherman, Crewdson, and Demand are but a few examples of renowned artists who are often loosely referred to as photographers. But it is perhaps more accurate to describe them as artists who use photography, as the essence of their art is only

tenuously related to using cameras to make pictures. This merging of photography with the purposes and practices of the other visual arts is now very widespread; and the concern with art historical issues and problems in art theory are now being more actively addressed by artists using photography than by painters. Instead of photography becoming art, Art has swallowed photography.

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