The Shape of Things presents a compact and non-comprehensive history of photography, from its inception to the early twenty-first century, in one hundred images. The exhibition is drawn entirely from the 504 photographs that have entered The Museum of Modern Art's collection with the support of Robert B. Menschel over the past forty years, including a notable selection of works from his personal collection that were given in 2016 and are being shown here for the first time.

"Photography is less and less a cognitive process, in the traditional sense of the term, or an affirmative one, offering answers, but rather a language for asking questions about the world," wrote the Italian photographer and critic Luigi Ghirri in 1989. Echoing these words, the exhibition presents the history of the medium in three parts, emphasizing the strengths of Menschel's collection and mirroring his equal interest in historical, modern, and contemporary photography. Each section focuses on a moment in photography's history and the conceptions of the medium that were dominant then: informational and documentary in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more formal and subjective in the immediate postwar era, and questioning and self-referential from the 1970s onward. The installation occasionally diverges from a strict chronological progression, fueled by the conviction that works from different periods, rather than being antagonistic, correspond with and enrich each other.

Organized by Quentin Bajac, The Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator of Photography, with Katerina Stathopoulou, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Photography.

The exhibition is supported by the Annual Exhibition Fund.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, 1940–1960

“As photographers, we must learn to relax our beliefs. Move on objects with your eye straight on, to the left, around on the right. Watch them grow large as you approach, group and regroup themselves as you shift your position. Relationships gradually emerge, and sometimes assert themselves with finality. And that’s your picture.

What I have just described is an emotional experience. It is utterly personal: no one else can ever see quite what you have seen, and the picture that emerges is unique, never made and never to be repeated. The picture—and this is fundamental—has the unity of an organism. Its elements were not put together, with whatever skill or taste or ingenuity. It came into being as an instant act of sight.”

—

Aaron Siskind, “The Drama of Objects,” *Minicam Photography* 8, no. 9 (1945)

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, 1940–1960

“The business of making a photograph may be said in simple terms to consist of three elements: the objective world (whose permanent condition is change and disorder), the sheet of paper on which the picture will be realized, and the experience which brings them together. First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture. The experience itself may be described as one of total absorption in the object. But the object serves only a personal need and the requirements of the picture. Thus rocks are sculptured forms; a section of common decorated ironwork, springing rhythmic shapes; fragments of paper sticking to a wall, a conversation piece. And these forms, totems, masks, figures, shapes, images must finally take their place in the tonal field of the picture and strictly conform to their space environment. The object has entered the picture in a sense; it has been photographed directly. But it is often unrecognizable; for it has been removed from its usual context, disassociated from its customary neighbors and forced into new relationships.”

—

Aaron Siskind, “Credo,” *Spectrum* 6, no. 2 (1956)

DIRECTORIAL MODES, 1970S AND BEYOND

"Here the photographer consciously and intentionally creates events for the express purpose of making images thereof. This may be achieved by intervening in ongoing 'real' events or by staging tableaux—in either case, by causing something to take place which would not have occurred had the photographer not made it happen.

Here the authenticity of the original event is not an issue, nor the photographer's fidelity to it, and the viewer would be expected to raise those questions only ironically. Such images use photography's overt veracity by evoking it for events and relationships generated by the photographer's deliberate structuring of what takes place in front of the lens as well as of the resulting image. There is an inherent ambiguity at work in such images, for even though what they purport to describe as 'slices of life' would not have occurred except for the photographer's instigation, nonetheless those events (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) did actually take place, as the photographs demonstrate.

. . . This mode I would define as the directorial."

—

A. D. Coleman, "The Directorial Mode: Notes Towards a Definition," *Artforum* 15, no. 1 (1976)

TRUTHFUL REPRESENTATIONS, 1840–1930

"One advantage of the discovery of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation, but which no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature.

Contenting himself with a general effect, he would probably deem it beneath his genius to copy every accident of light and shade; nor could he do so indeed, without a disproportionate expenditure of time and trouble, which might be otherwise much better employed.

Nevertheless, it is well to have the means at our disposal of introducing these minutiae without any additional trouble, for they will sometimes be found to give an air of variety beyond expectation to the scene represented."

—

William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, 1844–46

"I was interested in a straightforward 19th-century way of photographing an object. To photograph things frontally creates the strongest presence and you can eliminate the possibilities of being too obviously subjective. If you photograph an octopus, you have to work out which approach will show the most typical character of the animal. But first you have to learn about the octopus. Does it have six legs or eight? You have to be able to understand the subject visually, through its visual appearance. You need clarity and not sentimentality."

—

Hilla Becher, in "The Music of the Blast Furnaces: Bernhard and Hilla Becher in Conversation with James Lingwood," *Art Press*, no. 209 (1996)