

## MoMA Audio

### *Time Travelers: Photographs from the Gayle Greenhill Collection*

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**Artist, Charles Sheeler:** I just wasn't very much interested in the figure as subject matter. I'm interested in the manmade world—industrial subjects or a farm building.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** That was the artist Charles Sheeler.

Sheeler started as a commercial photographer, hired by architects to document their projects. It's really only in 1915, or thereabouts, that he starts working with photography as an art form. In this photograph, Sheeler's gone out into the countryside in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, looking at 19th-century barns. One thing that Sheeler was really drawn to was that they were spaces of work.

**Charles Sheeler:** Community built the barns with utility in mind. They weren't building a work of art. If it's beautiful to some of us afterwards, it's beautiful because its intention was very beautifully realized.

**Samuel Allen:** As a photographer, he's finding ways to draw out the inherent abstraction that exists in the world by framing a picture in a particular way. And he's positioning his camera so that these buildings recompose themselves into intersecting triangles, rectangles, and squares. You have some areas with clearly defined wood grain. These vertical lines—that's the siding of these buildings. You have shingles. They both retain their identity as the things that they are, but they also become reduced to shapes and fields of texture and light or dark.

**Charles Sheeler:** I do like contrasts. I think that's an important consideration for me. At times, I like a black coming right next to a white, like a pistol shot.

Archival audio from: Oral history interview with Charles Sheeler, 1959 June 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

**Artist, Lucas Samaras:** Narcissism has negative connotations. Don't look in the mirror and so on. When you do then seriously look in the mirror, you know, you look in the mirror, you say, "*Wow, what is it? Who am I? What the hell is this?*" That discovery is important to me.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** This is a work by Lucas Samaras from his series of *Photo-Transformations*. Autobiography was a central element of Samaras's work pretty much from the beginning. And the starting point for a lot of his Polaroid works is being alone and performing for the camera, contorting his body, wearing costumes, lighting himself in different ways.

**Lucas Samaras:** You have to face certain facts about yourself. Once I started photographing myself, I could see portions of myself that I hadn't seen before. When I see a side view, I'm not used to it. I would say, "Hmm, it's a little peculiar." It becomes an interesting psychological confrontation.

**Samuel Allen:** In the early 1970s, Samaras began working with a newer model of Polaroid instant camera, the SX-70. One thing that Samaras learned about the prints that were produced by this camera is that their chemicals stay soft for up to 24 hours, which means that if you take your finger or a pencil, you can push around the image material and shape it into all of these new forms. In this photograph, you can see how he's made it appear as if some of the joints of his arm and his leg are disconnected from his body.

It's about expressing all of the possibilities that might reside within himself. All these ways of being that you can't necessarily be in the world, you can be for a photograph.

Archival audio from: Oral history interview with Lucas Samaras, 1968 January 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

**Artist, Emmet Gowin:** I met Edith on a Saturday night—December of 1960. And Edith and I would get married three years later. I photographed her from the minute I got a camera.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** That was Emmet Gowin. This is a photograph of his wife Edith, in Chincoteague, Virginia.

Gowin's earliest photographs draw inspiration from the snapshot and family photography. There's a candidness to them, but they're also frequently posed, which means that the sitter's an active agent in the picture-making process.

**Emmet Gowin:** I wanted to announce to anybody who saw these pictures, you may think you're talking about me as an artist. That would be a confusion. Without Edith's gift to me, you wouldn't be looking at anything. In a way, I'm there being the observer to her. She consents to my observation, but both of us are equally exposed.

**Samuel Allen:** Chincoteague was this island where Gowin lived as an adolescent, so there's this personal significance for him. With this photograph, one of the notable qualities of it is that it's a square. It's not portrait format, it's not landscape; it's maybe both, simultaneously. The person and the landscape are being given an equal kind of importance.

**Emmet Gowin:** We think that people age and change. For me, it's just as true of a landscape. And if you've loved a place, and marked its particulars in your mind, and revisit it a year later, anybody with this experience will say something about the shock, how the landscape is not the landscape you have fixed in your mind. It's just not there anymore.

Archival audio from: Oral history interview with Emmet Gowin, 2010 May 13-14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

**693 Duane Michals. *Chance Meeting*. 1970**

**Artist, Duane Michals:** When you look at the first picture, you have no idea what's happening here. And then, very slowly, it unfolds. In six pictures, you could express a lot.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** This is a work by Duane Michals titled *Chance Meeting*.

In the late 1960s, Michals began creating photographic sequences, and they function almost like film stills, unfolding a narrative. *Chance Meeting* restages the experience of encountering someone on the street and realizing, belatedly, that you have some kind of connection to them. But we can also read the glances that pass between the two men in this artwork as desiring glances. Perhaps they've moved into a covert place to search for something that's not publicly condoned.

**Duane Michals:** In my day, being gay wasn't an option. The idea of somebody would be attracted to other men—I didn't even know what that was. When I did my work, it's about the legitimacy of affection between people of the same gender.

**Samuel Allen:** When Michals began with photography, the predominant way of working was this idea of the "decisive moment."

**Duane Michals:** And it only meant one thing: observable reality. But what about my reality? My dreams, my anxieties, my sexual fantasies? All which I found more legitimate. I thought that photography should deal with the entire range of experience. So therefore, the subjects I chose were things that I knew intimately.

Archival audio from: Oral history interview with Duane Michals, 2016 June 7-23. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

**Artist, JoAnn Verburg:** One of the things that comes through in this is my interest in Chinese screens. I loved that they divided the space up in such a way that you could see one piece of space at a time. And in each of the individual frames, there might be a whole sense of a world that would be different in quality and character from the next one over.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** That was the artist JoAnn Verburg. In 1995, Verburg began photographing olive groves in the countryside surrounding Spoleto, Italy.

Many of Verburg's artworks are composed of multiple photographs. When she creates works like this, she will ensure that the horizon line is in the same place from each image to the next. So, there's an illusion of continuous space, even though the four individual photographs don't necessarily align perfectly with one another. She's pushing against the frame of the individual photograph. She's showing what's to the left, what's to the right, how the world exceeds the boundaries of the single image.

**JoAnn Verburg:** One of the things that I like is that it moves from being abstract in certain places, and the scale is close up in certain places, and then in another frame, the subject matter is more recognizable in the distance. When you put them all together, I think there's a sense that there's not just one way to look at things. There are many ways.

**695 Jan Groover. Untitled. c. 1979**

**Artist, Jan Groover:** January, 1978, I got a grant. I took it to the bank, cashed it, and went to buy a 4x5 and started taking pictures with the kitchen sink.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** Jan Groover began photographing in the 1970s. She says that what interested her about photography was that everything was already there for the camera. But many of Groover's points of reference are painters.

**Jan Groover:** I look at as much painting as I look at photography. Sometimes that is about color. There's these colors that seem to be overlapping and are contained in two different kinds of shapes.

**Samuel Allen:** She had been interested in still life for a while, but it was really once she bought this 4x5 camera, a larger format camera, that she started working with still life in a concerted way.

She presents everyday objects—bell peppers, silverware, glasses, bowls. She's selecting these objects for the ways in which they can be both themselves and something else. They can be a form, a line, or a color. Also, many of the objects are either transparent or reflective, and so you're looking through things, you're seeing objects doubled on the surface of other objects. The whole image is cultivating uncertainty.

**Jan Groover:** I am interested in seeing the thing. I had some wild concept that you could change space—which you can. But once I bought the view camera, everything else was just eyeballing it.

**Samuel Allen:** Photography is something that Groover understood as being not so much an objective medium. So what we see in a photograph like this is not the world as we see it, it's the world as a camera sees it. Her task, as an artist, was delving into what a camera shows us.

Archival audio excerpted from *Jan Groover: Tilting at Space*. 1994. United States. Directed by Mark Trottenberg. Checkerboard Film Foundation

**Artist, Harry M. Callahan:** I walk around, all of a sudden, I see something, and then that's the beginning to start working on something. All the time I'm doing that, I feel like I'm adventuring in some way, looking for something. You don't know what it's gonna be.

**Curatorial Assistant, Samuel Allen:** My name is Samuel Allen. I'm a curatorial assistant in the Department of Photography at MoMA. And that was the artist Harry Callahan.

Callahan was fascinated by building facades. He photographed them frequently. And this is a photograph from 1945 titled *New York*. It's basically a grid of grids. It has this geometric composition of windows. The window panes create their own grids, so there is this way in which the image is built around an idea of linearity.

But what makes the photograph compelling, for me, is the deviations from the formal rigidity. You see inside the individual windows, curtains, and blinds. Some of the bricks are worn down. There's cracks in the facade. They speak to the interior life—some sort of vitality that's beaming through. And so the careful linear composition seems to create a framework in which suddenly life can emerge. For Callahan, the interest is about the world and the life of things.

**Harry M. Callahan:** At a certain stage in my life, I felt like I wasn't doing anything. And I felt, well, you should do something to benefit humanity. When I happened to get started in photography, all of a sudden it did that for me. I wanted to make somebody feel something. I always said that if it moves the spirit and human beings, then that's what I wanted to do.

Archival audio from: Oral history interview with Harry M. Callahan, 1975 February 13. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.