



## Press release

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**Cindy Sherman**  
*Untitled*, 1981  
Épreuve chromogène  
123,5 x 60,2 cm  
© Cindy Sherman. Courtesy the artist  
and Hauser & Wirth  
Crédit photographique : Centre Pompidou,  
MNAM-CCI/Philippe Migeat/Dist.  
GrandPalaisRmn

## *Another Avant-garde. Photography 1970-2000*

8 November 2024 — 16 February 2025

Shanghai

### Curation

**Florian Ebner**, chief curator in the Department of Photographs at the Musée national d'art moderne  
**Matthias Pfaller**, curator in the Department of Photographs at the Musée national d'art moderne

The exhibition presents the highlights of the photography collection of the Centre Pompidou. For the first time in decades, key works from the period between 1970 and 2000 are presented together to revisit the established story of photography's success in the art world. Precisely by juxtaposing wildly different works, from small conceptual pieces to large tableaux, from single photographs to experimental video works, the exhibition proposes to look at the wide spectrum of artistic possibilities of the camera. Whether as sculpture, performance, moving image, or in recourse to painting, photography has become an important tool for artists from different backgrounds. In its selection of works from Europe, the Americas, Africa, and China, the exhibition expands the hitherto Eurocentric narrative of art photography and sheds light on common concerns of artists from diverse social and cultural contexts.

The exhibition puts special emphasis on works from China, supported by a number of loans that establish a dialogue between different histories of the avant-garde. The Centre Pompidou thus continues the stimulating encounter of its collection in the different host countries of its partnerships.

The exhibition begins with a view back on the first avant-garde of the 1920s, whose originality, playfulness, and self-reflexivity are echoed in what is presented as another avant-garde in the following galleries. The exhibition continues with documents of performance art and Conceptual Art and thus acknowledges the importance of other artistic practices to popularization of photography in the 1970s, but it also makes clear the tremendous technical and conceptual influence of photography on these practices. The subsequent galleries demonstrate this symbiosis in artworks that both deconstruct and reconstruct the photographic apparatus and image. Select works from the collection of new media underline the parallel experiments in video art, making the connection between the still

and moving image, and the mechanism and performativity of the camera. The genres range from portraiture, landscape, appropriation art, sculpture and analytic photography, displaying the diverse spectrum in which artists worked and interrogated the potential of visual representation. With the grand tableaux of the 1980s and 1990s, the parcours arrives at a decisive development of art history: the return to figuration. After decades of the primacy of abstraction, photography offered artists the means to turn again to the physical world. However, rather than relying on a straightforward documentary style, artists explored the intricacies of the complex creation and reception of images and their importance in society. The exhibition concludes with an outlook on contemporary photography and digital media in a continued interrogation of the status of the photographic image.

## The exhibition's layout

### Introduction

Despite important historic artistic movements, such as Pictorialism and New Objectivity, which championed photography as art, it did not enter as such in museums until the 1970s. Through a juxtaposition of seminal works, this exhibition looks at the moment when photography became a leading medium in contemporary art. It traces its evolution as a document of artistic processes to an autonomous artwork. In the first half of the twentieth century, photographers of the avant-garde explored aesthetic abstraction in photography. From the 1970s onward, a new generation returned to figuration, yet detoured the documentary style in search for new modes of representing the physical world. What led these artists to turn to photography as a tool and a method? What can the camera offer in diverse technical, social, and cultural contexts? The exhibition highlights the productive tension between diverse modes of creation and presentation, such as series and unique pieces, image and text, realism and spectacle, appropriated materials and studio works, references to popular culture and art history, and their parallels to video art. By creating a dialog between artists from all over the world, distinct artistic backgrounds, and different moments in time, the exhibition shows photography's principal mechanisms that still influence contemporary art today.

### Section 1

#### A New Vision

The avant-garde from the 1920s onwards held up a mirror to photography: experiments in technical processes and new angles expanded the visual repertoire of photographers. A new consciousness about life, surfacing after the First World War (1914–18), changed the way artists were looking at the world, their practice, and themselves. The self-portrait manifests this moment of self-reflection and points out the interplay of relations: who is being photographed, who is looking at the image, and who is making it? In the 1970s, another avant-garde continued this interrogation, notably the Canadian artist Jeff Wall. *Picture for Women* is a theatrical set-up in which nothing is hidden, all the elements that make a picture are visible: the photographer, the model, and the camera. Through the mirror image and the work's size, the spectator, too, is involved in and confronted with the dynamics of pictorial representation.

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## Section 2

### **Art for the Camera**

Many artists using photography and film in the 1970s and 1980s were not trained in the profession, or did not take pictures themselves. Performance and conceptual artists, in particular, had their interventions documented by photographers to assure an afterlife of their work. For a long time, it was not the photographs but only the ephemeral actions that were considered the artwork. However, without photography, much of the interventions could not be exhibited. Artists staged their actions in ways that yielded the most expressive images, or conceived their works without an audience and only for the camera. Sometimes, the act of taking photographs even became part of the artwork, such as in the project *Pier 18* with Harry Shunk and János Kender. Thus, photography turned into an integral part of other art forms and influenced them with its own set of aesthetics, rules, and possibilities.

## Section 3

### **Questioning the Tool**

Working with a camera has always left room for experiments and chance. As a technical apparatus, every step from choosing the film, objective, shutter speed, aperture, and the developing of the image in the darkroom, offers a myriad of possibilities and variations. In an ongoing exploration of the capacities of photography and film, many artists did not aim for the technically perfect image, but tested the limits of the medium. In what can be called analytic photography, they dissected its individual components and mechanisms. Similar to Conceptual Art, this type of artistic practice becomes a program. A certain mechanism is applied in mundane situations, revealing what photography is and is not able to show. Hence, these artists challenged the photographic image as an immediate and truthful depiction of the world.

## Section 4

### **Questioning the Image in Society**

In 1965, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described photography as “a middlebrow art”, and as a ritual depending on certain societal rules and values. Being a mass phenomenon, photographs appear natural to us so that one no longer sees that they are social constructs. Artists, in turn, subvert everyday photography and turn private snapshots, tourism pictures, and commercial images against themselves. They reproduce common motifs and emblematic pictures and thus question the authorship and meaning of images. Several artists incorporate the language of advertising and sociology into their works to reveal how images are used to sell us things and lifestyles, and how we should think of ourselves and others. By appropriating, reassembling, and restaging pictures of mass media, they dealt early on with the augmenting flood of images that equally shapes our lives today.

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## Section 5

### **Transforming the portrait**

Portraiture is one of the oldest genres of visual arts. It is commonly considered as a fixed expression of the sitter's identity. The artists in this section demonstrate that it is also a fluid space in which the subject can experiment with diverse aspects of their personality, and negotiate the relationship between the individual, their friends and family, and society at large. These portraits can take the shape of serious arrangements in which the emotions and relations of the people become both unique to them and universal expressions at the same time. Other portraits appear utterly generic, thus challenging the idea of representing a person in all their complexity. For some artists, posing in front of the camera is an opportunity to momentarily slip into different roles. All of these artists underscore the fact that no portrait is natural, but always a construction of the self and the other through predetermined codes.

## Section 6

### **Photography as Sculpture**

At the same time that some artists sought to deconstruct the technical and symbolic aspects of photography, others went the opposite way: they redefined the photograph as a concrete object and reinvested its visual space. The interest for objects, architecture, and their structures has always been a driving force for photographers. The possibility to produce large prints in different techniques in the 1980s offered photographers to not only reproduce places and things, but to create analogies between form and content as well. The mixing of different media in contemporary art, such as photography, sculpture, film, and installation, has expanded the potential spaces in which images can be shown beyond the single framed print. In their material dimension, these works confront the viewer with both the compositional nature of the photograph and its physical immediacy.

## Section 7

### **Another Objectivity**

In the 1980s, artists explored the notion of objectivity not only through the material aspect of photography, but also by questioning what a photograph can objectively represent. The mistrust in media imagery and the documentary value of photography led artists to explore new forms of dealing with social issues in the world. They address these larger topics by visualizing them through individual fates, which are rendered as immersive pictures or collages of fragments that transcend the individual moment in which the photograph was taken. The variety of forms and themes of these works reflects the versatility that photography offers to artists. The size, technique, and material that artists choose are determined by the messages they want to convey, which ultimately constitutes a symbiosis of form and content.

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## Section 8

### **A World in Itself**

Since the 1980s, photographers produced works which appear like documentary images at first sight, but which are in fact meticulously constructed images. They do not depend on any outside context in order to be understood; they are 'a world in themselves'. These *tableaux*, in analogy to painting, rely on the concept of theatricality: they create the illusion of being real scenes while it is clear that they are made for an audience. They engage the spectators who complete the image through their contemplation. At the same time, the viewers are often excluded from a true understanding of the image through the deceptive minimalism of the motifs. By including the museum space and the audience that transform an image into an artwork, artists demonstrate the fictionality of the photograph and its context. Their works are *mises-en-abyme* of photography's success in the artworld.

## Section 9

### **Globalisation**

In the wake of globalization, artists have been investigating the reshaping of our societies and built environment by worldwide commerce. Artists accompany this development by traveling along the trading routes and expanding the reach of their work. Cheap imported goods in a supermarket, brand logos of multinational corporations, and urban architecture are the symbols of economic growth and international power relations around the world. Photography is the prime medium with which artists visualize these shared phenomena in a variety of places, showing both their similarity and site-specific context. Moreover, photography is itself a product of global exchange, in the trade of its materials, its mass production and reproduction, and easy distribution. Conceptually, too, it resembles the industrial logic in its standardized formats and the objectification of diverse situations and experiences.

## Section 10

### **Photography Today**

The avant-garde artists of the 1970s to the 2000s established photography as a key element of contemporary art practice, education, collections, and the market. Today's artists build up on this history by making use of all its techniques, from photograms to digital photography. Rather than focusing on the grand *tableau*, they mix different media and displays. Working in a documentary and socially committed manner, investigating historical archives, or pushing the technical boundaries of what an image can be, they explore the possibilities of photography, from fixing a moment in the present to reviving the past and speculating about the future. The unabated popularity of photographic images in everyday life urges artists to keep investigating photography's fundamental questions, such as its technical capacities, its uses in society, and how it can express the human condition.

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Since its establishment in Japan in 1961, SIGMA has been focusing on optical manufacturing with imaging at its base. Imaging is inseparable from photographic tools. Every time the shutter is pressed, whether it be a moment of excitement or calm contemplation, it is the creator's choice and depiction of time. SIGMA is excited to become the partner chosen in these important moments, accompanying creators to experience the joy and happiness brought by the art of imaging. Adhering to this concept, SIGMA has always insisted on high technology as its goal, providing innovative products and services, including the highly acclaimed SIGMA GLOBAL VISION series, full-frame mirrorless cameras fp and fp L series, the world's unique three-layer sensor «Foveon X3», etc., to provide more users with more personalized choices in various artistic creations.