In late 1959, after two years of trying, Robert Frank succeeded in continuing an American publisher to print The Americans—a book that not only would come to define his career but also would mark a turning point in the history of twentieth-century photography. The critical reaction was immediate, often negative, and profound. The harshest words appeared in Popular Photography in May 1960, describing the book as “a sad poem for sick people” and “marred by spite, bitterness, and guilt.”[2] In July 1960, Time Magazine described the book as “a sad record of a country that moves and speaks its language in terms of violence and hate.”[3] The New York Times declared it a “catastrophe.”[4] The New York Times Book Review identified it as “one of the most quoted of the book’s negative reviews.”[5]

Commercial success was essentially unimaginable—a photograph might sell for twenty-five dollars, if it sold at all—but many of these photographs still managed to produce monographic books that featured their work as they wanted it shown, among them Hélène Nuyts (1966, plate 32), by Shōzō Tatsukawa: The Americans (1969) and Women Are Beautiful (1973, plate 4), by Wim Wenders; Self Portrait (1975, plate 6), by Lee Friedlander; East 100th Street (1970, plate 17), by Bruce Davidson; Texas (1971, plate 49), by Larry Clark; Aperture’s Diane Arbus monograph (1972, plates 1–3); Suburbia (1973, plate 48), by Bill Owens; The New West (1974, plate 15), by Robert Adams; The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California (1974), by Lewis Baltz; Gypsies (1975, plate 33), by Josef Koudelka; Humanoïdes (1976, plate 34), by Sara Facio with Álica Amico; William Eggleston’s Guide (1976, plates 20, 21); Carnival Strippers (1976, plate 30), by Susan Meiselas; and Yokohama Story (1979, plate 48), by Miyako Ichihashi. Others would follow. It is not hard to see the sense of change whereas the generation that came of age artistically in the 1950s or earlier saw their work circulate first on the pages of Life, Look, Fortune, Esquire, Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and other magazines in Europe and the United States, younger artists largely eschewed magazine publication, both in principle (to protect their artistic integrity) and because other options for making a living were appearing.

The photographic world had been changing throughout the 1950s and 1960s—both the photographers of serious artistic intent had relied on as both livelihood and means of sharing their work with the world—was waning in importance and reach, and American audiences of photographers were turning to television and greeting cards and the world around them. Photographers were also beginning to recognize that a magazine’s editorial direction might not suit their control over the exhibition of the photographs, such as Garry Winogrand, learned these lessons from the inside, having started their careers at the publications they later came to distrust, but by the mid-1960s even the youngest artists were suspicious of magazines that might distort or dilute their work. Instead they looked for opportunities to publish books in which they could control the image, sequence, presentation, scale, and context. The Americans was a pinnacle of artistic integrity and independence; a fact noted by how difficult it was for Frank to find a publisher.2

Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago, when the label was new, made their pictures in the service of a social cause. It was their aim to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right. In the past decade a new generation of photographer has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and the frailties of society. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational. This exhibition shows a handful of pictures by three photographers of that generation. What unites them is not style or sensibility; each has a distinct and personal sense of the uses of photography and the meanings of the world. What they hold in common is a belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.3

In the nearly fifty years since New Documents, there has been a tendency to group the achievements of these three photographers, minimizing the individuality of each, although surey that was not Stankiewicz’s intent. The works of Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand, as well as many of other artists who sought to engage with the real world through a camera’s lens, are as diverse as what they chose to photograph; however, it is Szarkowski’s phrase to discuss them is both to acknowledge the exhibition’s influence and to newly apply its notion to the wide range of practices represented here, as well as in other chapters of this volume. The impact of this exhibition brought a larger audience to photography and provided the possibility, for photographers, of employment, unabated by commercialism. And a third seismic shift occurred in 1962, with the arrival of John Szarkowski as the director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this event: Stankiewicz’s approach to the medium, articulated through many exhibitions and fewer, but still influential publications, had a transformative effect on the ways in which both historical and contemporary photography was understood. In 1967 Stankiewicz organized the exhibition New Documents, in which he introduced Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand.
The following month, Twelve Photographers of the American Social Landscape, organized by Thomas Gavett, opened at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, in Massachusetts. Gavett brought together the work of four of the same photographers (Davidson, Friedlander, Lyon, Michals) with that of eight others (Frank, Ralph Gibson, Warren Hill, Rudolph Janson, Simpson Kalisher, James Marchael, Philip Perks, and Tom Zimmermann). The connection between his and Lyon’s titles is not entirely coincidental; in his acknowledgments Gavette cited Perkis, and Tom Zimmermann). The connection between his and Lyon’s titles is not entirely coincidental; in his acknowledgments Garver cited Perkis, and Tom Zimmermann). The connection between his and Lyon’s titles is not entirely coincidental; in his acknowledgments Garver cited Perkis, and Tom Zimmermann). The connection between his and Lyon’s titles is not entirely coincidental; in his acknowledgments Garver cited Perkis, and Tom Zimmermann). 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