

# **Photo eye of the 20's : an exhibition prepared in collaboration with George Eastman House, June 4-September 8**

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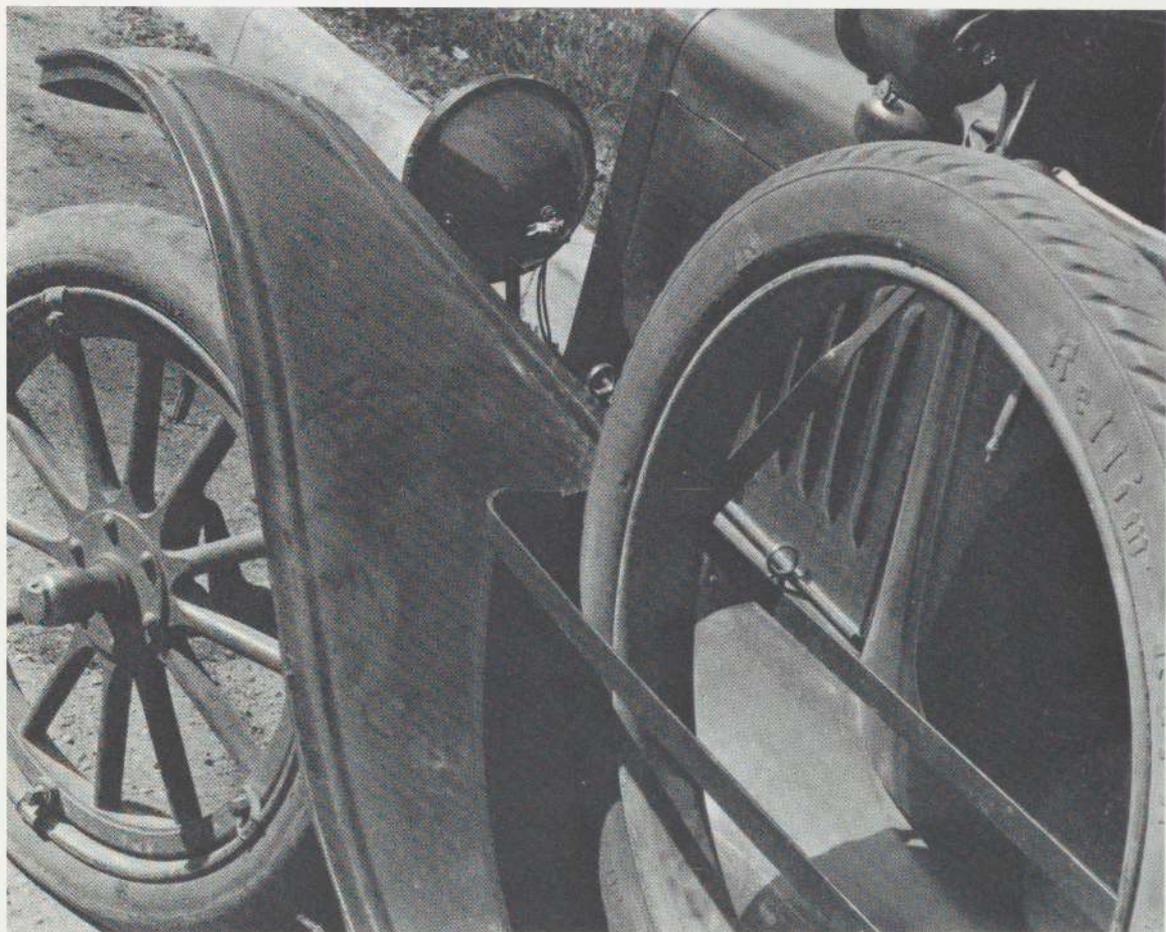
Exhibition URL

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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—  
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is  
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,  
primary documents, installation views, and an  
index of participating artists.

# Photo Eye of the 20s

An exhibition prepared in collaboration with George Eastman House



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The Museum of Modern Art

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The 1920s were years of exploration and regeneration in the arts. The functions of all artistic media were being redefined; artists and critics alike were seeking directions. Photography was an integral part of this progressive art movement which was sweeping across Europe and America.

In New York, Alfred Stieglitz had already demonstrated in his own photographs, in his quarterly *Camera Work*, and in exhibitions at the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession that photography and painting each had its own essential characteristics. In 1916 he championed Paul Strand. The photographs of this newcomer were direct, even brutal: portraits, almost life-size, of people in the streets, semi-abstractions of geometrical fantasy, and instantaneous exposures arresting the fleeting, ever-changing traffic of the city.

With Strand a power was realized in photography which, but for a few notable exceptions, had lain latent in all considerations of photography's artistic position. Charles Sheeler discovered that with the camera as well as with the brush he could capture the essence of what man had built. To Alvin Langdon Coburn, photography offered a challenge to abstract art. In 1912 he pointed his camera down from the pinnacles of Manhattan to create photographs he called "almost as fantastic as a Cubist fantasy." And in 1917 he made non-representational photographs by clamping mirrors around his lens to produce kaleidoscopic distortions. "Vortographs" he named them, in honor of the Vortex group. He made a portrait of its leader, his friend Ezra Pound, by printing the same negative three times on the same piece of paper. Stieglitz had taken a new approach to portraiture, which he conceived as a sequence of images not of the face alone but of all parts of the body—not the mood and look of a single instant but a revelation of changing aspects over a period of time. Edward Steichen, whose soft gum prints, rich in chiaroscuro, vague in definition, and posterlike in composition Stieglitz had praised only a score of years before, began even before 1920 to reveal in sharp detail the bold structure of architecture and plant forms, and he soon developed a style of portrait lighting more related to the theater than to the photographic studio.

Thus, when the decade of the twenties opened, two directions were already established: the direct use of the camera to bring us face to face, as it were, with the thing itself in all its substance and texture; and the exploration of a fresh vision of the world, conforming neither to tradition nor convention, and the creation of abstract, even autonomous, images unrelated to realism.



André Kertész. *Montparnasse*, 1928. The Museum of Modern Art

Edward Weston turned from Whistlerian asymmetry and flatness of field, discarded his soft-focus lenses, and reveled in the camera's power to record "more than the eye can see." In similar spirit Albert Renger-Patzsch was photographing in Germany; he titled a collection of his photographs "The World is Beautiful."

Painters explored cameraless photography. By placing objects both opaque and translucent upon sensitized paper in darkness and then exposing the assemblage to light, Christian Schad in 1918 obtained what his friend Tristan Tzara called "Schadographs." The technique was independently rediscovered by Man Ray and Lázló Moholy-Nagy in 1922; their "Rayographs" and "photograms" were rich, often enigmatic lightplays. Moholy-Nagy used the camera as a visual tool, discovering beauty after the exposure had been made. He delighted in forms found in photographs taken for utilitarian purposes through telescopes, microscopes, from airplanes, and with invisible radiation. The accidental juxtaposition of disparate visual elements also led to a new medium: photomontage.

Along with the discovery of form through the camera came the delight in how it can catch, in a fraction of a second, the unexpected and seemingly irrational. André Kertész photographed strange happenings in everyday life on the street; Walker Evans found the spirit of the day in homely details of torn street-posters and humble interiors.

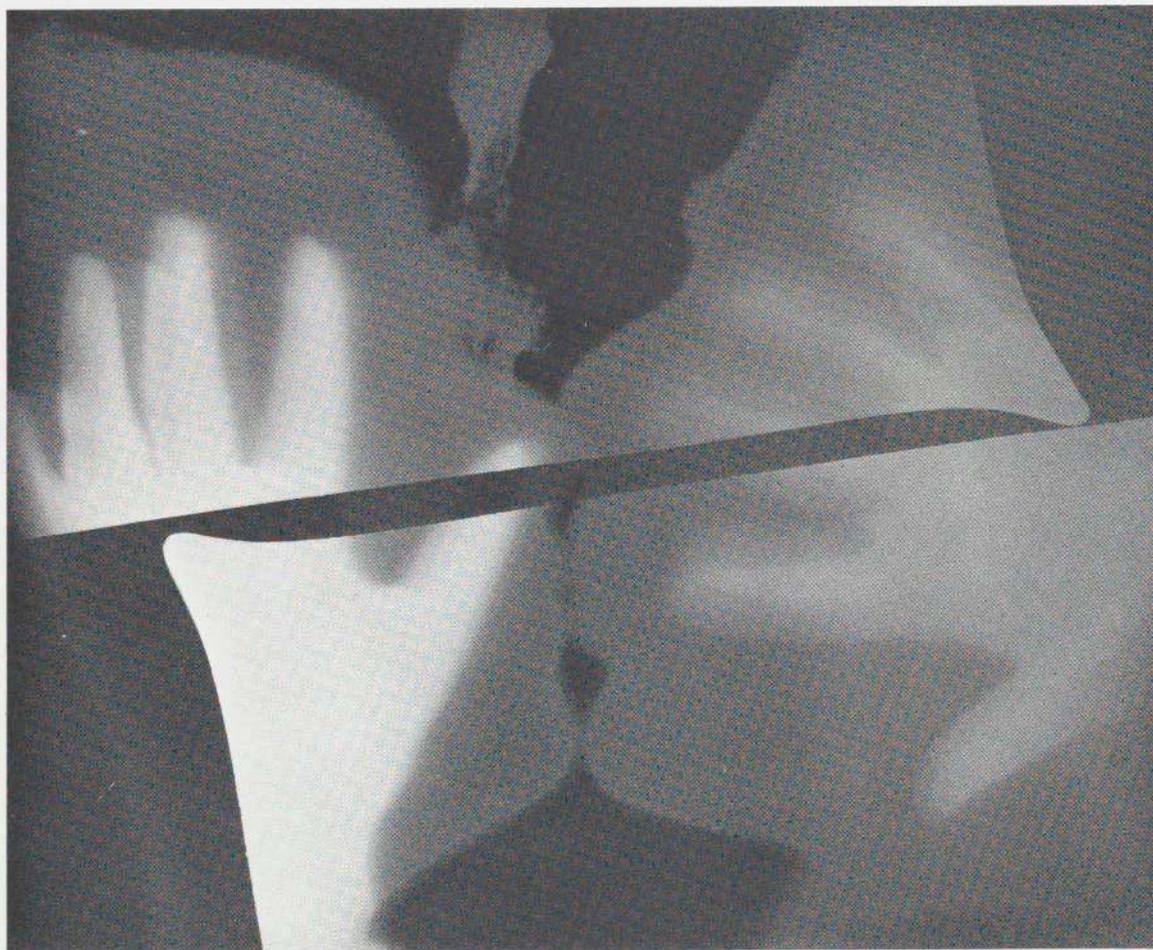
Linking the two directions, creating photographs both realistic and of abstract beauty, was Alfred Stieglitz. His "Equivalents"—photographs of clouds put in sequences—show that beyond subject matter, beyond form, lies an inner message.

In no other decade were photography and film more closely related. As an integral part of this exhibition, a selection of films of the twenties will be screened, ranging from such classics as Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, and Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* to such little-known films as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, Ralph Steiner's *H<sub>2</sub>O*, and Joris Ivens' *The Bridge*.

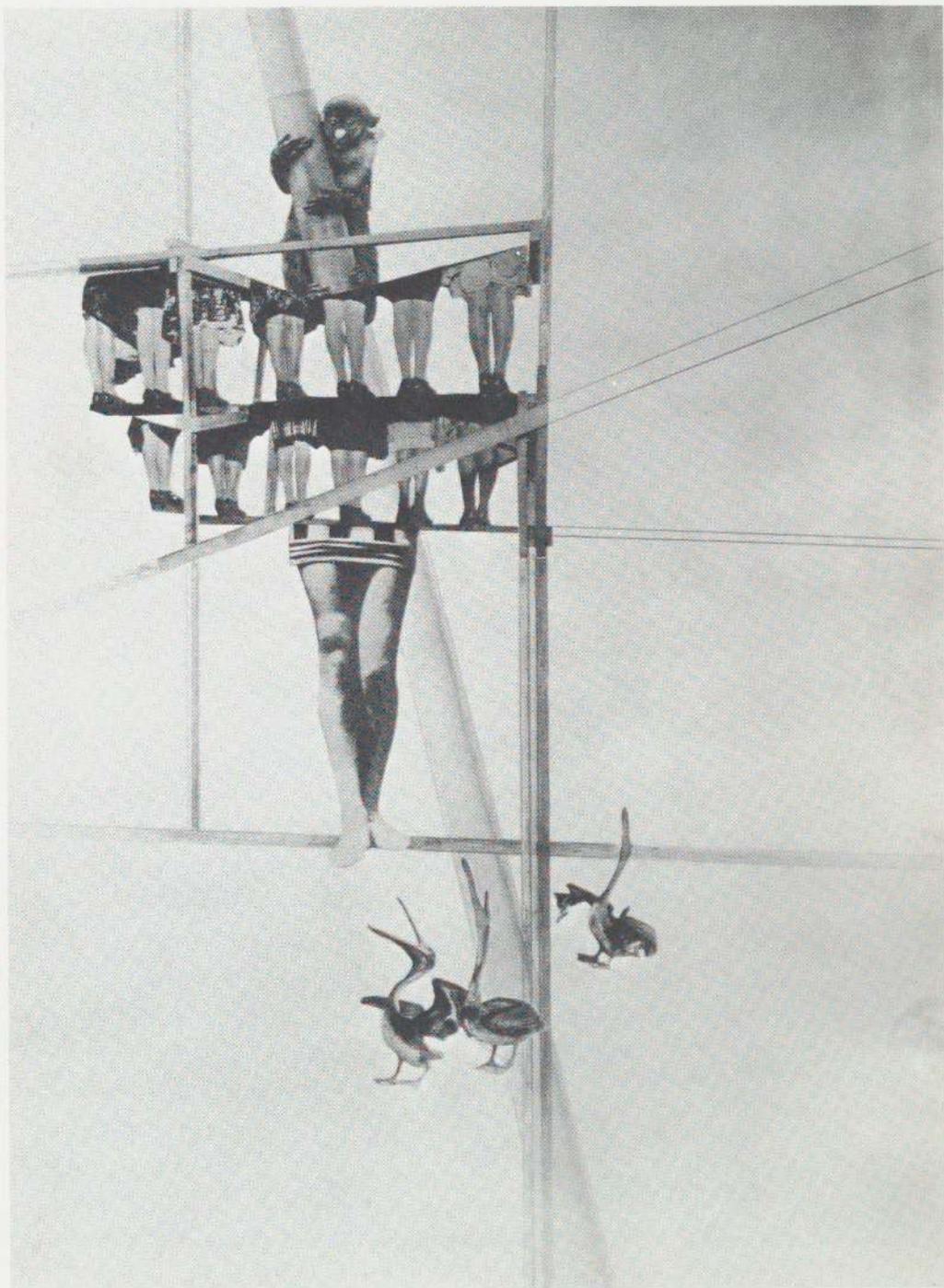
Beaumont Newhall

Director of George Eastman House and Director of the exhibition

*Kino Eye of the 20s*, a companion program of forty films selected by Beaumont Newhall from the archives of The Museum of Modern Art and George Eastman House, will be exhibited under the auspices of the Department of Film during June, July, and August.



Man Ray. *Rayograph*, n.d. The Museum of Modern Art



László Moholy-Nagy. *The Structure of the World*, 1927. George Eastman House  
cover: Ralph Steiner. *Ford Car*, 1929. The Museum of Modern Art