

JEU DE PAUME # 89

Concorde

Berenice Abbott

(1898–1991)

Photographs

21 February – 29 April 2012





Man Ray, *Portrait of Berenice Abbott*, 1925.
Collection Hank O'Neal, New York © Man Ray Trust/ADAGP, Paris, 2012



Jean Cocteau with Gun, 1926.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics

With over 120 photographs, plus a selection of books and documents never shown before, this is the first exhibition in France to cover the many different facets of the American photographer Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), who is also famous for her international advocacy of Eugène Atget. She came to Paris in 1921 where she learnt her craft from Man Ray before opening her own studio and embarking on a successful career as a portraitist. Returning to New York City in 1929, she conceived what remains her best-known project, *Changing New York* (1935–39). This was financed by the Works Progress Administration as part of its response to the economic crisis sweeping the country. The photographs she took in 1954 when travelling along the US East Coast on Route 1 (the exhibition presents a previously unseen selection of these images) reflect her ambition to represent the whole of what she called the “American scene.” Furthermore, in the 1950s, she also worked on a set of images for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) designed to illustrate the principles of mechanics and light for educational purposes. A committed member of the avant-garde from the early 1920s, and a staunch opponent of Pictorialism and the school of Alfred Stieglitz, Abbott spent the whole of her career exploring the limits and nature of documentary photography and photographic realism. This exhibition shows the rich array of her interests and conveys both the unity and diversity of her work.

Portraits

Berenice Abbott moved to New York City in the early 1920s and went about becoming a sculptor. Mixing in the bohemian circles of Greenwich Village, she met writers and artists such as Djuna Barnes, Sadakichi Hartmann and Marcel Duchamp. She also posed for Man Ray. Economic hardship at home and the allure of what then seemed the cultural *Eldorado* of Europe impelled several of these artists to try their luck in Paris, and Abbott herself joined this group of American expatriates in 1921. In 1923 she became the assistant of Man Ray, who had opened a portrait studio shortly after his arrival in France in 1921. While a fair portion of the studio’s clients were American tourists, Abbott found herself at the heart of the avant-garde scene – especially that of the Surrealists. Between 1923 and 1926 she thus learnt about darkroom techniques and portrait photography while at the same time picking up a broader intellectual and artistic education. She produced her portraits in Man Ray’s studio before opening her own in 1926. Success soon followed. Her clientele was a mixture of French cultural figures and American expatriates, of bourgeois, bohemians and literary types. Her portraits were on occasion manifestly influenced by Surrealism, and more generally show an interest in masquerade, play and disguise, but sometimes even in their use of overprinting and distortion. The female models express a kind of sexual ambiguity, notably by their



Nightview, New York City, 1932.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics

masculine haircut or clothes, deliberately exuding a sense of uncertainty with regard to their identity. In composing her portraits, Abbott developed a distinctive aesthetic, far removed from the usual commercial conventions. The absence of a set, with the background usually no more than a plain wall, helped to focus on the sitter and their posture, the position of their body and their facial expression. The use of a tripod and long-focus lenses placed at eye-height allowed her to avoid distortions and thus heighten the physical presence of the models. In early 1929 Abbott left Paris for New York City. Back in America she continued with the same activities, opening a new portrait studio and taking part in exhibitions of modernist photography, while also promoting the work of Eugène Atget, having bought part of his estate in 1928.

New York City

In the early 1930s, Abbott set about her project for a great documentary portrait of the City of New York, but had no luck when she approached institutions such as the Museum of the City of New York and the New York Historical Society for funding. She assembled her first efforts in an album (eight pages of which are exhibited here) in order to convey the scale of her ambitious undertaking, and in 1934 exhibited her photographs of the City at the Museum of the City of New York in the hope of attracting sponsors. In 1935, support was at last forthcoming from the



Triborough Bridge, East 125th Street Approach, New York City, June 29, 1937.
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Federal Art Project

Federal Art Project, a programme set up to aid artists by the Works Progress Administration as part of the New Deal; she now had the support of a team of researchers who produced an information pack with text and drawings to accompany each image. Entitled *Changing New York*, she conceived this commission as both a vast documentary record of the City and a personal work of art. Eighty of the 305 photographs constituting this project have been selected for the exhibition. These are accompanied by documents – a poster, exhibition views, sketches and historical notes, proofs, pages from the preparatory album and original editions – that help to convey the concerns and ambitions behind this major photographic undertaking. Abbott focused on the contrasts and links between old and new in the City's structure. Her images alternate between a New Vision aesthetic, characterised by an emphasis on details and bold perspectives, and a more documentary style that is frontal and neutral. Rather than the kind of nostalgic approach often brought to bear on a city's landmarks and typical sites, this ensemble offers an exploration of the nature of modernity and focuses on the ways in which the past and future are temporarily linked together. Seeking to reinvent the forms and functions of photography in relation to the practice of documentary, Abbott sets out to capture the "vanishing instant" by juxtaposing motifs from a city subject to an unprecedented process of demolition and reconstruction.



Sunoco Station, Trenton, New Jersey, 1954.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics

The upshot of all this work was the publication of a book, *Changing New York*, in 1939. But there was considerable tension between the publisher, whose concerns were commercial, and the photographer, with her artistic ambitions. In 1938, hoping to take advantage of the fifty million visitors expected at the New York World's Fair of 1939, the publishing house E.P. Dutton proposed to bring out a selection of one hundred images from the project accompanied by a text from the renowned art critic Elizabeth McCausland, who also happened to be Abbott's companion and unflinching supporter. Straying far from the project originally envisaged by the two women, Dutton changed the presentation of the photographs and produced what was a standard tourist guide, breaking the City down into a series of tours, from south to north and from the centre outwards. The text, too, was shorn of its poetic and pedagogical dimensions, leaving only information about the buildings in the pictures.

The "American scene"

This set of architectural images is completed by a selection of vernacular photographs. In the summer of 1935, Berenice Abbott went on a road trip down to the Southern US in order to create a portrait of a rural world in crisis. Choosing the kind of documentary style that would be the hallmark of the photographic survey launched by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) that same year, she focused on the modest wooden

houses and the farmers. Driving around these states with Elizabeth McCausland, Abbott took some two hundred photographs which the two women saw as part of an ambitious photographic portrait of America in book form, although in the end this was never published.

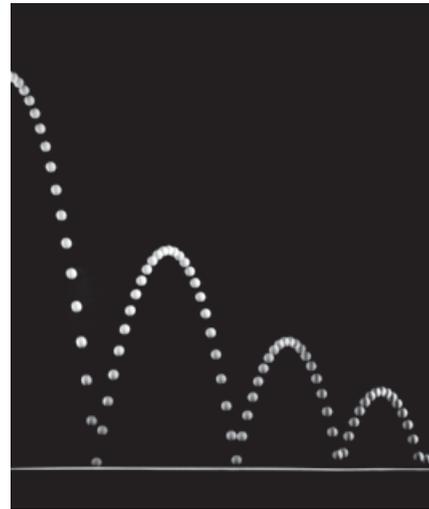
A similar fate befell Abbott's piece on the small towns and villages along Route 1, which she travelled in 1954. Covering approximately 6,500 kilometres as she followed this road along the East Coast of the US, she took some 2,400 photographs, taking in stalls, shops, portraits of farmers, diners and bars and dance halls. Her photography alternated between the documentary aesthetic and Street Photography. With *Route 1*, Abbott continued to pursue her ambition of representing the whole of the "American scene."

Science

Abbott started photographing scientific phenomena in 1939. In 1944 she was recruited by the journal *Science Illustrated*, where she published some of her own pictures, as head of its photography department. Abbott took a committed, pedagogical approach, seeing her images as a vital bridge between modern science and the general public. In 1957, as a result of the anxiety about national science stirred by the Soviet launch of the Sputnik into outer space, at the height of the Cold War, the National Science Foundation set up a Physical Science Study Committee at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Its role was



Interference Pattern, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958-1961.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics



Bouncing Ball Time Exposure, 1958-1961.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics

to develop new textbooks for the teaching of science in schools and to use innovative photographs to illustrate the principles of quantum mechanics. Abbott was hired by MIT to produce photographs for the popularisation and teaching of the sciences. Using abstract forms to visually express complex mechanical concepts and invisible mechanical laws, she used black grounds to reveal principles such as gravity and light waves. The exhibition features a score of Abbott's scientific and experimental images, as well as some of the books for which they were used. Harking back to the experiments of the avant-gardes, and in particular the rayogram technique, she was able to produce visually attractive and surprising images that were also rich in discovery, thus combining documentary information with a sense of wonder.

Gaëlle Morel, curator of the exhibition

outline chronology

1898

Birth of Berenice Abbott in Springfield, Ohio, on 17 July.

1917

Studies to be a journalist at Ohio State University.

1918

Leaves for New York City and moves in artistic circles.

1921

Sails to Europe. Studies sculpture in Paris and Berlin and frequents the Surrealist avant-garde.

1923

Hired by Man Ray in his Parisian portrait studio. In addition to making prints, starts to take her own portraits.

1926

Opens her own studio. Photographs the *bourgeoisie* and artists. First exhibition at the gallery Au Sacre du Printemps. Art critics take note.

Meets Eugène Atget and buys several prints.

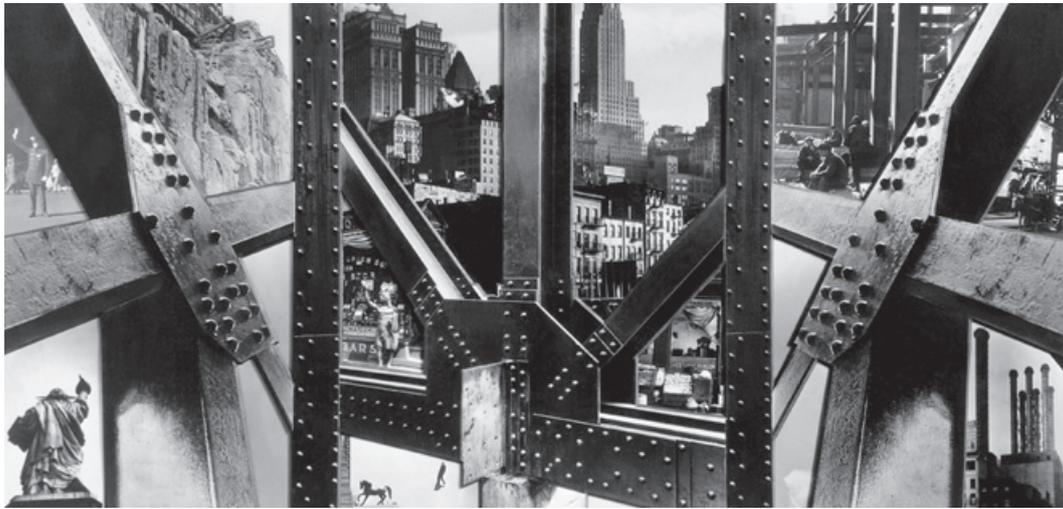
1928

Buys part of the estate of Atget, who died in 1927. Exhibits at the Salon de l'Escalier, a manifesto against Pictorialism.

1929

Shows in two German modernist exhibitions: "Fotografie der Gegenwart" (Essen) and "Film und Foto" (Stuttgart).

Returns to New York City. Opens a portrait studio and starts photographing the City.



Photomontage, *New York City*, 1932.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics

1930

Exhibits at the Weyhe Gallery. Publishes the book *Atget photographie de Paris*. Takes part in "Photography" at Harvard University, the first American show to break with tradition and also with the circle of Alfred Stieglitz.

1931

Seeks institutions to finance her big project on New York City.

1932

Exhibitions: "Photographs of New York by New York Photographers", "Photographs by Berenice Abbott" and "Exhibition of Portrait Photography" at the Julien Levy Gallery and "Murals by American Painters and Photographers" at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

1934-35

Photographs Victorian architecture in East Coast cities. Exhibitions: "American Cities Before the Civil War" (Yale University) and "The Architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson and His Times" (MoMA).

1934

Exhibits photographs about New York City at the Museum of the City of New York with the hope of finding sponsors for her project.

1935

Changing New York is supported by the Federal Art Project, a government programme to aid artists. Abbott takes over 300 photographs.

1935-1958

Teaches photography at the New School for Social Research.

1937

Exhibition of images of New York City at the Museum of the City of New York.

1939

Publication of the book *Changing New York*.

1941

Publication of *Guide to Better Photography*.

1944-45

Artistic Director of *Science Illustrated*. Develops the super-sight technique which produces 40 x 50 cm (16 x 20 inch) negatives.

1954

Travels along Route 1 to photograph towns on the East Coast.

1958-61

Hired by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to illustrate the physical principles of light, speed and magnetism.

1960

Exhibition, "Image of Physics" is organised by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

1964

Publication of *The World of Atget, Magnet and Motion*.

1968

The Museum of Modern Art acquires Abbott and Levy's portion of the Atget estate.

1991

Death of Berenice Abbott in Monson, Maine, on 9 December.



Miner, Greenview, West Virginia, 1935.
Ronald Kurtz/Commerce Graphics



Gasoline Station, Tremont Avenue and Dock Street, Bronx, July 2, 1936.
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, Federal Art Project

related events

■ Children First!

visit and workshop "Cities in transformation"

Saturday 25 February, 31 March and 28 April, 3.30pm

■ Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

tour of the exhibitions "Ai Weiwei: Interlacing" and "Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), Photographs" with a guide from the Jeu de Paume

Tuesday 28 February, 6pm

■ **talk** related to the exhibitions "Ai Weiwei: Interlacing" and "Berenice Abbott (1898-1991), Photographs", by Jean-Luc Nancy, philosopher. Both Berenice Abbott and Ai Weiwei pinpoint the architectural and urban evolutions of their respective periods, while evoking the notions of citizenship and community. Jean-Luc Nancy will examine the way these two artists treat such themes and will, in particular, consider the way their images function as artworks in relation to their sociopolitical concerns.

Friday 30 March, 6pm, in the auditorium

■ **symposium** related to the exhibition with Gaëlle Morel, curator of the exhibition and Exhibitions Curator at the Ryerson Image Centre, Emmanuelle de l'Écotais, Curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Frits Gierstberg, Head of Exhibitions at the Nederlands Fotomuseum,

Rotterdam, Françoise Reynaud, Curator of the Photography Collections at the Musée Carnavalet, and Terri Weissman, Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois.

This international symposium will bring together researchers and curators to study the stages of Berenice Abbott's career and the multiple facets of her work.

Saturday 21 April, 2.30pm, in the auditorium

■ Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

tour of the exhibition by Gaëlle Morel, curator
Tuesday 24 April, 6pm

■ **publication:** *Berenice Abbott*, edited by Gaëlle Morel, texts by Sarah M. Miller, Gaëlle Morel and Terri Weissman, co-publication Hazan/Éditions du Jeu de Paume/Ryerson Image Centre, with support from the Terra Foundation for American Art, 224 pages, 21.5 x 27.5 cm, 35 €

Jeu de Paume – Concorde

exhibitions

21 February – 29 April 2012

- **Ai Weiwei: Interlacing**
- **Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), Photographs**
- **Satellite Programme, Jimmy Robert: Langue matérielle**

until 15 March 2012

- Virtual Space, "Side Effects" cycle: **Blow-up**

forthcoming exhibitions

16 March – 18 September 2012

- Virtual Space, "Side Effects" cycle: **Form@ts**

22 May – 23 September 2012

- **Eva Besnyö, 1910–2003: The Sensuous Image**
- **Laurent Grasso**
- Satellite Programme, **Rosa Barba**

practical information

1 Place de la Concorde, 75008 Paris
access via the Tuileries Gardens, Rue de Rivoli entrance
www.jeudepaume.org
<http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org>
information +33 (0)1 47 03 12 50
Tuesday (late opening) 11am–9pm
Wednesday to Sunday 11am–7pm
closed Monday

■ **exhibitions:** admission: €8.50; concessions: €5.50
free admission to the exhibitions of the Satellite Programme
Young Visitor's Tuesday: free admission for students and visitors under 26 every last Tuesday of the month from 5pm to 9pm

■ **guided tours and workshops:** free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

Tours for individual visitors with guides from the Jeu de Paume

Wednesday and Saturday at 12.30pm

Family Tours

Saturday at 3.30pm (except last Saturday of the month)
by reservation on +33 (0)1 47 03 12 41/rendezvousenfamille@jeudepaume.org

Children First!

visit and workshop for 7 to 11 year olds
every last Saturday of the month at 3.30pm
by reservation on +33 1 47 03 04 95/lesenfantsdabord@jeudepaume.org

Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

every last Tuesday of the month at 7pm

■ **talks:** free admission on a first-come, first-served basis

■ **symposia:** €3 per session or free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

cover: *Gunsmith and Police Department Headquarters, 6 Centre Market Place and 240 Centre Street, New York City, February 4, 1937.* Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

translation: Charles Penwarden

layout: Élise Garreau

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Jeu de Paume – extramural

exhibitions

until 20 May 2012

- **Photography of Reconstruction. Rebuilding of the French Cities (1945–58)**

Château de Tours
25 Avenue André-Malraux, 37000 Tours
information +33 (0)2 47 70 88 46
Tuesday to Friday 2pm–6pm
Saturday and Sunday 2.15pm–6pm
admission: €3; concessions: €1.50

22 March – 13 May 2012

- Satellite Programme, **Tamar Guimarães: The Afterlife (of names and things)**

Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz
16 Rue Charles-VII, 94130 Nogent-sur-Marne
www.maisondart.fr
information 01 48 71 90 07
daily noon–6pm
closed Tuesday and public holidays
free admission

forthcoming exhibition

17 June – 4 November 2012

- **Pierre Bourdieu, Images of Algeria: An Elective Affinity**

Château de Tours

This exhibition is organised by the Jeu de Paume, Paris, and coproduced with the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto.

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