

MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago

FRAMING IDEAS

The Photographers of the New Bauhaus: An Expanded Vision

CURRICULUM GUIDE

Aimed at middle school, high school, and college students, this resource is aligned with Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core and contains information on the artists and artistic traditions featured, questions for looking and discussion, and classroom activities. A corresponding image set can be found [here](#). The MoCP is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The Museum is generously supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Committee, individuals, private and corporate foundations, and government agencies including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.



Kenneth Josephson *Chicago*, 1961

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Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

Introduction: The New Bauhaus

The New Bauhaus, later called the Institute of Design (ID) at what is now the Illinois Institute of Technology was one of the most important schools of design and photography in America during the twentieth century. Founded in Chicago in 1937 by László Moholy-Nagy, the New Bauhaus aimed to train “the perfect designer” through a modernist and multi-disciplinary curriculum that encouraged experimentation and broke down the hierarchy between fine and applied arts and industry.

In the mid 20th century, when fewer art schools existed and photography was seldom taught as anything other than a trade, the photography department at the ID was at the forefront of innovative methods of art education. It prepared students to work in industry with a foundation of strong technical skills while also encouraging them to develop their own voice and style as they experimented with a wide range of techniques and materials.



Nathan Lerner, *Light Volume, Chicago, 1937*

As Lloyd C. Engelbrecht writes, “Photography throughout the country was effectively revolutionized by what happened under Moholy: first, photography was taught as a basic understanding of light and the manipulation of light; second, it was recognized as central to modern vision, a fundamental part of what Moholy believed it meant to say that someone was literate; third, photography was integrated into a complete art and design curriculum; and fourth, it was taught experimentally, not rigidly or dogmatically or commercially.”¹

The ID photography program reached its prime between 1951-1961, under the direction of Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. In the tradition started by Moholy-Nagy, the program began with a strong emphasis on observing, using, and modulating light. All students made photograms to observe and record patterns of light and shadow and learn about the light-sensitive properties of photographic materials. Many assignments were formal and technical, while others encouraged students to be aware of social and political issues on the streets of Chicago where they often worked. Students explored “informal portraiture” made spontaneously on the street, and “self-documentation,” the description of oneself through one’s environment. Once they had mastered the basics of the Foundations Course, students were pushed to pursue unique personal projects in which they used photography to see familiar things in new ways. Students of Siskind and Callahan became important artists and influential teachers of the next generations of artists as more and more college level art programs were established following World War II.

¹ Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, “Educating the Eye: Photography and the Founding Generation at the Institute of Design, 1937-1946,” in *Taken by Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, 1937-1971*, ed. David Travis and Elizabeth Siegel (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2002), 17.

Select Photographers of the New Bauhaus

Lászlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) was associated with the avant-garde movement in his native Hungary before moving to Weimar to teach at the influential original Bauhaus from 1923 until its closure in 1933. He was one of many artists, designers and scholars who came to America seeking artistic and intellectual freedom as Nazi influence and persecution spread through Europe. Throughout his career, Moholy-Nagy experimented extensively in a variety of media, including photography, typography, sculpture, painting, and industrial design. He pioneered the form of photograms, which he felt revealed fundamental elements of photography. As a respected and prolific artist and a charismatic teacher, Moholy-Nagy was a relentless advocate of the school and its pedagogy, strongly supporting the integration of technology and industry into the arts. He led the New Bauhaus until his untimely death in 1946. His posthumously published *Vision in Motion* was a seminal academic text with examples of student work that provided a foundation for Bauhaus-inspired education in America.



Harry Callahan, *Eleanor*, 1947



Harry Callahan, *Chicago*, 1950

Harry Callahan (1912-1999), a Detroit native, joined the Institute of Design in 1946 and became head of the photography department in 1949. Callahan photographed a variety of subjects, including pedestrians, landscapes, and architectural facades, employing techniques such as extreme contrast, geometric focus, and other forms of abstraction, but he is best known for his beautifully lit, carefully composed studies of his wife Eleanor that emphasized the intimacy of their bond. Callahan often transformed his everyday subjects into (barely recognizable) simple forms; a visual essence that still evokes their worldly counterparts. Callahan's goal, however, was to describe, not to conceal or distort. For each new subject, he refreshed his photographic vocabulary and used his 8 × 10 view camera and strong sense of design and composition to create meticulously crafted and elegant images. Callahan taught at the ID until 1961, when he moved to Providence to teach at the Rhode Island School of Design.



Aaron Siskind
Jalapa 66, 1974, from the series *Homage to Franz Kline*



Aaron Siskind
Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation #99, 1961

Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) began his photography career as a documentarian in the New York Photo League in 1932 where he contributed to photographic essays such as *Harlem Document*, and *Dead End*. In the early 1940s, his work shifted to the abstract and metaphoric as Siskind cultivated friendships with such Abstract Expressionists as Franz Kline, Barrett Newman, and Mark Rothko, and began to exhibit work at the Charles Egan Gallery (which specialized in Abstract Expressionism). On the invitation of Harry Callahan, Siskind joined the faculty of the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1951, taking over as head of the photography program when Callahan left in 1961.

During the 1950s, Siskind's primary subjects were urban facades, graffiti, isolated figures, and the stone walls of Martha's Vineyard. Graphic in form, the subjects of each of these series resemble script, reflecting Siskind's interest in musical scores and poetry. Architecture was one of Aaron Siskind's principle photographic concerns during the 1950s. For instance, from 1952 to 1953 he and his students were engaged in an ambitious documentation of the Adler and Sullivan buildings in Chicago, which inspired student Richard Nickel (see below) to continue this work throughout his career. In 1963 Siskind helped found the Society for Photographic Education. Siskind and Callahan, famous for their synergy as professors and photographers, were reunited beginning in 1971 when Siskind left the Institute of Design for the Rhode Island School of Design, where Callahan was already a professor and Siskind continued to teach until his retirement in 1976.

American-born **Yasuhiro Ishimoto** (1921-2012) moved to Chicago in 1945 to study architecture after he was released from the Amachi Japanese Internment Camp in Colorado, where he was detained during World War II. In 1948, after encountering Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion*, Ishimoto enrolled at the Institute of Design, and studied photography under Harry Callahan. While at the ID, Ishimoto photographed extensively on the streets of Chicago, often documenting scenes that showed the inequality and tension between African Americans and whites in this very segregated city. Though Ishimoto returned to Japan in 1953, he maintained close ties to Chicago, returning to photograph on a fellowship from 1959 to 1961 and publishing two books of photographs called *Chicago*, *Chicago*. Moving through Chicago as both citizen and visitor, Ishimoto created documents that speak eloquently for the culture of the city in the 1950s and 60s. His photographs present highly original visual spaces, which nonetheless suggest the politics, mentality, and history of the city.



Yasuhiro Ishimoto, *Untitled from Chicago, Chicago*, 1960



Nathan Lerner,
The Shopping Bag, Tokyo, 1976

Nathan Lerner (1913-1997) studied painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago before joining the first class of the New Bauhaus in 1937. There, Lerner invented the “light box,” a modified construction that he used to modulate and photograph the effect of light on objects (see image on page 2). In 1945, Lerner returned to the Institute of Design to head its Product Design Workshop, and later became the dean of faculty and students and acting education director. After managing his own design firm for two decades, Lerner returned to photography in the 1970's, making work in Japan and Chicago. In his portfolio *Nathan Lerner: Fifteen Photographs*, Lerner photographs representations of eyes, linking representations of eyes found in such random places as shopping bags in New York to fish carcasses in Tokyo. These images elicit associations regarding the meaning of seeing and looking.



Kenneth Josephson *Istanbul* from the *Ken Josephson Portfolio*
1972 printed 1975

Kenneth Josephson (b. 1932) received his B.F.A. from the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he worked with Beaumont Newhall and Minor White. In 1958, Josephson entered the graduate program at the Institute of Design, studying under Callahan and Siskind. His graduate thesis, “Exploration of the Multiple Image,” implemented in-camera multiple exposures. Josephson is considered one of the early conceptual photographers; he staged simple interventions in the scenes he photographed, including the use of photographs within photographs, and highlighted real but fleeting phenomena that challenge and fool the viewer. Josephson became a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he taught until his retirement in 1997. Note: See Josephson's images on the cover of this guide and in the “activities” section.



Barbara Crane,
from *People of the
North Portal*, 1970

Chicago-native **Barbara Crane** (b. 1928) began photographing in 1947 while completing an undergraduate degree in art history at New York University. In 1964, after showing her portfolio to Aaron Siskind, Crane began classes at the Institute of Design, earning her master's degree in 1966.

Crane's varied and experimental work focuses on highly formal, often abstracted images of people and the urban landscape. Her graduate thesis "Human Forms" is a series of abstract nudes playing with line, shadow, and light, to create elegant forms. Crane has also experimented with creating multiple images of the same subject and then gridding them into one composition. In "People of the North Portal" (1970-71), Crane photographed people exiting Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, recording a wide variety of expressions and reactions. Some full-body shots, others focusing simply on the faces of her subjects, the photographs depict a large spectrum of human experience. More recently, Crane has experimented with digital imaging and has focused on nature including photographing plant and animal specimens in her studio for the series "From Coloma to Convert." Crane taught photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1967 to 1995; she remains professor emeritus there.

Ray Metzker's (1931-2014) images question the nature of the photograph and photographic "reality." Through cropping, multiple imagery, and other formal inventions, his work explores options for transforming photographs. "When you look at the multiples, you are aware of patterning and so forth," he says, "but there is still identifiable subject matter; frequently there are people there; there is a rhythm to those people." For his 1959 thesis project, *My Camera and I in the Loop*, Metzker took downtown Chicago as his subject, but renders it in experiments that tell more about photography than they do about the city. Between graduating from the Illinois Institute of Technology (MS, 1959) and 1983, Metzker taught at the Philadelphia College of Art, the University of New Mexico, and Columbia College Chicago.

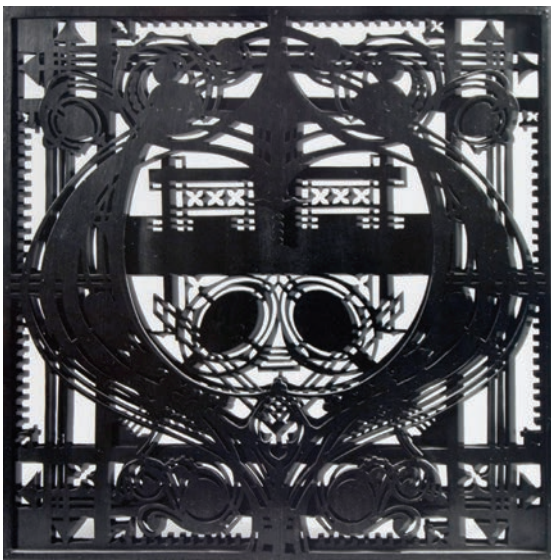


Ray K. Metzker
Couplet, 1969

Harold Allen (1912-1998) moved to Chicago in 1937 where he enrolled at the School of the Art Institute and majored in industrial design and photography. Unable to pay for his education, Allen took a job at the Art Institute and began night classes at the Institute of Design. In 1941, before he had earned a degree, Allen was drafted into the service where he served as an Air Force Photographer. He won a nine-week course in news and feature photography from the Life Magazine Photography School for the Armed Forces, and was able to take time to photograph architectural structures in France, Germany, and England. Allen's later architectural photographs reveal peculiarities and trends in the style and ornamentation of American buildings. His view on the built environment also shows how such ornamentation can be linked to a much broader historical scope and meaning, and his photographs have come to exemplify a scholarly and artful approach to architectural photography.



Harold Allen,
Subway Vista, Chicago, 1969



Richard Nickel,
Carson Building, n.d.

Richard Nickel (1928-1972), a Chicago native, studied under Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind at the Institute of Design, where he completed a BA in 1954 and an MFA in 1957. By the mid-twentieth century, urban regeneration and development in the United States spurred the demolition of historic buildings. Facing this impending loss, Nickel began campaigning for the preservation of American architecture. Starting in the 1950s, he lobbied for the protection of historic structures, researched and recorded their designs, and even personally salvaged some of their ornamental remains. His photographs constitute their own mode of preservation in safeguarding the visual memory of the buildings. Nickel's images champion the architecture of masters such as Burnham & Root, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright who transformed the American landscape by merging new technologies with modern aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth century. Among this period's innovators, Louis Sullivan emerged as a father figure whose buildings became Nickel's primary pursuit. With the help of Aaron Siskind, Nickel sought to create a photographic catalogue of all the works by the firm Adler & Sullivan. Nickel's final photograph was taken in his attempt to save the Chicago Stock Exchange designed by Adler and Sullivan. He was able to save a large portion of the building's ornament and the interior of the Trading Room which is now reconstructed in the Art Institute of Chicago. On April 13, 1972, he returned to the building alone in order to save a few last vestiges of the building's ornament when the floor of the Trading Room collapsed crushing him.

Select New Bauhaus Photographers in the MoCP Collection:

Harry Callahan; Aaron Siskind; Nathan Lerner; Barbara Crane; Joseph Jachna; Yasuhiro Ishimoto; Gyorgy Kepes; Ken Josephson; Ray Metzker; Joseph Sterling.

Additional images by the artists and artist's biographies can be accessed for classroom use from the museum's website at collections.mocp.org/main.php?module=objects.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

- Look carefully at the image. What pulls your attention? Why?
- What can you tell about how the artist made this image? What do you notice about how the artist used techniques such as lighting, time of day, framing, composition, motion, timing, and printing?
- What moods or feelings are evoked in this work? How?
- What do you think the artist was interested in showing or communicating when he or she made this work? Why?

Activities

1. Observing Light and Shadow

The word “photography” comes from a Greek phrase that means “to write with light.” Photography is fundamentally a record of light falling onto objects. Observing, understanding, and effectively using existing light are essential steps in learning photography and was at the core of the New Bauhaus curriculum. Over the next few days, pay close attention to the light in different environments and at different times of day. Examine how light affects the shape and appearance of people and objects and the mood or feeling of a particular place.

Assignment:

Observe and photograph light and shadow on the street, in your home, and community. Photograph in different lighting situations, at different times of day, and use the light that is available in the environment in which you are shooting. Try placing your subject in the light (or shadow) area of the scene. Photograph someone or something placed in light coming through a window. Photograph interesting shadows. Shoot most of your images outside, but take at least a few pictures indoors. You may not use a flash for any part of this assignment. Print or project a selection of your images and share and discuss them with your peers. What ideas and moods do your images express?

2. Exploring Vantage Point/ Point of View

Vantage point—where the photographer stands in relation to his or her subject—is a simple and important technique used by photographers. Look at and take photographs of the same subject from several different vantage points. Photograph your subject at close range, from far away, above, below, the side, and from behind objects or barriers. Look carefully at the images you have created. How does the appearance of the subject change as your vantage point changes? Which photograph do you like the best? Why?

Variation: Ask several students to photograph the same action or scene from multiple vantage points and distances at the same instant. A loud sound or verbal command could be used to signal when students should click their camera's shutters. Carefully examine all of the images. How are the images alike? How are they different? How does the story of the picture change in each frame? How is the “voice” of each photographer unique? What does this project suggest about the truthfulness of photographs?

3. Create an Image within an Image

New York State, 1970, from the series *Images within Images*, is one of Ken Josephson's most famous photographs and aptly displays the sort of visual statement that inspires critics to classify his work as conceptual or focused on an idea or concept. In the photograph, Josephson's arm stretches over a body of water and in his hand he holds a picture of a ship over the horizon. The boat in the picture is positioned in perspective to occupy the same space a full-sized ship in the distance would appear to take up if seen in that same spot. It is a clever illusion, yet constructed precisely to draw attention to its artifice. As with the René Magritte painting captioned "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," we are reminded that a picture of a boat, no matter how real it looks, is still not a boat.



Kenneth Josephson, *New York State*, 1970

- With Josephson's work as inspiration, make a photograph using an image within an image.

4. Abstraction

Many Institute of Design photographers made images that abstracted familiar subjects, seeing them in new ways. For example, Barbara Crane made the series *Human Forms* by paying her children thirty-five cents an hour to pose for her, on the condition that their faces were not recognizable. Because of the limitations this condition placed on her photographs, Crane began to abstract the images of their bodies, playing with line, shadow, light, and printing techniques to create the series' elegant forms. Similarly, Harry Callahan often transformed his everyday subjects including his wife and surroundings into simple, barely recognizable forms, and Joseph Jachna portrayed the landscape as an abstracted, graphic composition.



Barbara Crane, *Untitled*, 1969

Choose a subject you know well – this could be a friend or family member, your home or a familiar place in your neighborhood, etc. Photograph your subject in a way that focuses on contrast, geometric shapes, line, shadow, and light, rather than the specific identifying characteristics of your subject. Print or project a selection of your images and share and discuss them with your peers. What ideas and moods do your images express? Which images seem less familiar and more abstract? Why? Which photographs do you like the best? Why?

5. People Picture Assignment

Barbara Crane taught for 28 years (1967-1995) at the Art Institute of Chicago where she influenced several generations of artists. The below prompts are excerpted from an assignment she gave to her foundations students called the "People Picture Assignment." Make several pictures using one or two of the prompts listed below. Share and critique the images you make with your peers. See examples of Crane's pictures of people in this document for inspiration. This assignment is used with permission from Barbara Crane.

- People close-up, as close as the camera will allow or closer.
- People centered in the picture space.
- People at the sides or edges of the frame.
- People close and far in the same picture.
- People packing the frame.
- Tiny figures in large space.
- Parts of peoples bodies.
- People pictures taken by NOT looking through the camera's view-finder.

6. Getting to the Essence

The New Bauhaus curriculum emphasized careful and elegant composition that accentuated essential elements and stripped away unnecessary detail. Like photographers, writers also edit and strip back to what is essential in creating pleasing compositions.

Look carefully at a photograph by a New Bauhaus photographer whose work interests you. Write down 40 words that describe what you notice in the photograph and/or the feelings, sensory impressions, and meanings it evokes for you.

- Cross out 20 of the words on the list, leaving the words that you think are most important.
- Delete 10 more words.
- Delete 7 more words so that you are left with 3 words that you think are essential to describing the photograph.
- What words did you select? Why?

Optional extensions: It is interesting to do this as a group project with everyone writing about the same image. Share, and compare the words you selected. You could also describe a place or scene using the process described above. You could additionally extend this activity by using your list of essential words as the start of a poem or essay.

Glossary of Terms

framing/composition

How one composes an image in the camera's viewfinder. The organization of elements within the image.

photograms

A cameraless image made by shining light on objects placed directly on a piece of photographic paper.

vantage point

Point of view is where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:

CC.K-12.L.R.3 Knowledge of Language: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CC.K-12.R.R.1 Key Ideas and Details: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CC.K-12.L.R.6 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

K-12 R R.10 CC.K-12.R.R.10 Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.