‘What is photography?’ may sound like an easy question to answer but the potential replies could fill this book alone. The fact that photography can mean different things to different people is part of its enduring appeal. Photography is such a part of our lives now that it would be incomprehensible to think of a world without it. We probably couldn’t contemplate the fact of a wedding, watching the children grow up, or going on holiday without the camera. We are bombarded and saturated by images constantly, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, as well as the television and internet, yet we have an insatiable desire for more.

So why take photographs? What roles do photographs play in our life and relative to other forms of expression or communication? Does a photographer have responsibilities? What is actually involved? And what makes a result successful anyway? We will explore these issues and some of photography’s possibilities over the course of this book, with the understanding that photography is a combination of subjective thought, creative imagination, visual design, technical skills, and practical organizing ability. Begin by taking a broad look at what making photographs is about, to put in to context and perspective your thoughts. On the one hand there is the machinery and the techniques themselves, although try not to become obsessed with the latest bit of equipment or absorbed in the craft detail too soon (Figure 1.1). On the other you have the variety of approaches to picture making – aiming for results ranging from documenting an event, or communicating ideas to a particular audience, to work which is self-expressive, socially or politically or commercially informed for the family album or perhaps more ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Why photography?

Perhaps you are drawn into photography mainly because it appears to be a quick, convenient and seemingly truthful way of recording something. All the importance lies in the subject itself, and you want to show objectively what it is, or what is going on (a child’s first steps or a scratch on a car for insurance purposes). In this instance photography is thought of as evidence, identification, a kind of diagram of a happening. The camera is your visual notebook.

The opposite attribute of photography is where it is used to manipulate or interpret reality, so that pictures push some ‘angle’, belief or attitude of your own. You set up situations (as in advertising) or choose to photograph some aspect of an event but not others (as in politically biased news reporting). Photography is a powerful medium of persuasion and propaganda. It has that ring of truth when all the time it can make any statement the photographer chooses. Consider the family album for a moment: what pictures are represented here – all of family life or just the good moments?
Another reason for taking up photography is that you want a means of personal self-expression to explore your own ideas, concerns or issue-based themes. It seems odd that something so apparently objective as photography can be used to express, say, issues of desire, identity, race or gender, or metaphor and fantasy. We have all probably seen images ‘in’ other things, like reading meanings into cloud formations (Figure 1.2), shadows or peeling paint. A photograph can intrigue through its posing of questions, keeping the viewer returning to read new things from the image. The way it is presented too may be just as important as the subject matter. Other photographers simply seek out beauty, which they express in their own ‘picturesque’ style, as a conscious work of art.

One of the first attractions of photography for many people is the lure of the equipment itself. All that ingenious modern technology designed to fit hand and eye – there is great appeal in pressing buttons, clicking precision components into place, and collecting and wearing cameras. Tools are vital, of course, and detailed knowledge about them is absorbing and important, but don’t end up shooting photographs just to test out the machinery. We must not forget either that being a photographer can be seen as a very glamorous job as well – some of the most well-known photographers are those who have taken images of famous people and become famous themselves by association.

Another attractive element is the actual process of photography – the challenge of care and control, and the way this is rewarded by technical excellence and a final object produced by you. Results can be judged and enjoyed for their own intrinsic photographic ‘qualities’, such as superb detail, rich tones and colours. The process gives you the means of ‘capturing your seeing’, making pictures from things around you without having to laboriously draw. The camera is a kind of time machine, which freezes any person, place or situation you choose. It seems to give the user power and purpose.

Yet another characteristic is the simple enjoyment of the visual structuring of photographs. There is real pleasure to be had from designing pictures as such – the ‘geometry’ of lines and shapes, balance of tone, the cropping and framing of scenes – whatever the subject content actually happens to be (Figure 1.3). So much can be done by a quick change of viewpoint, or choice of a different moment in time.
These are only some of the diverse activities and interests covered by the umbrella term ‘photography’. Several will be blended together in the work of a photographer, or any one market for professional photography. Your present enjoyment in producing pictures may be mainly based on technology, art or communication. And what begins as one area of interest can easily develop into another. As a beginner it is helpful to keep an open mind. Provide yourself with a well-rounded ‘foundation course’ by trying to learn something of all these elements, preferably through practice but also by looking and reading about the work of other photographers.

**How photography works**

Photography is to do with light forming an image, normally by means of a lens. The image is then permanently recorded either by:

- **chemical means**, using film, liquid chemicals and darkroom processes, or
- **digital means**, using an electronic sensor, data storage and processing, and print-out via a computer.

As digital methods have become readily accessible, cheaper and more ecologically sound, photographers readily combine the two – shooting on film and then transferring results into digital form for retouching and print-out. In many cases now, such as news photography, for simple quickness of use the digital route is taken.

You don’t need to understand either chemistry or electronics to take good photographs of course, but it is important to have sufficient practical skills to control results and so work with confidence. The following is an outline of the key technical stages you will meet in chemical and in digital forms of photography. Each stage is discussed in detail in later chapters.

**Forming and exposing an image**

Most aspects of forming an optical image of your subject (in other words concerning the ‘front end’ of the camera) apply to both film and digital photography. Light from the subject
of your picture passes through a glass lens, which bends it into a focused (normally miniaturized) image. The lens is at the front of a light-tight box or camera with a light-sensitive surface such as film facing it at the other end. Light is prevented from reaching the film by a shutter until your chosen moment of exposure. The amount of exposure to light is most often controlled by a combination of the time the shutter is open and the diameter of the light beam passing through-the-lens. The latter is altered by an aperture, like the iris of the eye. Both these controls have a farther influence on visual results. Shutter time alters the way movement is recorded, blurred or frozen; lens aperture alters the depth of subject that is shown in focus at one time (depth of field).

You need a viewfinder, focusing screen or electronic viewing screen for aiming the camera and composing, and a light-measuring device, usually built in, to meter the brightness of each subject. The meter takes into account the light sensitivity of the material on which you are recording the image and reads out or automatically sets an appropriate combination of lens aperture and shutter speed. With knowledge and skill you can override these settings to achieve chosen effects or compensate for conditions which will fool the meter.

The chemical route

Processing. If you have used a film camera the next stage will be to process your film. A correctly exposed film differs from an unexposed film only at the atomic level – minute chemical changes forming an invisible or ‘latent’ image. Developing chemicals must then act on your film in darkness to amplify the latent image into something much more substantial and permanent in normal light. You apply these chemicals in the form of liquids; each solution has a particular function when used on the appropriate film. With most black and white films, for example, the first chemical solution develops light-struck areas into black silver grains. You follow it with a solution which dissolves (‘fixes’) away the unexposed parts, leaving these areas as clear film. So the result, after washing out by-products and drying, is a black and white negative representing the brightest parts of your subject as dark and darkest parts pale grey or transparent.

A similar routine, but with chemically more complex solutions, is used to process colour film into colour negatives. Colour slide film needs more processing stages. First a black and white
negative developer is used; then the rest of the film, instead of being normally fixed, is colour-developed to create a positive image in black silver and dyes. You are finally left with a positive, dye-image colour slide (Figure 1.4).

*Printing negatives.* The next stage of production is printing, or, more often, enlarging. Your picture on film is set up in a vertical projector called an enlarger. The enlarger lens forms an image, of almost any size you choose, on light-sensitive photographic paper. During exposure the paper receives more light through the clear areas of your film than through the denser parts. The latent image your paper now carries is next processed in chemical solutions broadly similar to the stages needed for film. For example, a sheet of black and white paper is exposed to the black and white film negative, and then developed, fixed and washed so it shows a ‘negative of the negative’, which is a positive image – a black and white print. Colour paper after exposure goes through a sequence of colour developing, bleaching and fixing to form a colour negative of a colour negative. Other materials and processes give colour prints from slides.

An important feature of printing (apart from allowing change of image size and running off many copies) is that you can adjust and correct your shot. Unwanted parts near the edges can be cropped off, changing the proportions of the picture. Chosen areas can be made lighter or darker. Working in colour you can use a wide range of enlarger colour filters to ‘fine-tune’ the colour balance of your print, or to create effects. With experience you can even combine parts from several film images into one print, form pictures which are part-positive, part-negative, and so on.

*Colour and black and white.* You have to choose between different types of film for photography in colour or black and white (monochrome). Visually it is much easier to shoot colour than black and white, because the result more closely resembles the way the subject looked in the viewfinder. You must allow for differences between how something looks and how it comes out in a colour photograph, of course (see Chapter 9). But this is generally less difficult than forecasting how subject colours will translate into tones of monochrome. Black and white is seen as less lifelike, creating a distance between the ‘real’ and its representation, and for this reason appeals to a number of beginners and advanced photographers alike, wrongly or rightly being considered more interpretative and subtle.
Colour films, papers and chemical processes are more complex than black and white. This is why it was almost a hundred years after the invention of photography before reliable colour print processes appeared. Even then they were expensive and laborious to use, so that until the 1970s photographers mostly learnt their craft in black and white and worked up to colour; there are of course exceptions to the rule such as William Eggleston (Figure 1.5). Today practically everyone takes their first pictures in colour. Most of the chemical complexity of colour photography is locked up in the manufacturers’ films, papers, ready-mixed solutions and standardized processing routines. It is mainly in printing that colour remains more demanding than black and white, because of the extra requirements of judging and controlling colour balance (see Advanced Photography). So in the darkroom at least you will find that photography by the chemical route is still best begun in black and white.

**The digital route**

*Capturing and storing.* If you are using a digital camera, whether an SLR or a cameraphone, the exposed image is recorded on a grid of millions of microscopic-size light-sensitive elements, which is normally smaller than one frame of 35 mm film. This is known as a CCD (charge-coupled device) and is located in a similar position to film within a film camera. Immediately following exposure, the CCD reads out its captured picture as a chain of electronic signals called an image file, usually into a small digital memory card slotted into the camera body, or else directly onto the ‘hard disk’ of the camera, or even to a CD or DVD. (For more detailed information on the sequence of digital capture as well as the alternative CMOS sensor, refer to Chapter 6.) Images can then be viewed on a small screen on the camera and any unwanted shots can be erased. Image files are later downloaded from the card or direct from the camera into a computer, where they appear on a monitor screen or directly to a television screen. Or they can be downloaded directly to a printer without first being viewed on a computer. A rough guide to the quality and size of prints possible from a digital camera will partly depend upon the number of megapixels available. The bigger the print you want to make, the higher the number of megapixels needs to be. If you are only looking to view images on screen or email to friends and family then a 1 or 2 megapixel camera is adequate. To provide ‘photo’ quality prints up to 10 × 8 inches you need a 3 or 4 megapixel camera. To produce images bigger than 10 × 8 inches you need to have at least a 5 megapixel camera or higher. If selling your photographs to an image library you will need to check the minimum megapixels required as this can vary between different libraries. After downloading or
erases you can re-use the card indefinitely for capturing new pictures (Figure 1.6).

Various image manipulation programs can be loaded into your computer, providing you with ‘tools’ and controls alongside the picture to crop, and alter brightness, contrast or colour, and make many other adjustments, effects and graphics. Each one is selected and activated by moving and clicking the computer mouse or by a keyboard shortcut – changes to the image appear immediately on the monitor display. Image files can be ‘saved’ (stored) within the computer’s internal hard disk memory or on a removable disk.

Output. When you are happy with the on-screen picture, the digital file can be fed to a desktop printer – typically an inkjet or laser printer – for full colour print-out on paper of your choice. Or else, you can take your removable disk to a photo lab or machine in a shop for lightjet prints onto photographic paper.

It is possible to have digital files transferred to film and then printed in the usual way, or have prints made by commercially available print processes such as Lambda and Lightjet that are printed on traditional photographic colour paper.

Practical comparisons between making photographs by the chemical (film) route and the digital route appear in detail in Chapter 6. You will see that each offers different advantages, and there are good reasons for combining the best features of each.

Technical routines and creative choices
With technical knowledge plus practical experience (which comes out of shooting lots of photographs under different conditions) you gradually build up skills that become second nature. It’s like learning to drive. First you have to consciously learn the mechanical handling of a car. Then this side of things becomes so familiar you concentrate more and more on what you want to achieve with the machinery, getting from A to B. Whether you work by chemical or digital means, photography involves you in a range of complementary skills. Being able to communicate your ideas to an audience is like getting from A to B and there are a few skills you need to acquire to do this in an interesting and successful way.

There are set routines where consistency is all important, for example film processing or paper processing,
especially in colour, and the disciplines of inputting and saving digital image files. A consistency to your image-making, both technically and conceptually, will help in developing your own style. There are also those stages at which creative decisions must be made, and where a great deal of choice and variation is possible. These include organization of your subject, lighting and camera handling, as well as editing and printing the work. As a photographer you will need to handle and make these decisions yourself, or at least closely direct them.

Having more confidence about getting results, you will find that you can spend most time on developing the ideas and content as well as improving creative picture making problems such as composition, and capturing expressions and actions which differ with every shot and that have no routine solutions. However, you should still keep yourself up-to-date by looking at the work of other new and contemporary photographers, and finding out about new processes and equipment as they come along. You need to discover what new visual opportunities they offer that could help your photography, but not by slavishly following fashion for the sake of it.

Technical routines and creative choices give a good foundation for what is perhaps the biggest challenge in photography – how to produce pictures which have interesting content and meaning. Can you communicate to other people through what you ‘say’ visually (getting from A to B) by simple humour as in Figure 1.7 (picture by Brian Griffin) that replaces the boring corporate portrait with a more interesting use of composition and pose or by some serious comment on the human condition like that shown in Figure 1.8.
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

Figure 1.8 This documentary shot by Gareth McConnell was taken from a series of portraits of people living on what some might call the borders of society. It relies greatly on the photographer’s ability to gain the trust of his sitter, and, by providing a non-judgemental response to communicate about their life, he accords them a dignified value and concern.

**Picture structuring**

Composition is to do with showing things in the strongest, most effective way, whatever your subject. Often this means avoiding clutter and confusion between the various elements present (unless this very confusion contributes to the mood you want to create).
The way you visually compose your pictures is as important as their technical quality. But this skill is acquired with experience as much as learnt. It involves you in the use of lines, shapes and areas of tone within your picture, irrespective of what the items actually are, so that they relate together effectively, with a satisfying kind of geometry (see Figure 1.9).

Composition is therefore something photography has in common with drawing, painting and the fine arts generally. The main difference is that you have to get most of it right while the subject is still in front of you, and make the best use of what is present at the time. The camera works fast, although the darkroom and computer do allow for alternative compositions. Often good composition is just about looking more carefully through the viewfinder. How many times have you seen a photograph with people’s feet cut off or a flowerpot growing out of someone’s head?

We have all heard that ‘rules are there to be broken’, as they encourage results which slavishly follow them but offer nothing else besides. As Edward Weston once wrote: ‘Consulting rules of composition before shooting is like consulting laws of gravity before going for a walk.’ Of course it is easy to say this when you already have an experienced eye for picture making, but guides are helpful if you are just beginning (see Chapter 8). Practise making critical comparisons between pictures that structurally ‘work’ and those that do not. Discuss these aspects with other people, both photographers and non-photographers.

Where a subject permits, it is always good advice to shoot several photographs – perhaps the obvious versions first, then others with small changes in the way items are juxtaposed, etc., increasingly simplifying and strengthening what your image expresses or shows. You need to get used to moving your body more when taking a photograph; all too often people will simply stand in front of a subject and shoot from eye level. Get down low, move to the side, hang from a tree! You will be surprised how much small movements can dramatically change the composition. It’s your eye that counts here more than the camera (although some cameras get far less in the way between you and the subject than others).

Composition can contribute greatly to the style and originality of your pictures. Some photographers (Garry Winogrand, for example: Figure 1.10) go for offbeat constructions which
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

There is little point in being technically confident and having an eye for composition, if you do not also understand why you are taking the photograph. An example of bringing together the technical understanding of photography and the power of photography to move people can be found in the work of photographer Joel Meyerowitz, Figure 1.11. However, the purpose may be simpler – a record of something or somebody for identification. It may be more ambiguous – a subjective picture putting over the concept of security (Figure 1.12), happiness or menace, for example. No writer would pick up a pen without knowing whether the task is to produce a data sheet or a poem. Yet there is a terrible danger with photography that you set up your equipment, busy yourself with focus, exposure and composition, but think hardly at all about the meaning of your picture and why you should show the subject in that particular way.

People take photographs for all sorts of reasons of course. Most are as reminders of vacations, or family and loved ones. These fulfil one of photography’s most valuable social functions, freezing moments in our own history for recall in years to come.

Sometimes photographs are taken to show tough human conditions and so appeal to the consciences of others. Here you may have to investigate the subject in a way which in other circumstances would be called prying or voyeurism. This difficult relationship with the subject...
has to be overcome if your final picture is to win a positive response from the viewer.

Understanding the best approach to the subject to create the right reaction from your target audience is also vital in photographs that advertise and sell. Every detail in a set-up situation must be considered with the message in mind. Is the location or background of a kind with which consumers positively identify? Are the models and the clothes they are wearing too up- (or down-) market? Props and accessories must suit the lifestyle and atmosphere you are trying to convey. Generally viewers must be offered an image of themselves made more attractive by the product or service you are trying to sell. In the middle of all this fantasy you must produce a picture structured to attract attention; show the product; perhaps leave room for lettering; and suit the proportions of the showcard or magazine page on which it will finally be printed.

News pictures are different again. Here you must often encapsulate an event in what will be one final published shot. The moment of expression or action should sum up the situation, although you can colour your report by choosing what, when, and from where you shoot. Until recently there was a long-held assumption that photographers are impartial observers, documenting events as they unfold. Reality is somewhat different, for no-one can be completely impartial. Photographers have their own beliefs (social, cultural, political or religious) and prejudices.

Figure 1.11 Joel Meyerowitz’s considered recording of Ground Zero demonstrates the changing role of photography in reporting the news, which is now dominated by constant rolling 24-hour news broadcast on television and the internet. Photography often offers us a post-event contemplation of the action.

Figure 1.12 Christopher Stewart photographs people working in the security industry for his series Insecurities, using traditional documentary practice, but at the same time, through the careful selection and editing of images, appropriates the codes and conventions of the staged photograph.
Photograph a demonstration from behind a police line and you may show menacing crowds; photograph from the front of the crowd and you show suppressive authorities. You have a similar power when portraying the face of, say, a politician or a sportsperson. Someone’s expression can change between sadness, joy, boredom, concern, arrogance, etc., all within the space of a few minutes. By photographing just one of those moments and labelling it with a caption reporting the event, it is not difficult to tinker with the truth; therefore the photographer has a responsibility of acknowledging their own beliefs and bias.

These subtle distinctions demonstrate how photographers have always manipulated the viewer. The ease by which digital manipulation can now add or remove picture elements seamlessly, described in Chapter 14, has further put to rest the old adage, which was never true in the first place, of ‘photographic truth’ and ‘the camera cannot lie’ (Figure 1.13).

Photography can provide information in the kind of pictures used for training, medicine, and various forms of scientific evidence. Here you can really make use of the medium’s superb detail and clarity, and the way pictures communicate internationally, without the language barrier of the written word. However, again the history of photography is full of examples of ‘scientific’ images manipulated to provide evidence of the photographer’s beliefs. Certain photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, was used to provide evidence that human traits were defined in the facial features of individuals, and the criminal, homosexual, diseased and mentally ill were subjected to the controlling gaze of the photographic lens (see Figure 1.14). The purpose of this was that they could be easily identified and removed from society to one form of institution or another, and you would then be left with a ‘pure’ race.

Today there are still certain types of photography that are based on difference, often visitors photographing in exotic places on holiday – the cute little Indian beggar boy or an African tribesperson – or even closer to home, the homeless. These and a number of other subject matters, such as windows and doors, forms of decay such as graveyards, scrapyards and even graffiti, enthral the photographer for one reason or another. As someone new to photography you will have to negotiate your way through the obvious and understand how you can define why you are taking photographs.
At another level, entirely decorative photographs for calendars or editorial illustration (pictures which accompany magazine articles) can communicate beauty for its own sake – beauty of landscape, human beauty, and natural form or beauty seen in ordinary, everyday things (Figure 1.15). Beauty is a very subjective quality, influenced by attitudes and experience. But there is scope here for your own way of seeing and responding to be shown through a photograph that produces a similar response in others. Overdone, it easily becomes ‘cute’ and cloying, overmannered, clichéd and self-conscious.

Photographs are not always intended to communicate with other people, however; you might be looking for self-fulfilment and self-expression, and it may be a matter of indifference to you whether others read information or messages into your results – or indeed see them at all. Some of the most original images in photography have been produced in this way, totally free of commercial or artistic conventions, often the result of someone’s private and personal obsession. You will find examples in the photography of Jo Spence, Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin, Wolfgang Tillmans, Joel-Peter Witkin, Hans Bellmer or Bernd and Hilla Becher.

There are many other roles photographs can play: mixtures of fact and fiction, art and science (Figure 1.16), communication and non-communication. Photography has played a major role in defining some artist movements such as surrealism (see Figure 1.17) where a play on the real or presumed objective nature of photography is used to startling effect. Remember too that a photograph is not necessarily the last link in the chain between subject and viewer. Editors,
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

Art editors and exhibition organisers all like to impose their own will on the final presentation. Pictures are cropped, captions are written and added, layouts place one picture where it relates to others. Any of these acts can strengthen, weaken or distort what a photographer is trying to show. You are at the mercy of people ‘farther down the line’. They can even sabotage you years later, by taking an old picture and making it do new tricks.

Changing attitudes towards photography

Today, photography is more popular in art than ever before, but an awareness and acceptance of photography as a creative medium by other artists, galleries, publishers, collectors and the general public has not been won easily. People’s views as to what photography can and can’t do for and against photography as art have varied enormously in the past, according to the fashions and attitudes of the times, and photography has had different roles since its invention. For a great deal of the nineteenth century (photography was officially invented in 1839: See Appendix G for a timeline of events leading up to the invention of photography and important dates), photographers were often seen as a threat by painters, who never failed to point out in public that these apparently crass interlopers had no artistic ability or knowledge. To some extent this was true – you needed to be something of a chemist to get results at all; but a knowledge of art also helped with composition, lighting and so on.
Figure 1.16  The Thinker. This double self-portrait uses the material of medical examination but re-presents it to the audience as an art object, questioning the relationship between doctor and patient.

Figure 1.17  In this portrait of the surrealist artist Salvador Dali, the photographer Philip Halsman, suspend furniture on wires then threw cats and water into the air while Dali jumped into the mix. The shot required over 20 ‘takes’ before Halsman was satisfied with the result. The wires were then retouched out and Dali painted cat legs and water out the canvas to match the composition of the photograph.
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

Art and documentation

In the first half of the nineteenth century several people tried to perfect photography, inventing different processes and techniques, but all had similar goals: to produce the most realistic and detailed pictures by fixing the image created inside a camera, and by making what are now called ‘photograms’ (see Chapter 13). The first photographs were regarded as miraculous and praised for their beauty and detail; they also required lots of skill and knowledge to produce (see Figure 1.18).

By the end of the nineteenth century, equipment and materials had become somewhat easier to handle, and photography had spread all around the world and was being put to use for artistic purposes and to document people, places and things. Early in the twentieth century, snapshot cameras and developing and printing services for amateurs, made black and white photography an amusement for the masses. Some ‘serious’ photographers felt the need to distance themselves from all this and gain acceptance as artists, so they tried to force the medium closer to the appearance and functions of paintings of the day. These photographers were also attempting to recapture the ‘hand-made’ feel of early photographs at a time when photographs were becoming mass-produced machine products. They called themselves ‘pictorial’ photographers, shooting picturesque subjects, often through soft-focus camera attachments, and printing on textured paper by processes which eliminated most of photography’s ‘horrid detail’ (see Figure 1.19).

Other photographers were more interested in photography as a new and modern way of producing images, and focused on what they thought photography could do better than other, traditional, forms of representation. They utilized new techniques for mechanically reproducing photographs on the printed page and were influenced by new popular culture (such as film and picture magazines) and by modern art as it became increasingly abstract. Photographers saw painters concentrating on the particular qualities of painting (surface, texture, and so on) and decided to concentrate on what photography could do, instead of trying to make pictures that looked like paintings. As a reaction to pictorialism, ‘straight’ photography came into vogue early in the twentieth century in Europe and America with the work of photographers such as Walker Evans, Paul Strand (see Figure 1.20) and Albert Renger-Patzsch. They made maximum use of the qualities of black and white photography that were previously condemned as artless: pin-sharp focus throughout, rich tonal scale and the ability to shoot simple everyday subjects using natural lighting and transform them into

Figure 1.18 Frozen action. Eadweard Muybridge uses the camera for his motion studies (1886) as a form of scientific discovery to reveal something too brief for the human eye alone to see
beautiful pictures. Technical excellence was all important and strictly applied. Photography had developed an aesthetic of its own, something quite separate from painting and other forms of fine art. This aesthetic was pursued by photographers such as Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham (see Figure 1.21) and their sharply focused studies of details and textures set the standards for art photography until the 1960s.

The advent of photographs mechanically printed into newspapers and magazines opened up the market for press and candid photography. Pictures were taken for their action and content rather than any greatly considered treatment. This and the freedom given by precision hand-held cameras led to a break with age-old painterly rules of composition.

The 1930s and 1940s were the great expansion period for picture magazines and photo-reporting, before the emergence of television. They also saw a steady growth in professional aspects of photography: advertising; commercial and industrial; portraiture; medical; scientific and aerial applications. Most of this was still in black and white. Use of colour gradually grew during the 1950s but it was still difficult and expensive to reproduce well in publications.

New approaches in the 1960s and onwards
Rapid, far-reaching changes took place during the 1960s. From something which a previous generation had regarded as an old-fashioned, fuddy-duddy trade and would-be artistic occupation, photography became very much part of the pop culture and consumerism that had boomed since the Second World War. New small format precision SLR cameras, electronic flash, machines and custom laboratories to hive off boring processing routines, not to mention an explosion of fashion photography, all had their effect. Photography captured the public imagination.
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

Young people suddenly wanted to own a camera, and use it to express themselves and depict the world around them. The new photographers were interested in contemporary artists, but neither knew nor cared about the established photographic clubs and societies with their stultifying ‘rules’ and narrow outlook on the possibilities of photography. As photographs had become so universal in people’s contemporary lifestyle they became integrated with modern painting, printmaking, even sculpture, and a generation of young artists that included Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson and Ed Ruscha (see Figure 1.22) began using photography as just another of the tools available to them. They saw photography very differently from the art photographers that had come before them and were less interested in the crafts of photography, enjoying its quickness, its ability to capture events and performances, and the fact that it seemed to be part of the everyday world of popular culture, not art.

Photography began to be taught in schools and colleges, especially art colleges, where it had been previously downgraded as a technical subject. America led the way in setting up photographic university degree courses, and included it in art and design, social studies and

Figure 1.20 Pin-sharp focus throughout, rich tonal scale and the ability to shoot simple everyday subjects using natural lighting and transform them into beautiful pictures were the aesthetics of modernist photographers such as Paul Strand

Figure 1.21 Imogen Cunningham, Unmade Bed, 1957. Cunningham joined the band of enthusiastic photographers founded by Ansel Adams and Willard Van Dyke in 1934 under the name of ‘Group f/64’. Ansel Adams said that the group should be made up of ‘those workers who are striving to define photography as an art form by a simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods’
Figure 1.22 These images are taken from Ed Ruscha’s seminal book Twenty Six Gasoline Stations, which was a milestone in the history of photography and pop art. He said about the photographs ‘I was after that kind of blank reality that the subject matter would present. I was met with a little scepticism from some people and usually those people were more intellectual… but someone who worked in a gasoline station would say “Hey, this is great!”’
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

communications. Nevertheless, few one-person portfolios of photographs had been published with high quality reproduction in books. It was also extremely rare for an established art gallery to sell or even hang photographs, let alone public galleries to be devoted to photography. As a result it was difficult for the work of individuals to be seen and become well known. Even magazines and newspapers sometimes failed to credit the photographer alongside his or her work, whereas writers always had a published credit.  

By the 1970s, though, all this had changed. Adventurous galleries put on photography shows which were increasingly well attended. Demand from the public and from students on courses encouraged publishers to produce a wide range of books showcasing the work of individual photographers. Creative work began to be sold as ‘fine prints’ in galleries to people who bought them as investments. Older photographers such as Bill Brandt, Minor White and Andre Kertesz were rediscovered by art curators, brought out of semi-obscurity, and their work exhibited in international art centres, whilst photographers such as William Eggleston (see Figure 1.5) and Stephen Shore (see Figure 1.23) became the first to exhibit colour photographs in major museums.  

The 1980s brought colour materials which gave better quality results and were cheaper than before. Colour labs began to appear, offering everyone better processing and printing, plus quicker turnaround. The general public wanted to shoot in colour rather than black and white, and gradually colour was taken up by artist photographers too. Colour became cheaper to reproduce on the printed page; even newspapers started to use colour photography. Around this time it also became possible to produce large-scale colour photographs, prompting a new generation of artist photographers to create images that were closer to the size of Old Master paintings, billboard adverts and cinema screens than to the book or magazine pages and small

Figure 1.23 Stephen Shore was one of the earliest photographers to use colour photography as an art form with exhibitions in major museums and is known for a series of cross-country trips, making ‘on the road’ photographs of American and Canadian landscapes
prints more commonly associated with photography.

Today the availability of less daunting, user-friendly camera equipment combined with a much bigger public audience for photography encourages a broad flow of pictures. Galleries, books and education have brought greater critical discussion of photographs – how they communicate meanings through a visual language of their own.

There are now so many ways photography is used by different individuals that it is becoming almost as varied and profound as any other art. In fact, today, photography is everywhere and it is part of almost every aspect of our contemporary lives. Digital cameras, scanners and the internet have made it possible to distribute photographs more widely and faster than ever before, and photography continues to expand as technologies and ideas change. A greater understanding of the languages of photography and the advent of new technologies has encouraged a wider appreciation of photography as a medium that documents the world and is expressive at the same time.

**Personal styles and approaches**

The ‘style’ of your photography will develop out of your own interests and attitudes, and the opportunities that come your way. For example, are you mostly interested in people or in objects and things you can work on without concern for human relationships? Do you enjoy the split-second timing needed for action photography (see Figure 1.24), or prefer the slower, more soul-searching approach possible with landscape or still life subjects?

If you aim to be a professional photographer you may see yourself as a generalist, handling most photographic needs in your locality. Or you might work in some more specialised area, such as natural history, police forensics, scientific research or medical photography, combining photography with other skills and knowledge. Some of these applications give very little scope for personal interpretation, especially when you must present information clearly and accurately.
to fulfil certain needs. There is greatest freedom in pictures taken by and for yourself. Here you can best develop your own visual style, provided you are able to motivate and drive yourself without the pressures and clear-cut aims present in most professional assignments. However, by building your own distinctive portfolio of photographs the aim is that you will become more successful, in the long run, as you are able to provide new and interesting ideas for clients rather than rehash what is already available in the marketplace.

Style is difficult to define, but recognizable when you see it. Pictures have some characteristic mix of subject matter: mood (humour, drama, romance, etc.), treatment (factual or abstract), use of tone or colour, composition … even the picture proportions. Technique is important too, from choice of lens to form of print presentation. But more than anything else style is to do with a particular way of seeing.

A word of caution; style over content is never advisable in any professional assignment, whether as a commercial or a fine art photographer. Many photographers have found themselves trapped by being defined as ‘such-and-such’ a photographer and lose the initial enjoyment that brought them to photography in the first place, when forced to repeat the work they are best known for by yet another client.

**Content and meaning**

Your approach to photography can be enhanced by looking at the work of others but it comes out of doing, refined down over a long period to ways of working which best support the things you see as important and want to show others. It must not become a formula, a mould which makes everything you photograph turn out looking the same. The secret is to coax out the essence of each and every subject, without repeating yourself. People should be able to recognize your touch in a photograph but still discover things unique to each particular subject or situation by the way you show them.

In personal work the content and meaning of photographs can be enormously varied. A major project, ‘21st Century Types’ by Grace Lau, explores identity and how people in one part of the world view people in another. Lau set up a studio in Hastings, South East England, to photograph passers by and explore connections between China and Europe by using found props. Regarding Figure 1.25 Lau says she is ‘making an oblique comment on Imperialist visions of the “exotic” Chinese and by reversing roles, I have become the Imperialist photographer documenting my exotic subjects in the “Port” of Hastings.’

Katy Grannan’s striking portraits examine the desire of her subjects to offer themselves up to the camera lens. Her early series (see Figure 1.26) are portraits of strangers Grannan met through newspaper advertisements. Her pictures are not documentary but staged. Her people are posed, and content and meaning are based on acute observation and meticulous planning. The landscapes and neighbourhoods of her photographs were informed by her own experience living in the American Northwest, and when photographing models in their own surroundings Grannan pays meticulous attention to the elements of each domestic setting, highlighting the mundane but often telling details. The subjects choose to remain clothed or model nude, working with Grannan to arrive at a pose resulting in an image that maintains a delicate, yet increasingly charged, sense of intimacy.

Many other contemporary photographers have gone to extremes to create staged images that look real, such as Jeff Wall (see Figure 14.1), Hannah Starkey or Gregory Crewdson,
creating tableaux (pictures of constructed events), where the subject has been replaced with actors or whole sets (re)created to look as if real locations. Although the tableau has a long history, the constructed photograph has existed since the invention of photography.

Victorians like Julia Margaret Cameron (see Figure 1.27) and H. P. Robinson produced many photographs narrating stories. This ‘staged’ approach has always of course been present in movies, and in most fashion and advertising still photography.

Sometimes the content of personal work is based on semi-abstract images in which elements such as colour, line and tone are more important than what the subject actually is. Meaning gives way to design and the photographer picks subjects for their basic graphic content which he or she can mould into interesting compositions, although in other hands even the simplest images of shape and form can carry meaning, as in Figure 1.28 where the image doesn’t show any detail but suggests a relationship between photography and memory.

Look at collections of work by well-known photographers (single pictures, shown in this book for example, cannot do them justice): Henri Cartier-Bresson’s love of humanity, gentle humour and brilliant use of composition (see Figure 1.9); Hiroshi Sugimoto’s austere and highly refined presentation of seascape (see Figure 1.29); or Robert Demachy’s romantic pictorialism (see Figure 1.19). Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Martin Parr, Keith Arnatt and Mari Mahr are photographers who each have dramatically different approaches to content and meaning. Their work is distinctive, original, and often obsessional.
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

In the fields of scientific and technical illustration the factual requirements of photography make it less simple to detect individuals’ work. But even here high-speed photography by Dr Harold Edgerton (see Figure 1.30), the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge (Figure 1.18) and medical photography by Prof. Dr Killian stand out, thanks to these experts’ concern for basic visual qualities too.

Measuring success

There is no formula that can judge the success of a photograph. We are all in danger of ‘wishful seeing’ in our own work, reading into pictures the things we want to discover, and recalling the difficulties overcome when shooting rather than assessing the result as it stands. Perhaps the easiest thing to judge is technical quality, although even here ‘good’ or ‘bad’ may depend on what best serves the mood and atmosphere of your picture.

Most commercial photographs can be judged against how well they fulfil their purpose, since they are in the communications business. A poster or magazine cover image, for example, must be striking and give its message fast. But many such pictures, although clever, are shallow.
Figure 1.27 Portrait of Mary Ryan ‘Study after the manner of Francia’ 1865 by Julia Margaret Cameron. Who was particularly adept in using long exposures, soft focus and atmospheric lighting conditions to create powerful portraits and allegories. She is recognised as one of the most experimental and influential photographers of the nineteenth century.

Figure 1.28 Ground #70: bordering on abstraction, this photograph by Uta Barth was created by focusing at a close distance, leaving the background as an ambiguous blur, to foreground the activity of looking and question how we look at familiar spaces. While not addressing the literal subject matter of the image but rather vision itself, Barth’s photography can have the effect of making the overlooked and everyday beautiful.
WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

Figure 1.29 *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica*, 1980, a graphic seascape by Hiroshi Sugimoto, ignores the golden rules of composition but offers a black and white interpretative image of great simplicity. It was seen and photographed straight but printed with very careful control of tonal values.

Figure 1.30 Inventor and artist Dr Harold Edgerton pioneered the strobe flash, stop-action photography and a method of taking super-fast images called Rapatronic. His image *Bullet Through Apple* was taken in 1964 with flash duration of about a millionth of a second.
and soon forgotten. There is much to be said for other kinds of photography in which ambiguity and strangeness challenge you, allowing you to keep discovering something new. This does not mean you have to like everything which is offbeat and obscure but by looking you should be able to develop your ability for critical analysis.

Reactions to photographs change with time too. Live with your picture for a while (have a pinboard wall display at home), otherwise you will keep thinking your latest work is always the best. Similarly it is a mistake to surrender to today’s popular trend; it is better to develop the strength of your own outlook and skills until they gain attention for what they are. Just remember that although people say they want to see new ideas and approaches, they still tend to judge them in terms of yesterday’s accepted standards.

A great deal of professional photography is sponsored, commercialized art in which success can be measured financially. Personal projects allow most adventurous, avant-garde picture making – typically to express preoccupations and concerns. Another route is that of the academic who is enabled by his or her institution to pursue their own practice, normally termed as research, alongside their teaching and administrative duties (see Figure 1.31). They like other artists may also be supported by grants and funding from a diverse range of awarding bodies, which is another way of measuring success. Artistic success is then measured in terms of the enjoyment and stimulus of making the picture, and satisfaction with the result. Rewards come as work published in its own right or exhibited on a gallery wall. Extending yourself in this way often feeds commercial assignments too. So the measure of true success could be said to be when you do your own self-expressive thing, but also find that people flock to your door to commission and buy this very photography.

Figure 1.31 Ori Gersht from the series entitled Blow Up, depicting elaborate floral arrangements, based upon a nineteenth century still life painting, at the moment of exploding using a digital process, which captures each shattering still life at a speed of 1/6000th of a second. Gersht explores questions concerning optical perception, the conception of time and the relationships between the photographic image and objective reality.