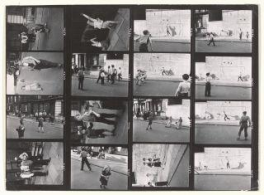
Collection Selection Box

The History of Photography (1940 – 1990)

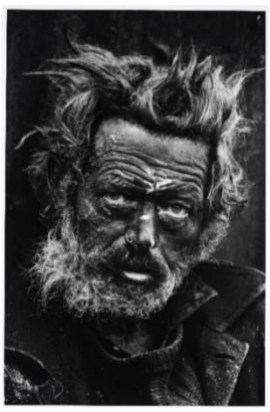
Introduction

This box contains images from the mid- to late 20th century. It discusses the continued development of photography in the years between 1940 and 1990, during rapidly changing socio-political and technological contexts. This box also contains a small case-study of photographs from the *New Society* magazine. This magazine was a pioneering weekly publication in circulation between 1962 and 1988, which focused on everyday people from all corners of modern Britain.

Box 3: The History of Photography (1940 – 1990)

			
Weegee (Arthur Fellig) (1899 – 1968) Last Rites 1942 Museum no. PH.414-1982	Harry Callahan (1912 – 99) Eleanor and Barbara, Chicago 1953 Chicago, United States Museum no. PH.774-1987	Roger Mayne (1929 – 2014) Contact sheet of photographs made in Southam Street, London 1956 London Museum no. E.3189-1990	William Klein (b. 1928) Fashion by Desses, Vogue 1961 Museum no. PH.711-1987

			
Harold Edgerton (1909 – 90) Cutting the card quickly, Bullet through King of Diamonds 1964 Museum no. E.584:2-1997	Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 – 2004) Café 1968 Paris, France Museum no. PH.488-1978	Bernd (1931 – 2007) & Hilla Becher (1934 – 2015) Washery for Coal, Tower Colliery 1975 Wales Museum no. CIRC.648-1975	Lewis Baltz (b. 1945) Prospector Park 1978 – 79 Utah, United States Museum no. PH.292-1983

			
William Eggleston (b. 1939) White Suit, from the series Southern Suite 1981 Museum no. PH.234-1983	Diane Arbus (1923 – 71) Xmas tree in a living room, Levittown, L.I. 1963 New York, United States Museum no. CIRC.309-1974	Steve Benbow (1931 – 2006) Young people on a hillside above Port Talbot 1981 Wales Museum no. E.62-2006	Don McCullin (b. 1935) Homeless Irishman, Aldgate East, London 1970 London Museum no. PH.1347-1980

	
Chris Killip (b. 1946) The Angelic Upstarts at the Barbary Coast Club, Sunderland, during a Miner's Strike Benefit Dance, December 1984 1984 Sunderland, England Museum no. PH.380-1987	

Weegee (Arthur Fellig) (1899 – 1968)
Last Rites
1942
Museum no. PH.414-1982

Weegee was born in the Soviet town of Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine) and immigrated to the United States with his family when he was eleven. He began working in a photography studio in 1918 and became a freelance news photographer in 1935. Focusing on police work, Weegee photographed crime scenes and accidents around Manhattan. He received permission to install a police radio in his car in 1938, which allowed him to arrive quickly, often before the police, at the scenes of incidents. The nickname Weegee is a phonetic version of 'ouija', the fortune-telling board game, which he gained as a result of this habit. Weegee's photographs appeared in many publications, including the *Herald-Tribune*, *Daily News*, *Post*, the *Sun* and *PM Weekly*. His work also garnered success outside of mainstream press in the 1940s; it was exhibited at New York's Photo League in 1941 and at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. His work is now held in many major museum collections of photography around the world. Weegee was skilled at selecting integral moments in the events he photographed and creating deliberately inclusive compositions. Both encourage an emotional connection between the viewer and subjects.

This photograph was published on 8th March, 1942 in *PM Daily*. It depicts the bodies of victims of a fire at a tenement in Brooklyn, New York, being given their last rites by a local priest. The priest is gathered with firefighters and first responders, who form a semi-circle around the dead. The viewer is drawn into the scene and appears to complete the circle, encouraging an engagement with the depicted characters.

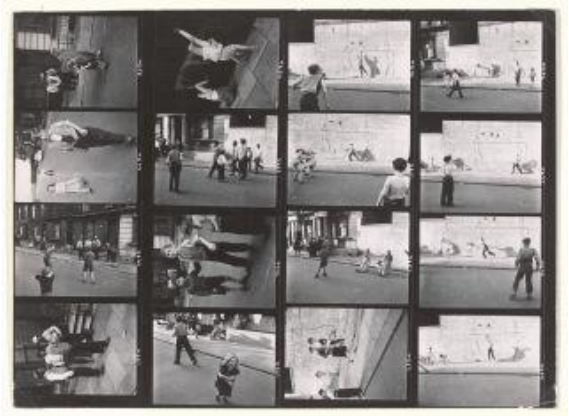
Harry Callahan (1912 – 99)
Eleanor and Barbara, Chicago
1953
Chicago, United States
Museum no. PH.774-1987

Harry Callahan is considered one of the great innovators of modern American photography. He began making photographs as a hobby whilst working for the Chrysler automobile company in the

1930s. Callahan was a member of Chrysler's Photo Club and heard Ansel Adams, a prominent American photographer, give a lecture there in 1941. Inspired by Adams' emphasis on photography as a standalone medium, Callahan began to pursue photography seriously. He learned to use larger, more complicated cameras that made highly detailed images with great depth of tone. From 1946, Callahan taught photography at the Institute of Design, Chicago, at the invitation of László Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy was an influential Hungarian-born photographer who had come to Chicago from the Bauhaus, a ground-breaking German school of art and design that was integral in the development of European Modernism in between the World Wars. The Institute of Design, known as the 'New Bauhaus', was under Moholy-Nagy's direction and advocated the Bauhaus's geometric but elegant style. Callahan taught here for 15 years and became greatly contributed to the growth of a simple, Modernist aesthetic in mid-century America.

This photograph depicts Callahan's wife Eleanor and his daughter Barbara. Eleanor features in some of his best known work and this deeply personal theme was often revisited throughout his career. This image is part of a series of photographs taken in and around Chicago in the early 1950s. Inspired by Adams' sweeping landscapes, Callahan approached these photographs in a manner typical of landscape photography. He used a large format camera; these cameras use large negatives (at least 4 x 5 inches), which result in very sharp, highly detailed images that feel expansive. By including Eleanor and Barbara in the picture, Callahan deliberately interrupts the vast landscape, transforming a usually detached style of photography into an intimate and delicate view of family life.

Roger Mayne (1929 – 2014)
Contact sheet of photographs made in Southam Street, London
1956
London
Museum no. E.3189-1990



Roger Mayne became interested in photography during his time as a Chemistry student at Oxford University in the late 1940s. He was drawn initially to photographic processing techniques, but by 1951 he was contributing to pictorial magazines, had moved to London and had decided upon a career as a freelance photographer. Mayne's best known work is that of Southam Street, a pocket of West London that experienced severe post-war poverty. He photographed daily life there between 1956 and 1961, and this series became one of the most significant photographic surveys of life in '50s Britain. He was inspired by French photographer and seminal photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson to make this series, which established Mayne's reputation as a serious photojournalist himself. He experimented with landscape photography and other artistic media during his career but continued to photograph street life, travelling extensively around the world. His work is characterised by high contrast, which emphasises form and creates dynamic compositions.

Mayne photographed the area of Southam Street intermittently for five years. The photographs focus on the youth in the community; children and adolescents, who were the first generation to be referred to as 'teenagers'. Images of gossiping girls and Teddy Boys, smoking in doorways and gambling in the street, are interspersed with images of younger children, running, climbing and

playing. Mayne revisited the theme of childhood throughout his career, reinforcing the universality of growing up. The children depicted could be from Southam Street, around the UK or indeed anywhere else.

These photographs have been printed as a sheet of contact prints. Contact prints are made without the use of an enlarger. The negative is placed directly on the photographic paper and exposed to light. The resulting print is the same size as the negative. Here, Mayne's camera film was cut into strips and laid in rows. Photographers often used a magnifier and contact sheets to assess the results of their work before selecting which images to print at a larger size.

William Klein (b. 1928)
Fashion by Desses, Vogue
1961
Museum no. PH.711-1987

William Klein's innovative approach to image making challenged the conventional expectations for photography. A native New Yorker, Klein began practicing in the 1950s and neglected the mainstream documentary style that was popular at the time. Instead, he experimented with different photographic processes, abstraction and moving subjects. Klein developed a signature style that celebrated 'bad' qualities: blurriness, graininess and distortion. He encouraged these qualities by using slow film and a wide-angle lens. During the 1950s whilst working for *Vogue* magazine, Klein made the seminal book Life is Good and Good for You in New York: William Klein Trance Witness Reveals. He said it was intended 'as a monster big-city Daily Bugle with its scandals and scoops that you'd find blowing in the streets at three in the morning'. It was panned in America at the time of its publication in 1956, but received a prestigious French photo-book prize in 1957. Klein subsequently returned to Paris, where he had lived after the War, and made three more books focussed on Rome (1958), Moscow (1962) and Tokyo (1964). In the late 1960s, Klein stepped away from photography to focus on film-making and only returned to it in 1978. His work from the 1950s and early '60s remains particularly significant, subverting the preconceptions of street photography and serving as inspiration for many photographers of the later 20th century.

In the 1950s, Klein began shooting for *Vogue* after the magazine's legendary art director, Alexander Liberman, saw some of his early photographs using subjects in motion. Klein worked with *Vogue* until 1965, during which he made unconventional fashion campaigns in New York and Europe. This photograph is taken at the Alexandre III Bridge in Paris, and exemplifies Klein's playful approach. He has used multiple exposures to make this image, seen in the repetition of the bridge's columns in both the right and left hand side of the image. The policeman also appears twice; in the foreground, striding towards the model, and in the background as a ghostly apparition.

Harold Edgerton (1909 – 90)
Cutting the card quickly, Bullet through King of Diamonds
1964
Museum no. E.584:2-1997

Harold Edgerton was an American engineer and photographer who developed the electronic flash and stroboscope stop-motion technology. A professor of electrical engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Edgerton combined these engineering technologies with photography, and brought both flash and stroboscopes into the mainstream. Edgerton's stroboscope was essentially a strobe light that emitted light at regular intervals. Whilst lit, objects in motion appeared to be static. His equipment could produce up to 120 flashes a second, with the result akin to leafing through a flipbook. Edgerton included a camera in this process, which captured an image every time the strobe light flashed. His work revealed intricacies of motion otherwise invisible to the naked eye; the trajectory of a bullets, the movement of liquid and the flight of insects. Edgerton bridged the gap between science and entertainment, taking ideas that were considered to be very complex and presenting them in a way that was accessible and visually engaging. Edgerton was a professor at MIT for over forty years and continued to be involved in the development of complicated photographic technologies, including sonar and deep-sea photography.

This photograph depicts the motion of a bullet cutting through a playing card. Made using Edgerton's signature stroboscope technology, the image captures an instant that the eye cannot see. The composition is simple and formal, clearly presenting the intended moment. Edgerton originally performed this experiment in 1962, when he appeared on the popular panel game show I've Got a Secret to demonstrate strobe flash photography.

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 – 2004)
Café
1968
Paris, France
Museum no. PH.488-1978

The V&A has over 440 photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson, a French photographer who is considered to be one of the fathers of photojournalism and masters of candid photography. He sought to capture the 'everyday' in his photographs and took great interest in recording human activity. He wrote, "For me the camera is a sketch book, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously. In order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel involved in what one frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry. It is by economy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression."

As a reporter and co-founder of the Magnum photography agency, Cartier-Bresson accepted his responsibility to supply information to a world in a hurry. He documented the liberation of Paris, the collapse of the Nationalist regime in China, Gandhi's funeral and the partitioning of Berlin. In 1952 the term 'decisive moment', most often used to describe Cartier-Bresson's photographs, was coined. It does not refer to the capturing of a historic moment, or to storytelling, which is not what Cartier-Bresson represents in his photographs. The phrase, derived from Zen Buddhism, is applied to his technique to mean the moment (which he photographs) when his internal sense of form is expressed. An emphasis on form is highly visible in Cartier-Bresson's photographs and it is as if the drama of his images takes care of itself. Cartier-Bresson helped develop the street photography style that has influenced generations of photographers that followed.

This photograph depicts an encounter at a café in the district of Saint Germain des Prés, Paris. A young woman sits in the foreground, styled in a quintessentially sixties fashion, as an older woman reading the French newspaper *Le Figaro* regards her from nearby. Many questions arise from this image: is the older woman’s gaze intentionally diminishing? What has caught her eye about the younger girl? Is the younger girl aware she is being watched? Cartier-Bresson captured an unremarkable moment in time, but he caught the subtleties of daily interactions that are usually overlooked. By presenting these details, he encourages viewers to think more carefully about everyday situations and consider the material world from a different perspective.

Bernd (1931 – 2007) & Hilla Becher (1934 – 2015)
Washery for Coal, Tower Colliery
1975
Wales
Museum no. CIRC.648-1975

Bernd and Hilla Becher met in 1957 during their studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Academy of Arts) in Germany. Before this, Bernd had studied painting and typography and Hilla had been photography apprentice. Both Bechers also worked for advertising agencies, specialising in the photography of commercial products. This refined their precise photographic technique and encouraged their aesthetic interest in mass-produced and industrial objects.

Influenced by Bernd's family's heritage in the mining and steelworks, the couple became fascinated with the industrial architecture of Germany. They began to document the structures associated with industry, which were fast being replaced with more modern factories and machinery. They created an extensive series of photographs depicting water-towers, coal bunkers, grain silos, oil refineries and gas tanks. Their images formed a visual catalogue of these structures. They referred to their repetitive approach to documentary photography as 'typology', or 'topographic photography'.

Bernd and Hilla Becher went on to teach at the Kustakademie Düsseldorf during the 1970s. Their students included many prominent contemporary photographers such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and Candida Höfer.

This photograph comes from a broader series of images depicting buildings involved in coal manufacture. All the images were taken from the same perspective, with the same objective viewpoint, in perfect focus. Although these edifices performed uniform functions and had similar formal elements, the range of images also revealed beauty in their varying architectural designs. This variance enables the pictures to function as standalone images that come together to create an interesting, in-depth series of work.

Lewis Baltz (b. 1945)
Prospector Park
1978 – 79
Utah, United States
Museum no. PH.292-1983

Lewis was born and raised in California, which is where he made his early photographs. His early work focuses on increasing industrialisation in the region, reflecting on the rapid changes in society and landscape.

In the 1970s, Baltz's work appeared in a group exhibition alongside photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr, among others. This group was presented with the name *New Topographics*. They were seen to represent a new, non-judgemental approach to documenting the changing landscape of North America and Europe. However, with hindsight, much of this work appears to criticise urban sprawl.

Baltz addressed societal change more in-depth later in his career. He now focuses on the interaction between humans and machines, looking at how computers, technology and surveillance have become embedded in modern society.

This photograph depicts a moment of human intervention in the natural landscape. Baltz used his Leica camera, known for being lightweight and portable, on a tripod. This ensured all the details of this image were in perfect focus, so that the foreground, background and middle ground can be clearly seen.

Prospector Park is the name of the housing estate being built in this image. The houses in the middle ground suggest the future for the piles of dirt in the foreground. The scene is set against a majestic natural landscape in the background, revealing what the rural area once was. There is a formal symmetry between the silhouette of the hills in the background and the dirt piles in the foreground, uniting the composition. Meanwhile, the dirt tracks at the bottom of the image draw the viewer's gaze into the depth of the picture. By employing these visual techniques, Baltz creates an elegant narrative of nature being given over to increasing population and suburbanisation.

William Eggleston (b. 1939)
White Suit, from the series Southern Suite
1981
Museum no. PH.234-1983

William Eggleston is credited with playing a crucial role in the development of colour photography in the 1970s. Until this point, the vivid colour technologies were mostly associated with garish advertising and commercial photography.

Eggleston was a successful and inventive documentary photographer of black and white images before he began using colour. He was associated with the artistic community in his hometown, Memphis, Tennessee, and he experimented with flash photography and unusual camera angles. In the early 1970s, Eggleston combined his knack for creative compositions with colour processes. He did so with such brilliant vibrancy that his images often evoke a sense of the uncanny. They reveal something remarkable, unusual or even disconcerting amongst the everyday and familiar. Photographer Raymond Moore described him as finding 'the uncommonness of the commonplace' in ordinary scenes and places.

To create bright, precise colour photographs such as this, Eggleston mastered the dye-transfer printing process, where images in red, blue and green are layered over each other to make a full colour image.

This photograph comes from the series *Southern Suite*, which Eggleston made during the late 1970s and early 1980s, capturing ordinary scenes of the American South. In this image, the flat white surface of the suit becomes jarring. Eggleston has cropped out the rest of the depicted clothesline, which would serve to contextualise this scene. The suit appears to levitate, disembodied, in the frame whilst the shadow of the leaves gives an eerie sense of breezy motion. Eggleston creates a strong impression of the scene surrounding the camera frame, but uses clever cropping to make the familiar subject more extraordinary.

Diane Arbus (1923 – 71)
Xmas tree in a living room, Levittown, L.I.
1963
New York, United States
Museum no. CIRC.309-1974

Diane Arbus was visited Alfred Stieglitz's gallery as a young woman, where she encountered documentary photography by artists such as Paul Strand and Eugène Atget. After the Second World War, Arbus opened a photography studio with her husband Allan. The two became successful fashion photographers, creating work for famous magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Despite their success, Arbus disliked fashion photography and quit the commercial business in 1956. She returned to studying and developed her interest in social documentary photography. She sometimes accompanied Weegee, the New York press photographer, on his night-time forays in Lower Manhattan. She began to work on commission for journalistic editorials and switched from using a standard 35mm camera, which produced grainy images, to a Rolleiflex camera, that made square, sharp pictures.

As her career progressed, Arbus focussed on photographing marginalised people. Her personal work led her to seek out subjects who were seen as deviants from normal society, whether through sexual orientation, disability or other habits or characteristics. Some people criticised her for being a voyeur and taking advantage of vulnerable people, but she was generally applauded for her unsentimental and non-judgemental approach to her subjects. Arbus became increasingly troubled herself, committing suicide in 1971.

The Rolleiflex camera Arbus used is operated by holding it against the body and looking downwards into the viewfinder, instead of holding it to the eye. This made Arbus' photographing process less invasive and gave a lower viewpoint to her images.

In this photograph, the lower camera angle creates a sloping perspective, which accentuates the stoop of the over-sized Christmas tree that dominates the empty room. There are no people in the festive domestic interior. This makes the pile of presents under the tree seem ridiculous and lonely, which is a feeling some people hold towards the Christmas season in general. This photograph is typical of the sense of the hollowness of modern life that Arbus often conveyed through her images.

Steve Benbow (1931 – 2006)
Young people on a hillside above Port Talbot
1981
Wales
Museum no. E.62-2006

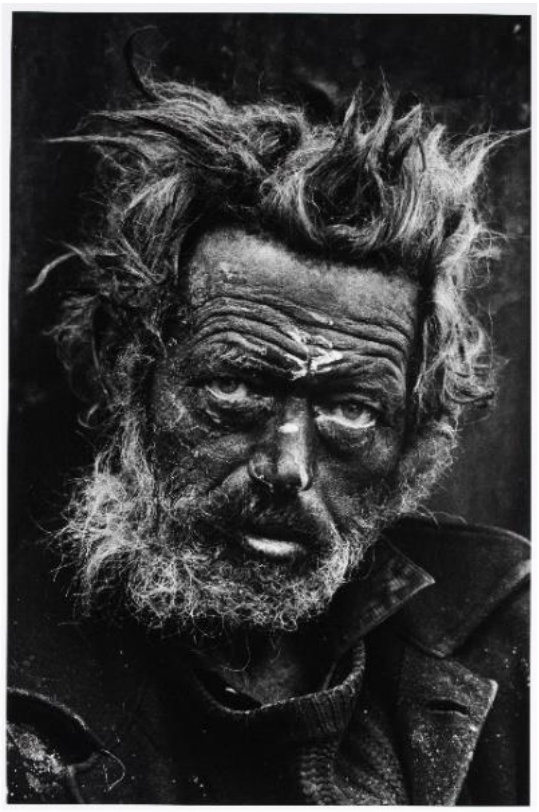
Steve Benbow was primarily known as a folk guitarist and singer during the 60s and 70s. Little is known about his photographic career, other than his work for the weekly magazine New Society. Published in the UK between 1962-1988, *New Society* produced articles and images commenting on life in Britain. Its reportage focussed on ordinary people around the UK and addressed issues relating to education, sociology, politics, economics and human geography. In a rapidly changing political climate, the magazine remained committed to improving the lives of the underprivileged through investigating the ethnic and non-metropolitan communities that constituted 'the other Britain'.

New Society placed great emphasis on its photojournalism, and often employed lesser-known photographers, recognising the early the talent of figures such as Brian Griffin, Martin Parr, Chris Steele-Perkins and Homer Sykes. It commissioned photographers to seek out and document the issues discussed within its pages and produced an important visual record of life in Britain during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. Its editor Paul Barker valued the photographic content because it 'helped to give statistics a human face.' The V&A held an exhibition of photographs from the *New Society* archive in 2010.

This photograph was commissioned to accompany an article entitled ‘Young and Out of Work: a Political Timebomb’. Unemployment among young people was a problem in the 1980s and there were fears that younger generations would grow into unskilled dependents of the state without consistent employment.

The composition uses the diagonal line of the hillside to cut the picture into two halves, contrasting the ominous grey steelworks in the background with the carefree young people in the foreground. The tension between the industrial workplace and playful youths aptly represents unemployment among the younger generations, which was discussed in the article.

Don McCullin (b. 1935)
Homeless Irishman, Aldgate East, London
1970
London
Museum no. PH.1347-1980



Born in Finsbury Park, Don McCullin was evacuated as a child during the Blitz. When he returned to London in his teens, his home had been ruined and he moved to the slums.

McCullin first encountered photography when undertaking National Service in the Royal Air Force in the 1950s, where he worked as a dark room developer. It was during this time that he bought his first camera and captured images of the civil unrest around him.

When he returned from his National Service, a photograph he took of a local gang in his native North London was published in the Observer. This launched his career as a photojournalist and he travelled the world photographing war zones and their victims. McCullin became known for his hard-hitting, evocative coverage in conflicts such as Biafra, the Vietnam War and the Northern Ireland conflict. He frequently put himself in danger to take authentic photographs of the theatre of war, once stopping a bullet with his camera. His shocking images are enhanced by their precise printing, a craft that McCullin learned during his youth in the RAF.

Don McCullin's work displays a strong social conscience. In addition to photographs of war, he documented the poverty and hardship at home in England, especially photographing homeless people in London.

Images such as this one, made for *New Society* magazine, show McCullin to be unflinching in his approach to photographing emotional subject matter. McCullin was not reluctant to interact with this man, when many people might have avoided him. The man confronts the camera directly, connecting with the viewer of the photograph. His dishevelled appearance is heightened by the highly contrasting black and white tone and clarity of the print. The close-up composition leaves the viewer without anywhere else to look, forcing them to acknowledge the social problems McCullin is documenting.

Chris Killip (b. 1946)
The Angelic Upstarts at the Barbary Coast Club, Sunderland, during a Miner's Strike Benefit Dance, December 1984
1984
Sunderland, England
Museum no. PH.380-1987

Another *New Society* contributor, Chris Killip, was a key figure in the New British Photography movement of the 1970s, which aimed to challenge existing academic ideas about the nature of photography. He had no formal training, but learned photography from working as a photographer's assistant in the late 1960s. Throughout the following decades he dedicated himself to documenting the social hardships experienced by those living in industrial and regional locations in the north of England and his native Isle of Man. In 1977 he became a founder and curator at the Side Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne, a cooperative organisation set up to display and archive the documentary work. Killip's frequently gritty photographs are some of the most important realist images of the era.

This photograph came from Killip's 1988 book *In Flagrante*, or 'in the act of wrongdoing.' The book comprised a body of work Killip made in Newcastle upon Tyne and the surrounding North East of England between 1975 and 1987. It captures people in the most wild and deprived parts of the region 'as they face the reality of de-industrialisation in a system which regards their lives as disposable', as Killip writes in the first pages of the book. Its subjects include caravan dwellers, skinheads, homeless people and wild children, caught in a crumbling, wind-lashed industrial landscape. The desolate physical environment reflects the bleak economic downturn of the 70s and 80s at the time of Miner's Strike and Margaret Thatcher's austerity.