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## Black and White and Accessible All Over MoMA Gives Walther Photo Collection Multiple Platforms

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**'Modern Photographs'**

Credit Herbert Bayer/2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Overflowing with prints by Berenice Abbott, Andre Kertesz, Edward Weston and other luminaries from the first half of the 20th century, "Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection, 1909-1949," at the Museum of Modern Art, would seem to be a straightforward look at photography's past. But the show, packaged with a book, a symposium and an engrossing interactive website, is really a bold attempt to visualize the future of photography inside the museum as it reckons with the unwieldy, image-saturated culture outside the galleries.

This multiplatform project is an ambitious experiment, four years in the making, which involved some two dozen scholars and conservators, and, as might be expected, it has a few redundancies. Nonetheless, it's an important — even necessary — step for the museum. By amplifying a collection from the first half of the 20th century, using contemporary tools, MoMA is finding ways to adhere to its name and mission while acknowledging that art has long since moved on from Modernism.

The Thomas Walther Collection, acquired by MoMA in 2001, consists of more than 300 photographs, largely from the 1920s and '30s. During those years, the medium was experiencing a technological and artistic growth spurt, with the help of hand-held cameras, new motion-capture technologies and special effects borrowed from cinema.

It was a heady time for photographers, as evidenced by the German Willi Ruge, who snapped pictures while parachuting from an airplane over Berlin. His adrenaline-fueled images, published in the weekly *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in 1931, put today's GoPro-toting daredevils in perspective; one shows the photographer's feet hovering above a plaza, seconds before landing.

Audacious experiments were also taking place in the darkroom, where Maurice Tabard, Edward W. Quigley and Franz Roh, among others, were playing with solarizations, double exposures and photograms (images made on photosensitive surfaces using light but not cameras). Sometimes these techniques were used to quasi-scientific effect, as in Mr. Quigley's light-spiral "Vortex," and in other cases to achieve more of a Surrealist quality, as in Mr. Roh's layering of nudes and architecture.

Both the show and the website emphasize networks, allowing the viewer to discover social and geographical connections among the photographers. This is particularly visible on the site, with its interactive maps that allow you to follow nomadic photographers from city to city, or find points of contact linking artists, but it's also apparent in the exhibition, organized by the chief photography curator, Quentin Bajac, and Sarah Hermanson Meister. There, portraits of artists by other artists — Tina Modotti's "Edward Weston," Lucia Moholy's "Florence Henri" — and glimpses of life inside institutions like the Bauhaus make clear that modern photography was very much a team effort.

The website is probably the best way for photo lovers to compare and contrast prints. There, the Walther Collection can be filtered by technique and material, or by subject, style, school or circle.

Casual viewers overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information online and the possibilities for playing curator will find a bit more focus in the galleries, where certain figures are explored in depth. Teal accent walls are one of the exhibition's many delights, offering intimate, informal glimpses of artists' studios and possessions. One image shows Mondrian's glasses and pipe, casually arranged on a table.

The show's largest section, "Dynamics of the City," best encapsulates the Walther Collection's distinctly urban, peripatetic take on Modernism. Here, works by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Ms. Abbott and Alvin Langdon Coburn, to name a few, explore cities from

unusual angles or abstract their infrastructure; Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's "Berlin, Radio Tower," with its vertiginous overhead perspective, does both.

Also in this gallery are inspired pairings of photographers with filmmakers (supported in the book and online by Mr. Bajac's lucid essay "The Age of Distraction: Photography and Film"). Walter Ruttmann's short film "Berlin: Symphony of a Great City" accompanies dreamy photographs of the metropolis by Umbo (Otto Umbehr), who worked as an assistant to Mr. Ruttmann. Meanwhile, Ms. Krull's photographs of Paris and Marseille are shown alongside a short film by her husband, Joris Ivens. Titled "Rain," it's a roving, lyrical account of a passing storm in Amsterdam that's partly shot from speeding bicycles and trams.

The restlessness of the film feels appropriate. By presenting the Walther Collection simultaneously in print, online and in the galleries, MoMA is conceding that photographs travel farther and faster than ever before. The many options for navigating the collection empower viewers at the risk of overwhelming them. But that's a risk that is worth taking because it may show the way for MoMA to expand access to its collections without gobbling up more physical real estate.

"Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection, 1909-1949" runs through April 19 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, [moma.org](http://moma.org).