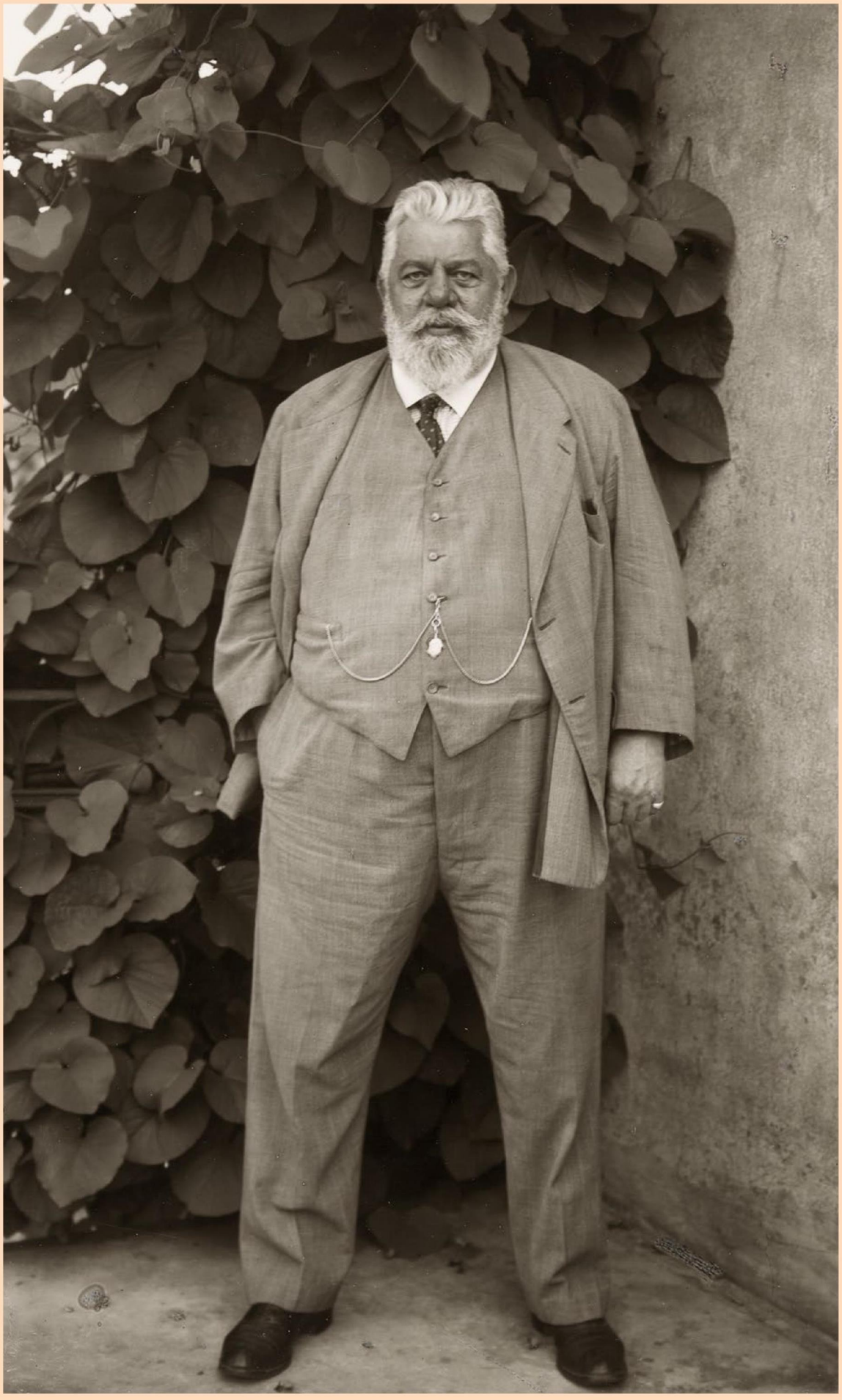
Opposite:
Djeneba Aduayom, *Nya*, Los Angeles, 2019

This page:
Daniel Stier, *Untitled*, 2016

Between Art and Function

What purpose does a photograph serve?

David Campany



This page:
August Sander, *Pharmacist*, ca. 1930
© Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur – August Sander Archiv, Cologne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

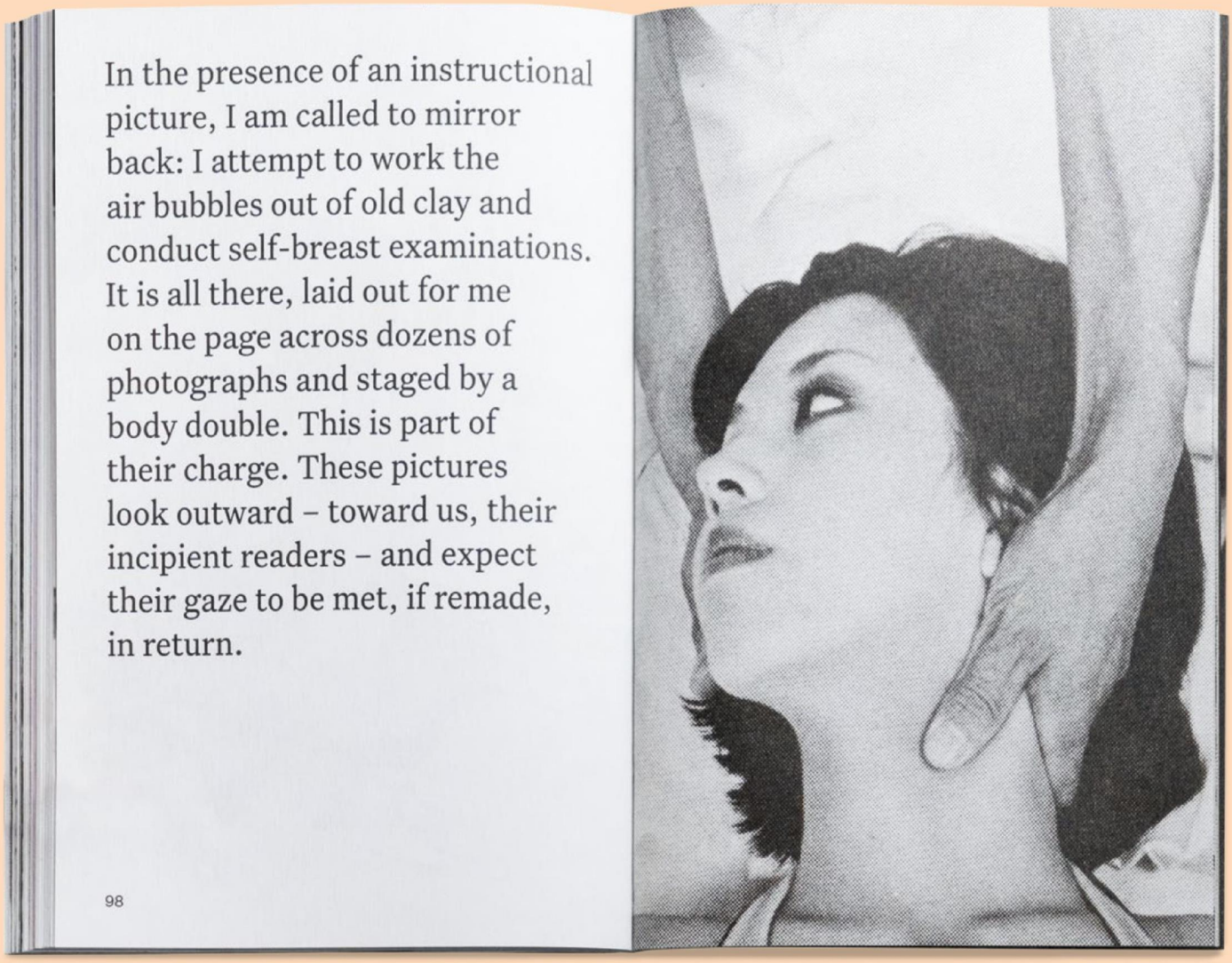
Opposite:
Spread from Carmen Winant, *Instructional Photography: Learning How to Live Now* (SPBH Editions, 2021)
Courtesy the publisher and Carmen Winant

Look at these two images on the previous pages, one by Daniel Stier, the other by Djeneba Aduayom. They appear here in a photography magazine, so you may ask where they came from and what their original purpose was. Or you could just enjoy them for what they are while not quite knowing. As it happens, Stier and Aduayom are artists who make images for themselves, and are also accomplished commercial photographers who receive assignments from magazines and websites—editorial work that gives them a lot of creative leeway. So there's not a world of difference: the commissioned work is quite similar to the art they want to make anyway. In his exhibitions, Stier mixes them up and doesn't reveal which is which. When Aduayom sends me her images now and again, I think about their possible role in the world, but I don't ask. It's more fun.

What would be the *most* purposeful kind of photograph—a mugshot, a picture of a wrench in a tool catalog, a news or real-estate image? And what purpose would it serve? Does a purposeful image have to look a particular way, or is it a matter of context, of putting the image to work? Is "art" purposeful, or is it something else? And what does art do to supposedly purposeful photographs? These are old questions, but they never age, because every photograph is potentially useful and useless. It is a document and an artwork, a reference to something and an enigmatic thing unto itself.

Photography became a truly modern medium around a century ago, when it faced these questions head-on. Many canonical photographers of the 1920s and 1930s, from Eugène Atget, Berenice Abbott, and Walker Evans to Ihei Kimura, Germaine Krull, and Laure Albin-Guillot, made their art in the guise of photography's applied vernaculars: documentary, reportage, fashion, advertising, architecture, portraiture. They frequently earned their living in those fields but had ambitions to either make work that was better than required or pull their work away from such narrow application, perhaps to make a book or an exhibition. In that pulling away, a photograph's purpose is suspended somewhat, and made thinkable, more open to interpretation. Abbott, wanting to present Atget as a modern master, oversaw the publication of a posthumous book of his varied photographs of old Paris, while Man Ray bought images from Atget to publish in Surrealist journals, for different reasons, with different effects. Other artists, illustrators, and designers also acquired Atget's photographs and used them for reference. For all its artistry and sense of atmosphere, his work is full of useful details about what things looked like. A gate. A tree. A postman. A church.

When, in 1929, August Sander published *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of Our Time*), his book of sixty portraits of the German people, it wasn't exactly clear who was buying it or what it meant to them. Was it sociology? Anthropology? Fashion? Political commentary at the onset of Nazism? Art? Design? Carefully observant, artistically restrained, and slightly inscrutable, Sander's project compelled in the multiple frames of reference it invoked. Since then, it has been canonized in the history of photography, but this settles nothing, only deepens and intensifies the work's multivalence. Years ago, I found a much-thumbed copy of the book in the library of Central Saint Martins, the art and design school in London, which at the time didn't have a photography program. Ninety percent of the borrowers were fashion students, the librarian informed me.



Victor Burgin, *Photopath*, 1967–69, from the exhibition *1965 to 1972: When Attitudes Became Form*, The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1984
Photograph by Sean Hudson. Courtesy Fruitmarket Archive

What would be the *most* purposeful kind of photograph—a mugshot, a picture of a wrench in a tool catalog, a news or real-estate image?

I have no idea if they had an appreciation of Sander's photographic achievement, and maybe that didn't matter. Maybe they just wanted to know how interwar Germans dressed or posed, or how fabric looks in black and white.

Even when artists have not been obliged to work in applied fields, they have made photographic work that is in dialogue with them. Think of the reworking of mass-media imagery by Pop artists and the Pictures Generation. Or Conceptual art's playful prodding at the photograph's status as truth or common knowledge. Think of Cindy Sherman's critical mimicry of the film still; Christopher Williams's arch remaking of industrial photography; Stan Douglas's ventriloquism of midcentury news photographs.Think, too, of the representation of the archives of countless working photographers who were either typical or innovative in some way. A touchstone here is the influential collection of anonymous photographs that Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel gathered between 1975 and 1977 from institutional archives and published in the book *Evidence* (1977). Out of context, it's comically unclear what the photographs were intended to be evidence of. One can also think of how the varied documentary practices in art, from the lyrical to the more strategically allegorical, are reflections upon the genre.

These examples are broad, but they are all instances of reconsideration. Art becomes an operating table or a stage set to which photography's applied vernaculars are brought, to be thought about and appreciated in other ways. It's hard to imagine the medium's relation to art in the last century without this dynamic. (Put another way: Is there an art of photography that has no relation to its nonart modes, that could *only* be art?)

Since even the most purposeful-looking photographs are pictures, they are never merely purposeful. They are always doing other things, such as suggesting other meanings, unspoken or even repressed. They have an aesthetic charge. This seems to be the interest of the artist Carmen Winant. In her book *Instructional Photography: Learning How to Live Now* (2021), she pairs appropriated images with texts, reflecting upon what supposedly instructive photographs do, or could do in a different setting. There's a history of illustrated instruction books and another history of artists' interest in them. Artists see the art in everything, and it doesn't take Winant long to point out that the boundaries are pretty blurred, not least because art photography has been flirting with nonart for generations now. Interestingly, the 1920s and 1930s saw a remarkable proliferation of illustrated instruction books, on everything from skiing and swimming to carpentry, cooking, and sex. This was also a period when editors as well as artists recognized the role of context in the shaping of meaning. An important early example was Ernst Friedrich's polemic *War Against War*, first published 1924, for which he gathered all manner of images that had been supressed or censored or were never for public consumption. Some of the most powerful were medical photographs of soldiers' injuries, which had been made as reference documents for surgeons. In Friedrich's hands they served to help end conflict. Even the most apparently straightforward image can be repurposed.

Plenty of art photography is also useful. If you wanted to build a wood-frame house, some of Walker Evans's photographs would be a real help (in 1933, the Museum of Modern Art showed them in its architecture department). Constructing a water tower? Bernd and Hilla Becher made a whole book about them. They titled their first major publication *Anonyme Skulpturen* (Anonymous sculpture), and it was their passport into a world of art in which Minimalist sculptors were using standard industrial forms. But none of the Bechers' subsequent publications made such an explicit claim; they were much more open-ended and ambiguous. Their photographs are art *because* they are also potentially not. Photography's ascent in the world of art over the last century parallels art's own questioning

Christopher Williams, *Untitled (Study in Yellow and Green/East Berlin) Studio Thomas Borho, Oberkasseler Str. 39, Düsseldorf, Germany July 7, 2012*
© the artist and courtesy David Zwirner and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

of what art is and does. It is not a matter of photography "fighting to be accepted." It was accepted by being and not being art.

The last place I saw an August Sander portrait was in the book *Photography RX: Pharmacy in Photography since 1886* (2017). His image *Pharmacist* (ca. 1930) was an obvious inclusion, but there were many other images in the collection related only tangentially to the subject, such as artful still lifes of medicine bottles and famous street photographs by Helen Levitt and Robert Frank with a Walgreens or Duane Reade deep in the background. Assembling that collection must have involved a hunt not just *for* photographs but *within* them. How you search determines what you find, and context determines how you see, although never absolutely. There is always wiggle room. Once, a friend who is a mechanic looked through my copy of *Uncommon Places*, Stephen Shore's photobook of 1970s small-town America. The first thing he noticed was the large number of MGB cars parked on the streets. That's not something a "photo person" may notice, but it is as valid a response as any to that book. The closer art comes to embracing the descriptive, the more its meanings open outward. That might seem counterintuitive, but if it weren't true, the art of the last century would be profoundly different.

In 1967, the artist Victor Burgin typed the seemingly straightforward instructions for his work *Photopath*: "A path along the floor, of proportions 1x21 units, photographed. Photographs printed to actual size of objects and prints attached to floor so that images are perfectly congruent with their objects." The card is not meant to be exhibited, but realizations of the instructions can be, and they must be made afresh each time. The instructions are plain and simple, but their implications run wild. Exactly how would you make *Photopath*, and what might it mean? The most literal things are often the most open-ended and mysterious.

David Campany is a curator, writer, and educator. His latest book is *Indeterminacy: Thoughts on Time, the Image, and Race(ism)* (2022), cowritten with Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa.

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