Sarah M. Miller

Berenice Abbott (1898– 1991) **Word Count: 230**

Photographer, theorist, teacher, and inventor, Berenice Abbott first learned photography as Man Ray’s studio assistant in Paris. There, in 1926, she established an independent portraiture studio, attracting clients from international avant-garde circles. She befriended French photographer Eugène Atget and after his death acquired thousands of his prints and negatives with help from Julien Levy. Through her advocacy, Atget’s oeuvre became a touchstone for avant-garde and documentary photography in Europe and the United States.

Returning to the U.S. in 1929, Abbott embarked on a study of New York City titled *Changing New York* (supported by the Federal Art Project 1935-1939), while developing unique theories of documentary photography and realism predicated on “communicative interaction” (Weissman). She taught photography at the New School for Social Research and was active in the Photo League. Often collaborating with Elizabeth McCausland, she authored pioneering essays about the history and theory of photography including the pedagogical text, *A Guide to Better Photography* (1941).

In the mid-1940s Abbott turned to science photography and was later employed at MIT, where she invented devices and methods for photographing light, speed, magnetism, and gravity, producing images for textbooks and her own 1964 books *Motion* and *Magnet*.

**References and further reading:**

Abbott, B. and McCausland, E. (1939) *Changing New York: Photographs by Berenice Abbott*, New York: Dutton.

Weissman, T. (2011) *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.