Carrie Mae Weems (to name only the artists touched on in this exhibition) joined the program as faculty members or graduate students. Diverse in their approaches, these artists shared an orientation toward conceptualism and a desire to challenge modernist orthodoxies. Their common emphasis on photography was grounded not in the formal specificities of the medium but in its very hybridity—its capacity to move, multiply, combine with text, and capture fleeting actions. They were also drawn to photography’s fundamental, referential connection to the social world—and hence, to a realm of everyday life, both personal and political.

Emerging in the turbulent, transitional period of the late 1960s and 1970s, this group of artists sought photographic media and formats adequate to address their historical moment and its pressing questions. This essay attends to the many sites and contexts of this production, including the young UCSD campus and its new visual arts department; the larger city of San Diego, a military town far removed from the art world; and activism surrounding the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, and the growth of the New Left. It also emphasizes the turn toward the everyday, which became politicized through feminism and which is a unifying interest among the artists in the exhibition.

These artists are, however, far from unified in their artistic approaches and political affiliations. The Uses of Photography draws attention to the affinities and links between their disparate practices. It gestures toward the myriad relationships that informed their work: those of peers, friends, rivals, partners, spouses, mentors and mentees, teachers and students, political and intellectual heroes. It does not attempt to chart a straightforward lineage or demonstrate precise influence. Influence was carried along multiple vectors; it was not only teachers who influenced their students,
but also students who influenced their teachers. Some artists were already advanced practitioners with active careers when they entered UCSD as graduate students.

Further, the work in this exhibition conjures various forms of sociality and intellectual exchange, including participation in reading groups, classroom discussions, studio critiques, protests and activist meetings, feminist consciousness-raising groups, parties, artistic and interdisciplinary collaborations, and intimate gatherings in homes and offices and at the Che Café on campus. In this way, The Uses of Photography traces critical conversations about art and politics, theory and praxis, as they coalesce and crystallize in artworks, and are, in turn, taken up again in discourse.

The title of the exhibition points to the functions and possibilities—the fundamental serviceability—of photography and other reproductive media for artists of this era. Some of the artists discussed here used photography to easily and inexpensively distribute their own work. Some used photography because it was not painting. Others used it because everyone could use it: it was mechanical and fundamentally populist. Some used it to capture performances and actions.

Others explored photography’s nonart uses, invoking medical and police records, journalism, and advertising. Photography enabled these artists to picture subjects otherwise unpopular in the art world: bodies injured in war or at the workplace; the domestic sphere and family life; a disappearing landscape and changing climate. And often these artists explored photography’s histories and envisioned social transformation.

The department

The department was brand new and it was started by maniacs, which was great.

—Martha Rosler

The early visual arts department at UCSD was characterized by an adventurous, experimental ethos. The dean of Muir College—UCSD’s humanities college—had recruited Paul Brach to serve as the first chair of the department. A second-generation New York School painter, Brach moved to San Diego with his wife, artist Miriam Schapiro, who also taught in the visual arts department for a time and would make
signal contributions to the field of feminist art. Brach assembled an eclectic group of artists that included poet and art critic David Antin, conceptual artist John Baldessari, painter (and later computer artist) Harold Cohen, sculptor (and later ecological artist) Newton Harrison, and the art historian Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk. As Martha Rosler observed, they were “people recruited as visionaries.” She continued, “Almost every male faculty member (there were only one or two women) described himself as three things, the last of which was ‘theorist.’ (John Baldessari, a local boy, didn’t call himself a theorist, though of course he was.)” As Rosler indicated, the faculty had multiple interests and areas of expertise. Baldessari, for example, had been a painter who became a conceptual artist using photography and, through his work, theorized questions of authorship, craftsmanship (or the absence thereof), and language—issues that quickly emerged as vital to the larger department.

Brach would soon leave UCSD to become dean of the School of Art at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), with Baldessari in tow. Harold Cohen served as chair from 1969 to 1971 before the job went to David Antin, who had been teaching art criticism and running the department’s gallery, mounting notable exhibitions of Fluxus, post-pop painting, and process art. Antin would have a profound effect on the trajectory of the department and its artists (1.1). In subsequent years UCSD’s visual arts department garnered a reputation for its growing emphasis on expanded photographic practices, including video, and its critical revisions of documentary practice. The work that emerged from UCSD in the 1970s fundamentally altered the discourse surrounding photography and became central to accounts of postmodernism in the visual arts.

As department chair, Antin made intermedia and photographic practice a priority, establishing a “commitment to non-formalist photography.” Though photography classes had been offered from the beginning, Antin initiated an official photography program—one that was not sequestered from the rest of the visual arts department as it was at other schools, such as UCLA. Antin followed his instincts in hiring Phel Steinmetz and Fred Lonidier on the strength of their work, despite the fact that Steinmetz had no formal higher education and Lonidier had just completed his MFA. “We tried to form a department that was right up to the moment,” Antin recalls. “And photography had a
big place in it, but it was the philosophy of photography, not necessarily the fact of it.”

The philosophy, not the fact: the emphasis on photographic media was not motivated by any purist notion of the medium. On the contrary, photography functioned as a kind of antimedium that brushed against the modernist sensibility that colored the earliest years of the department. It also took the form of moving images, and UCSD was one of the first departments to incorporate video into its curriculum. In 1971 Antin took a group of graduate students with him to learn video production in the only place on campus where that was possible: in the basement of the medical school, where autopsies were videotaped for teaching purposes.

In the early to mid-1970s joining the department were: film critic and painter Manny Farber; environmental artist Helen Mayer Harrison, who eventually joined her husband, Newton Harrison, in a joint position; Allan Kaprow; Eleanor Antin; Jean-Pierre Gorin; and the art historian Moira Roth. A number of other artists who practiced video, photography, and experimental film came to UCSD in the later 1970s and early 1980s, some for a brief time, others for the duration of their academic careers. These included Claudio Fenner-López, Louis Hock, Standish Lawder, Ulysses Jenkins, and Babette Mangolte. Connie Hatch, a significant figure in the so-called new social documentary was a visiting professor. Like Lonidier, Martha Rosler and Elizabeth Sisco entered the department as graduate students and subsequently taught there. Allan Sekula majored in visual arts as an undergraduate, completed his master’s degree in the program, and taught in the department as an adjunct.

In many ways, the program reflected the leveling, democratic spirit of the time. Hierarchical distinctions between student and faculty member seemed to matter less than they might now: undergraduates mixed with graduate students and faculty, while graduate students attended faculty meetings and were empowered to vote on graduate admissions and faculty appointments (1.2). As Pamela Lee demonstrates in her essay in this volume (pp. 80–93), the typical “top-down model of pedagogy” simply did not apply to UCSD’s program. Influence and teaching went in both directions and extended across disciplines and departments on campus. Department of Visual Arts faculty and students were part of a milieu that included such Leftist thinkers as Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, Carlos Blanco, Louis Marin, Herbert Schiller, Anthony Wilden, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel de Certeau, and Angela Davis (then a graduate student) as well as a proliferation of activist groups on campus. Rosler and Sekula attended the Marxist Literary Group led by Jameson in the Department of Comparative Literature and mixed with Herbert Marcuse and his graduate students. And together with Lonidier and Steinmetz, they formed their own reading and working groups.

Even in this period of radical pedagogy and communitarian impulses, internal conflicts arose. In this eclectic, interdisciplinary community, personalities frequently clashed, and the artists who worked in traditional mediums were often at odds with those in the conceptual, intermedia camp. In these ways, perhaps, UCSD’s was a typical art department. Yet such conflicts also suggest growing pains in the midst of experimentation and profound change at the university and in the broader culture. As Eleanor Antin recalls, “We were all explorers and pioneers. For artists, it was open country—you could do anything you wanted to do. Nobody was standing over you to see whether you made the right move.”
The feeling that “nobody was looking” was reinforced by San Diego’s relative isolation as a city: geographically distant from New York, it was also 120 miles south of Los Angeles. Yet this isolation enabled a sense of permissiveness and freedom to experiment. For her part, Eleanor Antin sent postcard missives to the art world in the form of 100 Boots (1971–73; 1.3, 2.5), a photographic “novel” that follows its protagonist (100 rubber boots) from Solana Beach to New York City. Her colleague Steinmetz shot the series, which Antin disseminated by mail, without the assistance of galleries or museums. She summarized her gesture as “Hello, we’re here.” 17

Political movements, on campus and beyond

Even as the perceived remoteness of San Diego fostered artistic risk taking, it did not shield this community from the exigencies of the moment—exigencies that catalyzed so many of the photographic experiments explored in The Uses of Photography. An overwhelmingly conservative city, San Diego was home to a major naval base, and the military-industrial complex had long been the foundation of the local economy. David Antin remembered his culture shock upon arriving in San Diego from New York in 1968: “San Diego was a military town in those days, mostly navy, some marines and lots of veterans and retired officers with brush haircuts and well-groomed, patient wives with neat leather handbags and white gloves.” 18

The late 1950s and 1960s saw the rapid growth of the aerospace and defense industries in San Diego, and General Dynamics’ Convair Division—which appears in Allan Sekula’s now canonical Untitled Slide Sequence (1972; 4.19, p. 202) of workers leaving at the end of the day—was a leading employer in San Diego, second only to the military. 19

The military industry informed the very creation of UCSD: when the University of California system established its San Diego campus in the elite north county suburb of La Jolla in 1960, it was with the support of General Dynamics and allies in the navy and air force, which desired to build a world-class science and engineering school to feed San Diego’s aerospace and high-tech industries. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UCSD had been engaged in undersea warfare research since World War I. 20 Even the early visual arts department carried physical ties to
the military. While its permanent building was under construction, the department was housed on Matthews Campus, which had previously been Camp Matthews, a marine corps rifle range and training facility. This meant that the department’s offices occupied the camp’s old wooden buildings, while studio classes were taught in Quonset huts and the art gallery was “a discreetly remodeled marine officers’ bowling alley,” as Antin writes.

That UCSD was the recipient of significant Pentagon research funds became a major point of contestation in the late 1960s as demonstrations grew on campus, with students protesting the university’s complicity in the war in Vietnam. Many artists were active in the antiwar movement both on and off campus as well as in social movements that included women’s liberation, black power, Chicano rights, and gay rights. Far from being ensconced in an ivory tower of academia, the artists working in this context were concerned with the “real” world, with its messy social relations and political conflicts. Activities on campus were not separate from broader activism in San Diego, which, despite (or because of) being a conservative stronghold, was the site of fierce opposition to the Vietnam War and home to a powerful Leftist political movement. Visual arts department faculty and students aimed to intervene in this tumultuous moment, deploying their varied skills as both organizers and artists.

In 1969 Newton Harrison served on a faculty committee in support of the campaign to rename the new Third College—one of UCSD’s most storied episodes. Students from the Mexican American Youth Association and the Black Student Council fought to name the new college Lumumba-Zapata College, demanding a radical curriculum that would serve the interests and needs of students of color. Herbert Marcuse and graduate student Angela Davis were instrumental in this struggle, which culminated in the occupation of a university administration building. Indeed, Marcuse was integral to many protest actions on campus and assumed the role of mentor to many student activists. He was lambasted, however, in San Diego’s newspapers and threatened by the American Legion. As part of his battle with the larger University of California system, Governor Ronald Reagan pressured the UC regents to fire Marcuse, who was eventually forced to retire.

Such episodes are representative of the conflict-ridden atmosphere of UCSD’s campus as it entered the 1970s and demonstrate the urgency of action felt by many. Allan Sekula spoke of an “underground geography” of the campus, where marine deserters hid in dorm rooms and students used utility tunnels to access research labs while staging sit-ins. Fred Lonidier’s political activism predated his arrival at UCSD. As a student at San Francisco State College in the mid-1960s he participated in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and joined the Peace Corps following graduation. In 1967 he was called up for the draft and resisted; he subsequently documented the draft resistance movement in Seattle in an extensive photographic series. Later, in San Diego, Lonidier produced his important...
term that referenced the broadcasting of destruction and carnage into American homes via television reports every evening. 

Martha Rosler also created potent antiwar works. Her now well-known photomontages in the *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* series (c. 1967–72; 1.4, 1.5) were initially created as Xeroxed flyers for demonstrations and found their way into underground newspapers. The series combines documentary images of the devastation in Vietnam, extracted from *Life* magazine, with images of domestic comfort and affluence, clipped from the pages of *House Beautiful* and similar sources. Rosler’s photomontages made concrete the notion of the war in Vietnam as the “living room war,” a term that referenced the broadcasting of destruction and carnage into American homes via television reports every evening. *Tron (Amputee)* appeared in *Goodbye to All That!: Newspaper for San Diego Women* in 1970 (1.6, 4.9), one of San Diego’s grassroots feminist newspapers. In this image, a Vietnamese girl with an amputated leg appears to stand in a plush American “family room,” where a television sits at the center of things. The child is out of place and also out of proportion—a repressed presence that has seemingly emerged from the TV set to dominate the room. The range of subjects that appear alongside Rosler’s montage in the newspaper—from San Diego housing and the Chicano Neighborhood House to job discrimination and child care—suggest the reach of feminist activism. The feminist movement illuminated and politicized aspects of
1.5
daily life and labor that had previously gone unnoticed and were taken to be normative and “natural.”

Rosler had moved to San Diego in 1968 and was part of the university milieu before she entered the graduate program. She remarked that as a student she “had trouble noticing what the university boundaries were.” Rosler was active with the Women’s Liberation Front, a group of socialist feminists that was based at UCSD, though a number of its members were non-university women. The group’s presence beyond the UCSD campus was significant for Rosler, who attended meetings, participated in consciousness-raising groups, and was involved in other capacities as well: writing pamphlets and serving, with other members, as a speaker in neighborhood living-room groups and schools.

Eleanor Antin’s work is also deeply indebted to the feminist movement, which prompted her to explore autobiography and narrative within the context of conceptualism, a movement that had previously rejected such forms (see 1.8–1.12). She credits the importance of her friendships with other women artists in San Diego, including Rosler, Schapiro, Pauline Oliveros (who taught in UCSD’s music department), Linda Montano, and Ida Appelbroog. In addition, Antin developed a relationship with the new women’s studies department at San Diego State University, one of the first programs of its kind. She was also involved with the Women’s Building in Los Angeles, where she befriended artists Arlene Raven and Suzanne Lacy.

Some artists became meaningfully involved with feminism even if they didn’t identify as feminists, as was the case with Allan Kaprow, who joined the UCSD faculty in 1974. Despite his skepticism of art driven by a political agenda, Kaprow was a participant in the development of feminist art through his role as teacher and supporter of artists working in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in the early 1970s. And feminism, in turn, exerted an influence on Kaprow’s work. He adopted a practice of post-performance follow-up discussions modeled on feminist consciousness-raising sessions, wherein participants debriefed and shared their experiences.

The feminist movement permeated and altered the field of contemporary art in ways that are frequently taken for granted. That ubiquitous catchphrase of the