

Contemporary art photographers are opening up new ways of thinking about the medium. Are institutions ready for this wave of photographic innovation?

Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles Charlotte Cotton

It has been nine years since I wrote *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2004), my survey of photographic practice over the previous five years. The slow and cumulative battle to validate photography as contemporary art had long been won by the time we went to print. The market for photography as art—at the time this almost invariably meant Lightjet color prints laminated behind sheets of Plexiglas, at least 30 by 40 inches in size—was buoyant. With the final death throes of traditional editorial photography as a means to earn a living, there was a shift of emphasis in the realms of documentary photography and photojournalism, away from the pages of magazines and newspapers and into museums and galleries and the pages of photobooks. Few knew how digital capture or postproduction would impact independent and artistic photography. And I suspect that no one anticipated the extent to which digital dissemination would increase the number of independent photographers and the potential to self-publish. If anything, the schools of and growing market for contemporary art photography seemed content with digital photography mimicking its analog predecessors' conventions and not particularly interested in deciphering what might be uniquely digital characteristics, in either its aesthetics or its channels of dissemination.

Watching these developments, I've oscillated between feeling we are on the cusp of seeing unimaginably brilliant, liberated, and different iterations of photographic ideas in a wholesale digital world and being worried that we may be marking the cynical end of a once-central visual medium that is now being put out to a niche pasture.

My own drama over this problematic cultural paradigm doesn't stem from a sense of photographic practice per se becoming redundant in its capability for social and cultural awakening. Far from it. Instead, it comes from a genuine concern that the very mechanisms of the medium's dissemination—publishing houses, museums, commercial galleries, and art schools—that could be seen as having won the good fight to legitimize photography as a contemporary art form with its own medium-specific history are becoming part of the problem. These structures, with their gamut of agendas, unwittingly risk placing a stranglehold upon the evolution of the medium.

Opposite:
Owen Kydd, *Canvas
Leaves, Torso, and Lantern*,
August 2011, 2011
Installation photograph
by Michael Underwood
Courtesy Nicelle Beauchene
Gallery, New York

Below:
Kate Steciw,
*Don't worry, we will all
be dead soon I*, 2012
Courtesy toomer labzda,
New York

It may be stating the obvious to say that no one person—indeed, no institutional matrix—is powerful enough to hold back the momentum of creative change or its full cluster of mitigating factors. The ecosystem of image making continues to evolve, and does not require the validation of art galleries and museums. What is at stake is how the mainstream instruments of “photography as culture” can deal with the arrival of the first wave of independent photographic practice that does not look like or model itself upon the separatist story of photography that institutions have already told.

I have worked as a curator of photography in museums for most of my professional life; perhaps I should be more generous than I feel toward the cultural organizations that have attempted to engage with the newly dominant forms of photography—such as citizen journalism, visual social media, photography as activism and social practice, and collective creativity. Perhaps there is a way to blend some contemporary photography into a seamless continuum of the museological story of the medium, a story that began in the 1840s. But in my own experience, museums’ engagement with contemporary photography—outside the increasingly narrow band of consciously, conventionally, unwaveringly “high art” photography—is littered with misunderstandings and meanings lost in translation, and has accomplished little to expand a cultural understanding of this beautifully complex medium.

Photography is, and has been since its conception, a fabulously broad church. Contemporary practice demonstrates that the medium can be a prompt, a process, a vehicle, a collective pursuit, and not just the physical end product of solitary artists’ endeavors. Addressing that multifarious terrain is a hefty challenge for most museums and galleries, and a genuinely impossible task for those who continue to believe photography is best sliced into monographic exhibitions and sometimes into classic genres and themes. (What other medium is still exhibited so regularly in those dreadfully tired categories “landscape,” “portraiture,” and “still life,” as per forty years ago?)

Of course it’s a tough economic moment for museums and nonprofit spaces to rethink both their remit and their mode of operation. It is chancy to change rather than to go into a holding pattern, doing what you have always done for whom you have always done it, but with much less money. It is no wonder that in recessionary times such as these, galleries and museums cling hard to the work and narratives of photographers with watertight authorship, blue-chip track records of collectability, and blatant signature styles, even though the glory days of such an approach seem to be over. This would be sad but fine if it weren’t for the fact that practically everything that surrounds mainstream cultural organizations engaged with photography *has* changed, and this, by extension, changes the meaning of even an unchanging enterprise.

Our attitudes to authorship, shifted massively by our common use of the Internet, confuse our understanding of where photography will fit in the cultural landscape of the future. Anyone invested in high-art photography (where authorship is king, where influences are conventionally hidden, and where reusing existing imagery is consciously acknowledged as appropriation) sees this intellectual-property amnesia of the age of the “digital native” as a problem, at least on the level of terminology. All photographic imagery circulating on the Internet is the raw material for millions of “unique” stories of (educators, hold your breath) “self-expression”: found illustrations that quasi-communicate millions of people’s homogenized experiences and emotions. The Internet does not adhere to the inherent, necessary asymmetry of high-versus-low-art categorizations that we use in the cultural sector: in a





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We are not only a civilization of amateur photographers; we are amateur curators, editors, and publishers. Some of the new amateurs are pretty noble—like the citizen journalists who put in serious hours of work and comprehend so thoroughly the intelligent capacities of our pervasive image-led technologies. And just as this pro/am (professional/amateur) school of journalism seems to be a counterpoint to the ever-decreasing realm of independent news media, we at least have to think through the groundswell of pro/am photographic artists who self-publish, collectivize, and find their audiences themselves, knowing full well that the professional infrastructure for art photography is never going to accommodate them during their productive lifetimes.

And what really is the difference between a serious amateur who is disciplined enough to use his or her nonprofessional hours to create independent photography (subsidized by first and second jobs) and the economic reality for most artists who are not among the handful of well-known names whose practice is underwritten by sales? On an individual level, I'd guess the main difference is a debt of somewhere in the region of sixty to eighty thousand dollars, built up during the span of an MFA program. Of course there is a handsome number of MFA photography graduates who have made good use of their education to store up a degree of criticality and experience that will nourish them throughout their creative lives. But there is an underlying conservatism that graduates have to wrestle with when considering how such an expensive education will literally pay off. It's a risk to propose new forms of photographic art to a market that took almost ten years to feel comfortable with the idea of pigment prints. And it is the same pressure for postgraduates entering curatorial work—except they have to deal with curating being a newly fashionable lifestyle choice (see J.Crew's "curator pants" for starters).

I don't think it's good for anyone if the new professionals of curating distinguish themselves from pro/am lifestylers, stylists, picture editors, artist-curators, and even their more enlightened professional predecessors by aligning themselves with photographers who produce splendid, unmistakably

“high-art” spectacles. It’s like a generation of photography curators not being allowed to wage their battle to expand the notion of photography as a subject and potentially to win new terrain within cultural discourses for the medium.

Still, within this mercurial climate, I see something magical beginning to happen: a critical mass of contemporary art photographers whose clarity and sentience to the image-making epoch in which we live transcend all the blockages I’ve outlined. It’s a critical mass rather than a grouping because, mercifully, the ways in which they open up the *subject* of photography are diverse. Some of these image creators have found their footing in the haptic and social era of photography; they make works that think through how new technologies feed into the analog-framed discourses of photography as contemporary art. Invariably these digital-native photographers experiment across platforms: the gallery context is one of several; there are also online formats, and traditional and e-publishing. This latest generation of practitioners is distinctly high-versus-low agnostic while being meticulous about the meaning and values of photographic language in its different contexts, and cognizant of the variance in the types of engagement that these different sites create with an audience.

Other contemporary art photographers that are giving cause for robust hope began their relationship with photography through analog thinking and processes, marveling at the prospect of photography as an expanding field while perhaps more acutely treasuring the sensory pleasure of traditional photographic prints for their pronounced craftsmanship and authorship. Contemporary art photographers are the only full-time creators of photography who labor over the production of photographic prints destined only for the spaces of art galleries and museums. Photography’s materials (straddling analog and digital technologies) have never been more readily understood by artists or audiences as a series of conscious choices.

At its most literal, contemporary art photography is beautifully dialogical. Photography is the central subject within photography as an artistic medium, an entity best understood *in relation* to a host of mitigating factors, from its quotidian cousins in social image-making to the elder statesmen of highbrow art—especially painting and sculpture but also installation arts, including video.

For instance, Carter Mull’s floor-based installation of scattered prints *Connection* (2011–12) offers a deeply visceral experience of photography that combines a heritage of conceptual-art references with a very contemporary meditation upon the state of the mediated photographic image. *Connection* places us in a space that fuses the dissemination and production methods of photographic imagery. The installation takes into account the permeation of imagery on the pages of the declining empires of print media, and our promiscuous capturing of transitory visual experience via mobile devices—specifically the iPhone. *Connection* encourages us to take stock of both the plethora of contemporary imagery and its impact on our consciousness, while showing our disregard as we tread on its physical detritus. It is an experience that could only be so abstracted and pinpointed in the rarefied context of a contemporary art gallery and through the authorial voice of the artist.

The relationship between photography and sculpture has perhaps been the most imposing signature of contemporary photography of the twenty-first century so far. About a decade ago, Sara VanDerBeek made a significant contribution to the art-world celebration of photography’s materiality with gorgeous



Matt Lipps, *Untitled (Horizon Archive)*, 2010
Courtesy the artist and Josh Lilley Gallery, London

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photographs of her handmade sculptures. With her recent installations (including her 2011–12 commission for the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles) she breaks important new ground. Every element of VanDerBeek’s Hammer installation was clearly an intricate web of finely crafted acts and artistic decisions that rendered a tangible sense of the photographic. Small, framed black-and-white photographs (a portrait, a still life, a lunar image) seemed pronounced in their material perfection; sculptural pieces incorporated found objects, including bird feathers and a beaded curtain. The elements on display prompted the curiosity of looking that has driven the history of observational photography. Each framing device, from the exterior walls of the installation to the sculptural frames and supports within the space, reiterated the construction of classical photographic vantage points.

Much of the production of digital video art by photographers in the past five years does not go beyond an explorative sketching out of ideas, but in some cases we are starting to see important artistic proposals for how the “photographic” can credibly be explored through video. Owen Kydd creates short, fixed-shot video works that are also meditations upon the notion of the photographic. In what he calls “durational photographs,” Kydd sets up a dynamic for the viewer to search in his thirty- or forty-second videos for the photographic moment, anticipating the single, decisive observation. We forget the distinction between our own looking (for a determined length of time, given the seamless looping of the video imagery) and the durational and endlessly repeating video recording of a now-past moment.

We also see a confident use of the photographic frame, holding and condensing an impossibly large amount of visual information. I enjoy the way Matt Lipps literally cuts and pastes imagery, principally from mid-twentieth-century magazines and books, and carefully creates sculptural photomontages.

It is so *unreconstructed* of him! His most ambitious work so far is the six-panel *Untitled (Horizon Archive)* (2010), in which a huge cast of real-life and art-historical characters are lined up for an imaginary photo-call. With the theatrical use of lighting, Lipps re-animates these orphaned images into his own story construction—in a way that brings to mind the compiling and connecting of the best Tumblr “curators,” but with more gorgeous photographic drama.

Lipps’s work is not unconnected to the mesmerizing strangeness in the composite work of Daniel Gordon and also the videos of Brian Bress. The three share a knowing originality in the ways they physically rework the mass of image production, mediation, and crass default settings to create works that function in high-art settings. For me, this mode of taking the essence, rather than the aesthetic, of default lowbrow photographic imagery into the art world feels like the planting of intellectual incendiary devices that at some point are going to explode the conventional ideas of where photography can be positioned in contemporary art.

The manner in which future generations of image makers will configure the idea of photography as contemporary art can be as seemingly effortless and open to the happenstance of photographic observation as ever. Jason Evans’s recent installations, including the one at the 2012 Krakow Photomonth, set up a joyous binary dance between photography and sculpture by coupling sculptural arrangements of objects on plinths with photographic posters of still-life arrangements pinned to gallery walls. Evans’s photographs of lyrical still lifes are titled *Pictures for Looking At* (2007–11) and his plinth-based sculptural arrangements of mass-produced, handmade, and found objects are titled *Sculptures for Photography* (2012), delightfully inviting us to perceive these constructions as photographs just waiting to happen.

It is clear that we are a million conceptual miles from where we were even nine years ago—when there was a pernicious idea that photography had to adopt the values, traditions, and rhetoric of other art forms and simultaneously deny its own broad lexicon of dynamic and quotidian meaning in order to have credibility. I look at the work of photographers such as Artie Vierkant and Kate Steciw, as well as that of Asha Schechter and Lucas Blalock, for instance, and get a mighty rush of excitement about photography’s bright new future. I find myself struggling to find the words to discuss their work—though I am neither short of opinions nor inexperienced at looking at new photography. My stumbling block is this: for the first time in my professional life, I am seeing independent photography that doesn’t operate in a conventional art-photography way... and I don’t know how to position *myself*. It is beyond the discourse that I know, and I experience this as a really positive expectation for the field of photography as art. This is why I think that those of us who have a genuine vested interest in the future of photography as contemporary art should open our doors and just let this new life come in.

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Words Without Pictures was published as a print and ebook by Aperture in 2010.