

As vinyl has been to MP3, we watch the shift from physical aspects of photography to near complete product disposability. Instead of flailing and falling through the cracks, this can lead the way to expansion, broadening and remix; paving the way to boundless artistic relevance within a form.

by Charlotte Cotton

A Photographic Moment

I admit to not being an impartial viewer of *Foam's* reconceived magazine's first issue. In fact I am thrilled that it commences by acknowledging nine exceptional artists who are providing new permissions for the practice and theory of contemporary art photography. Over the past two years much of my curating and writing has been about the practices that these artists encapsulate and I share *Foam's* belief in their articulation of photographic ideas as important and timely for us to think through. These North American artists' approaches to image-making represent a leading regional locus of a global phenomenon. We are seeing multiple, international and highly individualised versions of proposals for photographic practice that move away from the now well-travelled path of contemporary art photography as a hermetic discipline. The questions that these artists seem to be asking are more broad and ambitious than what the next incremental step will be for this prized photographic genre.

The ideas, values, processes and use of materials represented here are active contemplations of the role of the artist and the meaning of the photographic within the evolution of our

visual and cultural climate. A prevailing theme of the discussions I've had in studio visits and teaching situations in recent years centres upon where authored photographic practices sit within an image environment that necessarily privileges the algorithmic, empirical mass of photography. In effect, people are asking: how do artists create works where their intent can be clearly read and they can continue to utilise the idea of photography's broad terrain in meaningful ways? Like all creative fields in the 21st century, cultural photography underwent a process of polarization of sorts. We see this played out in the operations of the art markets, education, cultural institutions, the professions and industries of photography. It leaves all except the newly emerging and most established art photographers without a stabilising sense (or fantasy) of a meta-structure or institutional aim to support and acknowledge their contribution to the discourse's vitality. The potential and also danger for contemporary art photographers has been feeling at the mercy of market determinism, as the suppliers of the photographic equivalent to vinyl – an aesthetic revivalist gesture and un-reconstructed material form – at the other end of the spec-

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trum from the MP3-esque world of contemporary image culture. This separation may suit a market that requires products of clear lineage and stable meaning but denies the actuality of the practices and theories that underscore the true potential of photography as contemporary art. As the artists represented here attest, photography operates within art as a locative material, capable of being within, outside, and between artistic definitions. This hing-

es on its capacity to be more than one essentialist notion, instead realised through the iterative, layered, rapid and additive behaviour of the broad concept of the image environment with as much acuity as its deployment of photography's historical, material, and contemplative capacities for artistic authorship.

Navigation of the media image environment has been a factor in the story of independent photographic practice and modern art since the late 19th century and the first groundswell of potential in photography's mass-making and distribution. There is a passing resemblance to the attitudes of earlier image-makers in the strategies available to contemporary art photographers: the Secessionist use of craft

to distinguish artistic authorship from the medium's quotidian and amateur mass; critical use of popular press and news imagery in avant garde collage and montage; and Postmodernist appropriation of advertising photographs into schema that laid bare the connotations and denotations of mass-media imagery. While it is worth remembering that our contemporary image explosion is a hyperbolic version of what artists have drawn on for over one hundred years, we have to acknowledge the differences, including the ways that it provides new and multiple positions for an artist to take.

An important contemporary collective idea of photography is as a constantly growing information stream, in circulation as an algorithmically flattened plane of scrolling orphan imagery that exists to be re-versioned and remixed. The history of art photography may unintentionally add some old-fashioned authorship into the contingent meaning within the image banks of Tumblr, Pinterest, et al. but doesn't necessarily maintain any distinctions between the photographic few and the many, or the source and its versions. Our arrival at the long-awaited destination where software becomes a medium of the genre of contemporary art photography requires us to acknowledge other forms of authorship in photography's modalities of editing, archiving and curating. Appropriation and archive retrieval now seem like quaint ideas of reassuring boundaries between the artist and image consumer rather than the counter-arguments to prevailing

visual and cultural climate. A prevailing theme of the discussions I've had in studio visits and teaching situations in recent years centres upon where authored photographic practices sit in an image environment that increasingly privileges the algorithmic empirical mass of photography. What are we asking, how do we create works where their intent can be easily read and they can continue to utilise the idea of photography in meaningful ways? In all creative fields in the 21st century, cultural photography underwent a process of deauthorship of sorts. We see this played out in the operations of the art markets, education, cultural institutions, the professions and industries of photography. It leaves all except the newly emerging and most established image cultures by a sentient contemporary artist. With such pluralistic and highly unfixed photographic ideas, the challenge for artists can seem as basic as how to make a gesture that can be distinguished in ways more substantial than production values and context from image consumer behaviour on the internet and within social media. The points of artistic authorship in the practices of photography have never been more explicit or dispersed, starting with the choice to make your own image capture or to use an image source. We can and should read meaning into artists' processes and their decisions about what old or new photographic hardware they deploy and how they insert manual and material labour. Uses of software to render

the image, circulate it, compress and convert it, and give it form require us to perceive software as a medium with its own terms and conditions – and authors – regardless of the start of its relationship with contemporary art photography in the 1990s as the new default tool to mimic and enhance analogue photographic processes. The dominant software that reaches to the core of contemporary art photography is Photoshop, the go-to pixel-based software of our era with its automated filters that can simulate the physical tools of photography and painting. Its additive layers of manual work call forth compounding existential issues for photographic practices that presume to be founded on the idea of the original picture, in this new creative playing field of iteration, versioning and in-built obsolescence.

My take on what unifies *Foam's* selection of artists is their direct addressing of the cultural environment in which they are operating. They are creatively engaged with what it can mean to make art within a networked image culture. These are not artists who act as illustrators of the operations of the image world, and their work rarely makes contemporary image media its explicit subject or, indeed, its narrative. Instead, they draw the media ecology – its ideograms, theories and processes – into the site of contemporary art. For me at least, these gestures create a crucial unfixing of the idea of contemporary practice as servicing (with digital processes and refreshed narratives) the tail end of the idea of photography as a separatist cultural discipline that still needs to legitimise itself as art. Consequently, photography as an arena somewhere on the outside of and looking in on to contemporary image culture at large becomes the photographic material with which to navigate art.

In viewing the selection and layout of the works represented here, I'm struck by the extent of the individual photographers' creative journeys in a matter of just a few years. Collectively, they speak to the pace at which photographic ideas are being versioned and convey the fertility of the ground that they have created out of dispersed notions of photography. Photographic capture remains central to all of the artists represented here, including in its singular removal from the multiple processes of rendering within Kate

Steciw's most recent works. Authored capture operates as a primary source material in Lucas Blalock's practice and in Joshua Citarella's earliest works shown here. Capture translates into the fixing of the quasi-alchemical possibilities of in-camera photographic techniques for both Jessica Eaton and Matthew Porter. Their meticulous and controlled labouring with analogue tools consciously offers a technical counter-argument and material equivalence to the automated processes of

image software. For Daniel Gordon and Matt Lipps, photographic capture is the act of animating their intensive processes. This is also apparent in Sara VanDerBeek's photographs from the late 2000s where photographic prints and photo-mechanical reproductions are the central component of the temporary sculptural constellations of material relationships that she stages for photographic capture. The idea of photography as a material stock or cache, with which the artist can render, is most pronounced in the work of Matt Lipps and Daniel Gordon. The authored act of photographic capture animates and transforms Gordon's laborious constructions (constituted from torn scraps of luscious on-line advertising imagery) of intentionally clumsy bad-art approximations of painterly still lifes and portrait scenes. Matt Lipps' recent works continue his poised crafting of fantastical and idiosyncratic scenarios created with image reproductions from a series of *Time-Life* photography volumes published in the early 1970s. Lipps recalibrates the image hierarchy of these

analogue-age genres of photography into precious souvenirs, orphaned from their makers and contemporaneous reading, yet newly vital.

I am drawn by the way that Kate Steciw and Lucas Blalock use very definite signs of human mark-making and painterly gestures in their practice. Kate Steciw's use of Photoshop to blend and distort her archive of stock photography is the image canvas onto which she applies signs of manufactured and artisanal production. Her manufactured materials include mass-produced stickers and catalogue-ordered domestic ornaments that version photographic sources and the gestures of the human hand. Steciw also collaborates with craftsman

How could this possibly be photography?

frame makers (whose trade stickers are often visible in her final works) that declare the photographic frame to be another site of authorship and meaning. Increasingly, Lucas Blalock's use of Photoshop moves beyond his disruption of the image through the software that is conventionally supposed to seamlessly perfect it. Blalock proposes a naturalised idea of Photoshop to be a similarly additive process as painting. His *oeuvre* rapidly evolves and reads less as an ironic calling the bluff of software's automation of human gesture and becomes more of a proposition for software as an additional tool for authentic artistic expression. Blalock's current practice highlights the shift in contemporary art practice from the appropriation to the channelling of the motivations and enquiries of earlier

artistic practices. Blalock's recent work consciously meditates on the spirit of painter Philip Guston and the determined and truthful childishness of his paintings from the late 1960s with their celebration and mockery of image culture. There are other explicit citations apparent here that similarly function as the channelling of artists' investigations to create newly resonant and authentic forms of practice. Jessica Eaton directly cites both the formalism and creative motivations of Josef Albers and Sol Lewitt in her work shown here. Sara VanDerBeek's recent work, which provides a significant proposal for how the photographic and the sculptural both merge and can be separated, seem channelled through a creative conversation with the Postmodernist practices of Sarah Charlesworth.

The remixability of the surfaces and motifs of visual culture is also at play within the work of these selected artists. Matthew Porter layers mid-century references points including an Arne Jacobsen chair, Sol Lewitt's wall drawings, commercial graphics and interior design motifs into the materials of analogue photography. A parallel construction of a visual fantasy of references into cogent contemporary art is found in Joshua Citarella's most recent work. He remixes a millennial lexicon of industrial design, contemporary art, and the optical space of commercial photography with the spirit of a Simulationist creating a flattened hierarchy of visual signs wrapped around empty forms. There is something of this characterisation in the visual experience and effect of Owen Kydd's new still-life video works, meditating on constructed still lifes and artful assemblages. Kydd's durational photographs declare just how ostensible rather than conventionally symbolic or literal a subject can be in the way that Kydd's looping videos frame the photographic moment and act of identification in a quite unexpected and timely way.

In 2012 I had my first opportunity to curatorially think through the ideas that I've expressed in this text in the exhibition *Photography is Magic!* at the Daegu Photo Biennale in South Korea. On my final day in the city, I watched visitors to the exhibition experience the work. I walked into Sara VanDerBeek's installation of elegant black-and-white photographs and

painted cinder block sculptures as a man entreated the gallery attendant (who translated for me afterwards) to explain how this could possibly be photography. I went into one of the upper galleries and watched three teenagers standing in front of an Owen Kydd video where a beam from a car headlight reflects along the upper edge of a knife in a store window. They waved their hands delightedly in front of the screen, believing for a few minutes that their presence controlled this infinitely looping photographic moment.