

The firm foundations of the photographic world have been shaken many times before this point. Whether it be from revolutionary talent, technical progression or simply a changing viewpoint, no one can deny that digitalization has struck the infrastructure of photography in a way like never before. Rather than leaving ruins behind it, we see the blueprints of the practice we know being re-evaluated, re-assessed and re-imagined by those with a camera in one hand and their digital tools in the other.

by Marcel Feil

What is a photo? This seems a rather routine question that will have little urgency for the majority of people who make use of photography in an everyday and fairly unconscious manner. Yet however simple the question, the answer is a good deal more complex and pressing than many might at first realize. How do we arrive at a proper definition of the word 'photograph' now that the nature of photography has changed so fundamentally with the ever-advancing digitalization of the medium over recent decades? In daily conversation we speak of 'photography' for the sake of convenience, even though the techniques and methods generally used bear little if any resemblance to those of classical photography. For convenience we also still talk about 'cameras', although in fact the word is an anachronism if we mean devices for taking pictures. There is no physical film, and no use is made of a dark-room, of photochemical processes, or of paper or card as a vehicle on which the image unambiguously presents itself. No tangible object is involved, with a specific format, weight and material composition. The fact that the traditional photographic vocabulary is no longer adequate is clear from the increasing use of the term 'image' in place of 'photo'. The 'image' has broken free from a physical existence. It has been liberated from the frame to rediscover itself in a previously unknown and unforeseen digital context that is determined by the apparatus used by the viewer. An image is no longer fixed. It has acquired an ephemeral, immaterial character; it can continually change its nature and status and manifest itself in different ways; it can reproduce itself endlessly in no time at all and be in several places at once, perhaps in a broken down form. Whereas a photo is a single material object, the technical image is a multiplicity of possible and often simultaneous appearances. So, again: what is a photo?

This fundamental change in the photographic toolbox has produced a generation of artists who treat the medium in a critical and investigative way. Some concentrate on formal aspects, while for others an often implicit criticism of the social implications of the current use of images is more important. Because along with the medium the position and meaning of the photographic image has changed radically. Especially in a society in which so much culturally relevant information is communicated through images, and more than ever a complex dynamic exists among visual material, it is important that a fundamental reassessment of the medium takes place and that the foundations are laid for a new

visual literacy. What is the value and significance of photography in our own time? How are we to read photographic images? How do photographic images come about and how does that translate into new questions about form and a new aesthetic? What is the relationship between photography and reality and how do images function in a society in which digitalization has changed our ways of communicating, whether socially, politically or commercially, so thoroughly? How does the current medium relate to its own past and what is the role of the photographer?

Such questions are highly relevant to the new generation of image makers working both with and within the new visual landscape. The need to reassess photography is leading to its reinvention in a totally transformed social and technological context, a reinvention that is mindful of almost a hundred and seventy-five years of photographic history. The current position of photography therefore has a certain amount in common with the very earliest years of the medium. In all sorts of places people are experimenting with new photographic techniques, trying out methods and processes that have not fully crystallized yet and demonstrating a mindset that is pleasingly non-conformist. This open-mindedness guarantees that there will be unexpected approaches and often surprising results, whether in a formal or aesthetic sense or with respect to content. It is therefore in the nature of these developments that no ultimate aim has been clearly formulated. This necessary reinvention of the medium may in retrospect turn out to be the start of a real renaissance of photography.

The editors of *Foam* first came into contact with the work of several representatives of this new generation of image-makers through our refined network of scouts and especially through the portfolios submitted in response to our annual talent call. Among the innumerable portfolios submitted we noticed on a number of occasions work that testified to a new approach to the medium, a new aesthetic and a mentality that seemed to slip back and forth between brainy and witty. We were fascinated, but at the same time we did not feel we could really put a finger on it. That in itself increased its appeal – reason enough to publish the work in the issue we devote annually to new, upcoming talent. Work by Jessica Eaton appeared in *Foam Magazine Talent Issue #28* in 2011, as did that of Lucas Blalock. Closely related work by artist Sam Falls appeared in the autumn of 2012, #32, and that of Daniel

Gordon and Joshua Citarella in the *Talent Issue* #36 of 2013. Daniel Gordon was chosen in March 2014 by an international jury as the winner of the Foam Paul Huf Award. A little additional research has made clear that the artists whose work we initially saw from a particular perspective are representatives of a far greater whole. There were other artists who worked with related themes and issues, who had comparable working methods, a similar mentality or the same training, in some cases even knew each other well and had worked together. Yet from the start it was clear that it would not be correct to speak of a group or a new school of photography in the traditional sense. That is far too static, homogeneous, not to say old-fashioned a way to describe this generation of artists, a generation characterized by dynamism, movement, changing coalitions and a focus on process, a generation produced by a reality in which flux, non-linearity and ambiguity are essential. Charlotte Cotton was right to speak of the artists in question as 'a critical mass'.

Although the work of these artists is visually highly diverse and apparently difficult to characterize, there are some clear similarities between them. At the risk of generalizing a little, the following common features are significant: The final image is in almost all cases constructed, whether analogue or digital, and whether produced by montage, collage or assemblage. In order to do so, much use is made of existing visual material, whether or not it is digital in nature or origin. Therefore, deconstruction and recontextualization are essential. There are often references to other techniques and media (painting and sculpture; computer animation) or use may be made of a multimedia approach, and analogue and digital techniques are played with, sometimes in a hybrid form. However, the visual result is translated into an image that is primarily photographic, even if the layering and tension of the surface is increased by the integration of tactile objects. As a result great importance is attached to the intrinsic quality of the surface. This artistic process leads to an often intriguing tension between the ephemeral, digital character of much visual material that was used and the physical, object-like character of the final work. Having said this, in general there is a particular stress on the importance of the process involved; the way images come into being and the particular methods deployed are sometimes more important than the physical result. Despite the regular references to history and art history, photographic conventions are set aside and there is much room for experimentation.

And lastly, despite the emphasis on formalistic topics, thinking in processes, including production processes, and the ways the value of image and perception are determined are often linked to social criticism, especially criticism of the financial, economic, capitalist system.

Current technological conditions have given rise to a vast digital archive of images of a magnitude that is beyond human imagining. Every day many tens of millions of images are uploaded. Despite these immense quantities, the majority of this material is in theory relatively accessible from computers, smart phones and other gadgets. The decentralized model of the internet also means that information streams appear less hierarchical and there is a notion of equivalence. This has made the appropriation of the image, in a broad sense, and its manipulation, adaptation and further distribution into a tried and tested, and widely accepted, artistic method. Many artists use images from the internet as raw material for the creation of new images.

Daniel Gordon finds his visual building blocks on the internet by entering particular terms in Google Image Search. The first transformation of the visual material is the result of a simple print command. A hierarchy of immaterial, abstract information built up module by module by means of pixels becomes a physical, paper object with an image that is constructed in a different way from the original. From countless cut out two-dimensional pieces, Gordon constructs a three-dimensional tableau that is largely based on classical genres such as the still life or the portrait. With an analogue view camera and making use of thoroughly conventional studio techniques, he transforms the spatial constellation into a new two-dimensional reality, that of a negative. By then scanning the negative, the image is brought back into a digital context, where a digital toolkit is available for post-production work. Eventually the image is returned to physical reality by the creation of a high-quality print. Repeated changes to the nature of the material, along with changes to the context in which certain facets of the image are shown, determine the eventual result.

Because of his special appreciation of the quality of photography in printed media, Matt Lipps leaves the digital archive of images on the internet completely out of account. Using existing visual material from magazines of the 1950s and 1960s he investigates

what happens to images with a recognized artistic or cultural value when they are deployed in a new system and arranged according to new categories. By means of subtle cut and paste work he creates physical tableaux and theatrical settings that he further manipulates using light and adjustments to scale. What makes his work so fascinating, especially the series *Horizon(s)*, is that the images come from a magazine that was intended to inform its readers about art and culture. The magazine dictated, as it were, how cultural history ought to be understood, namely in a way that was strictly ordered, unambiguous and chronological. By rethinking that hierarchy, Lipps undermines the established cultural-historical canon and the time-honoured linear way of writing about history. His tableaux remind us of surfing the internet: non-linear, associative, with an order and hierarchy that are constantly changing.

To others, analogue photography is substantially less important in the creative process. Since the arrival of consumer software in the late 1980s, the opportunities to manipulate images digitally have increased markedly and in the commercial arena no image is any longer published that has not been thoroughly digitally manipulated. The intention is of course that the manipulation should be invisible; the final image must communicate directly and unambiguously without giving anything away about how it came into being. Lucas Blalock deliberately turns this process around and makes digital intervention an essential part of his work. The use of image-manipulation tools such as the 'clone stamp' or the 'layer mask' is not hidden but emphasized by embracing the visual implications as part of a new aesthetic. What would normally be regarded as disturbing digital errors are deliberately deployed by Blalock to achieve a different kind of photographic image, fascinating, surprising and sometimes disturbing precisely because of this appeal to unusual aesthetic frameworks. The flatness of his images is an element both striking and intriguing. His pictures appear to have a cool, impersonal directness that seems to arise from the visual language of cheap advertisements and leaflets. The presence of the artist, his signature, appears to manifest itself mainly in the introduction of unsettling perturbations.

Are we dealing here with implied criticism of the nature of most of the photographic images with which we are surrounded, namely images with a commercial goal, and of the ubiquitous influence of commerce on our lives? It is undoubtedly true that many of our

desires and wishes, and through them ultimately also our behaviour, are determined to a great degree by images. In the form of a tempting image, an invitation is held out to us that we want to believe in and go after, even without knowing exactly how the image relates to the physical object or reality it represents. In this sense a photographic universe creates the terms on which objects are represented, shapes the desires of the viewer/consumer and ultimately determines the way that the concrete, material object is understood and appreciated. This interrelational system of references, representations and symbols led Kate Steciw to experiment with the re-contextualizing of objects and images in an attempt to disturb the process through which the dominant commercial ideology offers us visual material. In doing so Steciw constantly switches back and forth between the photographic space within the framework of the flat surface and the sculptural space of the attached objects, which are built up out of photographic material. Perspectives are interrupted, photographic material is distorted into baroque shapes and integrated into sometimes extremely complicated compositions, within which the sense of space and the distinction between represented object and material object is challenged to the utmost.

This playing with and simultaneous presentation of different perspectives is sometimes reminiscent of Cubism and its use of collages. Steciw talked about this in a conversation with Lucas Blalock on Shane Lavalette's online platform, *Lay Flat*, saying: 'I think this is an apt connection to make to a lot of the conceptual and formal investigations occurring in and around contemporary photography, not only because we find ourselves at a similarly aesthetic junction but also because new technologies again have created new spatial and perceptual potentials that must be considered from the vantage point of the current artistic paradigm. I think what is most compelling about both Cubism and recent photographic trajectories is that they represent a kind of conceptual bridge between movements.'

The reference to Cubism, especially as a transitional form, is interesting and not to be seen in isolation. In his text Joshua Chuang refers to two earlier moments in the history of the medium that demonstrate similarities with current developments, namely the avant-garde movement in Europe and the Soviet Union between the wars and the photographic developments that

took place in America in the 1960s and 1970s. It is no accident that both were periods in which great social change came about. Now too, with drastic and rapid technological innovation, we find ourselves in a time of historical transition in which old certainties are being undermined and we have no clear idea of what shape the future will take. We are justified in speaking of a new generation of artists that in some sense could be described as post-Cold War, post-9/11, post-Lehmann Brothers and post-NSA. The falling away of an apparently clear and unambiguous worldview, the decline of leading ideologies, the unmasking of a powerful banking system, the revealing of the dark sides of capitalism and the many crises all this has brought with it form the social context within which much of the work included in *Under Construction* needs to be understood. It is no longer linear but non-linear, it is ambiguous rather than unambiguous, simultaneous instead of chronological, quantum instead of Newtonian, context rather than standpoint, partial in contrast to total, complexity versus simplicity, more process than product, dynamic versus static, access in preference to ownership. In view of the uncertain, heterogeneous character of our time, it is also not without reason that in quite a bit of the work of this generation we find references to history or to historical precursors (Picasso or Matisse in Daniel Gordon, Josef Albers and Sol Lewitt in Jessica Eaton and the quest for a perfect naturalistic rendering of the human body by the ancient Greeks in Sara VanDerBeek) – as if within this hybrid, heterogeneous environment an assiduous search is underway for a foothold, for a fixed foundation in the past from which the quest for a new equilibrium can be pursued. Where this search will lead no one knows, and bearing in mind the mentality of many of the artists mentioned here that is perhaps far less important than the journey itself. What is clear is that photography, and the use, value and significance of photography, have reached an important transitional stage, and that an active search is going on for ways to enter into a new, meaningful relationship with the world around us.

But is this search exclusively done by American artists? It goes without saying that the fundamental social, political, economic and artistic changes caused by technological developments are of an outspoken global nature and not limited to a certain territory or culture. We are all touched and influenced by the consequences of living in a digital era. So we can identify a similar quest for a new use of the photographic medium with other artists both in

Europe and to some extent in Asia. However, the fact that there is an obvious and outspoken awareness of the challenges forced upon us by the new digital reality among a striking number of American artists is not without importance. The US have an longstanding and strong photographic tradition and were hugely influential in the early emancipation of the medium as a proper means of artistic expression. Within this tradition there has always been a strong emphasis on formalism and the potential of photography to relate to shared visible reality in an mostly clear documentary way. Given the nature and the strength of this tradition the current artists are blatantly open-minded and show the guts to experiment in a sometimes unorthodox way. The fact that this is currently happening within American photography might also be evidence of the huge and sometimes even disturbing impact of visual footage on American society, especially within an outspoken commercial framework. Visual representations of an ideal, desirable but often mendacious reality are omnipresent and infect the hearts and souls of many. Images create desire, and desire is a powerful undercurrent in much of our social behaviour. So a critical approach of images is perhaps more understandable, perhaps even more justified within the American social context.

Lastly, a few words on the nature of this publication. We deliberately choose to not divide the work of the artists in clear and well-defined portfolios. This image driven publication can be considered almost as a continuum of new visual material, as a stream of images that forces the viewer to find new ways to relate to the work presented. Just as the images themselves often have an intrinsic quality to puzzle the spectator and to put our perception to the test. We tried to conceive the publication almost as a relay in which the work of every single artist partially overlaps the work of the former and the latter artist. By doing so we tried to connect different bodies of work in a very open, playful manner to increase coherency. All articles and texts are really considered to be interventions that pass-through the stream of images and are intended to provide the reader with the necessary background information. Because context and the possibility to relate to the bigger picture is of the utmost importance to properly understand the importance of perhaps the most fundamental transitional period in the history of photography.