

THE GREAT LEAP SIDEWAYS

Between Immersion and Interpretation: Charlotte Cotton's "Photography is Magic"
Wolukau-Wanambwa
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I.
If we take as a measure of prominence a mix of art press, gallery exhibitions and museum shows, then *Photography Is Magic* is a book (consisting of works made since 2010) that cuts a cross-section through a vein of photographic practice that has been ascendant in fine art for much of the last six years. It comprises a resonant grouping of works whose conceptual affinities have been the subject of much critical attention, and whose prominence has been the cause of much internecine debate. In *Photography Is Magic*, Charlotte Cotton sets out to assess "the current state of photography's presence—its status as cultural material—within art." The book prompts the timely question of where much of photography's conceptual focus, artistic praxis and critical thinking have moved in the period since 2010.

A selective list of those artists who have participated in New Photography exhibitions at the MoMA in the years 2009 to 2015 provides a serviceable, if imperfect illustration of this recent historical conjuncture. Such a list would include Walead Beshty, Daniel Gordon, Leslie Hewitt, Carter Mull, Sara VanDerBeek, Roe Ethridge, Elad Lassry, Amanda Ross-Ho, Moyra Davey, Deanna Lawson, Michele Abeles, Anne Collier, Zoe Crosher, Shirana Shahbazi, Brendan Fowler, Annette Kelm, Lisa Oppenheim, Anna Ostoya, Eileen Quinlan, Ilit Azoulay, Lucas Blalock, Natalie Czech, DIS Collective, John Houck and Anouk Kruithof.

Thirteen of the twenty-five artists named above are included in the eighty-four artists whose work is published in Cotton's expansive book. Similarly, six of the ten artists in the recent Guggenheim exhibition *Photo-Poetics: An Anthology* are represented in the above MoMA list, and three of those six in Cotton's book. This is to say that the broad field of practice of which these artists can be taken as representatives is, and has been, in a moment of ascendancy that can be traced back in the United States to at least 2009.

In *Photography Is Magic*, these artists are bound together by their common interest in the exploration of "experimental approaches to photographic ideas"* , whilst Jennifer Blessing describes her Guggenheim show as grouping together artists whose work contemplates "the nature, traditions, and magic of photography at a moment characterized by its rapid digital transformation." While the two are in no way equivalent events, the book and exhibition are certainly comparable and relatively simultaneous explorations of the contemporaneity of this strand of fine art photography.

Attempts to brand this mode of practice have ranged from the revivalist ("The New Formalism") to the overtly pejorative ("Rocks and Perspex") to the apocryphal ("The New Synthetics"). None of them have proven especially fruitful, or developed much productive traction. But what becomes clear in a re-examination of this recent history is the extent to which photography's deposal from the pinnacle of visual culture by television, video and the Internet, forced its practitioners, scholars and curators to reassess its defining characteristics and its ongoing utility in a period of dizzying change. This has tended to provoke a substantive reappraisal of photography's 'medium-specificity'—a theoretical axiom Christopher Bedford aptly describes as "both obsolete and invaluable" in his 2009 *Words Without Pictures* essay "Qualifying Photography as Art, or, Is Photography All It Can Be?"

If the modernist category of the medium is obsolete, much contemporary work nevertheless belies an express antagonism toward its proscriptions. In the book's survey of a broad set of practices which inquire into ways of 'materialising contemporary photographic image culture,' its technologies, its modes of consumption and distribution, its tendencies toward "automation, repetition, and versioning,"* *Photography Is Magic* resonates with a contemporary art practice shaped not only by a resistance to modernist proscriptions, but by an attentiveness to the complicated status of the image in postmodern life.

II.

In an unbroken sequence of over three hundred images, *Photography Is Magic* unfolds a dizzying and iterative array of large reproductions, which are counterposed to unprepossessing captions. The book is laid out in a form that "privileges the potentials of ideas over the virtuosity of individual authors or the perfection of techniques and mechanisms,"* so that the visual experience of its images' constant succession determines its primary mode of experience. In this, it is a book that mimics the irrepressible flow of digital images.

Asha Schechter's opening salvo in the book, *Picture 049 (Cardboard Box, Autumn Leaf Red, Funky Monkeys)*, is an image dominated by the shadowed depths of a seemingly empty cardboard box, photographed in an indeterminate space against a diaphanous linen backdrop patterned by bright yellow printed bananas. The picture presents us not merely with a hollow centre, but with the absence of its titular monkeys, an absence elided with the apparent emptiness of the cardboard box. The box invokes the contemporary prevalence of an internet-driven model of consumption and distribution—an allusion strengthened by the resemblance of the work's title to the structure and grammar of an inventory.

Bananas recur in Schechter's *Picture 066b (Rubik's Cube, Clear Book, Clubmasters, Rubik's Cube, Vintage Pictures Retro Photos Cotton Fabric, Thumbtack)*. It is an image whose title dutifully lists its contents in near-perfect clockwise rotation, excluding the horn-rimmed glasses at the image's centre, which together with the second Rubik's Cube form the vague impression of a human face. Schechter's works suggest themselves as mock catalogues of personal effects from which the identity of their owners cannot reliably be reconstructed. They simultaneously develop a reflexive critique of the unique art object through the rote manner of their naming, while invoking the algorithmic logic of internet retailers who model individual identity on the accumulation of mass-produced possessions.

In Lucas Blalock's *Blue Bottles*, the recognisable shadows of two wine bottles can be read in green-tinged black against the silvery hue of reflected light. The picture nominates the bottles as its subject, but each of them have been disguised by his deliberately inept use of Photoshop's clone stamp tool, so that only their silhouettes are legible. The photograph thus produces a sort of double negation—it is not its nominal subject, nor is its subject visible in it—whilst simultaneously dissuading us from recognising it as an image comprised entirely of blue plastic. Blalock's exploration of the ambivalence of photographic naming here recalls Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*. He invokes and enacts the limits of photography's rhetorical conventions, while incorporating the plasticity of the picture's material into a layered critique of visual meaning.

Materiality is plainly much at issue in the book, whether through the illusory quality common to homogeneous digital imaging tools and the consumerist objects they depict, or in the recurrent emphasis on the illusionistic power of colour embodied in the photographs of Jessica Eaton. To this, Michele Abeles's *Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:* series adds a commentary on the additive, mutable and compulsive nature of digital technology, and its effect on our daily visual

experience. Her series title is emblematic of the endlessness of computerised reproduction and (re)distribution, but also of technology's utter ambivalence to the content it disperses throughout the world.

In this vein, *Red, Rock, Cigarettes, Newspaper, Body, Wood, Lycra, Bottle* conflates English and Spanish language ads with Japanese lettering embossed on mechanically coloured fabrics, producing a strangely vivid sense of equivalence. In this, and two other images, nude male figures are masked, propped up, upstaged and even priced by other intervening disjecta, in narrow and flattened pictures that invoke the studio space, the window display and the aggregate disorder of digital trash.

John Lehr's tightly cropped photograph *Grate* zeroes in on the slender and distended filaments of a window-mounted air conditioning unit. Its wavy lines, bowed here and bent backward there, give shape to an object that allegorises the city as an imperfectly oxygenated mechanism, while recalling stacked arrays of servers massed in some large-scale data centre.

Where some works disentangle the intricate links that tie the photograph to consumerism and culture, others deal with its mutable relationship to brute physical presence. In Darren Harvey-Regan's *The Halt*, a small wood-bladed axe affixes a print to a white wall on which the image of a seemingly identical axe is reproduced. The print's penetration by the object effects a theatrical flourish, while demonstrating the resilience of traditional modes of illusion parsed through new digital forms. But these works also question the effect of the photograph's affect within an "image system"* in which we are enmeshed, and in which we depend upon mechanically reproduced images while remaining acutely suspicious of their 'nature,' and of their effects upon our own.

While violence is unchained in overt and tacit ways by de Joode's work, Sarah Cwynar's *Gold-NYT April 22nd, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers)* is marked by glittering parodic excess. In it, a multitude of golden hues are unevenly struck by lighting that transforms adhesive letter tiles, magazine clippings, gold bars and card stock into a shimmering cascade of senselessness, modelled on the structure of a window display. The fake gold 'watches' draped across the display are at once caricatures, real symbols of collective aspiration, and two-dimensional objects that will accurately tell the time twice a day. These false objects are scaled to disproportionate size when the image is printed at its native 30 x 40 inches, in a physical gesture that reinforces the picture's comic treatment of desire. The image's conjunction of reality and illusion, or perhaps its exemplification of the reality of illusion, is comparable to our present conflation of reality TV and realpolitik, embodied presently in the transformation of a goonish Donald Trump into a viable candidate for the American presidency.

III.

Photography Is Magic coincides in its release with an ongoing interest in the specific qualities of art made in a 'post-medium' condition. Its works alert us reflexively to the possible processes of their construction, the multiple media imbricated within their forms, and the prevalence of digital interactions in their ongoing lives as images. In this they simultaneously recall the media-specific vocabulary of collage, the postmodernity of Rauschenberg's combines, and Conceptual Art's trenchant critique of the unique art object.

The problem of the photographic image—its economy, its fragility, its morphology, its fertility, its dispersal and its magnetic power—recurs throughout the rhythmic sequences of images in this book. These photographic objects often play with the malleable forms of art itself, as in the multi-modal *Image Objects of Artie Vierkant*. Moreover, the works in *Photography Is*

Magic underline the indeterminate positions of the object and subject in the image world of contemporary life: are they us? are we made into things by our use of them? does our habitual immersion in their depths dull our interpretive faculties or does it refine them?

Cotton underscores these complexities in her essay, pointing to the prevalence in the book of images that place "computational devices at the aesthetic center of the works," so that "Photoshop's filters and layers are visible and pronounced," effectively "calling out Photoshop as a medium in its own right, with inherent possibilities for creative subjectivity."* Elsewhere she cites Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, in which Flusser argues that technical images "are in the process of magically restructuring our 'reality' and turning it into a 'global image scenario'" in which our "lives become a function of [our] own images."

Flusser's essay is echoed in the arguments of Hito Steyerl in "Walking Through Screens: Images in Transition," published in Carol Squiers's recent and timely catalogue *What Is A Photograph?*. In it, Steyerl argues that "it has become clear that images are not objective or subjective renditions of a preexisting condition nor merely treacherous appearances, but that they are nodes of energy and matter migrating across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems." For Steyerl, images "have acquired an uncanny ability to proliferate, transform, and activate. Images have become real as junkspace (...) they invade cities, transforming space into sights, and reality into reality."

Works such as *Blue Bottles* and *Gold-NYT April 22nd, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers)* foreground the culturally encoded nature of photographs, as much as the technological processes through which they are produced and distributed. These works identify complex cross-currents in the 'substance' of the photograph, through which its affect dulls our attentiveness whilst exciting our senses, in a manner that echoes both Flusser's and Steyerl's claims. Similarly, works by artists like Taisuke Koyama and Jessica Eaton stress the systems of translation and refraction that undergird the surface of photographic images, underscoring a profound distinction between retinal perception and understanding.

But this reflexive exploration of the image, which leads us into its mechanisms of construction and illusion, can nevertheless provoke a sense of individual (and perhaps collective) powerlessness in the face of the image world in which we are embedded. Writing on Alfredo Jaar's *Lament of Images*, Jacques Rancière argued that "conceptualism is not an intellectual frustration strategy. It is the construction of a sensory arrangement that restores the powers of attention itself." The dilemma for fine art photographers is thus how to work with images to alter attention (through whatever aesthetic form), or, to borrow from Fredric Jameson's essay in *Unfinished Business*: "how to struggle within the world of the simulacrum by using the arms and weapons specific to that world which are themselves precisely simulacra?"

That the works in this book invoke the relationships between these vexed questions is a measure of its undeniable contemporaneity, and a reflection of photography's continually generative relationship with culture, time and place. *Photography Is Magic* delivers an expansive—perhaps definitive—rendering of a mode of art practice that has been the prominent face of American art photography for the past six years. The book's antic pace, its digressions and its repetitions, all speak to the challenge for any artist in today's visual culture wishing to strike a balance between immersion and interpretation.