

A speculative exhibition: Aspects of recent photographic practice

Text by Natasha Bullock



In 1970 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, presented 'Photography into Sculpture', which took the 'flat' photograph as its departure point.¹ The exhibition looked at material, sculptural concerns and a 'wide variety of techniques reflecting our modern technological culture'.² More than four decades later in 2013, the Centre Pompidou, Paris exhibition 'Image into Sculpture' dealt with related ideas highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of art practice by bringing the image into conversation with different media.³ The shift in exhibition terminology from 'photography' to 'image' reveals much about how the medium of photography is understood and how it is interpreted today through an expanding prism of digitalisation and proliferation. But it also indicates the cultural and structural evolution of the 'picture' and 'picture-making' because we can understand each exhibition as indicative of a particular milieu: with 'Photography into Sculpture' appearing in the wake of pop art and minimalism, and with 'Image into Sculpture' accenting artmaking across disciplines.

Why begin a discussion about photography in the 2000s and beyond with this 40-year juxtaposition? Both exhibitions represent expanded forms of traditional 'flat' or 'documentary' photography. Their correlation highlights how the cross-fertilisation of ideas between mediums is not a recent phenomenon.⁴ Pho-

tography's objecthood is intimately tied to technological transformations and obsolescence, and so the medium continues to evolve and respond of-

ten in conversation with other disciplines. Along with material developments is the abiding question of context, of the social fabric and cultural framework within which these objects exist.

It is clear from 'Image into Sculpture' that the participating artists Nina Beier, Simon Denny, Navid Nuur and Yorgos Sapountzis are responding to a world saturated by many forms of imagery. Essential to the curatorial rationale by Christine Macel, the exhibition 'thus focuses on a new approach to images – both mental and material – in their relation to different media'.⁵ Auckland-born, Berlin-based Simon Denny's hybrid work, for example, of monitors sunk into crates and hidden behind plastic comments on the increasing disappearance and obsolescence of analogue television and how vision is continually altered by changes in technology. Other artists in the show, all of a similar generation – born from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s – treat the image in diverse ways and in combination with sculpture, installation, video and painting.

'Image into Sculpture' appears at a prescient point in time just as a critical mass of artists and curators, in Australia and internationally, are questioning the vicissitudes of images and operating across disciplines. At the curatorial heart of Massimiliano Gioni's 2010 Gwangju Biennale, titled '10,000 Lives', for instance, is the power, impact and confluence of images on people.⁶ Gioni's biennale combined different artforms to tell a story that charted a journey through time from 1901 to 2010 with images from history, cultural artefacts, outsider art and contemporary practice. Another

¹ 'Photography into Sculpture', Museum of Modern Art, New York, 8 April – 5 July 1970.

² See www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/4438/releases/MOMA_1970_Jan-June_0035_36.pdf?2010 (accessed 1 August 2013).

³ 'Image into Sculpture', Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2 May – 5 August 2013.

⁴ We can even look back to 1929, for instance, when photographer Harold Cazneaux collaborated with artist and graphic designer Adrian Feint to produce a series of photographs for the magazine *The Home*.

⁵ See www.centrepompidou.fr/media/imp/M5050/CPV/90/e5/M5050-CPV-8b164680-c1ed-42ac-90e5-ade92a554ac8.pdf (accessed 1 August 2013).

⁶ The 8th Gwangju Biennale, '10,000 Lives', 3 September – 7 November 2010.

exhibition (that I co-curated with Alexie Glass-Kantor in 2012), the 12th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, titled 'Parallel Collisions', showed work that explored the 'collision' of images across time from the historical to the contemporary – in

7 The 12th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 'Parallel Collisions', Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2 March – 29 April 2012.

juxtaposition, association or as narrative fragments.⁷ *Parallel Collisions* was also a collaborative endeavour between artists, architects, designers and curators. The aim was to embrace an interdisciplinary approach to exhibition-making. With incursions of contemporary art in correspondence with the works that had inspired them – such as Rosemary Laing's photograph *ground-speed (Rose Petal) #17* (2001) across the room from John Glover's *A view of the artist's house and garden, in Mills Plains, Van Diemen's Land 1835* – 'Parallel Collisions' speculated on the nature of images and how the passing of time and context can bring a renewed receptivity and understanding to historical specificity and the contemporary object.

In a related way, 'Octopus 13: on this day alone' at Melbourne's Gertrude Contemporary more recently examined a number of artists' relationship to images and image-making.⁸ Curated by Glenn Barkley, this sensitive exhibition was not *of* but *about* photography, and comprised objects, moving images and sound. 'on this day alone' included

8 'Octopus 13: on this day alone', Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, 26 July – 24 August 2013.

a remarkable work by the celebrated American photographer Ansel Adams: a sound recording of the artist typing a letter in 1983. By including this work, Barkley questioned the 'documentary' status and innate veracity of photography and sound. Moreover, the exhibition title evocatively captured something of the singular approach each of the participating artists adopt in relation to the image.

Can we imagine a further exhibition of work that speculates on the meaning and nature of images today? If in 1969 it was a radical gesture to fry a polaroid in the gallery, gild it and send it as gift (as in Gordon Matta-Clark's *Photo-Fry*), or curate an exhibition of three-dimensional photographic objects, what now characterises how artists use images and the relationship to photographic processes? How does the discipline of photography relate to the discourse of images? Undoubtedly, photogra-

phy is an imprint of what is in front of the lens and truly indebted to the past in a material and philosophical sense. By looking at some recent work by six artists who elaborate on the character of images different ideas begin to emerge.

Sydney-based Justene Williams looks back in time, trawling through personal archives and art history for inspiration and reference points. Her video installations involve her performing in striking interior settings assembled from cardboard, inexpensive building material and sculptures made from past work, including photographic remnants. Williams was at first purely a photographer and she sees the world cast through this slippery and mediated lens. Her most recent installation, *Milk seeped in bread and rocked the leg* (2012–13), includes a kind of homemade theatre construction with steps functioning as seats and seven different projectors, some resting on stacks of bread, and some whose footage is sourced from an iPhone.⁹ The work is partly inspired by the artist's ongoing interest in European avant-garde movements such as dada and the performances at the Zurich nightclub Cabaret Voltaire. Photography is inherently of the past, and collage is another form of co-opting that past to fashion new meanings and visual interest in the surplus of images and leftover materials. In a related spirit, Williams's video installations collage together materials, costumes, sound and the expressive abstractions of the choreographed body. Similar to her early snapshot photographs that slid across the surface of nightclubs and car shows, Williams's intricate video constructions piece together an image of humanity that is as raucous as it is poignant, as hopeful as it is helpless.

While Williams employs collage to fashion three-dimensional experiences, Sydney-based Lillian O'Neil and Melbourne-based Zoe Croggon collage fragments from diverse sources, producing pictures that visually connect that which cannot be connected in real time and space. In the experience of life, people, places and things overlap and merge in our minds and memories in the same way as collages inherently shatter the composition of the world, folding the past into the present to

This was exhibited as part of the Balnaves photomedia project 'We used to talk about love', which the author curated at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 31 January – 21 April 2013.



Justene Williams, *Milk seeped in bread and rocked the leg*, 2012–13, installation view, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013; 7 projectors, 2 pine shelves, pine table, 3 pine steps/seats, white bread, pillows dimensions variable, production stills by Lauren Eve, cinematography by Gotaro Uematsu and friends; courtesy the artist, Sarah Cottier Gallery, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

generate other realities, associations and feelings. O'Neil's monumental collages are sourced from second-hand books and have a distinctively retro feel evident in their sanguine colour. Her work explores the language of love and relationships with a twist, and a sense of humour. *Attack of the Romance* (2012) reveals a man and a woman with swapped genitals, along with another smaller couple kissing, overlaid with suggestions of sex and heartache, and all in the context of a swirling cosmological universe. Informed by a sensibility more inspired by dance and theatre, Croggon, in contrast, brings humans and objects into contrapuntal conversation. She finds images in sports encyclopedias, dance catalogues, film stills and photography books, collaging corresponding forms and distinctive textures that flow across the page to produce pictures that subtly and seismically perceive the energy of the human form.

Based in both Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia, Simryn Gill collects objects and works with

photography, sculpture, books, paper and drawings to amass ideas around the poetry of living in a place or understanding the paradox of language. For her, the 'image' is complex and laden. Gill's sequence of 116 photographs of dilapidated buildings in Malaysia, *Standing Still* (2000–03), beautifully buries the obsolescence of her chosen film stock into the content of her project. Halfway through shooting the series the film became unavailable. Encapsulated in this gesture is the material and conceptual notion of time and extinction; time ripples through the buildings overgrown with nature, empty and abandoned in the aftermath of the late 1990s Asian financial crisis. The series exemplifies both decay and fecundity.

The beauty of Gill's work is in its capacity to register subtle shifts in meaning, often in the correspondence between mediums and objects. For 'Here Art Grows on Trees', which was presented in the Australian Pavilion for the 55th Venice Biennale, the artist made a sequence of canvases pasted

Previous spread: Simon Denny, *7 Drunken Videos: Snopor*, 2009, TV casing, wax, glue, denim, copper, Plexiglas with plastic protective sheet, screen print, wood, found chair, 103 x 62 x 60 cm, collection Doris Maampe, Berlin, courtesy the artist and Centre Pompidou, Paris.



Lillian O'Neil, *Attack of the Romance*, 2012, collage on wooden board, 3 panels, 370 x 226 cm (overall), courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney.



Simryn Gill, *Here Art Grows on Trees*, 2013, installation view, 55th Venice Biennale, comprising: *Half Moon Shine*, mild steel, 158 cm (diameter); and *Eyes and Storms*, 8 Ilfachrome prints from a series of 23, 125 x 125 cm (each); courtesy the artist and the Australia Council for the Arts. Photograph Jenni Carter.

¹⁰ 'Simryn Gill: Here Art Grows on Trees', Australian Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, 1 June – 24 November 2013.

with words cut from books, photographs of Australian open-cut mines and waterholes, and a large rusted metal bowl shaped like a Hindu ritual vessel.¹⁰ For the first time on a major scale, Gill altered the architecture of the space creating an exhibition of work that will physically deteriorate in real time. A segment of the Australian Pavilion roof was removed, allowing the work to be swept up in the elements. The panels with pasted words appear like a large gust of wind, words scattered across the surface, mixing meanings and defying clarity. As the work slowly alters, as the effects of atmospheric conditions accumulate, the idea of entropy, which is rooted in the work's presentation, becomes generative.

Melbourne-based Christian Capurro is another artist whose work rests on the cultural production of images. In his long-term project, *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette* (1999–2009), more than 250 people erased a magazine

copy of *Vogue Hommes* (September 1986) between 1999 and 2004; the erasure was accounted for in the hours and pay of the individual contributions of time as labour. Capurro's project throws into relief the phenomenon of a contemporary excess of vision while embedding the passing of time in the object. Here the erased text and pictures result in a magazine carcass of ghosts, shadows and bodies; a beautiful and poignant hereafter. Recently Capurro has begun working with digital video. In the series 'Amateur Props' (2012–13), these new works are made from a hand-held phone camera. They are artworks about art, re-takes and a form of homage. In *Amateur prop - Lisbon3* (2012), Capurro films a Dan Flavin monument to V. Tatlin of flickering luminescent tubes and its intermittent encounter with another visitor/body. These mesmerising, quiet works are a telling expansion of Capurro's interest in the tension between seeing and neglecting to see. What do we make out in the image quagmire that sur-



Christian Capurro, *Coda (Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette)*, 2005–07, editioned photograph, 75 x 100 cm, courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney.

rounds us? As always, meaning resides in the relationship between the image and the body.

In a related way, Roni Horn's work navigates the complex relationship between images, objects and viewers. Based in New York and Reykjavik, Iceland, the artist grapples with how to elaborate emotions or a psychology of the landscape. Her recent solid cast glass sculptures situated near windows reflect the world outside, the shadows and changing nature of the air and atmosphere as the blue surface of the sculpture adjusts hue – from purple, pink to aquamarine. For her, the experience of art is paramount. Alongside these sculptures, Horn uses the photographic image to amass meaning. In *Untitled (weather)* (2010–11), she produces topologies of a face whose disposition changes slightly in each print in the same way that the glass sculptures are not static but always alter in relation to the outside world. Horn's practice is a startling metaphor for the field of photography, for work that incorporates images and objects in a myriad of diverse

and surprising ways. Fittingly, the glass sculptures are called *Untitled ('Consider incompleteness as a verb')* (2010–12). Horn's work continues to evolve and transform in order to interrogate the variable terrain of perception and, in a visual sense, to respond to the multifarious nature of light and atmospheric conditions. Recalibrating Horn's title we can begin to think of photography in a similar way – as a verb that conveys states of being incomplete.

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Blessed are the peacemakers.
(Matthew 5:9)

The servants of the Beneficent God are they who walk on the earth in humbleness, and when the ignorant address them, they say: peace.
(Koran 25:63)

Peace will not come out of a clash of arms but out of justice lived and done by unarmed nations in the face of odds.
(Mohandas Gandhi)

The Hindu-Balinese black and white checked design, called poleng, symbolises how the wellbeing and continuation of the world rely on the acceptance and balance of opposing forces.

(Peter Dunbar-Hall)

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