

A NEW MATERIALISM

Mark Bolland

Photography is always changing and has always been understood through, or in dialogue with other media. Its histories are of succession by, and connections with, other media and forms. Its identity has always been plural and malleable. With this in mind we might try to summarise some of the key developments in photography of the past thirty years or so in order to provide some context for the apparently anachronistic photographic practices featured in this issue of *Scope: Visual Archaeologies of Photography*.

If we were to try to describe the current situation across the many and various fields of photographic practices we would certainly give prominence to three recent occurrences that have shaped the photographic landscape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: Firstly, the advent of technologies for the digital production and dissemination of images; secondly photography's rise to prominence in contemporary art; and thirdly, a new materialism that prioritizes objects, chemical processes and a tendency towards the singular that may seem positively perverse in the era of the digital.

This 'new materialism' is the focus of this issue of *Scope*, and the new materialist practices featured here can be understood as a corollary to digital images and the digital dissemination of images. The materialist meme seems precisely and deliberately antithetical to the digital with its characteristic ease, its immateriality and its ubiquitousness. It is also part of a wider cultural trend that has seen a revaluing of the handmade and the artisanal in parallel with the rise of the digital. These ideas are not archaic or a neo-ludditism, nor are they necessarily a nostalgic return to a lost photography, but rather, they represent a deliberate move away from the hermetically sealed world of high-tech and the intangibility of the digital to something visible, touchable and makeable. They are not necessarily a return to the past but an embracing of different possibilities for the present. In photography these ideas also represent a recognition that the many possibilities of photography are still interesting and relevant despite the current domination of the digital, and that apparently old ideas can be combined with the new in interesting ways.

Digitisation, accelerating the process started by photography in the nineteenth century, has helped create a world dominated by image and by images, where images produced for consumption have largely replaced pictures made for contemplation. It has also highlighted and heightened the fluidity and malleability of photography that defies some of the previous assumptions about the medium, casting doubts upon its veracity, as well as changing its modes of dissemination and reception. During this time, contemporary art and its accompanying critiques have provided a context in which these changes can be considered, while recent art photography has provided the contemplative pictures absent from consumer culture. These pictures often reflect upon society and the continually shifting identity of photography in a way that the majority of the photographs we encounter cannot. In keeping with this, we might understand the 'new materialism' as an extension of the idea of the contemplative picture into territory where it can position itself not just in dialogue with, but as an opposite of, the culture from which it emerged, or as a reclaiming of some of the possibilities that digital culture excludes or reduces to simulations.

If the arrival of digital imaging technologies, precipitated a 'crisis' in photography, then this crisis, which led to the premature announcement of photography's death in some quarters, was generated by the anxiety that such a change would leave the photographic field with no essence or identity. This anxiety has at least two main symptoms: Firstly, digitisation erodes the truth-effect of the 'indexical' character of the photographic image and undermines photography's power to carry with it our belief - although not to the extent that was feared some years ago.

Digital images and their many uses and manifestations have highlighted that rather than simply recording the visible, photographs or 'photo-capitalisms' actually construct new realities. The second consequence of the arrival of digitised photographic images was that it marked the end of photography, in the traditional – optical, chemical-sense, as the dominant form of technically produced images.¹ This obsolescence has freed chemical photography from its utilitarian functions (which had been gradually taken over first by moving image technologies and then by digital modes) and opened it up, once again, to the artistic and the utopian.²

One trend that resulted from the 'crisis' of digitisation was a concerted attempt to gather up the various strands of the newly expanded medium and pull them together – to re-form photography and to re-establish it as a discrete medium. But its subsequently continuing dispersal and dissemination only serves to highlight its now undeniably hybrid qualities. Photography, then, has been replaced by *photographies*.

If we were to use this idea of an 'expanded field' of photography to map the various forms of photographic practices in contemporary art since the late 1970s,³ we might find that modernism and its critiques are no longer the only starting point for a thoughtful artistic photographic practice. The same period has seen both a renewed interest in nineteenth and early twentieth century photographic practices and processes, and also a reappraising of the turn-of-the-century pictorialism that seemed so un-photographic to the modernists in the 1920s: After the 'de-skilled' aesthetics of the 1970s and the tentative return to 'pictures' (modernism deconstructed, but retaining its distaste for pictorialism) in the 1980s, the pictorial has subsequently re-emerged as a significant part of photography in contemporary art.

The new materialism is not a return to pictorialism, however, as it incorporates various aspects of photography from the nineteenth century into a contemporary practice that embraces its connections to, or defines itself in opposition to, the prevailing culture, whilst maintaining a dialogue with any number of historical manifestations of the photographic. In other words, such a practice necessarily conceives of the photographic as being plural and being part of an ecosystem of cultural production, rather than a silo.

Recent new materialist photographic practices are expanding the possibilities of art photography by reconsidering 'old' modes of production and dissemination, and these practices choose to emphasise properties of photography that are currently neglected in the prevailing popular culture. At the beginning of photography the multiple and reproductive possibilities of WHF Talbot's positive/negative process triumphed over Daguerre's direct positive process because it was more suited to the commercial demands of the burgeoning consumer culture based on mechanisation and mass production. Now that those responsibilities have been taken over by digital processes, photographic practitioners can luxuriate in the qualities that were exemplified by Daguerre's process: uniqueness, objecthood and beauty. In doing so, they might cause us to consider the ways in which we use, and what we value about, photography in the digital era. If the billions of photographs on social networking sites have now inverted the original photographic project of making the world visible, because they largely only serve to point back to the photographer as their reference point, then the 'new materialist' photographers remind us that there are other photographs and that they can still show us the world in interesting, beautiful and surprising ways.

1 See: Peter Osborne, *Photography in a Expanding Field: Distributive Unity and Dominant form*, 'Where is the Photograph?' David Green, Ed., Photoforum & Photoworks, Brighton, UK, 2003.

2 As Rosalind Krauss has pointed out: "[Walter] Benjamin believed that a the birth of a given social form or technological process the utopian dimension was present and, furthermore, that it is precisely at the moment of the obsolescence of that technology that it once more releases this dimension, like the last gleam of a dying star. For obsolescence, the very law of commodity production, both frees the outmoded object from the grip of utility and reveals the hollow promise of that law." Rosalind Krauss *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 1999, p.41.

3 George Baker did this in: *Photography's Expanded Field*, October 114, Fall 2005, pp.120-40.