POST-PHOTOGRAPHY LETTERS
A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF
PHOTOGRAPHY BETWEEN

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AND SONIA VOSS

Two curators—one from Bucharest, the other living between Paris and Berlin—devise an arc in time and space and engage in an exciting exchange about the future of photography as an artistic medium. What does it mean to live through images? How is time measured in photography? And how can we overcome the temporal disorientation of a continuous now? Stoenescu and Voss seek to formulate tentative answers to these questions, grounding them in the works of contemporary artists like József Király, Isabelle Le Minh, Olivia Mihăltianu, Marianne
connections with a particular space and time multiply until the trace, the indexicality of the image, becomes irrelevant.

The photographic image transmits this shared subjectivity through temporal dislocations that it creates and through our perception of these temporal pockets, as dependent on the time of observation. That is to say, if images work against the memory of the original object in the sense that the viewer’s time will always influence how they contextualise a photograph, once they forget its prentense to record, they can see photography as a means to express, create, and escape its present tense/past tense cycle. While photography belongs to the past, the here/there (à la Roland Barthes) is also of the here/now. If photographs are meant to be further created, imagined, and to develop new connections with lost times, I think that they also contain an anterior future—a will-have-been-as a space of speculations between subjective readings of the image.

I was inspired by the phrase temporal disorientation in Kajet’s open-call for texts. I saw in this a connection to Isol Kirdy’s work, which I curated in the show Letting days go by, water-flowing underground at the Anca Poterasu Gallery during the summer of 2020. I would like to use his work as an incentive for a wider discussion on photography today. Kirdy’s digital and analogue photomontages reconstruct the same space across different times: days, hours, or even years. His images create a layering of meanings. We can talk at length about the documentary aspect of his Indirect series, which follows the same space since the 1990s, or about the deconstruction in his attempt to conceptualise the photographic act.

For example, there is a certain performative dimension to the people he captures in his photomontages, but these are rather found (as he creates hundreds of snapshots and post-pones the decisive moment of choosing) and not directed, and, at the same time, selected, but not searched for. In the work Reconstruction—L.A. Getty Museum, he photographed various visitors in several places around the museum’s entrance on a hot summer day. The decisive moment for the work takes place several years later, when he digitally stitches together the snapshots into one composition.


I think that in such works, the index and the icon become transparent, breaking the relationship between subject and object. In renouncing its association with direct representation, the work moves into a more complex connection between photography and the reality that it depicts, but also into a new relation with other mediums.

SV


Allow me to pick up on that last sentence, in which you allude to Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of the sign. When we started talking about our written exchange, I immediately wanted to discuss the French artist Isabelle Le Minh, whom I have been following for a few years. But I never thought you would offer me—without premeditation of course—such a perfect transition to introduce her work.

One of Le Minh’s pieces is called Peircing (2015), a title that plays with the name of the semiologist and the act of punching holes—of piercing. Its source is a self-portrait of the Countess of Castiglione, who can be considered the first self-performer in the history of photography. The countess was photographed numerous times in poses that she always thoroughly prepared. The self-portrait in question—I speak of a self-portrait even though the countess collaborated with a photographer whose name is known today—is her most famous. It dates from 1660 and is signed by Meyer and Pierson. The latter name is very close to that of ‘Peirce’ and is of course another element that Le Minh plays with. In her work, Le Minh translates the image into the holes of a cardboard. The image is recreated by its negative. Let’s recall that Peirce, in defining the concept of ‘clue,’ uses the example of a perforation caused by a gunshot. Walter Benjamin, in Passages, also writes that “the real has, so to speak, burned a hole in the image.”

Virginia Verasis Countess of Castiglione. Musée d’Orsay, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In line with this critical homage to Peirce, all of Le Minh’s works consist of deconstructing the
indexical role of photography, and she always does it with a great deal of humour. Relying on the history of the medium itself, she questions photography’s property of “verifying the real” that we usually attribute to it. Photography, she tells us, can deceive us. Nevertheless, it also always creates a new reality.

CS

Le Minh deconstructs the photographic image’s rapport to reality beautifully in the a-photographic, tactile, and mechanical punching of holes into a surface, which suggests the tangibility of photons leaving traces on the photosensitive paper. She also creates a very tactile way of shaping images out of missing matter (the image surface), which is an interplay of the negative and also pointillism. I especially like her Rebound (2015) series, which also plays with the direct relationship between the form of the lens and the rectangular film strip that excludes parts of what the camera captures as a whole and at the same time, is connected to a cinematic image. It makes one question how the photograph and even the camera lens follow a rectangular way of perceiving the image, which is tethered to a legitimation process or a comparison with painting, depending on its interpretation of pre-existing (pictorial) expectations.

In the Rebound series, the artist lets the surface of the photograph be affected by gun shots to create a direct relationship between the shutter-speed and the bullet-time. In both Piercing and Rebound, the index becomes secondary to the process and the photograph’s time is translated to other mediums, as a deconstruction of photography’s distance from reality. Do photographs become more transparent as intermediated works? Communication scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin use the term transparent immediacy for instances when the observer looks past the medium and directly at the subject, and hypermediacy, if the observer looks at the medium instead of through it to reality. In your example, the slow time of the Countess of Castiglione—whose stillness was imprinted in a photographic portrait versus the voyeuristic, instantaneous snapshot of a shooter and an on-looker—becomes part of a demystification of the photographic image in relation to slices of reality and, most importantly, to time.

Take, for instance, Olivia Mihălțianu’s transmedial approach in one of her latest installations in the show Wounded Identity (2020) in Bucharest, curated by Ileana Pintilie. Her work, Self Portrait as a Drowned Artist and The Portrait Studio (2020), references Hippolyte Bayard’s nineteenth-century self-portrait, Le Nauèt. The artist writes in her statement: “He may have been the first inventor of photography or just an impostor (as some researchers consider), but for certain he was the first to understand and use the true essence of photography as art, as well as the power of the artistic statement in front of a camera.” Mihălțianu’s work considers how technology influences the artistic practice, and it also approaches how photography interacts with other mediums, such as documents, through artistic statements, suspensions of time, or time as decomposed, rather than embodied. It is a living medium, which rearticulates itself in social spaces, as spaces of internal conflict and contradictions. I infer here that, even though photography seems to be dependent on the evolution of technology, the subjective image and the virtual worldmaking of the artist and of the observer are decidedly not. Instead, they open towards the speculative realities, imagined pasts, and will-have-beens we still debate in the history of photography today.

I like comparing Mihălțianu’s reproduction of the self-portrait with the work you presented from Le Minh since they both appeal to the history of photography to generate new spaces of reflection. They start from the uncertain status of the photograph as an art form, and, at the same time, add even more indexes, until the medium disappears. I think that in our conversation, the relation between medium and time is important, especially considering that nowadays the image is fast, and slows down only to create pockets of present time.

SV

Your answers could lead us in so many different directions. In response to Le Minh’s Rebound, which refers to a practice of vernacular photography (the shooting stands at fairs), I cannot resist mentioning a show I curated in 2015. It featured George Shiras, an American who learnt hunting techniques from Native Americans in the region of Michigan and who was the pioneer of “camera hunting.” In the 1870s, he decided, out of environmental concern, to swap his gun for a camera and immortalise his prey rather than kill them. I showed his incredibly beautiful photographs at the Hunting and Nature Museum. I later also showed Sophie Calle’s works on US petty criminals—portraits usually used during their practice shooting sessions—sharing the view of the photograph that we often overlook the body as photographic device. It is always the gaze, as if the body is not fully process, as if it is not literally ripe air, or dancing in three-dimensions to extract a photograph. In the case of Shiras, I find it beautiful that you can see the camera (and sometimes dangerous) face-to-face between the photographer and the matter (just as in hunting). With Sophie Calle, it returns to a symbolic function of photographs: criminals stand in for an enemy to the body, it induces strong physical violence. I think this is a parenthesis and go back to parallel processes of time and space.

CS

I like these time-pockets in our discussion, caught by the idea of how a photograph can heighten our common experiences and culture even further confirms the position of the liminal space of encounters. The diversity of these encounters still vary on the participants, the observer. Post-humanist theories on photography days start from the object itself. If I were a space for encounters, can it be a body object in a relational social process, for example, we no longer rely on the words of Walter Benazier, but thinking, where the instrument is an object and object. Looking past the boundary of hypermediacy, there is also a tend...
There seems to be a strong trend nowadays among young conceptual artists to question photography through the history of the medium and to thus open an internal temporality, directly related to a re-visitation of the origins, rather than the use of new (dematerialised) tools. Le Minh and Mihăilăianu are brilliant examples of this, but I recently also discovered the work of Peruvian-American artist Tarrah Krajnak (whom I showed this summer in Arles). She questions Edward Weston's series Nudes, their female representation, and the beauty canons they convey, by re-encoding them as self-portraits in which she poses like Weston's models. It is probably not a coincidence that these strategies of re-reading and paying critical homage to the founders and masters of photography emerge so strongly among women artists, particularly in contexts where female representation is an important topic. These artists have a very interesting approach, which is both intellectually solid and "pacifist." They don't reject the artistic heritage they received, but propose a shift in the way we view it.

When referring to post-photography, there is an after-photography implied—which is ironic, because it seems that everything in the photographic act is after-the-fact. The photograph's relation to past realities allows for, and even encourages, shifts in the historical perspective, just as you described in the practices of Le Minh or Mihăilăianu. When the obvious connection that photography has to passing time is unravelled, the historical context also unravels in our contemporary minds and toys with indexes and relativities much easier than any other medium. Even vernacular, documentary, or conceptual tags associated with photography change and allow for poetic and political reconsiderations.

Interesting thesis I read recently details this idea: Redmond Bridgeman, From Beyond: A Speculative and list Photography?, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Faculty of Humanities, the Art Institute of Chicago, 2013.

Again, to its materiality, its intrinsic quality as an object. The photographic object refers not only to the precise moment of the depicted scene (the index function), but to the moment of shooting itself, and thus to the time separating the acts of viewing and of photographing. This back-and-forth movement between the new theoretical space and the viewer creates a new theoretical space.

But in the case of Király, I find it impressive that the space he creates is not only theoretical, but also very physical (configured with bits of tape, metal wires, etc.). It is a multiple, diffused, and temporal space. I recently re-read Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space and was struck by this sentence: "In its countless alveoli, space contains compressed time. That is what space is for." 62

One of my favorite works by Király, Echoes, Liberate, depicts a snowman that caught the artist's eye somewhere in Bucharest during the 1989 Romanian Revolution. The snowman holds the pierced Romanian flag and conjures up the victory sign. The photograph is framed in a cassette, as if bottling the enthusiasm of those days and hopes for the future. Along its edges, the artist collages smaller images, jumping from the momentous visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania in 1991, to the bereft socle of Lenin's statue in the Piata Victoriei, or to him playing next to the head of the statue, which lay for years on the vast lawns of the Mogosoaia Palace. The arrangement of the collage is inspired by the vernacular framing of family photos with a large, important event at the center, such as a wedding or a baptism, that is then followed by smaller portraits of the married couple having children, of the children growing up, and so on.

The work embodies Barthes' idea of the future past in photography, the would-be-have that we deduce in any image, of what followed and what happened before.63 The compressed time that is created in the cassette space of Király's photo assemblage further enhances how we relate to the 1989 events. The piece does not strictly document the past, but instead creates the diffused temporal space that relates to the viewer, adding to your reference of Bachelard's Poetics of Space. It is the space through which we see the moments that could have created a different version of the future than the one we experience now.

In attempting to figure the flow of time in one collage made from photographs of multiple separate moments, Király creates works that both succeed in forming a utopian space and demonstrate the impossible dimension of the task. We like to think that we exist in fluid time, while the consciousness we have of ourselves, or of the world, is in fact a combination of multiple static states. The use of the time stamp in some of Király's other images that deal with time itself, such as Inter-City 593 No. 2 (2003), is a clever way of making such a statement because it is a typical photographic device (and a quite dated one, too!). It has also been used by Marie Tomanova—an other 'emerging talent' whom I presented in Arles this summer. She confronts the subjective time of her memory with the objective information conveyed by the time stamp, thus superposing two temporalities in a single picture (which reminds me of the magnificent 1964 film Brigadoon by Vincente Minnelli, in which the character is caught between two temporalities: his own and a suspended time that might be the time of dreams, or eternal myths). Tomanova thus opens a gap between two poles where a vibration occurs, a very troubling effect that resonates with both our fleeting and archaic nature.

At the very beginning of our discussion, I suggested I would talk about Marianne Mispelaère and maybe I can write a few words about her and close for today. Her work Silent Slogan shows a number of gestures that she gathered from the Internet: collective, codified gestures that emerge through processes you cannot really track down, in demonstrations, public gatherings, etc. Although connected to specific historical moments (Occupy Wall Street and other movements of revendication), they take on, through the artist's cropping and their repetitive display, an atemporal dimension. They become like mantras that belong to each one of us and to all of us at the same time. Mispelaère
The idea of photography as a democratic tool is at play here, but I can also see a reflection about the repetition of history, its non-linear movement. Interestingly, it is not an idealistic work, as you might first think, about the collective gesture as empowerment and a tool of expression at the service of positive values. Reactionary gestures are represented as well as progressive revindications. There is an interrogation of the relationship between body and history, between archaic group dynamics and present time considerations, between the moment of the action and the communication of gestures inside a group, and the moment of image circulation and the broader collective aftereffects of this circulation—and, of course, what photography and its objects can teach us about all this.

CS

Mispelaere's Silent Slogan did indeed seem to me to be an idealistic process at first, a play with authorship and also an intervention in the capitalist logic of the art market. However, I agree that it is more than that, and in a way a perfect conclusion to our talk, which began with the reconsideration of the photographic index. Mispelaere portrays almost all the ways through which the index no longer exists, enacting Jean Baudrillard's perfect crime. She uses collective internet images, so the criminal would-be author is missing. Meanwhile, the crime itself is hidden with no reference to a direct political cause, but rather to the idea of collective protest itself. There is also no victim to be identified. The loop goes on, and reality seems to never arrive at a conclusion. All of the pasts, presents, and would-have-been futures are locked in a continuous interrogation. The traces of the photographic images merely mark a 'continuity of nothingness,' not even the spectre of a nostalgic past lingers on. It is a mark of postmodernity in the end, relativisation to the point of disappearance, the future as a captive self-referential loop.

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Wide, Ryder was a product of pruning, of removing
western Europe. The very notion of transforming a
Eastern Europe was translated into a word that indicated a

Since 1990, the act of redrawing the future has

Kajetan Kornel, Issues 98, 2005

Kajetan Kornel, Issue 96, 2002

On Easternerums