

**ART & DESIGN**

# The Next Big Picture

With Cameras Optional, New Directions in Photography

By PHILIP GEFTER JAN. 23, 2014

At first glance, viewers of “What Is a Photograph?” opening on Jan. 31 at the International Center of Photography, will not even recognize the work on the wall as photographic. There is no easily identifiable subject, no clear representational form.

“The show does not answer the question,” said Carol Squiers, the show’s curator. “It *poses* the question. It is an open question, and that’s why I find this period in photography so exciting.”

Ms. Squiers pointed to Travess Smalley, who cuts shapes from magazine pages and colored paper and composes them into photo collages directly on a scanner. He considers the scan the negative for the print. “He doesn’t necessarily call the result a ‘photograph,’ “ she said, but she wasn’t ready to define exactly what it was.

Photography is vastly different in these early years of the 21st century, no longer the result of light exposed to film, nor necessarily lens based. As digital technology has all but replaced the chemical process, photography is now an increasingly shape-shifting medium: The iPhone, the scanner and Photoshop are yielding a daunting range of imagery, and artists mining these new technologies are making documentation of the actual world seem virtually obsolete.

“Practices have changed,” said Quentin Bajac, the Museum of Modern Art’s new chief curator of photography, one of four curators at major institutions who spoke of the opportunities and obstacles of their jobs at

this pivotal moment — photography's identity crisis.

The shift of focus from fact to fiction, and all the gradations in between, is perhaps the largest issue in the current soul-searching underway in photography circles. Questions swirl: Can the “captured” image (taken on the street — think of the documentary work of Henri Cartier-Bresson) maintain equal footing with the “constructed” image (made in the studio or on the computer, often with ideological intention)?

Museums, for their part, are debating whether photography should remain an autonomous medium or be incorporated into a mash-up of disciplines in contemporary art. And photography curators, too, are questioning the quality and validity of new practices, as the ever-morphing ubiquity of social media challenges the singularity of the photographic image.

“The biggest problem facing curators and historians of photography,” Mr. Bajac said, “is the overflow of images.”

MoMA, the first museum to create an autonomous department of photography, in 1940, perpetuated the idea that documentation of the actual world as in the work of Eugène Atget, Walker Evans and Robert Frank was the backbone of photographic art making. Mr. Bajac's predecessors — Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, John Szarkowski and Peter Galassi — presided over the field from what critics have, at times disparagingly, called “the judgment seat.” Mr. Bajac acknowledges a definite change in that paradigm.

“Today, MoMA is only one of the judgment seats,” Mr. Bajac said. “We're writing one history of photography, while other people or institutions are writing simultaneous histories.”

Asked why he thought he was offered the job at MoMA, Mr. Bajac, impeccable and youthful at 48, surmised that “someone who is not American, who is not linked or connected to that long history of photography, is more appropriate now.” He arrived at the museum from Paris, where he had been chief curator of photography at the Pompidou Center and before that at the Musée d'Orsay.

In his inaugural exhibition, “A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio,” which opens on Feb. 8, the focus is on the practice in the photographer’s studio as opposed to the aesthetics of the print, a clear shift in emphasis from museum canon. The works on view, drawn from MoMA’s archives and arranged thematically, include 19th-century and contemporary material, and film and video.

This idea of the studio as both a laboratory and playground is exemplified by Charles Ray’s diptych, “Plank Piece I-II” (1973), showing the artist pinned to the studio wall, in two different ways, by a large wooden plank — a conceptual performance for the camera.

A 2008 work by Walead Beshty of Los Angeles, who creates photograms — cameraless pieces — by exposing photographic paper to colored lights, verges on pure abstraction. Mr. Bajac said he was among the younger generation of artists in the recent New Photography series at MoMA whose “practices are entirely studio-based.”

Many works in the show are by international artists like Constantin Brancusi, who considered his studio as much a photographic subject as his sculpture. Another such artist is Geta Bratescu of Romania, who lived in her Bucharest studio in the 1970s, during the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, and made a 17-minute film, “L’atelier” (“The Studio,” 1978) acquired by Mr. Bajac for MoMA, signaling the recognition of video in a photographic context.

“For Bratescu, of course, the studio was a place of open expression,” the curator said, an escape from the pressure to create propagandist art glorifying Ceausescu.

Mr. Bajac also explores the studio backdrop, an artifice that divorces the subject from context — “The model or subject becomes a kind of specimen in scientific terms,” he said — and the use of props and costumes for portraiture, from the draped curtain behind an Auguste Belloc nude in the 1850s to Cindy Sherman disguises in 1983.

“Taking people away from their natural circumstances and putting them into the studio in front of a camera did not simply isolate them, it

transformed them,” Irving Penn said, in a quotation on the gallery wall.

Matthew Witkovsky, the curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, echoed a growing consensus among curators that, today, the field is more pluralistic. “One wants not a judgment seat,” he argued, “but strong judgment.”

In the past, the role of the curator required tireless advocacy for the medium’s legitimacy. Christopher McCall, the 38-year-old director of Pier 24, a museum-caliber private photography center in San Francisco with roughly twice the gallery space for photography as MoMA, sees that battle as ancient history.

“For myself and my generation, whether photography is art has never even been the question,” he says.

Today, the job calls for distinguishing serious photographic art making within the vast, visual cacophony of image making. What criteria are to be applied to what is called a “photograph” when digital technology has revolutionized where, how and how often pictures are viewed?

The wall-size photographic print was already the rage in Chelsea galleries at the turn of the century (the 21st, that is), as digital files replaced the film negative. Thanks to scanners that can read imagery with optical fidelity, the evolution from chemical process to digital is nearly complete.

Yet several works in “A Sense of Place,” at Pier 24 through May 1, pose more questions than answers. Eric William Carroll’s large diazotype prints — a process used for architectural blueprints — fill the gallery with blue-tinted shadows that resemble leaves, evoking a walk in the forest. For “24 HRS in Photos,” Erik Kessels downloaded and printed every photo uploaded to Flickr in 24 hours; an avalanche of images tumbles down — wedding photos, selfies and “sexties” — the democratization of art made tangible, and threatening.

Lucia Koch, a Brazilian artist, registers a welcome degree of wit in her digital exploration of perceptual, as opposed to technical, anomaly: Her photograph appears to be a sun-filled hallway; in fact, it is the interior of a

spaghetti box with two cellophane windows.

At the International Center for Photography, Ms. Squiers asked the essential question that permeates the field: What even constitutes a photograph?

While younger artists are incorporating chemical processes into their experiments with digital techniques, many “are still finding this need to make an object,” Ms. Squiers said.

An example is Marco Breuer, who has several works on display with no visible relationship to photographic imagery. His work “Spin” consists of fine concentric circles scratched and embossed on chromogenic paper. The camera-less process still requires emulsion and developer, but the result is a one-of-a-kind handmade object.

Ms. Squiers also included the work of Christopher Williams, whose photographs compose an inventory of increasingly obsolescent film-based equipment — cameras, lenses and darkroom gear — as beautiful and precise as catalog product shots. The accompanying text adds detail about how the equipment was used. Such scrutiny suggests, with elegiac clarity, the end of the chemical era in photography.

Mr. Witkovsky, at the Art Institute of Chicago, is giving Mr. Williams his first museum retrospective, beginning this month, in a traveling show, “The Production Line of Happiness.”

“This is a fully arrived ‘history of art’ in photography,” Mr. Witkovsky said of the work by Mr. Williams, who applies an art historian’s scrutiny to the social and historical implications of the medium in the mid-20th century.

Mr. McCall, of Pier 24, acknowledged that a curatorial consensus on the photography’s future has not been reached. “There has to be some photographic process involved, some piece of technology that we acknowledge as photographic, but I don’t think it means it has to be lens-based,” he said. (But don’t feel bad for the auteurs of representational photography in the digital age: Shown at Pier 24 are also Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky and Paul Graham — whose photographic

documentation of the “authentic” moment continues a stalwart tradition.)

Mr. McCall dismissed the notion that experimentation with unconventional processes or the overabundance of images poses any threat to contemporary photography. “It’s a benefit,” he said, encouraging curators “to analyze and think about images because they’re everywhere.”

Trying to define what a photograph is today situates the curator at a new frontier, Ms. Squiers suggested. While it’s unclear where the medium is headed, she is certain that contemporary photographers are doing something that is disorienting yet ultimately transformative.

“You feel like the cord to the mother ship has been cut,” she said, “and now you’re floating in space.”

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