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Expanded Photography: Persistence of the Photographic

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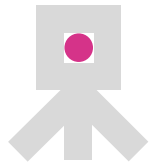
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PhotoResearcher



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Expanded Photography: Persistence of the Photographic

Lucy Soutter The digital age has ushered in remarkable new combinations of photography with other forms and activities. Many recent artworks incorporating photography push into three dimensions to overlap with sculpture, installation or architecture. Others emphasize passing time or action through the use of the moving image, performance or audience participation. Digital technology provides further hybrid possibilities for the mediation and presentation of images. While a number of such works have a foundation in 1960s conceptual art or in the “new media” of the 1980s and ‘90s, many could not have been conceived before the present era. Some writers argue that art photography has collapsed into the larger category of contemporary art and that distinctions of medium are no longer relevant. Others have proposed that recent developments raise important questions about the ontology of photography, or even represent a move into “post-photography”.¹ This essay demonstrates that the photographic continues to require our attention, even – and perhaps especially – in cases when the print photograph is no longer the singular, pre-eminent form.²

In the past few decades, visual art, the global field of activities that is most commonly referred to as “contemporary art”, has been characterised by diversity and contingency. Each traditional art form – what 1960s American art critic Clement Greenberg called a “medium” – certainly persists, but these mediums have also been eroded and conflated, sometimes producing works that might not previously have been acknowledged as art.³ Most ambitious contemporary artists have willingly relinquished the autonomy of the modernist artwork in favour of practices that are contingent on a number of levels.⁴ More than ever, artists draw on all different kinds of subject matter and, in a logical extension of the work of Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century, almost any activity or object may be proposed as a work of contemporary art – even if not all audiences will accept it as such. Terms such as painting and sculpture, as well as even more recent categories such as installation and performance art, are invoked in the knowledge that they have, to a greater or lesser degree, been redefined in relation to their expansion and unravelling. Across contemporary art, the meaning and interpretation of works rely increasingly on paratexts, supplementary information such as backstories or insider references that require effort to access.⁵ In this context, it is possible for artists to pick up any art (or non-art) material they choose, without placing emphasis on the historical baggage it may once have carried. Conversely, artists may choose self-consciously to locate themselves within or between the boundaries of recognised art forms.

1. Carol Squiers (ed.), *What is a Photograph?*, New York 2014 and Robert Shaw, *Post-Photography: The Artist with a Camera*, London 2014.

2. This essay developed out of ‘Beyond Photography’, the final chapter of my book *Why Art Photography?*, London 2013, and also out of *Expanded Photography*, a panel I chaired at the Association of Art Historians Conference in London in April 2014. I extend my thanks to all who participated in the panel for their valuable contributions to my thinking. I would also like to thank my students and former students at the Royal College of Art for their insights around this topic.

3. For the classic articulation of Greenberg’s concept of medium, see his 1960 essay ‘Modernist Painting’, in: Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-69*, Chicago 1993, 85–93.

4. See, for example, Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, Mass. 2003.

5. Gérard Genette coined the term ‘paratext’ in the late 1980s to refer to conventions and devices that frame and border a literary text such as titles, prefaces and jacket blurbs. See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Perception*, Cambridge 1997. Such liminal elements have become increasingly important in contemporary art in the 21st century.

Philosopher Peter Osborne argues that the convergence of all art forms into a single “generic” art is an inevitable consequence of transglobal capitalism. He identifies neoliberal economic policies as the engine of a transformation in art, “from a craft-based ontology of mediums to a post-conceptual and trans-categorical ontology of materialisations”.⁶ His observations can be confirmed superficially by looking at any one of the global art fairs or Biennials that typically include a heterogeneous mix of art forms, even within the work of one specific artist.

However, not all scholars agree that contemporary art forms have collapsed into one another. Art historian Rosalind Krauss was one of the first to refer to art’s “post-medium condition”. In her 2000 essay called ‘Voyage on the North Sea’,⁷ she uses the term to refer to conceptual art in which the idea is more important than particular artistic forms, as in the work of Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers. But Krauss herself argued that the best contemporary art exhibits a “differential specificity”; that is a kind of self-reflexive awareness of the forms that it contains and the history of these forms, even – and perhaps especially – when such forms are becoming obsolete. Krauss has seen medium undergo tremendous changes in her lifetime. She was one of the first to write about expansions of the “sculptural” (in 1979), and she retains a certain commitment to medium as a vehicle for more than just formal meaning. In an essay in 2010 she wrote, “[t]he medium is the memory,” implying that the way a medium is used in an artwork reflects its historical context in important ways.⁸ Thus, Krauss continues to advocate close attention to particular forms – especially outmoded forms like film-based photography.

George Baker, a Los Angeles-based art historian and former student of Krauss’, was one of the first scholars to write specifically about the fate of photography within a post-medium condition. In his 2005 *October* essay, ‘Photography’s Expanded Field’ Baker wrote, “photography itself has been foreclosed, cashiered, abandoned – outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically.”⁹ For Baker, photography is no longer a destination in itself, but is rather one form among many, most interesting for what it is *not*, rather than what it is, its stillness in perpetual dialogue with the temporal and spatial movement of narrative and cinema.¹⁰

The sense of photography being exhausted as a medium has appeared in several contexts. In 2010 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art hosted a conference entitled *Is Photography Over?*¹¹ Quite a number of the short talks by various professionals in the field argued that photography is in a state of crisis or decline. Curator Charlotte Cotton expressed her frustration with photography markets and institutions: “It’s about time for photography as a cultural

6. Peter Osborne, ‘The Fiction of the Contemporary’, in: (id.), *Anywhere or not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London 2013, 28.

7. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, New York 2000.

8. Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge, Mass. 2010, 19.

9. George Baker, ‘Photography’s Expanded Field’, *October*, 114, Autumn 2005, 122.

10. Baker’s position is particularly fruitful for considering works that combine still and moving imagery, but is overly pessimistic about the possibilities for photography more broadly.

11. ‘*Is Photography Over?*’ A Symposium held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April 2010. Videos and transcripts available at <<https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/photography-over/>> [03.06.2016].

institutionalized, ghettoized, and frankly, dull and acquiescent, photo-art-market serving ‘discipline’ to be over.” In her 2016 book *Photography is Magic*, Cotton offers a more positive assessment of photography, noting the emergence of a newly accessible, often mixed-media, photographic art, premised on the post-Internet fluidity of photography-as-contemporary-art in relation to other forms of imaging. She identifies a potentiality and exciting instability in these recent works and asserts that they take place in a moment of “unprecedented compatibility and transparency between viewers and artists.”¹² Yet it is evident that, without access to the (often photographic) subtexts that underpin many of these complex, layered works, viewers are likely to emerge with only the most superficial understanding of what they are seeing.

The push and pull between photography and “contemporary art” more broadly is not new. Recent scholarship has underlined the fact that mixed-media works with important photographic elements emerged in the 1960s out of both fine art photography and conceptual art. While Osborne argues that first-generation conceptualists made a key contribution to the erosion of disciplinary boundaries, I have argued elsewhere that the anti-aesthetic approach these artists took towards photography nonetheless contributed to the development of photography as an ambitious art form with a self-conscious relationship to its own history, theory and social embeddedness.¹³ Furthermore, recent exhibitions and publications have recuperated artistic practices from the 1970s that had roots in photographic education yet pushed the photograph into three dimensions and into mixed-media forms. For example, the Museum of Modern Art’s 1970 exhibition *Photography into Sculpture* demonstrates a desire by fine art photographers of the period not merely to claim more ground for photography as an artistic medium, but also to combine photographic techniques and materials with other forms to reflect critically on aspects of contemporary life and politics.¹⁴

The conceptual art of the 1960s and ‘70s had an austere attitude towards materials and an iconophobic relationship to photography.¹⁵ Subsequent scholarship has reinforced this austerity. Robert Heinecken, for example, continues to be controversial not only because of his sexualised imagery, but also because the pleasurable use of materials in his mixed-media photographic works of the 1960s –80s has contributed to their being read as affirmative rather than critical of the media culture depicted.¹⁶ A highly influential figure in North American photographic education, having founded the UCLA graduate photography program and taught there for almost

12. Charlotte Cotton, *Photography is Magic*, New York 2015, 3.

13. A point developed at length in my 2001 Yale University PhD thesis, *The Visual Idea: Photography in Conceptual Art*.

14. Lucy Soutter, ‘Expanding Photography circa 1970: Photographic Objects and Conceptual Art’, in: Mary Statzer (ed.), *The Photographic Object 1970*, Berkeley, CA 2016, 70–78.

15. See John Roberts, ‘Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual Art’, in: (id.), *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, London 1997.

16. Martha Rosler famously derided Heinecken’s work as ‘pussy porn’, see Eva Respini, ‘Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something’, in: Eva Respini

(ed.), *Robert Heinecken: Object Matter*, New York 2014, 20. The assessment of Heinecken’s work as ‘hopelessly retrograde’ in its depiction of women was reiterated in the *New York Times* review of the MoMA exhibition by Karen Rosenberg, but refuted by the *Los Angeles Times* critic Sharon Mizota who found the work offered a ‘scathing indictment of the triviality of contemporary media’. Karen Rosenberg, ‘Forward Thinking, Backward Mind’, *New York Times*, 20 March 2014, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/21/arts/design/robert-heinecken-object-matter-is-on-view-at-moma.html>> [05.05.2016]; Sharon Mizota, ‘Hard truths underline Robert Heinecken exhibition at Hammer’, *L.A. Times*, 21 November 2014, <<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-heinecken-hammer-review-20141122-story.html>> [03.06.2016].

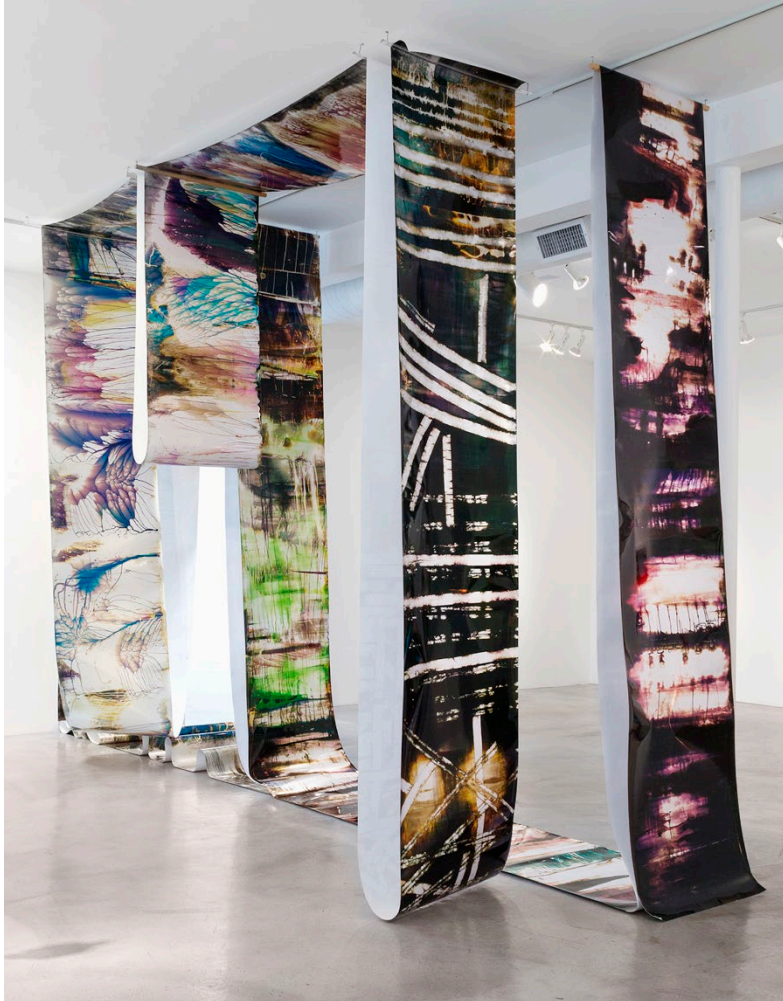


Figure 1
 Mariah Robertson, *113*, unique color print on
 metallic paper 76 x 4998 cm, 2012.
 Courtesy of the artist and M&B Gallery,
 Los Angeles.

Let us consider some recent examples of expanded photography that have been appearing in museum and gallery exhibitions, art fairs, magazine articles and in art school studios. Many contemporary art works contain photographic images but do *not* have a particular investment in photography. In the following examples, however, the photographic has a significant role to play.

Mariah Robertson's (1975, Berkeley CA) abstract images show traces of their making as large color prints. While this chemical and mechanical process is usually hidden from view in a finished photographic print, Robertson's streaky, multi-cultured darkroom productions foreground photographic chemicals and processing technology. In one ongoing series, she uses entire rolls of photographic paper, each work taking the form of a single "photograph" about 50 meters long that is displayed as a draped installation. The patterns and images on the paper in a work like *113* (2012) (fig. 1) were produced without a camera in the darkroom with a combination of photographic negatives, the shadows of actual objects and areas of masking tape, the surface worked by hand with various mixtures of developer and fixer to produce a spectrum of alchemical effects. A parallel hands-on approach to making painterly photographs is also seen in the work of Matthew Brandt, who was exhibited with Robertson in the 2014 exhibition *What is a Photograph?* curated by Carol Squiers at New York's International Center for Photography, a show that set out to challenge traditional definitions of photography with works that re-define the photographic in more painterly or

30 years (several of his students were included in the *Photography into Sculpture*-exhibition), Heinecken was almost excised from the canon of photography as contemporary art with no major East Coast retrospectives between a 1976 exhibition at George Eastman House, and a 2014 show at MoMA.¹⁷ Of course, each generation of artists and curators mines the past for figures that appear to make sense of current trends. The recent recuperation of Heinecken as a precedent for photographic postmodernism as well as contemporary practices indicates a climate more receptive to visually and materially exuberant elements in photography-based conceptual art. Heinecken is now available as a precedent for young artists alongside his more orthodox conceptual contemporaries Victor Burgin and Martha Rosler.



Figure 2
Alix Marie, *Orlando*, installation,
dimensions variable, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.

sculptural terms.¹⁸ And indeed, Robertson's works evoke painterly abstraction and a handmade craft textile tradition. Yet for anyone who has ever printed a large color photograph, a work like *113* also evokes the romance of the darkroom: the smell of the chemicals, the unpredictability of the processes, the inevitable accidents caused by working in darkness and the skilled care involved in handling a long strip of paper without mangling it. At a moment when digital printing has separated the final photographic image more than ever from its means of production, Robertson's works turn attention to the materiality and labor of chromogenic print-making.

Alix Marie (1989, Paris) is fascinated by the photographic index – the power of the photograph to provide a pointer and a direct physical trace of the thing photographed. In *Orlando* (2014) (fig. 2), a sculptural installation, a viewer encounters a huge heap of rock-like lumps, which on close inspection have photographic surfaces that look fleshy, like some combination of skin, wax, pink marble or meat. Each photographic object is made out of close-up photographic prints of Marie's boyfriend's skin, mediated with layers of cracked and melted wax, scanned and reprinted. Marie plays on photography's ability both to capture surface detail and to provide a precious souvenir of intimate moments. Blown up so much larger than life, *Orlando's* skin is rather creepy and the piece as a whole has a rather obsessive feeling that reflects our attempt to use photography to hold onto those we love. Other artists working in

17. Robert Heinecken: *Object Matter*, curated by Eva Respini, was on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art from 15 March–22 June 2014, and showed at the Hammer Museum Los Angeles from 5 October 2015–17 January 2016.

18. Squiers 2014 (reference 1).

Figure 3
Lorenzo Vitturi, *Dalston Anatomy*,
installation view.
The Photographer's Gallery, London, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist and Flowers Gallery,
London.



a related vein (and who, like Marie, attended the Royal College of Art) include Darren Harvey-Regen and Jonny Briggs, both of whom play with the notion of photographic trace, the push and pull between reality and representation and photographers' recurring fascination with the human body. While both painting and sculpture, particularly the body cast, have histories

of fascination with the human figure and human flesh, *Orlando* riffs in particular on the photograph's affinity with the fetish, as theorized by Christian Metz.¹⁹

Lorenzo Vitturi (Venice, 1980) constructs sculptural assemblages from objects that he buys at Dalston Market, a highly globalized local market in East London that combines strands of commerce from the UK, the West Indies, Africa and China among many other sources. Photographs of these assemblages came together in a beautiful book with unique fabric covers, and into the installation *Dalston Anatomy* (2014) (fig. 3) at the Photographer's Gallery in London. Photography allows Vitturi to distil his assemblages into permanent images, to combine and juxtapose them and then to spin them out once more into three dimensions. The project exists on various platforms, with all of them relying on the power of the photograph to compress the chaotic visual content of the world into pleasurable images. Vitturi's images tap into the colorful seduction of commercial table-top photography, as well as the immediacy of everyday life represented in contemporary memes like the "food selfies" that people post on social media documenting their meals. This work engages photography's capacity to mediate between high and low forms, and to aestheticize junk. Vitturi's work also has a relationship to different studio practices, especially to photographs made by modernist sculptors from Brancusi to Moore, a genre of photography that might once have been regarded as mere documentation but which has emerged over the last decade as an art form in its own right, one aspect of the artistic exploration of the relationship between two and three dimensional form.²⁰

Dominic Hawgood (1980, United Kingdom) uses computer-generated imagery to test the limits of what we perceive to be real in photography. His 2015 installation shot of the project *Under the Influence* (fig. 4) is a computer-generated rendering of an exhibition rather than an

19. See Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', *October*, Vol. 34, Autumn 1985, 81-90.

20. See, for example, the exhibition *Rodin, Brancusi, Moore: Through the Sculptor's Lens* at Waddington Custot Galleries, London, 22 May-11 July 2015.



actual photograph, a strategy that allows the artist to imaginatively project what an ideal exhibition would look like, and in practical terms to solve curatorial problems, and to circulate his work in its ideal form. Some of the images within the rendered exhibition show objects that have been computer-generated rather than photographed. Depicting scenes and objects associated with exorcisms at African Pentecostal churches around London, this project reflects on the extremes of human experience and what is felt as authentic or real. Hawgood's projects borrow from more than one strand of photographic practice, with documentary directness brushing up against the tradition of staged art

Figure 4
Dominic Hawgood, *Under the Influence*,
installation view (digital render of an
exhibition), 2015, vinyl prints, lightboxes and
LED lights. Courtesy of the artist.

photography in which the studio is a place for discovery. The presentation is theatrical and boldly innovative, using LED strip lighting, colorful light boxes and black and white vinyl panels, shown alongside gritty black and white videos, slowed down from YouTube videos of exorcisms. The form the work takes is highly mediated via various digital processes, yet the investigation remains close to questions about the possibilities and purpose of photography in relation to human truth.

In these works of expanded photography, we see a number of tensions, between image and object, between craft and concept, between representation and presentation. In all cases, the work pushes beyond photography's traditional domains of the wall, the page and the screen, yet retains a deep connection to photographic ideas or impulses. The recent examples discussed in this essay circulate within the world of contemporary art and are not made solely by purist photographers for an exclusive photography audience. They have a history that comes both out of experiments that emerge from within photography-as-art, as well as out of a 1960s conceptual tradition that held photography at arm's length.

21. Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, 270.

A critic or art historian proposes a new term in order to make a provisional proposal about an aspect of the field so that it may be discussed and tested. In my use of the term “expanded photography”, I am looking less to the structuralist diagrams of Krauss’ or Baker’s “expanded field” for contemporary art than to Gene Youngblood’s 1970 book *Expanded Cinema*. A pioneering exploration of video as an art form, the book describes cinema as an aesthetic medium with a rich history and formal conventions as well as relevance to the latest media theories of the day. A latecomer to the field of fine art, photography has been regarded as a medium for transmission perhaps more frequently than as an art medium. Yet its history as an art medium is also part of its richness as a form for cultural production. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued, new visual media do not replace older forms but rather rework and reconsider them, in a process of remediation: “[...] what is in fact new is the particular way in which each innovation rearranges and reconstitutes the meaning of earlier elements.”²¹ Future study of expanded photography will explore its roots in the photographic activities of the past as well as its future possibilities.