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Photography in the Mix:

FLORA-FAUNA-PHOTO

"The agitated foliage, the running stream, the flying clouds, and the motions of living animals, all destroy the picture in which they occur."

—Edinburgh Review, January 1843¹

essay

Although photography changes with the times, it carries its history with it.

BY DORE BOWEN

This history is not innocent. "Power," writes Geoffrey Batchen, "inhabits the very grain of photography's existence."² The authority that photography wields is based on a Cartesian conceit, a mental distancing built into the primary establishing feature of the medium—perspective. Only such visual distancing allows for a "view"—a visual point organized around the eye of a monocular observer looking out upon the world as if onto a flat surface. The camera is a site for such outward exploration and inward rumination. Yet, the inarticulate presence of nature haunts this ocularcentric teleology.

As Akira Mizuta Lippit suggests, photography can be understood as a "mourning apparatus" for those life forms that it kills off.³ While the history of photography involves documenting the disappearance of nature and animal life, it is, at the same time, the very condition that brings this death into being. For instance, the camera/lens apparatus is reported to have been realized when, in 1619, German scientist Christoph Scheiner scraped the sclera from the eye of an ox, which he then placed in a hole in a shutter.⁴ This story persists because it holds a mythical if not factual truth: photography is founded on the transformation of "nonhuman" elements—both flora and fauna—into the photographic. Quite literally, photographic print emulsion is ground from animal bones (and, in the early days, egg whites), the paper base is derived from trees, and the metals, such as silver and palladium, are mined from the earth. While photography continues to be used extensively to picture wildlife, these elements lie latent, but negated, within the process itself.

The works in *Agitate: Negotiating the Photographic Process* allow this sacrifice to trouble the seemingly smooth surface of the print. This tension is ignited by **Marco Breuer**, an artist who creates an arena in which he compulsively struggles with his materials. Having used, at times, a hot-glue gun, sparklers, a sander, and his own blood, Breuer dramatizes photography's mastery of nature by forcing color to the surface of the paper. Less violent but no less determined, **Kate Farrall** pursues shafts of undomesticated light that leak into the sealed darkroom. Staging the darkroom as a site of permeability, Farrall's installation encourages the viewer to gaze with the eyes of a beast—that is, down on all fours—in order to locate signs of life outside the black box. Seeking irregularity within the apparatus, **Roger Newton** encourages visual aberrations by creating his own lenses constructed of glass, oils, and (in one experiment) fish eyes. Since the lens structures knowledge and perception, Newton's altered lenses guide the viewer's eye elsewhere. This desire to stretch the limits of the photographic apparatus is furthered by **Ann Hamilton**, who, in her *face to face* series, discloses her own animality. By placing a pinhole camera in her mouth, Hamilton deprivileges the enlightened eye, emphasizing the less subdued orifice instead. Through this shift from eye to mouth, Hamilton introduces an alien element, what Lippit calls "the magnetic animal," into her photographic transference.⁵

Other artists in this exhibit engage with the plant life that underwrites photography by abandoning the mediating lens altogether. For example, **Binh Danh's** prints are singularly direct experiments with light and chlorophyll. The process, however, is deceptively complex. Working with

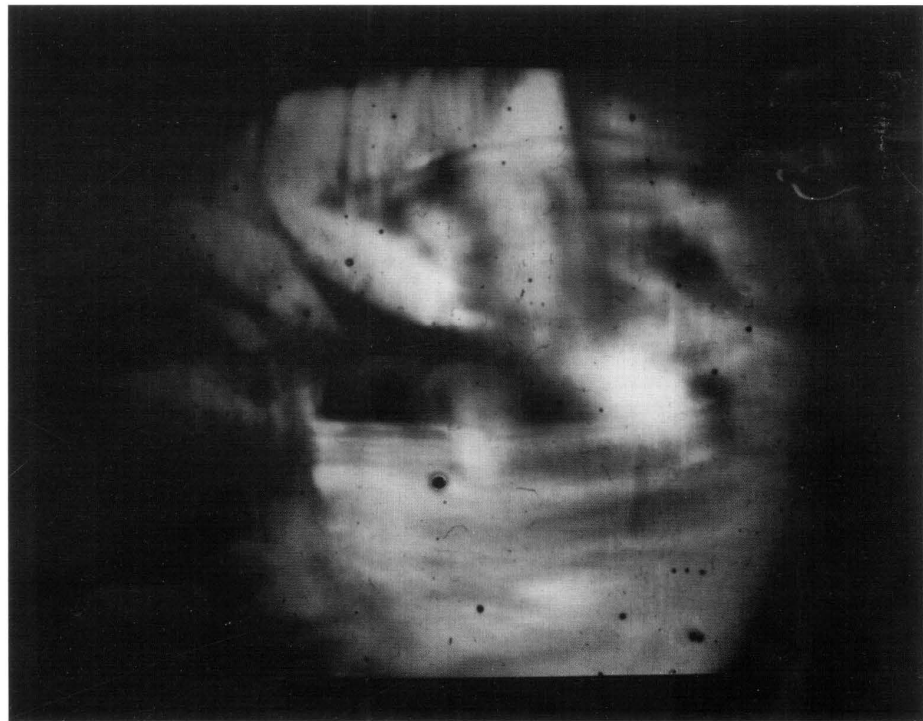
OTO

LEFT: **William Henry Fox Talbot**, *The Haystack*, 1844-45. Courtesy of Lacock Abbey Collection.

RIGHT: **Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey**, *The Other Side (L'Altro Lato)*, 1990. Presented by Laboratorio Aperto in Bussana Vecchia, Italy. Ackroyd and Harvey created an interior "living" space by growing grass on the walls of the room. A yellow shadow left by a ladder on one of the walls provided the inspiration to create photographs in grass.



Roger Newton, *Untitled*, 1997; gelatin silver print, 20 x 40".



NOTES

1. Quoted in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 56. The anonymous 1843 article evaluates the new "photographic art" in general, and the daguerreotype and calotype processes in particular.
2. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 202.
3. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 188. Lippit is speaking specifically of the figure of the animal; I have extended his argument to plant life as well.
4. Some have attributed this apocryphal tale to René Descartes.
5. Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 166. Lippit explains that the figure of the animal operates as a foreign presence that seeps into and transforms the language of which it is a part. "The animal is magnetic because it draws the world-building subject toward an impossible convergence with the limits of world." Lippit concludes, following philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that "all 'becomings' are animal becomings."
6. Interview with Binh Danh by David Pace, December 2002. See the CD-ROM accompanying this issue.
7. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis:

both digital files and the photocopy process, Danh creates a negative which he then places on the surface of a leaf for an indefinite amount of time; it may take up to a month for the image to emerge. This organic/mechanical process is rooted in Danh's desire to link the scientific quest for knowledge to the unhurried and circular tempo of organic processes. Danh explains the quotidian metaphysics that compel him to print planetary imagery on yard leaves when he states that "instead of searching for the stars by looking up, we can look down."⁶

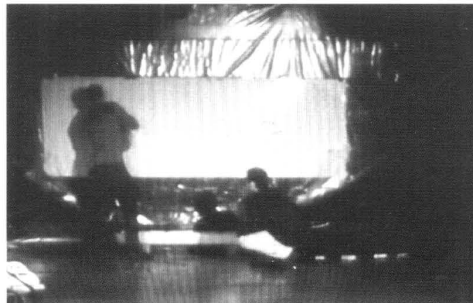
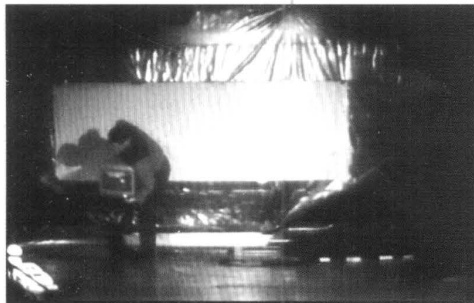
In a similar vein, **Carlos Motta** stages this relationship between photography and nature as a communion between a tree and light-sensitive photo-paper. The resulting image is merely a trace of this event. In a more painterly key, **Cynthia Young**'s stunningly scarred black-and-white prints, as well as **Diane Althoff**'s minimalist-inspired spectrums of color and text, immerse the viewer entirely within the image's embrace. There is no subject in these photographs. Instead, the prints emerge from contact with ephemeral substances such as light, pressure, and liquid. Pushing this atonement with nature to the limit, **Heather Ackroyd** and **Dan Harvey** cultivate grass-prints that return photography to a state akin to a naturally fading fossil; the print is subject to natural change and decomposition. Here, the organic emerges to nearly reclaim the image.

In many ways, the works in *Agitate* resemble the process-oriented photography that emerged in the 1970s. At that time, photographers stained, stitched, and stretched the light-sensitive emulsion. Yet there are significant differences. Today, technological advances have altered the status of the photographic such that it now appears in ways and forms that surpass previous definitions.

part of his live performance. Baert's work, influenced by nineteenth-century scientific experiments, as well as 1960s happenings, expands the very idea of process photography and, at the same time, interrogates the fluidity of the medium as it now exists. Although there is no longer an authentic live performance, neither is there a pristine photograph.⁸

At the same time that such works display a pronounced fluency between the photographic, the performative, the tele-visual, and the digital, this is not without a certain frisson. As interventions, the works disclose a prior loss residing within photography itself. When this loss is allowed to surface, the relationship between the photographic and the nonhuman no longer appears seamless or innocent. Rather, the animal rubs up and disturbs the morbid stasis of the print while the organic returns as the basis upon which the image rests. The minerals separate from the paper; the lens reverts back to the eye. Why is this aspect of photography emerging now? Does this neo-vitalism have anything to do with the eroding natural environment, the proliferation of global media, or the prosthetic body?

Agitate stages a dialogue between the works to provoke such questions, hopefully revealing aspects of the medium that might otherwise lie dormant. Furthermore, instead of seeking to contain the reverberations, which the works initiate, this exhibit opens out onto further discovery. For instance, lecture, performance, and film events are being held at Camerawork's gallery in conjunction with the exhibit in order to add another dimension to the still photographs. And this issue of *Camerawork* features three highly original essays that link photography to memory, performance, politics, and gender while the accompanying CD-ROM includes



University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

8. Philip Auslander writes that the increasing desire for "live performance" ignores the fact that today performance exists within the sway of media culture. "Far from being encroached upon, contaminated, or threatened by mediation, live performance is always already inscribed with traces of the possibility of technical mediation (i.e. mediatisation) that defines it as live." Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 53.

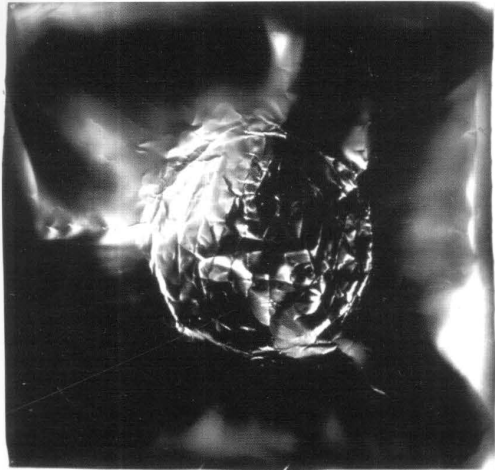
In other words, photography itself is in a state of becoming, existing as but one component within an ever-expanding flow of new media and digital information. As Arjun Appadurai notes, this event has created new forms as well as "new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds."⁷

In *Agitate* the artists aggressively rework the photographic apparatus with an eye to the hybrid possibilities that exist within today's media-saturated environment. **Jean-Philippe Baert**, for example, turns the gallery/theater into a darkroom, creating what he calls a "TV imprint" or "image fossil" by passing a monitor in front of photographic paper and developing the image as

artist interviews, images, and video clips.

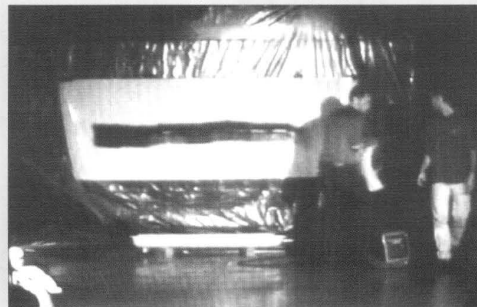
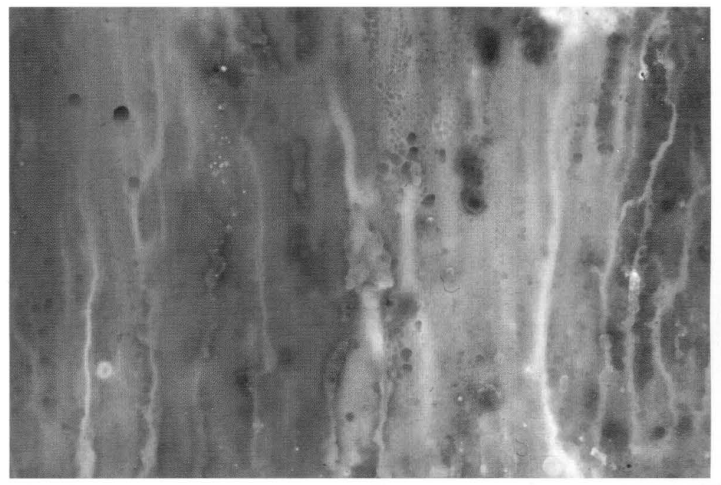
Clearly *Agitate* is an exhibit that, like a swelling river, overflows its banks. This is in keeping with the work. Although there is no consensus, these works gesture toward a photography that allows the running stream to destroy the picture in which it occurs, a photography that is not content to sharpen the pencil of nature, even for humanitarian goals. In this refusal of stasis and clarity, the works hark back to photography's early struggle to master "the elements." Yet today these elements exit the darkroom and enter the gallery through the front door. ■

Dore Bowen is co-curator of *Agitate* and co-editor of this issue of *Camerawork*.



LEFT:
Cynthia Young,
Untitled, 1997; from
Casting; gelatin
silver print, 42 x 42".

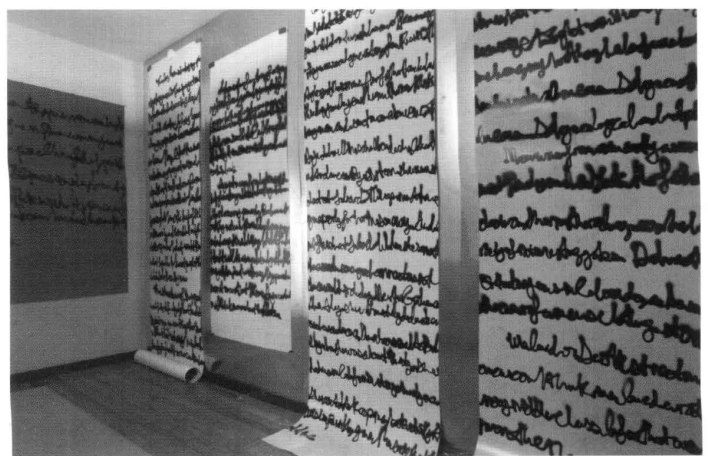
RIGHT:
Ann Hamilton,
making of a face to
face portrait, still
from the Art21 doc-
umentary. Courtesy
of Art21, © 2001 by
Art21, Inc. All rights
reserved.



ABOVE LEFT:
Carlos Motta,
*A Tree is a Tree is
not a Tree*, detail #9
of installation in
process, 2001.

ABOVE RIGHT:
Carlos Motta,
Untitled (Tree #18),
from the series *A
Tree is a Tree is not
a Tree*, 2001; rain
and tree bark on
unfixed color photo
paper, 5 x 7".

ABOVE:
**Jean-Philippe
Baert**, stills from
a live performance
of *Empreintes
numeriques or
Happening:
I-MAC/Web* at
Maison Populaire
de Montreuil,
France; February 1,
2002.



LEFT:
Diane Althoff,
studio installation
view (left to right),
*German Expres-
sionism, Auto-
biography 1, 2, 3, 4*,
2002/2003; chro-
mogenic prints
unmounted, vari-
able height up
to 146 x 30 x 5".
Photograph by
Alex Sutton.