

Dafoe, Taylor. “Photo-Poetics: An Anthology” *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 27, 2016

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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Photo-Poetics: An Anthology

by Taylor Dafoe

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
NOVEMBER 20, 2015 – MARCH 27, 2016

At first glance, *Photo-Poetics* seems like a rehashing of recent iterations of the *New Photography* series at MoMA. Six out of the ten artists, including Anne Collier, Moyra Davey, Leslie Hewitt, Elad Lassry, Lisa Oppenheim, and Sara VanDerBeek, have been featured in MoMA’s series, itself perhaps the closest thing New York has to a proper survey of newfangled photo-based work. However, *Photo-Poetics* positions itself as an anthology, not a survey. The difference is curatorial: whereas a survey is a selection that aims to capture a moment or movement, an anthology asserts no such reach. It is, simply, a gathering of likeminded artwork, and in this case the common ground is a concern for the properties of the medium.

In some ways *Photo-Poetics* is quite conservative—all the artists’ work is traditional camera-and-print-focused; they’re mostly still lifes, largely studio-based; and with the exception of films, it’s all printed and framed. But this narrowness of scope is a positive. Unlike other new photo shows, hamstrung by the same issues they purport to explore (often squeezing in as much work as possible as a means of dramatizing the over-saturated image culture in the digital age) here, there is plenty of real estate for each artist.

In an exhibition angled towards “mechanisms of representation” (to borrow a phrase from the curator, Jennifer Blessing), it is worth noting that the lineup is predominantly female: a refreshing nine out of the ten artists are women. The show highlights their respective investigations into the camera’s distinct



Anne Collier, *Woman With a Camera (Cheryl Tiegs/Olympus 1)*, 2008. Chromogenic print, 31 3/4 × 42 1/2 inches. © Anne Collier. Courtesy of the artist; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles; The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow.

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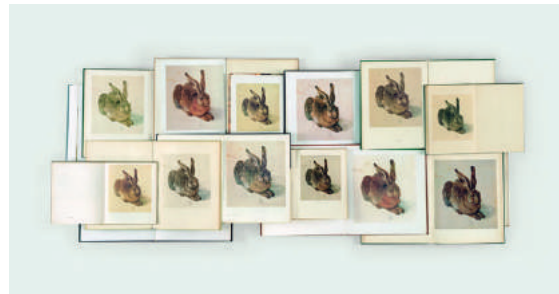
form of representation and replication, and the history thereof. Says Blessing, “Theirs is a sort of ‘photo-poetics,’ an art that self-consciously investigates the laws of photography and the nature of photographic representation, reproduction, and the photographic object.”

Anne Collier is interested in reproduction and commoditization in commercial media; her contribution features photos of printed objects. Her subjects are women or hobbyist photography or the intersection of the two in the name of advertising. Her image, *Woman With a Camera (Cheryl Tiegs/Olympus 1)* (2008), is a photograph of an Olympus ad from the '70s, the supermodel made-up and posing somewhat ridiculously with a 35mm camera. In contrast, *May/June 2009 (Cindy Sherman, Mark Seliger)* (2009) is a shot of two copies of Vogue Magazine with Cindy Sherman on the cover, smoking a cigarette.

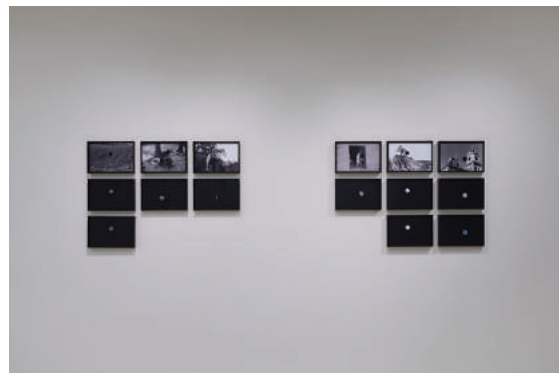
Claudia Angelmaier’s work explores similar themes of replication and representation. Her piece, *Hase* (2004), is a photograph of nearly a dozen printed reproductions of Dürer’s *Young Hare* (1502). Collected in one scene, apparent are the variances in color and resolution that occur with different printing processes. This image, canonical as it is, has been printed countless times.

Necessarily, the vast majority of people will have only seen it in its reproduced—and inaccurate—form. What’s more, the viewer is aware of the fact that these reproductions, further reproduced by Angelmaier’s camera, are themselves merely representations of verisimilitude. The other works of Angelmaier’s are pictures of postcards of well-known artworks, all of which feature a woman as their subject. The postcards are shot from their underside, but lit just enough so that you can see through it to reveal the content—acting like a negative, and at once providing a commentary on the commoditization of artwork, the specific intricacies of photographic representation, and women as muses throughout art history.

These ideas of negative space and art historical winking appear in the works of Lisa Oppenheim and Sara VanDerBeek as well. In Oppenheim’s work *Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans* (2007–09), she photographs scenes recreated from a series of Depression-era Walker Evans photos deemed not suitable for publication and hole-punched. Displayed are prints from the original negatives, and, below them, single circles of what Oppenheim reimagines as the missing part of the originals. In two versions of her piece, *A sequence in which a protester throws back a smoke bomb while clashing with police in Ferguson, Missouri* (2014, 2015), the artist creates prints of found images of explosions that occurred during



Claudia Angelmaier, *Hase*, 2004. Chromogenic print, 43 × 78 3/4 inches. © Claudia Angelmaier. Courtesy the artist.



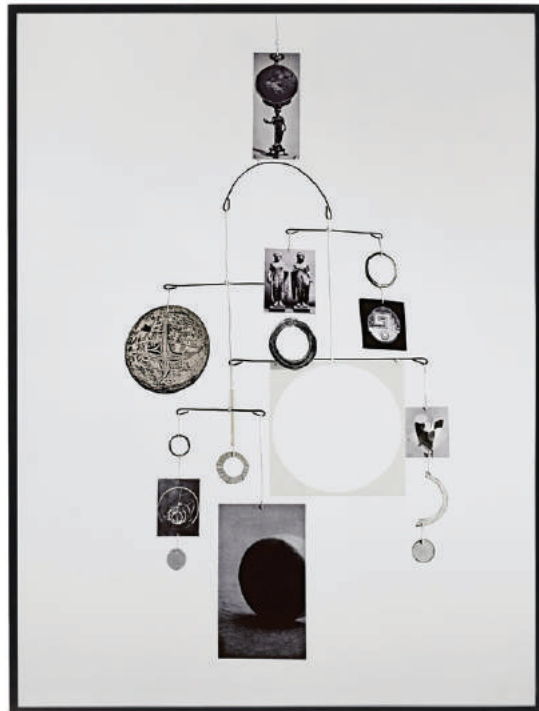
Lisa Oppenheim, *Killed Negatives: After Walker Evans*, 2007-09. Fifteen chromogenic prints, 10 × 13 inches. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. © Lisa Oppenheim. Photo: Owen Conway.

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the Ferguson riots of 2014, invoking the history of photojournalism and the camera’s role as documenter of social strife. However, the images are cropped so that just the smoke is in the frame, effectively removing the political context. The prints are also made by exposing the negatives with the light of flame, reuniting the content to the form, and introducing a subtle humor.

Sara VanDerBeek’s *From the Means of Reproduction* (2007) is a photo of a hanging mobile created by the artist for the shot. Dangling from the sculpture are various images of reproduced artworks, from ancient artifacts to sculptures by Rodchenko and David Smith. All feature a circular motif, a metaphor for propagation. The most prominent image hangs at the bottom: a black-and-white picture of a birth control pill from *Life* magazine. By visually establishing an unexpected poetic connection between the political struggle of women’s rights and the tensions inherent in art replication, VanDerBeek brilliantly raises questions of power, authority, and ownership.

The show’s catalogue is devoted to Sarah Charlesworth. Her influence is everywhere here, both in the content of the images and their aesthetic—look at Lassry’s colored frames, VanDerBeek’s art-historical allusions, or the orientation of Sontag’s still lifes, to name a few instances. Charlesworth, a product of the Pictures Generation, hasn’t received as much attention as some of her other contemporaries, notably close friends Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons. Her work has garnered much more attention recently though, peaking in last year’s great retrospective at the New Museum. She’s become a touchstone for a new generation of artists. Charlesworth passed away in 2013, a victim of that all-too-familiar art-world irony in which female artists aren’t properly appreciated until they’re close to the end of their lives. Thanks to these smart artists and this well-curated show, the spirit of her work isn’t going away anytime soon.



Sara VanDerBeek, *From the Means of Reproduction*, 2007. Chromogenic print, 40 × 30 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Sara VanDerBeek.

CONTRIBUTOR

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