

A Journey Through a Hybrid Universe

by Marcel Feil ~ curator Foam_Fotografischmuseum Amsterdam

An annual ritual to be marked in one's diary far in advance is a visit to the graduate shows at the Netherlands' various art academies. Although the Netherlands is a small country, it has no fewer than five academies which are worth a visit. The overall comparison of the work that the various academies produce, judging the level in respect to previous years, getting acquainted with the work of a new generation of photographers, conversations with individual students, teachers and colleagues – all of these activities typify a visit to a graduate show and make it rewarding.

And of course every year again there are great expectations: the hidden hope that this time an exceptional talent will be revealed, that there will be evidence of an unusually good year, full of stimulating, intriguing work. In short, the hope of seeing work that is relevant because it is original and adds something new to what already exists. It goes without saying that such work is by definition much scarcer than work that surprises less or not at all: the amount of work that introduces nothing new, but validates, copies or quotes is far greater.

In recent visits to various graduate exhibitions, it became apparent that the work which appealed most to the imagination and which people talked about the most often diverged sharply from the traditional, framed or mounted prints fastened neatly to the wall. Most of this was work in which photography was intentionally shown in connection with other media, such as painting, video, sculpture or graphic design. This connection was sometimes so intimate that a unique fusion existed – this not only created a form all its own, but led to questioning the nature as well as the boundaries of a specific medium. And even though much of this work was still far from fully formed and from the point of view of quality there was still room for improvement, nevertheless, the work stood out from the rest as refreshing and stimulating.

A significant reason for this is that the work at once appears to relate to photographic traditions and a recognizable and established pho-

tographic vocabulary in a completely free and independent way. Many students yield to the temptation to express themselves in familiar visual language, usually in the hope of linking their own work to a certain tradition and charge it with an aura of originality. Their own contribution, however, is then often woefully thin. It is work that faces the past and has been shaped by the idea 'that's how photography has to be'. Much more interesting is work created with knowledge of its own history, but from the idea that 'photography could also be like this'. This is work that explicitly questions certainties, even rejects them, and looks critically at traditions, dogmas and sacred cows. This obstinate and non-conformist stance certainly does not always lead to good work, but does attest to a mentality which is pleasantly refreshing – a mentality that is able to break open what has been stuck and to make room for new developments. More than the work itself, perhaps, was the mentality that made it appealing: the experimental and slightly anarchistic 'do it yourself' attitude expressed by the exhibited work. It was work that did not look back at the past, but forward to the future. And this is of great significance because photography, as well as society as a whole, is going through a process of change which is fundamentally altering how we regard ourselves and the world. An open view of the future and critical consideration of the fundamentals of both photography and our vision of the world are of particular importance in this present time of radical yet subtle transition. It may seem like a lot to say, but questions concerning representation, coding, communication, perception, falsification and authenticity are now more important than ever.

This searching, open mentality of young artists in particular, who don't shy away from fusing photography with other media, can be directly or indirectly linked to the widespread digitalization of our society. The cause is thus far broader than just the digitalization of the medium of photography itself. Of course this also significantly affects working methods, the nature of photography and the applicability of image material, and this is



Human Colour Wheel Fig. 24, 2009, part of the publication A Study on Colour © Katja Mater



Human Colour Wheel Fig. 03a, 2009, part of the publication *A Study on Colour* © Katja Mater

~
*An increasing number of
artists within the newest
generation are no longer
concerned about which label
gets placed on them*
~

naturally also reflected on by artists, but the primary issue is ultimately the set of instruments. It has to do with the means, the medium, and less with how this can be utilized in a much broader, societal connection.

Yet it is good to first carefully consider a few of the effects of the digitalization of photography. The process is not yet fully completed and is one aspect of much greater and more sweeping developments, namely the electronic revolution which began in the first half of the 20th century and has had a strong influence on all segments of our society. Digitalization, including that of image and sound, can be seen as a following and possibly even a decisive phase in this radical development. A major consequence is the de-objectification of the photographic image.

Since the beginning of its history, the photographic image has always been inextricably linked to a material manifestation: a negative necessary for the exposure and a printing medium which uses chemicals influenced by light to induce the image and to fix it. This was an explicit, photochemical process in which cause and effect were clear. An essential aspect was that the photographic image was always inseparably linked to a physical carrier, to an object, namely the photo. The photographic print as object meant that a photo was always limited by time and space. Regardless of the number of prints made from a specific exposure, all exist as physical manifestations of a certain place at a certain time. Thus, these objects, the prints, can also be collected, something which has been done enthusiastically over roughly the last hundred years and is still being done today – a need which, as strong as it is, now seems nearly archaic.

The digitalization of image has fundamentally changed the physical nature of photography. Photographic imagery no longer corresponds to a unique object – instead an image can be invoked, processed, duplicated or transmitted to a very wide range of carriers. Image can now be viewed on screens of every sort: from LCD to plasma screens, on telephones, iPods, cameras and computer monitors. Image and carrier have long abandoned their convergence. Numerous media exist that also actually function as a medium, as a means of transmitting information, in this case image. The image itself has become immaterial, as it were. Minuscule electronic pulsations, voluminous data and difficult-to-fathom technological processes which are taken for granted lie at the foundation of such images. The image can ultimately be reduced to a quantity of pluses and minuses, to a specific code.

This de-objectification and coding of image has a number of important consequences. The existence of a code at the basis of the image also means that the code can be altered, by which the image too can be

altered relatively simply. Another significant fact is that theoretically anyone can do this. With cameras on mobile phones and the availability of simple software, practically everyone in our Western society has the ability to take photos at any given moment, to manipulate them and to transmit them. The democratization and resulting circulation of images have made astonishing strides. By eliminating its character as object, many of photography's physical limitations have also disappeared and a society has been created in which differences in time and space are no longer experienced as barriers to the distribution of and communication via images. Images function in a digital, virtual reality in which totally other rules apply than did in our old, analogue world. At the same time, this virtual reality cannot be separated from our familiar, analogue world. Hence, virtual reality does not replace this world, but merges into a new, complex hybrid. In a moment, without being all too aware of it, people move from one reality to the other with surprising ease. Thus, at one moment they are people made of flesh and blood, bound by a number of fundamental laws of nature, and at the next virtual, self-created characters moving through a universe that has other possibilities and laws. A hybrid reality exists in which the analogue and the digital world (or as Fred Ritchin states in an interview elsewhere in this issue 'the Newtonian and the quantum universe') enter into a complex relationship – a relationship in which ambiguity and synchronicity are core values. Within this hybrid universe, concepts such as time and space, original and modification, appearance and reality are essential but rarely unequivocal.

It should come as no surprise that a great number of artists have responded to this new situation with extremely diverse work. A generation of Internet artists has been created who specifically concentrate on the vocabulary and opportunities provided by the Web, and many artists have also been forced to revise and expand the conventional definitions of the medium which they had been using. And where do the boundaries and so the singularity of a medium show themselves more clearly than where they touch upon another medium? In addition to fundamental investigation into the essential characteristics of a medium, in recent years we have seen, nearly as a counter-reaction, a large increase in hybrid forms of art. Thus, photography can be used by artists who do not consider themselves strictly as photographers, and traditionally educated photographers can combine photographic work with painting, video art, sculpture or installation, whether their own work or not. A result is that customary designations such as 'painter', 'photographer' or 'sculptor' are slowly but surely coming under pressure and increasingly seeming to belong to the past. An increasing number of artists within the newest generation are no longer concerned about which label gets placed on them, within which tradition they fit or with which conventions they should comply. They feel themselves to be artists first and foremost and they choose the medium they believe relates to their subject best and gives expression to their ideas. Apart from the consequences for art education, the result is a welcome sort of anarchy and non-conformity, as well as a clear-cut focus on subjects which are relevant for them at the time.

Examples of such work can be seen in the *Photography - in reverse* exhibition, to be presented at Foam from at the end of November 2009. The exhibition includes the work of five young artists who primarily consider photography as a medium and not as a preconceived end product. It would, however, be going too far to consider their attitude or even their art as 'investigation' or 'criticism'. That is an anachronism. It implies the possibility that they place themselves outside the discipline and approach reality from outside it. But it is more a question of a classical subject-object dichotomy in which the observer and the observed converge. They are not looking from the outside in; they already are inside and intentionally create discordant work based on their own, immediate

experiences in the hybrid reality. In addition to the quality of their work, the relevance and necessity of showing it is found precisely in this fact. All artists participating in the exhibition will mostly be presenting new works in which diverse disciplines are intermingled: photography and Internet, projections, film and spatial work. One example is the work of Constant Dullaart, who makes use of the Photoshop 'clone stamp' tool. Of an entirely other order is 'Density Drawing' by Katja Mater, created by capturing various moments in the creation process of a drawing and by using multiple exposures to fuse these into one single negative. The final photo is a non-manipulated account of the process, though not an accurate visual rendering of the actual drawing. 'The photograph in this context becomes a remarkably unreliable object: is it an image, a drawing, a sculpture, a performance, or a hybrid? Is it documentation or a primary object?'

The tension between the time interval of a sequence and the immediacy of visual, photographic perception is also a major element in the work of Idris Khan. This still-young but already esteemed British artist makes use of musical notations, rudimentary texts, paintings and key works from photographic history, and transforms these into work that can be considered as a visual reflection on authorship and time. While both a music composition and a text require a specific span of time in order to unfold completely, a photo makes a direct, instant impression. Just as Mater, Khan makes use of multiple exposures, for example, of every page of a certain score, and fuses these into one single image. Due to the multiple layers from which the image is composed, the separate music notes can scarcely be distinguished – if at all – and an amalgam of grey and black shades is created. The result indeed reflects the mood of the piece of music, but undermines the proper function of the score, namely to 'read' the music. A related fact of interest is that the score of course cannot be equated with the music itself: it is a musical notation, a way of noting that indeed refers to a specific musical work in an exact sense, but it is not the music itself. It is a form of indexing, of coding, which corresponds to the coding of an image in a digital environment. By using digital techniques for stacking the multiple exposures and the desired nuancing of the shades of grey, the visual and musical codes merge and converge into a single image.

Although in the examples cited there is evidence of a fusion between two or more disciplines, the end result is nonetheless the classical, flat surface of a photo. How different it is if the final artwork is spatial, such as an installation where photography is a key element – a work by Christian Boltanski, for instance, as an example of such work from the recent past. Or where sound, light and even film are a substantial part of the presentation and thus the experience of the visitor. How can justice be done to a multimedia artwork in a magazine that is itself also a medium? A medium that still comes from the old world: analogue, two-dimensional surfaces, produced with printers' ink on paper and designed as a physical object according to the same time and space limitations as an old-fashioned photo was in the past. A possibility was to show the relevant spatial work purely as photographs of installations. But to do so would be to document it instead of the high-quality reproduction we normally do, the kind we, as magazine, pride ourselves on. It was a problem: to devote attention to the merging of photography and various other media by means of a medium that itself has many limitations. It was decided not to construct a portfolio from installation photos. That would not only go beyond the intention of this magazine, but above all would not do justice to the essential trait of a spatial installation – namely the opportunity, even

the necessity, for visitors to experience such a work for themselves, not only visually but with all the senses. One of the objectives of an installation is to transform a specific space and redefine it, and then to enable the visitor to relate to it in a personal way. The visitor moves physically through the installation, determines his or her own viewpoints, chooses a certain tempo, a period of time to remain within it. If it works, it can be a physical as well as an emotional experience, like a journey. Along with that comes the role of the factuality of an installation, its concreteness. Other than is oftentimes the case with photos, it is less a matter of indexing, referring to a reality beyond the work. By contrast, many installations aspire to bring about a certain form of realism which is decisive in the relationship with the visitor. An installation is built with real building blocks, each with their own real properties; it occupies a truly measurable surface area and forms a discrete microcosm which relates to reality in a different way than two-dimensional work. All these essential features are completely lost in a photo of an installation.

We have chosen to include work that took on the familiar flat surface, but of which the essence would be the least damaged by reproduction in Foam Magazine. In the eight portfolios presented here, photography enters into a close relationship with film (Tarkovsky), Internet (Umberto Eco), fashion/sculpture (Freudenthal and Verhagen), painting (Wahlström), text (van Duijvenboden), architecture (Hatakeyama), video (Claudio Llosa) and finally with itself, through the transformation of documentary into autonomous work (Broomberg and Chanarin). Irrespective of the differences between them, all are portfolios which not only give insight into the complex nature of photography and the fascinating position of images in our society which is determined by technology and media, but which also illustrate the fruitful transitional period in which photography now finds itself – a transition in which hybrids, unexpected marriages and unanticipated forms of collaboration ensure a boundless future.

Notes:

¹ Lauren Ptak, *The Medium Formerly Known as Photography*, published for Foam, 2009. *Photography – in reverse exhibition*, 2009.

Anne de Vries (1977) creates new worlds, inspired by new media and our technical culture. De Vries departs from an abstract, technical concept which he explores by expressly working with extremely commonplace means. His work has an anarchist tone, adverse to conventions and good taste. Katja Mater (1979) often works with installations and focuses on the medium of photography to its technical characteristics and its limitations. Time and synchronicity, and dimensionality are of great importance in her work.

Their work will be part of the exhibition Photography – in reverse, organized by Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam and to be seen from 27th November 2009 to 21st of February 2010. The exhibition focuses on works by a new generation of photographers who work with the medium of photography in a refreshingly uninhibited, unconventional and sometimes slightly anarchic way. Constructions within the space, projections, moving images and installations make up a significant part of the shows in addition to more conventional methods of exhibition. The exhibition also includes work from Jaap Scher (1979), Corriette Schoenaerts (1977) and Constant Dullaart (1979).