

## The Medium Formerly Known as Photography

Text: Laurel Plak

Cover: Fake Flowers in Full Color, 2009 © Jaap Scheeren & Hans Gremmen  
Courtesy of the artists and Flatland Gallery, Utrecht

→ In the early 1990s, pop star Prince decided to abandon his name as an inventive form of protest against the artistic and corporate stranglehold his record label was exerting over him. In its place he decided to adopt an unpronounceable symbol instead. On June 7, 1993 he issued a press release that declared from here on he would be known only as:



With this gesture ♣ had essentially swapped language for image and curiously enough, chaos ensued. For instance, his staff had absolutely no idea how to call out his now unpronounceable name when they needed to command his attention. Fan-created websites that were eager to reflect his new moniker grew alienated when they grappled to find a URL to depict it. And above all, the media truly could not get over this disavowal, excoriating and mocking 'the artist formerly known as Prince' for many years to come. It was as if the image of a superstar they had constructed and controlled for so long was finally questioning their domain, and much in the fashion of a teenager to its parents, it was willfully demanding its independence. Thinking back on it now, this avalanche of ugly feelings is worth puzzling out. What started as a means for a

recording celebrity to outmaneuver his contractual obligations to a greedy and controlling record company touched upon an unexpected nerve. The nature of identity, authorship, ownership, and representation inside a powerful, corporate, capitalist system were at stake, and gauging from reactions, the gesture carried with it some powerful destabilizing propositions.

Anne de Vries, Jaap Scheeren, Constant Dullaart, Corriette Schoenaerts, and Katja Mater all share something of the spirit of ♣ in their work: these are artists using 'the medium formerly known as photography'. But what might this curious phrase mean? Since the 1990s what was once a relatively stable, analogue medium went digital. Photoshop became ubiquitous. The internet established itself as a powerful and desirable mass platform for the circulation of images of all kinds. With these foundational and technological shifts also came a reordering of our subjectivity around photographs, as well as many other aspects of our lives. De Vries, Scheeren, Dullaart, Schoenaerts, and Mater recognize this in their work. They represent a first generation for who this shift is truly native, yet they also have experienced and understood what came before it.

New media and our technical culture are the starting point for Anne de Vries's work. He creates images that are self-consciously adverse to both convention and good taste. One strategy involves printing out existing



Silent Storm, from the series *Waves from the Web*, 2009 © Anne de Vries



images of ocean waves from the internet, combining them, and ultimately re-photographing them. One way to think about his *Waves from the Web* project might be as an all too aware and absurdist reading of media theorist Marshall McLuhan some decades too late. Think of the 1960s optimism of McLuhan's *Global Village* that has come, in retrospect, to stand in for a hokey proto-vision of the internet, and substitute it for de Vries's *Multi-media Ocean*. Though glib on its surface, the work does have a darker side, it addresses the way that collective experience has been dismantled by digital culture and is based ever more on simultaneous private experiences distributed across time and space.

In characterizing the relationship that exists between new media and photography, Lev Manovitch has pointed out that the logic of the database privileged by the computer and the internet is also a logic which has driven numerous photographic practices throughout the medium's history. This might be one reason to explain why photography has been so at home in the online context, but it doesn't go all the way to explain something quite intriguing about our behavior towards the internet as a kind of vast, collective, image archive. We are no longer viewers of visual culture, but users. We seem to feel a sense of agency. Regardless of authorship, we believe these images belong to us somehow, that they are there to be used, and perhaps only through their use can we apprehend their actual social value.

**Jaap Scheeren** is curious about the artist's role as a manipulator of perception. The work *Fake Flowers in Full Color*, a collaboration with Hans Gremmen, shows the process of a 3D color separation unfolding photographically. By revealing steps that would typically be concealed, we are forced to think about the relationship between images. His process is one of photographing four separate still-lives in cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, each shown individually but also printed over one another in order to create the resulting 3D image.

The project recalls a much earlier moment in photography, before color processes had ever been invented. Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, a Russian scientist and photographer working at the turn of the twentieth century came up with the means to record photographs on black-and-white glass plate negatives using red, green, and blue filters to crudely create color images. Because of limitations with the technology available to him, any stray movement within the camera's field of view showed up as multiple 'ghosted' images when the red, green, and blue layers were combined, accidentally resulting in a 3D-effect seen in

many of his pictures. The fake flowers themselves are a clue that Scheeren and Gremmen are also pointing us to the artificiality of our visual conventions themselves. Photography's current norms and standards make Scheeren's photographs look playful or ironic while Prokudin-Gorskii's in contrast, were perceived in his own time as uncannily realistic.

Preoccupied with the influence of image manipulation on contemporary visual language, **Constant Dullaart** seeks out rhetorical devices that have been made visual in memes. Perhaps it's productive to think of his work in the manner of an anthropologist: exploring, reconstructing, narrating, and manifesting the ways in which digital manipulation has informed our present subjectivity.

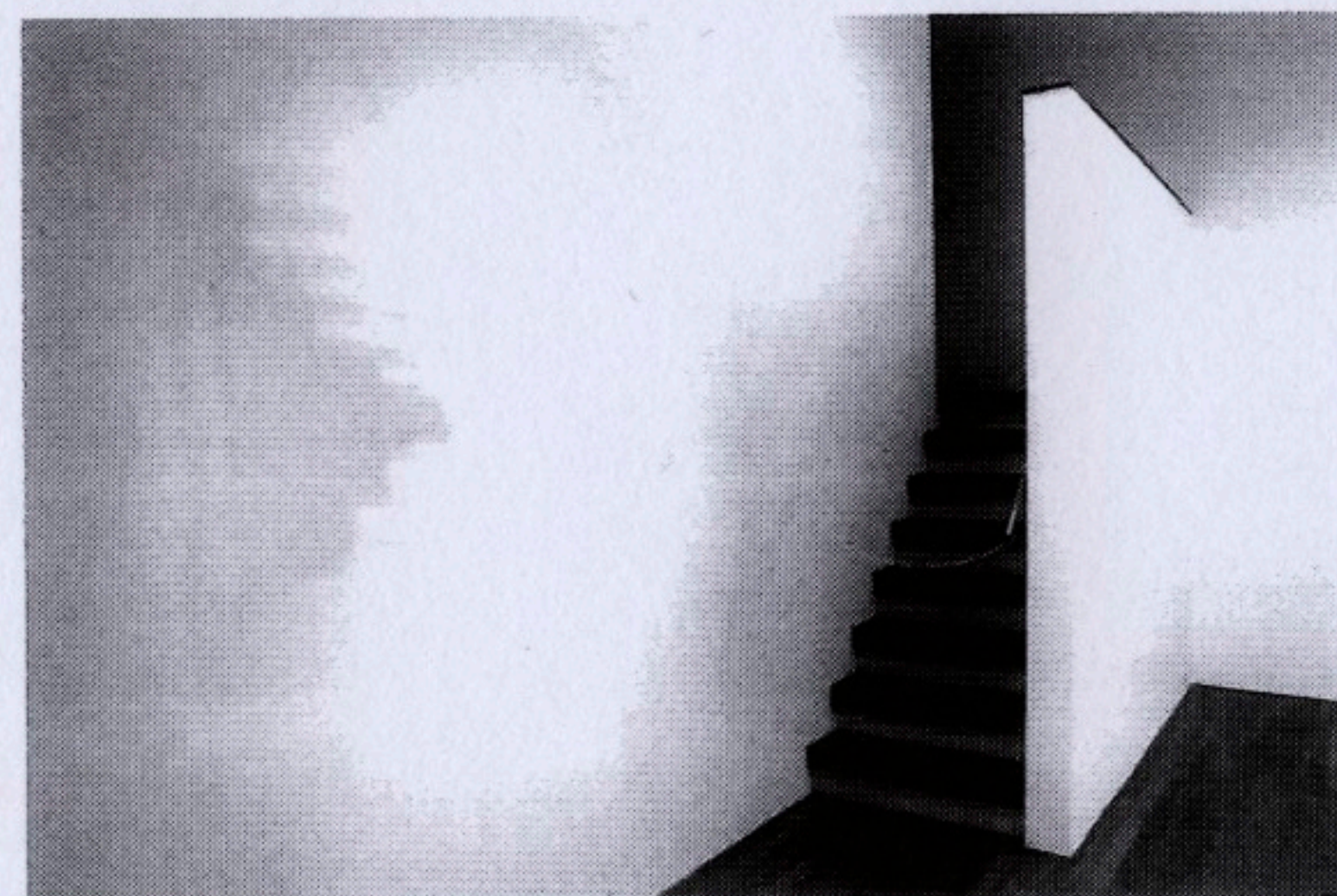
Employing lenticular printing, a technology available since the 1940s but more recently improved upon dramatically with digital means, Dullaart uses multiple photos taken of the exhibition space as a starting point. The images are combined, corrected to produce the illusion of depth, and appear to change or move as the image is viewed from varying angles, yet exist all together in one seamless print. The hyper-real of the lenticular print, when mounted in the exhibition space, in precisely the same spot that it depicts, eerily reveals the conventions and visual language at play.

**Corriette Schoenaerts's** work centers around the construction of photographs from various layers, a process she calls 'compression'. In her installation at Foam this act of compression moves beyond the flat photographic surface to envelop real space. A banal stock photograph of a jungle landscape is projected onto an arrangement of tropical plants that have all been painted white. The wall, the plants themselves, and even the viewer in the space are each swallowed and colored in by the image from the projection. Boundaries between representation, real, image, space, object and subject are nowhere locatable. Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle leaps immediately to mind, but yet his claim that "the spectacle appears simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification" does not exactly hold up in Schoenaerts' environment. In her articulation the image is not a totalizing one. Everything enveloped by the projection still manages to maintain its own character, shape, or specificity.

Of course a major shift between Debord's 1960s perspective and ours today is that even though he finds reality and image everywhere around him conflated, they are still ultimately distinct and severable conditions. As Schoenaerts's work suggests, the possibility of any divide between the two is lost on us in the contemporary context.



*Fake Flowers in Full Color*, 2009 © Jaap Scheeren & Hans Gremmen  
Courtesy of the artists and Flatland Gallery, Utrecht



*Clone Stamp Shadow Shape 1*, 2009 © Constant Dullaart



Partial to the more contradictory qualities of photography, **Katja Mater** pays close attention to the medium's characteristics and limitations often to show us just how interwoven these two things are. It's the process of creating a hand-made marker drawing that is recorded photographically in Mater's *Density Drawing* series. The photograph in this context becomes a remarkably unreliable object: is it an image, a drawing, a sculpture, a performance, an installation, or a hybrid? Is it documentation or a primary object?

Mater's process is one of constructing what we see in the photograph by recording several moments in the making of a drawing, layering them onto one negative through multiple exposures. While the resulting photograph is in one sense an unmanipulated summary of what happened, it does not 'accurately' visually resemble the drawing itself. The clichéd notion of objectivity in photographic representation and subjectivity in hand-made media are collapsed. The gesture affirms a more recent cultural narrative about the mutability of representation embodied by digital means, but what is most intriguing is Mater's choice of employing only analogue tools to make this point. In this lies a compelling proposal: the possibility to challenge photography's objectivity was latent in its analog state all along, though it's not until quite recently that we have been ready to employ it in to these ends.

What De Vries, Scheeren, Dullaart, Schoenaerts, and Mater all have in common in their work is the idea that real and representation as two distinct poles, as they were once dichotomously perceived, no longer hold in our contemporary context. These artists everywhere protest, collapse, reverse, and simultaneously employ the two. This does not come from a theoretical position, but rather one of experience. It's not only inside their work, but it's also completely familiar from our everyday life. Photography as a historical concept is entirely bound up in and dependent upon this very dichotomy. Throughout its history and discourse this has been narrated to us in numerous ways, as the opposition between analogue and digital, objectivity and subjectivity to name just a few. To begin to speak about the condition that De Vries, Scheeren, Dullaart, Schoenaerts, and Mater address in their work, we need to think in other terms.

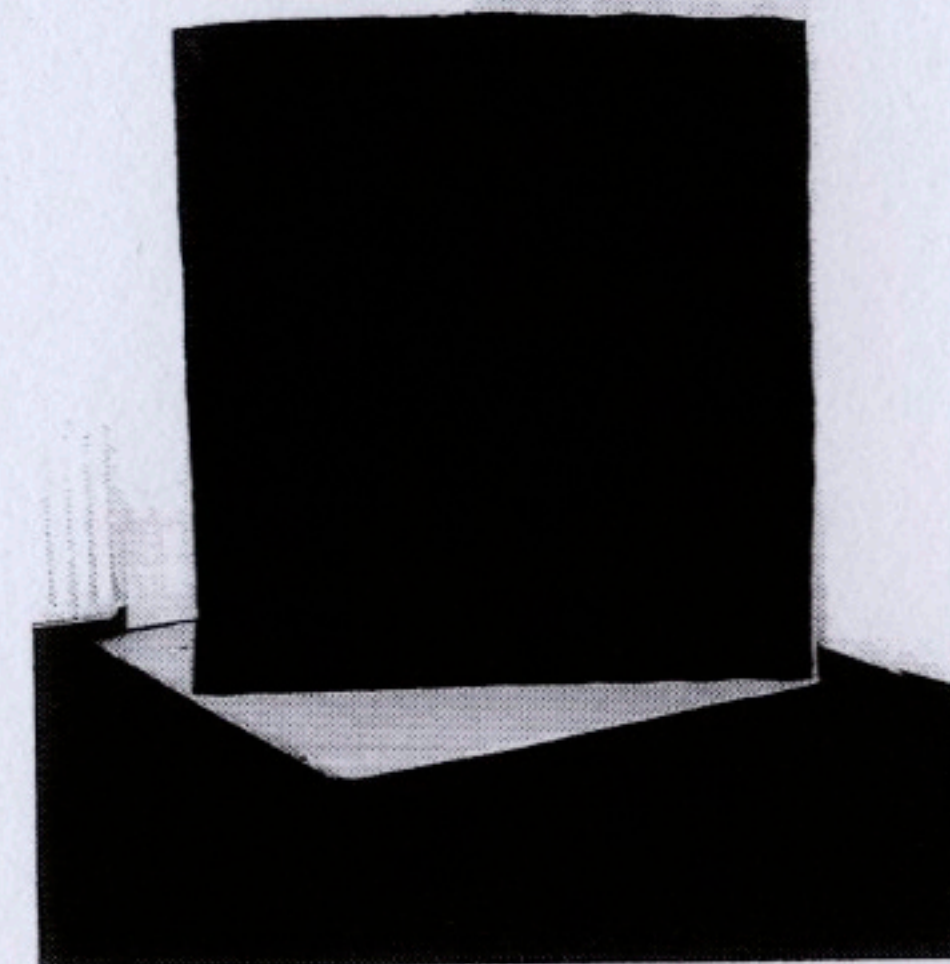
To this end, one final observation about the Prince story. What I take to be its most dazzling aspect is the kind of space that it materializes. It's a marking of territories between what Prince had come to be known for and what he now might be. Put another way: an album by  $\otimes$  relies on all the previous albums by Prince for why it is so fantastic to listen to. But it also disturbs any natural, linear progression from

Prince to  $\otimes$ . It forces a system to question itself and to demonstrate that even while we might not be able to fully dismantle it, perhaps it's not a system that suits us so well anymore. For me, Anne de Vries, Jaap Scheeren, Constant Dullaart, Corriette Schoenaerts, and Katja Mater perform just such an intervention. As far as I can tell, they are all already at work writing the medium formerly known as photography's future history.

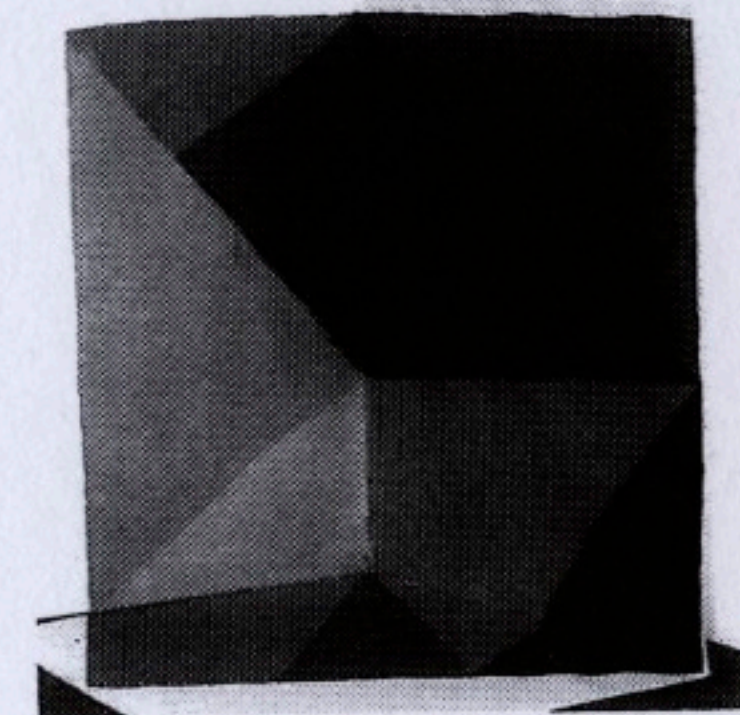
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The Implicate Order #1, 2008 © Corriette Schoenaerts



A photograph of the acrylic painting, from the series *Density Drawings*, 2009 © Katja Mater



Multiple moments during the making of the acrylic painting, from the series *Density Drawings*, 2009 © Katja Mater