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Photography in the Mix: Flora-Fauna-Photo

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Although photography changes with the times, it carries its history with it. This history is not innocent. "Power," writes Geoffrey Batchen, "inhabits the very grain of photography's existence." The authority that photography wields is based on a Cartesian concept, 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. 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. 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.

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

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 Veki 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 particu-
lar.
3. Akira Mizuta Lippit, Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of
Wildlife (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 189. 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 apo-
ryphal tale to Rene 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 con-
cludes. Following philosophers
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,
that “all becomings are animal
becomings.”
6. Interview with Bing Danh by
David Pace, December 2002. See
the CD-ROM accompanying this
issue.
7. Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis:
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, exca
vated, dissected, or threat-
ened by mediation, live perfor-
ance is always already inscribed
with traces of the possibility of
technical mediation (i.e. mediat-
ization) that defines it as live.”
Philip Auslander, Liveness: Per-
formance 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 imagi-
ned selves and imagined worlds.”

In Agitate the artists aggressively rework the
photographic apparatus with an eye to the hybrid
possibilities that exist within today’s media-satu-
rated environment. Jean-Philippe Baert, for
example, turns the gallery/theater into a dark-
room, 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.
ABOVE: Jean-Phillippe Baert, stills from a live performance of *Empreintes numeriques or Happening*. J-MAC/Web at Maison Populaire de Montreuil, France; February 1, 2002.

LEFT:
Cynthia Young.
Untitled, 1997, from *Casting*, gelatin silver print, 42 x 43".

RIGHT:
Ann Hamilton.
making of a face to face portrait, still from the Art21 documentary. 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".

LEFT:
Diane Althoff.
studio installation view (left to right), *German Expressionism, Autobiography 1, 2, 3, 4, 2002/2003*, chromogenic prints unmounted, variable height up to 146 x 30 x 5'. Photograph by Alex Sutton.