



## THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Photographic artists are reimagining the medium in highly idiosyncratic ways. And major museums, auction houses, fairs and galleries are now championing their work. Pernilla Holmes reports

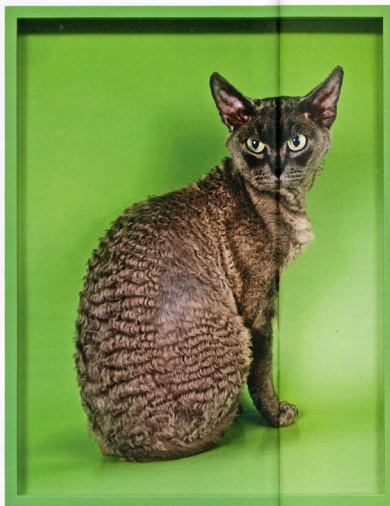
A trip to last autumn's Frieze art fair in London offered a microcosmic view into the frenzied ascendancy of photography. And not just in art. Everywhere you looked people were snapping, sending or receiving images of themselves, their friends, famous people, the exhibits, jugs of other works etc. In the case of my bench-neighbour in the waiting area, an overly groomed miniature dachshund. Over the past decade, smartphones and other sophisticated devices made idiot-proof easy have enabled even the technophobic to become creators and consumers of relatively good photos. So much so that one might think that photography would lose its power as a tool for contemporary art.

In fact, the opposite has happened. The medium generally has gone (probably) mainstream, but in reaction artists have started using it, or at least its materials, in such highly idiosyncratic ways that they are entirely rethinking what photography can or should be. "The ease of taking photos has had a profound effect on artistic creativity," says Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, CEO, director and chief curator of the Aspen Art Museum, who last year held a seminal exhibition on the subject called *The Anxiety of Photography*. "Artists are pushing, questioning, redefining and remaking it into a highly personalised and transformed medium. This is an incredibly rich and exciting time for new photography."

Just what the "new photography" is varies radically from artist to artist, but none take anything like a snapshot or a classically composed, easily read image. They are defiantly



Clockwise from far left: Three Color Curl, 2008, C-Print, by Walid Shaker; Raphael Netti at work. A photograph from his *Apexoplum* series, 2012. That luxury 1960s Devoz Rex C-print in painted frame, 2011





Above: Annette Kelm.  
Right: her *First Picture for a Show, 2009*, ©print

not out on the street looking for their next great shot. Instead they are in their studios constructing elaborate compositions – smashing or crumpling, or working in the darkroom to create what Wolfgang Tillmans, one of the most influential artists in this area, describes as “paintings with light”. Examples include the work of Elad Lassry and Annette Kelm, who place objects and lighting just so, using the polished visual language of advertising but in ways that refuse to be simply understood. Lucas Blalock creates beautifully manipulated, “cubist” photographs in Photoshop (example pictured on final page), while Brendan Fowler smashes his photos into sculptural reliefs. Nature is also turned into a collaborator by artists such as Lisa Oppenheim and Raphael Hefli, who both create ethereal pieces that allude to the sublime.

All of which is a very long way from the conceptual practices that dominated photography in contemporary art in the 1990s and into the 2000s. Movements in art can often be seen as a series of reactions against what went before, which in this case is best summed up by the school of Bernd and Hilla Becher, a highly influential artist team who shot black-and-white photos of industrial buildings and whose students included such big-name straight-shooters as Andreas Gursky. Cassandra Höfer and Thomas Ruff, according to Zachemman Jacobson: “The recent developments of championing subjective, highly manipulated pictures and the explorations of new media’s malleability are part of the natural continuum. Everything that used to be taken as a given is up for discussion.”

The art world’s wide embrace of these artists is clear. The major prize has either had major museum shows – including the Whitney in New York and the Tate Britain – or been in important museum group shows in New York, such as Anne Collier and Michele Abeles’ *Let’s Make a Deal* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brendan Fowler at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, or Walead Besly at the Guggenheim. The art market – which tends to put the most beautiful, well-hung-able pieces that can be taken seriously, too – has also responded in a positive way. Fairs such as Frieze or Art Basel are full of these creations. Items by Besly can fetch up to about €45,000 retail and Tillmans’ £50,000 to £60,000 at auction. In the galleries there are long waiting lists for choice photographs by many of these artists.

But the slick world of auction houses and museums can be a very long way from the roots of the works that end up there. To get the full picture behind Swiss artist Hefli’s images, you have to imagine their origin in the mountains. Tall, with black-framed glasses and a gentle, lilting voice, Hefli comes across as a poet, but if so he’s one with madcap, scientific leanings. Take his *Lycopodium* series (from €10,000): “To start with I went with some friends into the mountains for a few days to harvest the spores from some moss,” he says. The moss

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in question, lycopodium, is also known as “witch powder” for its explosive qualities and has historically had links to the occult. Hefli, who studied mechanics and electronics, brought the plants home and dried them out in the large underground storage facility that he uses as a darkroom to release the fine, white dust. “So then I lay the photo paper out, spread the powder over it and set it on fire,” he explains.

The resulting series of explosions creates, over time, celestial, abstract patterns in a rainbow of colours, determined by the heat (example pictured on previous page). The pictures range from large to extremely large, as in the 6m-long works shown recently at White Cube Bernemusey. Amazingly, the paper remains undamaged because the explosions flow upward and the powder itself masks the sheet, enabling Hefli to become a kind of artist-chemist of image.

This is not his first foray into the creative use of explosive materials. “In 2006, I came across a way of getting decommissioned magnesium from the military, which was used for flares,” he recalls. Hefli sent large parcels of it into the sky dangling from weather balloons, detonating them at 1,000m in huge explosions that lit up the Swiss mountainscape at night, which he captured on camera. “Unfortunately, on one of these occasions,

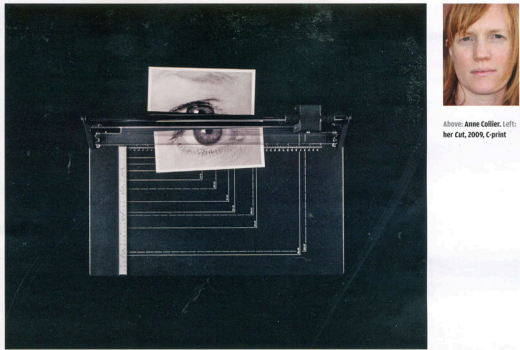
I made a mistake,” he says. Having left one, unneeded quantity of magnesium in his car, Hefli hit the detonator, only to discover he’d taken the wrong one, turning his late-series Mercedes into a charred shell only a few kilometres from where the World Economic Forum was occurring in Davos. Charges followed and as a result he was unable to gain entry to the US for three years.

At the other end of the spectrum, several “new photographers” have taken up the sanitised, shadow-less language of advertising and commercial photography, but rendered it surreal – or even hyper-real, as in the case of Lassry’s brighter, clearer, more colourful-than-life images. The LA-based artist, whose pieces sell from \$9,000 to \$70,000, works from his archive of “snuff” pictures drawn from magazines, catalogues and other commercial sources. These have included cucumbers, cats (example pictured on previous page), a male made posed with basketballs, a smiling young woman with bezzelizing blue eyes and a lookalike of celebrity dog Lassie. He recycles them in his studio, or rephotographs them through foils or filters and with special lighting. The effect is disquieting – the images are super-high quality and verge on kitsch, but provoke in their obliquity.

German artist Annette Kelm likewise takes pictures of all kinds of things – fabric patterns with great stories behind them, amplified guitars, a cowboy on a horse, or an acorn (above, alongside a picture of Kelm) – either in odd juxtapositions or in ways that divorce them from their context. “I like the immediacy of the medium,” she says. Her work, *Untitled (2005)* came about from an already slightly surreal situation, and as such feels more staged than it actually is: “I met the cowboy of the picture with the fan in Elysian Park in Los



Below: Wolfgang Tillmans, with his *Frischschimmer 214, 2012*, ©print



Above: Anne Collier, left: her *Cat, 2009*, ©print

Angeles where I used to take walks in the morning,” she says. “After I saw him riding by many times, I asked him if I could take his picture, picked a spot in the park and brought several objects with me.” The resulting image, set on a manicured lawn, of the cowboy on a horse holding a large fan behind him in his outstretched hand, feels like a cross-cultural, cross-era study. The aesthetic is filmic, but devoid of a ready narrative within which to frame it.

Where artists such as Kelm and Lassry have manipulated what is in front of the camera, Besly and

Tillmans are among several others, including Markus Amann and Mariela Robertson, who have pulled away from the camera altogether in favour of darkroom manipulations – a movement that has its forerunners in the 1920s and 1930s with modernist artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, who placed objects on photographic paper and exposed them. The difference is that both Tillmans and Besly are making work that is purely abstract. In Tillmans’ spectacular *Frischschimmer* series, hues of blues, greens, burgundies, pinks and purples appear rather like dye moving through liquid (example pictured left). He is reluctant to reveal his exact technique, though he has said he makes them using light in the darkroom. “I see it as a picture,” Tillmans has said. “I don’t make such a distinction between photograph or painting. People have been making pictures for approximately 30,000 years, and about 150 years ago the photographic process was added to that vernacular.”

Besly’s journey to abstraction began with photos he took of a former Iraqi embassy in what was East Berlin that had been abandoned for some time and taken over by squatters. He was interested in the cross-border politics and glimpses of a past life he found there. One day he accidentally passed his film through an airport X-ray machine, bleaching out and discolouring the images, which he decided to show anyway. From there he went to pure shapes of bright colours that danced up and down and back and forth across the surface. Unlike Tillmans, he is very happy to reveal the process, which involves bending and rolling the paper and exposing it at different angles (example pictured on opening page). So consistently beautiful are the end results that they almost challenge the idea of a unique and rare artwork, which must be part of Besly’s point, a kind of cheeky two-fingers-to-the-precious-history-of-abstract-art, and to the carefully considered, subjective photos taken through a camera lens.

Transcending boundaries between disciplines has long been a mainstay of contemporary art, but in photography never more so than in a new generation of sculptural photographers that includes Erin Shirreff, Deschênes and Fowler. In perhaps the most visceral departure from what has gone before, Los Angeles Fowler layers photos on top of each other



Above: Lisa Oppenheim.  
Left: her *Heliograms*,  
1876/2011, photographs



Left: Lucas Blalock.  
Far left: his *Straw*  
Picture, 2011, C-print

and then smashes another right through them, sometimes as if woven, creating a spectacularly conceptual representation of a both personal and conceptual idea. Tall, lanky and hipster, he started out as a "low-level indie star" under the name Barr. In Barr's performances he speaks and sings about his life—or rather he tries to but his equipment breaks, or he forgets what he is saying, or something else gets in his way, much like life itself.

Fowler's photos (from \$12,000) are likewise autobiographical—featuring odd bits of studio, friends and their homes or cars, and flowers from his mother

Patty's garden—and the way they obscure each other suggests we'll never really get the full picture. But larger resonances are also afoot. Asked why flowers, for example, Fowler responds: "They are the ultimate exhausted signifier of beauty. They are so exhausted that they sort of say 'nothing' out loud. But everyone has to take them on—the impressionists, Warhol, [Christopher] Wool, Laura Owens, ad infinitum—so they turn into a micro-conversation about personality. They become like a mark of penmanship. They are kind of an infinite feedback loop oscillating between impersonal and hyper-personal."

But perhaps the artist who most nails how we relate to images now is Collier, who re-photographs existing imagery, such as album covers, books, puzzles or posters, deftly recontextualizing their manufactured visions as self-portraits of the different aspects of herself (from £7,200). Some days she feels as lumpy-go-lucky as the soft-focus nude girl painting on the lawn, while on others she cries like Astral Gilberto on one of her album covers, or smokes a cigarette with the fierceness of Grace Jones. There are tropes of photography that aim to play upon and romanticise any mood you might have, which Collier cannily plucks out with aesthetic flair. But this is no postmodern appropriation. Despite its conceptual finesse, there's something very sincere about Collier's work (example pictured on previous page), and it doesn't take long before

you realise we are so infiltrated by images on a daily basis that they have profoundly changed how we understand even ourselves. \*

#### LIGHT HEAVY WEIGHTS

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