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Associations for Phil Chang

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By James Welling

Editor's note: We kindly refer the reader to Walter Benn Michael's *Meaning and Affect: Phil Chang's Cache, Active for context.*

I want to start by introducing the idea of “inherent vice.”¹ In the language of insurance, “inherent vice” is the natural tendency of an object to self-destruct for no apparent reason. The inherent vice of glass or marble objects, for instance, is that they can collapse at any moment; the material is structurally unstable. For photography, and particularly for color photography, the inherent vice of the photograph is that it inevitably tarnishes, no matter how hard we try to slow it down.²

I'd like to mention quickly the now gigantic industry in archival preservation of photographic materials. Chang's work suggests this: no one wants their photographs to fade in their lifetime. The term “archival” is announced on the box of the plastic page protectors I buy from Staples. The purple glue stick I buy from 3M is now acid-free, i.e. archival. If I were to chart the rise of the interest in archival preservation from the late 1970's on, I would start with the Wilhelm Imaging Institute's³ groundbreaking study of the accelerated aging of color photographs. ⁴

In his text, Walter Benn Michaels discusses Chang's use of the photogram. But many of the component units of *Cache, Active* are not photograms but photographic contact prints. So what is the difference between a photogram and a contact print? A photogram is made without a photographic positive or negative. An object shadows the sensitized surface/paper to produce an image. A contact print is created when the sensitized surface/paper is put in contact with a photographic positive or negative.⁵ The “contact print” is frequently opposed to prints made with a photographic enlarger because contacts are sharper than prints made by enlargement. As we will see in a moment, sharpness is not the only reason contact printing is employed for certain photographic processes.

Some of the earliest photographs used a sensitized surface that visibly darkened when exposed to light. Known as a printing-out process (POP), the POP emulsion was so slow that the exposure had to be made under strong ultraviolet light. After 1880, a “faster” sensitized surface was developed. Developing-out processes (DOP) were optimized for exposure using artificial light. After developing-out paper was exposed to light, an invisible, “latent image” formed and this image was made visible by a chemical developer.

Although Chang is using DOP paper for *Cache, Active*, he is exposing it as a POP. That is, he's exposing the DOP paper to bright light and making a POP print on it. So, it should be noted, that in order to create the representational parts of *Cache, Active*, Chang needed to carefully think through the process of making the work. Chang's procedures in making the work are both necessary and roundabout. Necessary because in order to use DOP photographic paper as POP, Chang needed to put massive amounts of light on the paper to coax an image from the material. And, in order to make “photographic” images, a photographic enlarger would not be bright enough to expose the paper as a POP print. The roundabout solution Chang came up with was to create a same size negative from his original negative or digital file so that he could make a POP contact print with a UV light source on DOP paper.

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A quick aside here: Michaels and Chang mention that the photographic paper is “expired” in Cache, Active. When applied to photographic materials “expired” can be a bit inaccurate. Kodak puts an expiration date on its materials to tell you that they may not perform perfectly after the expiration date. Yet, as photographers, we all know that expired paper or film more often than not works exactly as it should some years after its expiration date. If expired paper were truly “expired,” as in “dead,” no image would result. I don’t know how old Chang’s paper is, but there is still enough chemical potential stored in to produce an image. Perhaps the idea of expired paper also adds to the affect inherent in the work; expired, no longer manufactured paper etc. is used. It occurs to me that Chang’s paper may not yield any sort of developed-out image, but there’s still enough silver in the paper to print-out. Or it may still be OK to print on using an enlarger. Either way, the paper has enough compounds that react to light so that the term “expired” is somewhat misleading.

The notion of making a photograph that eventually turns a black, recalls a paper that portrait photographers used in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Kodak Studio Proof 6 was a printing out paper that was intentionally left unfixed by photographer so the client’s picture would darken after a few hours. And the client would then have to buy prints that were properly fixed. I remember watching the proofs of my high school yearbook photographs turn black in the afternoon sun.

A few years ago I thought of curating a show of “black” photographs. In addition to Chang, the show would include work by

Jose Alvaro Perdices
Black Photos, 1997

Liz Deschenes
Tilt / Swing, 2009

Walead Beshty’s
Transparencies, 2009

Allan McCollum’s
Glossies, 1980

Marco Breuer
Nature of the Pencil, 2009

Breuer uses a sheet of maximally exposed and processed photographic paper (i.e. black paper) to carefully scratch lines at different depths to reveal colored dyes below. For Breuer, Phil’s work would be a starting point, not an end point.

Finally, I’d like to mention three works made by Chang’s peers that I associate with Cache, Active:

Erika Vogt’s *Action Unrestricted*, 2005, a film that unspools onto the exhibition floor, thereby hastening its destruction.

Mathew Brand’s *Lakes and Reservoirs*, 2011, waterlogged chromogenic prints with the emulsion partially destroyed

Evan Holloway’s, *Negative Value Drawing*, wherein the value of the work decreases (by fiat) each time it is sold.

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Holloway's drawing focuses on value inversion in the art world. In the art market, the older the thing is, the greater its value. Holloway flips this around and forces the first collector of the work to agree to sell it at a lower price in six months. And so on for the next purchaser. This is in line with the economics of digital technology where new devices are priced higher than old ones. Because of its inherent vice, photography occupies a somewhat fraught place between these two positions, and this seems to be the crux of matter in Chang's *Cache, Active*.

REFERENCES

1. I began my talk by mentioning that I do association not theory.↑
2. All analogue or chemical photographic processes make use of the tendency of silver compounds to darken when exposed to light.

Thomas Wedgwood and Humphrey Davy are often footnoted as the inventors of photography. In the first decade of the 19th century they created photograms on salted paper. However they were unable to fix the images they made, so the work eventually turned black. I've often wondered what happened to these images. I'd love to see one. Couldn't the blackening be chemically reversed or bleached back to discern an image?

In 1997 Sandra Goldbacher made "The Governess," a film about the invention of photographic fixer. Minnie Driver plays a destitute young woman who is forced to hide her Jewish identity in order to work as a tutor for a wealthy Scottish family. Driver falls in love with the mad-scientist-inventor-head-of-the-household, Tom Wilkinson who, like Wedgwood and Davy discovered a photographic process but could not fix his images. Driver is deeply moved by a fading photograph of a bird's wing and she embraces the quest to make the image permanent. She takes the picture back to her garret room and begins to celebrate—in secret—the Passover Seder. Driver accidentally splashes salt water on the print and this fixes it. From there the romance goes south when Wilkinson takes the credit for the all-important discovery. Driver's character leaves Scotland with this secret knowledge, returns to London and succeeds as a masterful portrait photographer.↑

3. http://www.wilhelm-research.com/about_us.html↑

4. Stephen Shore set his 8×10 color contact prints at low prices because he anticipated that they would fade. This price structuring may have been the result of Wilhelm's research into image permanence.↑

5. The printing plates in offset lithography are exposed by contact using a UV light source.↑

6. Introduced in 1892, discontinued in 1987, Kodak's Studio Proof printing-out paper was the longest continuously manufactured photographic paper.↑

About the Author

James Welling's books include *Glass House* (2011); *Light Sources* published by Steidl/Mack (2011); *Flowers* (2006); *Photographs 1974-99* (2000); *Wolfsburg* (1994); *Usines de Dentelle* (1993); and *Les Voies Ferrées/St. Etienne et La Plaine du Forez* (1990). In 2004, Welling produced the feature film *Easy* which screened in Dramatic Competition at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival.