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Art in America

PHOTOGRAPHY OBJET MANQUE

By Claire Barliant
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Gordon: Untitled, 2002, from *Flying Pictures*, published by PowerHouse books.

In 1978, in the pages of this magazine, sculptor Robert Morris bemoaned the “malevolent powers of the photograph to convert every visible aspect of the world into a static, consumable image.”¹ Today, when pictures captured by mobile phones or digital cameras are ubiquitous and photography so pervasive as to have become practically invisible, it’s worth parsing Morris’s statement. Note the vehement stance against photography—he calls its powers “malevolent.” And his other adjectives, “static” and “consumable,” are almost as harsh. Morris called the photographs Robert Smithson made of his outdoor mirror works “perverse,” saying they effectively mislead us as to what the pieces are about. Freezing the mirrors’ reflections and thereby rendering them moot, the photographs deny the phenomenological experience that lies at the heart of the work. Still, according to Morris, in requiring the viewer’s direct experience, the site-specific sculpture of his generation of artists was uniquely positioned to challenge photography’s adverse effects. “Space,” wrote Morris, “has avoided [photography’s] cyclopean evil eye.”²

Ironically, nearly 35 years after Morris published his article, photography is our main, if not only, conduit to much of the work that he was addressing. Already in 1947, André Malraux, while compiling the images that made up his “museum without walls,” posited that art history, especially the history of sculpture, had become “the history of that which can be photographed.”³ In 1989, the art historian Donald Preziosi wrote, “Art history as we know it today is the child of photography.”⁴ For many contemporary artists, a relentless flood of reproductions of artworks raises issues that cannot be ignored. Tino Sehgal, who choreographs live actions (he doesn’t call them performances) that encourage viewer participation, refuses to let any of his work be photographed. In a 2008 conversation in *Bomb* with artist Nayland Blake, sculptor Rachel Harrison lamented that the photograph inhibits the possibility of really grasping an art object: “Maybe I’m starting to think that artworks need to unfold slowly over time in real space to contest the instantaneous distribution and circulation of images with which we’ve become so familiar.”⁵

Partly in resistance, a rash of artists born after 1970—Talia Chetrit, Jessica Eaton, Daniel Gordon, Corin Hewitt, Alex Hubbard, Elad Lassry, Yamini Nayar, Demetrius Oliver, Erin Shirreff and Sarah VanDerBeek among them—are addressing (or redressing) the issues attendant on becoming familiar with an artwork through its photographic reproduction.⁶ Most of them have a studio-based practice that involves more than one medium—some are not even primarily photographers—but thinking about photography is central to what they do. Often their work includes handmade objects as well as photographic reproductions from any number of sources. They might build a sculpture based on a reproduction of an existing sculpture. They might videotape or photograph an object or setup they have created, destroying it after (and sometimes during) its documentation, or create an installation whose sole purpose is to generate photographs. Viewers consider the artwork before realizing that the object or situation they are contemplating no longer exists (a realization that is sometimes accomplished by reading some form of accompanying text). All that is left is the photographic trace—an objet manqué, as I think of it, using a somewhat antiquated art historical descriptor.⁷

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Today everybody knows that a reproduction is divested of a transparent relation to an original, yet that doesn't stop collectors from judging and buying work simply by looking at jpegs; indeed, most of us first experience an art object by seeing an image of it in an advertisement, a magazine or online. For artists, it seems natural to start with an object that they then drain of significance as an original through its reproduction and circulation.

By absenting the referent, they would assert control over a system of circulation that they see as generally depriving the artwork of its autonomy.

These artists take the virtual, and the idea of the simulacrum, for granted. For them, there is no "punctum," as Roland Barthes termed it—no lacerating detail that connects the image to a particular time and place. There are precedents in work by Hirsch Perlman, Barbara Kasten, Thomas Demand, James Casebere and James Welling, to name just a few. Going further back, one might cite the abstract photograms of László Moholy-Nagy—the polymath Bauhaus artist who dubbed photography "the new culture of light." Brancusi's sculptures survived, but not the studio arrangements in which he photographed them.

In our postmodern age, the image, the copy and the notion of what is "real" have been problematized many times over. These issues—surrounding the simulacrum and the trivializing of experience as a result of the pervasiveness of photography—came to the fore in the late 1970s, when many of these artists were growing up. Following is a discussion of four of them: artists who begin with the understanding that an image is based on a purely provisional object. They are proving the objet manqué newly relevant.



Gordon: Nectarines in Orange and Blue, 2011, chromogenic print, 24 by 30 inches. Courtesy of Wallspace.

DANIEL GORDON

Gordon, who graduated with an MFA in photography from Yale in 2006, has long played with the artifices of photography. As an undergraduate at Bard College he made a series of self-portraits "in flight" in various landscapes. Taking a running leap, he would launch himself in the air, torquing his body so that it was parallel to the ground. An assistant photographed him in midair before he came crashing back to earth.

Lately he has turned to a studio-centric (and safer) mode of working. For a show at Wallspace gallery in New York last fall, he created a series of C-prints called "Still Lives, Portraits & Parts," based on three-dimensional setups constructed of images culled from Google Image searches. The photographs are monstrous, Frankenstein-style heads or arrangements of fruit and flowers that allude to classical still-life paintings. A row of potted plants is composed of a range of photographs of succulents, while a bouquet of lilies is made of pictures of unconnected petals. Gordon finds imagery online, prints it out, crafts it into an approximation of the object it represents, and then creates a flat, two-dimensional image of the result.

Gordon has called his studio a "physical manifestation of the Web." He embraces a slightly rough esthetic, saying that he is interested in "showing my hand and letting people see the imperfection."⁹ In *Portrait in Red, Blue and Green* (2011), cut-out profiles cast silhouettes on surfaces behind them, making the third dimension of his setup explicit. Some of the images he cuts and tears apart are naturalistic, others have a glossy sheen and vibrant colors that create an illusion of slick digital effects, yet the overall quality of the construction announces, "Someone made this."

¹ Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," *Art in America*, January 1970, p. 79.

² *Ibid.*

³ Malraux, quoted in Geraldine A. Johnson, "Introduction," in Johnson, ed., *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1998, p. 2.

⁴ Quoted by Roxana Marcoci in *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1830 to Today*, exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2010, p. 12. "The Original Copy" exhibition raised provocative issues regarding the relationship between photography and its objects and was instrumental to me in the writing of this essay.

⁵ Rachel Harrison, "Rachel Harrison and Nayland Blake," *Bomb* 105, Fall 2008, available at bombsite.com.

⁶ Among the notable recent shows that have included these artists and/or others engaged in the conceptual aspects of photography were "New Photography 2009" (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, featuring six young photographers with a studio-based practice, and "The Anxiety of Photography" (2011), an overview of 18 artists at the Aspen Museum of Art.

⁷ See, for example, Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1975, p. 35. He writes, "Now it is essential to the notion of an image, or imitation, that it fall short in some way of its original; if the image were perfect—'expressing in every point the entire reality' of its object—it 'would no longer be an image,' but another example of the same thing (Cratylus 432; trans. Jowett)."