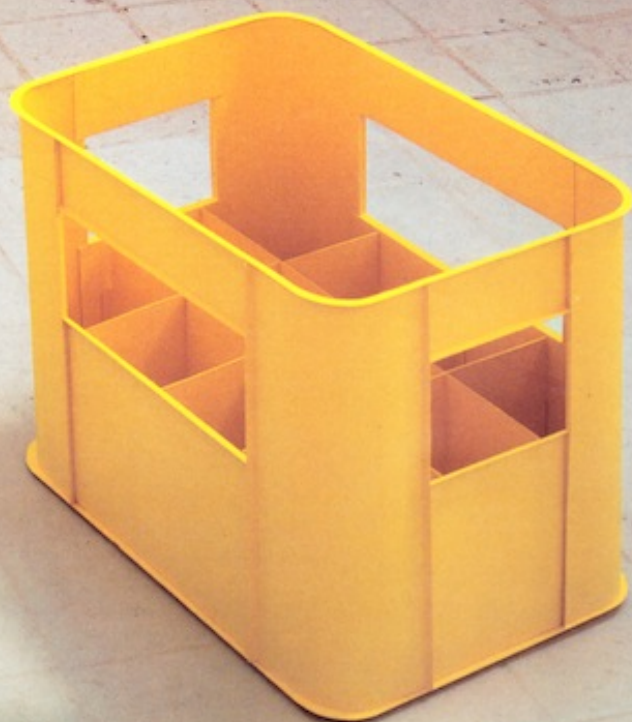


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New Paper Sculpture
The Timeless Chris Ware
Abstract Photography



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The Occasion of an Unfolding

Abstract photography is on the rise again, in reaction, it can be argued, to the widespread dominance of documentary-style photography.

by Lyle Rexer

When William Henry Fox Talbot began to make his first photographs in the late 1830s, he marveled not only that the world might be faithfully duplicated but that the duplication itself had its own properties. Its variable colors, its oddly abstract being, conjured on paper out of chemicals and light, were mesmerizing in their own right. This was a time before the language, repertoire, indeed the very ontology of the photograph, were established. Yes, it was a chemical process, usually mediated by a lens, but its powers of disclosure were unknown. Might it not offer evidence of things unseen, in nature and in the imagination of the artist? It is this search for a medium in which inner and outer worlds converge, and in which the conventional relation of the observer to reality is suspended, that has provided a continuous alternative impetus to photography since its inception. And the search is most fevered when the dominant ideology is the most objective, as it is now.

Photography today seems to be under the sway of documentary-style photographers—Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Alec Soth, Stephen Shore, Robert Mistrach. However, just as “the new

objectivity”—an exhaustive cataloguing of views and people with an emphasis on a purified, specific vision—emerged in German photography in the mid-1920s and engendered its shadow in the non-objective photograms and solarizations by Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, there has been a similar counterreaction in our time away from “objective” recording and toward non-objective photography. Photographer Ellen Carey, following Roland Barthes, has called this trend “Photography Degree Zero.”

Carey creates much of her work at Polaroid’s studio in Manhattan, pulling sheets as large as 40 by 80 inches through a giant Polaroid camera. The paper is either never exposed, or exposed only to a single flash of light, and is not imprinted with an image from outside of the camera. Her images result rather from the spread of the imageless pools of pigment and the reaction of the emulsion to factors such as temperature and humid-



Above: Ellen Carey, *Pull XL*, Polaroid 40 X 80 color positive, unique dye diffusion transfer print [128 x 44 in.], 2004. Courtesy the artist and Jayne H. Baum, New York, and Paesaggio Gallery, West Hartford, Connecticut. Opposite page: Silvio Wolf, *Horizon 05*, C-type [125 x 85 in.], 2003–4. Courtesy the artist.





This page: Ellen Carey, *Mourning Wall*, installation view, 2000.

Courtesy the artist and Jayne H. Baum, New York, and Paesaggio Gallery, West Hartford, Connecticut.

Opposite page, left: Richard Caldicott, *Untitled #208*, C-print (50 x 40 in.), 2002.

Courtesy of the artist and Ariel Meyerowitz Gallery, New York.

Opposite page, right: Roger Newton, *Untitled*, Ultrachrome (50 x 40 in.), 2003. Courtesy the artist.

ity. These “pulls” result in one-of-a-kind finished pieces. With the traditional Polaroid, the negative is thrown away; she keeps both the white-papered positive and the negative, which is not transparent but darkly opaque.

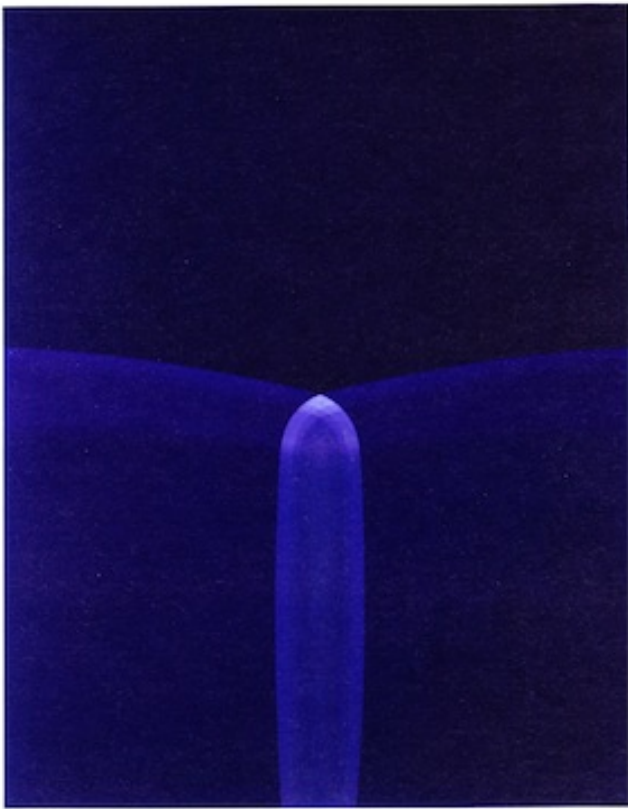
Carey’s work is a continuous play between experimentation and calculation. Her recent exhibition, installed in two galleries at Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum, created an alternative universe in which all the conventional terms of photography are reversed. In the main room, fourteen of the 80-inch Polaroids face each other, seven negatives and seven positives. The series, titled “Pulls XL” (2004), immediately contradicts the usual valorization of the terms “positive” and “negative,” showing them to be purely relational and equal, metaphysically as well as aesthetically. Likewise, the exhibition overturns the notion of a photograph as a displacement of the subject by its image. Instead of serving as a record of things no longer there, these photographs constitute present objects. They were installed hung like banners or emblems, metaphoric or utterly meaningless, depending on the viewer’s attitude and associations.

With the phrase “Photography Degree Zero,” Carey has encouraged an interpretation of her work as a form of minimalism. She implies a stripping away of imagery and with it the mimetic, ideological, and even expressive aspects of photo-

graphs—analogue to what happened to painting and sculpture in the 1960s. Her monumental *Mourning Wall* (2000), a series of one hundred unexposed 20-by-24-inch Polaroid negatives that are tiled to create a silver-gray wall, have the reductive quality and autonomy of Ad Reinhardt’s paintings. And yet the trajectory of Carey’s work over twenty-five years is specifically photographic, less a stripping away than a complex re-engagement with the material conditions of photography that its documentary and fine-art traditions have submerged. Her work reveals the metaphoric dimensions of photographic processes as well as the spiritual dimensions of viewing photographic images.

Of course, one can simply take a picture of a thing that looks abstract, or take it in such a way as to render the subject abstractly, as in Edward Weston’s eroded rocks, Brassai’s graffiti, or Aaron Siskind’s patterned walls. A close-up shot and tight cropping divest the subject of its familiarity and open it to interpretation and fugitive associations, but its status vis-à-vis the camera and the viewer remains unaltered. Something different happens with truly abstract photography.

Richard Caldicott is one of a group of English photographers who are exploring the abstract possibilities of photography, very much in the experimental spirit of Fox Talbot. Their investigations—“interventions” may be a better word—range from pro-



ducing particular effects through the way they treat the subject being photographed (i.e., by means of lighting, camera angle, focus, etc.) to various ways of manipulating the negative and the print. In Caldicott's work, it scarcely matters that his "subjects" are ordinary Tupperware containers. He lights them, photographs them, and then overlays the diaphanous images to create rich, delicate hues. At first glance, the large, luminous prints look like attempts to document the neon effects of Dan Flavin's fluorescent sculptures. Yet rather than record light, the images seem to emit it. Their subjects fall away, leaving an experience of pure light and color, independent of time and material origin.

The lens is the crucible of Roger Newton's images, the device that mediates between inner interpretation and outward events of light. He photographs through lenses that he fabricates himself, and is currently creating one from diamonds. In Newton's work, the lens structures vision but does not determine it. His images, hovering between abstraction and representation, or as he puts it, "below the level of expectation," embody uncertainty and solicit emotional response.

Unlike these more "scientific" investigators, Italian conceptual artist Silvio Wolf has followed a path to abstraction by exploring visual thresholds where images fail to communicate and are transformed into something else. In one installation, he



incorporated photographs of paintings that are so brightly lit that the reflections of the light off the paintings' glossy surfaces blotted out the images altogether. In another body of work, his photos of skylights sculpt precise zones of light and dark, transforming windows from avenues of viewing to sources of illumination. From there, it was a short step for Wolf to leaving all anecdotal reference behind. He discovered that developing the end of an accidentally exposed film roll could create binary color-field abstractions. Wolf calls them "Horizons," but their power and pathos reside not in their evocation of landscape but in their telltale signs of photographic origin—the spread of emulsion and the darkening at the end of the film. These "photographs" invite us to leave behind a world of familiar representation and enter a world of new actualities.

Photography Degree Zero sets up a dialogue between seeing and being, between encounters with unclassifiable objects and an experience of vision unbound from conventional seeing. "Photography," as Roger Newton says, "can be an analogy of the physical world or an expression of a spiritual impulse, but it can be other things as well. It can be the representation of an expansive experience, the occasion of an unfolding."

—*Lyle Rexer is a writer based in New York.*