

Photographic Practices in the Studio at MoMA, New York

ON PICTURE-TAKERS AND NEGATIVE-MAKERS

With his first MoMA exhibition, Chief Curator of Photography Quentin Bajac upends analog photography's reputation as world-dependent, giving it some special capacity to mirror exactly what the lens sees, which for most people remains the hallmark of 'old-school' photography. In my mind, he had two good reasons to stage an exhibition that challenges this entrenched notion. Given digital photography's obvious user-dependent capabilities, analog photography is problematically perceived as its world-dependent rival. Straightly photographers are thus cast as picture-takers, while digital printers are negative-makers.

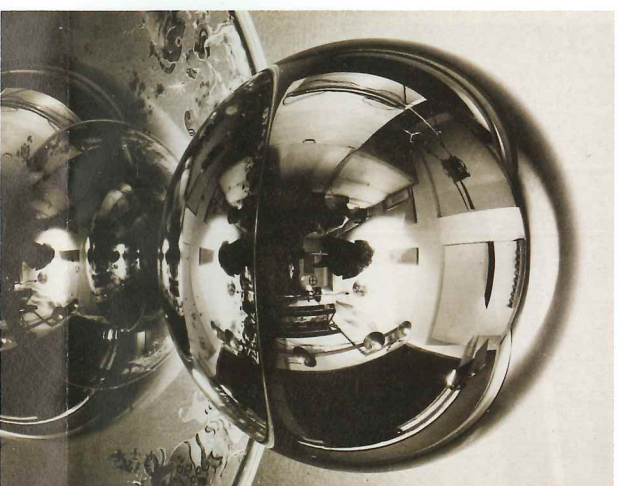
Bajac's exhibition title 'A World of Its Own' not only riffs on Virginia Woolf's essay 'A Room of One's Own', in which she ties creativity to personal autonomy, but the title also characterizes a world of its own 'making', as in, a world constructed by the photographic process itself. By linking analog photography to creative-independence, this exhibition derails the typical tendency to perceive works by Richard Avedon, Karl Blossfeldt, Irving Penn, Thomas Ruff, Edward Steichen, William Wegman or Edward Weston as merely 'descriptive, documentary photography'.

Instead of presuming to know what the camera saw, spectators leave 'A World of Its Own' won-

dering what really happened. And if this show has a particular flaw, it may just be the absence of fascinating stories that are invisible to sight. By describing how 'unstraightforward' Penn's studio practice really was, Palazzo Grassi's extremely comprehensive Penn exhibition goes miles to cure our amnesia regarding analog photographers' decepted operations. As it turns out, Penn, who was criticized for decontextualizing his sitters, that is, depicting them detached from their environment, worked most of his photographic magic in the dark room, quite happily manipulating his photographs, and by extension his subjects, all the more. Penn hand-brushed emulsions, varied the ratio of platinum salts to other metals and modified exposure times, altering negatives to determine each print's character. MoMA's exhibition features a 1983 photograph of Paruro Indians, shot in a Cuzco studio by Peruvian photographer Martín Chambi fifteen years before Penn's Cuzco series, as well as six 'staged' photographs from the mid-19th Century, reminding us that photographic deception arrived with its inception.

NEUTRAL SPACE

Divided into six sections, 'A World of Its Own' differentiates 171 photographs into: 1) Surveying the Studio (10 photographs), 2) The Studio as Stage (22), 3) The Studio as Set (21), 4) A Neutral Space (35), 5) Virtual Spaces (18) and 6) The Studio, from Laboratory to Playground (65). Most people who follow contemporary photography and art will recognize most names here, though probably not Michele Abeles, Geta Brătescu, Dudley Lee or Barbara Morgan. The first three categories are rather straightforward. Intriguing studio images include Uta Barth's triptych 'Sundial



Man Ray, 'Laboratory of the Future', 1935, gelatin silver print, 23.1 x 17.8 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of James Johnson Sweeney, © 2014 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

(07.13)' (2007), Geta Brătescu's 'The Working Desk' (1971) and Man Ray's 'Laboratory of the Future' (1935). Staged photographs present people either as subjects bathed in light and shadow, or as objects to be posed, such as Akram Zaatari's rephotographed found photographs. Four interesting photographs of 3-D constructions by Shozo Kitadi and Kiyoji Otsuji defy the mostly formal photographs in the set-up section.

After experiencing this exhibition, it proves difficult, if not counter-productive, to ever again view the studio as a neutral space, making Harry

Callahan's 'Eleanor' (1948), plus 34 other Neutral Space images of birds, plants, brussels sprouts, mannequins and body parts seem suspect, not impartial. Virtual Spaces repeatedly prompts the 'wow' factor, since one has no clue how photographers like Nicholas Ház, Mariah Robertson, Osamu Shihara or Luigi Veronesi produced their abstract prints. The largest section, which features photographers mixing technology and imagination, includes several interesting projects, including films by David Askevold, Peter Fischli/David Weiss, Bruce Nauman, Roman Signer and William Wegman. Here, time's impact predominates, given its inclusion of Eadweard J. Muybridge and Harold Edgerton's motion studies, Berenice Abbott's magnet-and-wave series, and images of Adrian Piper's fasting on a juice diet, while reading Immanuel Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason' during the summer of 1971.

In light of digital photography's indubitable fictional status, photography curators are now focused on erasing erroneous assumptions concerning analog photography. As 'A World of Its Own' demonstrates, photography has always been a printing process, rendering the connection between photographs and their subject pure fiction. Analog photographers focused on negative-making, not picture-taking, prove just as imaginative as their digital progeny, so long as they engage the medium as a user-dependent technology.

Sue SPAID

A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio until 5 October at Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA.
www.moma.org

'Irving Penn, Resonance' until 31 December at Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy. www.palazzograssi.it