Analogue Photography in the New Media Age
Photographic History Research Centre, De Montfort University, Leicester (UK)
29 April 2014 - Edith Murphy Building - Room EM2.09 and EM2.10

Analogue Photography in the New Media Age will explore the social and aesthetic appeal of resuscitating analogue photographic practices in a digital world. Recent decades have seen the emergence of photographic practices and technologies that have resuscitated either historical image-making techniques or merely the visual properties of analogue photographs. Some of these practices make use of actual analogue processes as alternatives to the digital means of photographic production readily available at present. Others utilise the digital technologies and platforms designed to support the production of photographic imagery whose appearance connotes the aesthetics of analogue photographs. Either way, a tendency to recreate or replicate the visual and physical characteristics of analogue photographs appears to be prevalent amongst amateur and professional practitioners alike.

While scholarly literature on this subject appears scanty, eclectic popular sources provide a number of possible reasons to explain the increasing number of analogue and analogue-looking photographs produced in the new media age. Some believe it is a nostalgic reaction to the rapid transformation of photographs into virtual ephemeral images, that are hyperrealistic and thereby removed from reality itself. Others claim it is the product of digital natives’ curiosity about what they interpret as obsolete technologies and the aesthetics of past times. According to another view, the tangibility of analogue processes and the ability to modify realistic representations by digital means make users feel in control of the mechanical and digital means of photographic production, as well as involved in the materialisation of photographic images and objects. In line with this perception, it is suggested that digital natives understand the physicality of analogue processes as the difference between amateur and professional practice.

It would seem that, in fact, this return to the analogue defines digital photography, its benefits, conventional uses and also its limits and limitations. The one-day postgraduate symposium will foster an interdisciplinary approach to the investigation of the current trend of returning to or reinterpreting analogue photography. It aims to address a diverse range of environments in which photographs are produced, disseminated or displayed to include, for example, social media, art galleries and museums, educational activities, photographic societies, camera clubs, and others.
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10.30: Registration, Tea/Coffee (room EM2.09)

11.00: Gil Pasternak (Photographic History Research Centre, De Montfort University, UK).
"Introduction and opening remarks: fun, sociability, tactility, and the 'authentic' self" (room EM2.10)

11.30-13.00: Materiality and Cultural Meaning (room EM2.10) – Chair: Kelley Wilder
Allison Pappas (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA).
"Between ablation and obsolescence: analogue self-destruction in contemporary photography"
Frances Cullen (McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada).
"Cameraless abstraction and the wonder of photography"
Lynette Zeeng (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia).
"Prussian blue – cyanotype and the digital age"

13.00-14.00: Lunch break (lunch provided in room EM2.09).
During lunchtime we will project "Gustav, Graham and Lee", a 9 minutes film by Anna Lucas (De Montfort University).

14.00-15.30: Processes and Social Practices (room EM2.10) – Chair: Beatriz Pichel
Alan Duncan; Benjamin Dolman, Terry Kavanagh (Loughborough University, UK).
"Exploring traditional photographic processes in the digital age"
Katie Cooke (Photographic History Research Centre, De Montfort University, UK).
"Authenticity and mysticism in modern wet plate collodion photography and its digital emulations"
Marine Cabos (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK).
"The practice of referencing in contemporary Chinese photography"

15.30-15.45: Tea/Coffee (room EM2.09)

15.45-16.30: Plenary Lecture (room EM2.10) – Chair: Gil Pasternak
Professor David Frohlich (Director, Digital World Research Centre School of Arts, University of Surrey).
"Re-inventing the family album"

16.30-17.00: Questions and open discussion (room EM2.10)

17.00-18.00: Symposium reception (room EM2.09)
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Allison Pappas (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA).  
Email: apappas@mfah.org

"Between ablation and obsolescence: analogue self-destruction in contemporary photography"

Photographs are inherently self-ablating. Made from light and passed through chemical baths of water, photographic prints succumb to destruction through moisture and light from the very moment of their creation. As this conference suggests, the turn or return to analogue processes as a response to today's digital dominance is increasingly common amongst artists working with photo-based practices. This paper explores one impetus behind this return, focusing on a handful of artists who employ analogue processes to make work that emphasizes its inherent material, photographic properties through referencing its own degradation, deterioration, depletion, or destruction, mirroring the increasing obsolescence of the processes themselves. At their core, digital photographs are spawned out of pixels, light captured on a sensor and transformed into electronic code, infinitely transferable, impalpable, seemingly immaterial. An abstract concept, it is hard to find the thing there, a fact that calls for an analogue response.

In Lament and Latent (ongoing from 2007), Alison Rossiter processes photographic papers that expired decades ago, looking for light exposure, fingerprints, mold, atmospheric damage, signs of the paper's historic deterioration embedded in the print, transforming them into the image, the very purpose of the work. Matthew Buckingham's Image of Absalon to Be Projected Until it Vanishes (2001) consists of a 35mm slide projected continuously in the exhibition space as the heat of the projector lamp burns the slide’s photographic emulsion, slowly dissolving the image until it fades into a white oblivion. Chris McCaw loads sheets of photographic paper directly into his camera and leaves the shutter open for minutes or hours in Sunburn (ongoing from 2006), allowing the rays of the sun to literally burn cuts through the surface of the paper. Made by means of and to the end of their own destruction, these photographs and others like them are all about the thing there, or the thing that will not be there much longer. The return to analogue may be a response to both the inherent ephemerality of the analogue product and the apparent immateriality of the digital process, denying obsolescence through a continual cycle of material creation and ablation.
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Frances Cullen (McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada).
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"Cameraless abstraction and the wonder of photography"

From monolithic, politically-informed conceptual artworks such as Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin’s panoramic exposure “The Day Nobody Died” (2008); to the poetic and intimate photograms created almost in the way of personal meditations by photographers such as Hiroshi Sugimoto and Michael Flomen; to the home ‘sun photography’ kits available for purchase in boutiques and retail chains like Urban Outfitters, contemporary applications of cameraless photochemical techniques appear with increasing frequency as the digital age advances. These quietly proliferating practices certainly align, as the standard account would hold, with the generalized analogue nostalgia that defines photochemical technologies in counter-distinction from digital media. But their emergence further prompts questions about the intersections of recent photographic abstraction with a neo-modern tendency of contemporary aesthetics, especially in light of the history of modernist photography. When scholars like Rosalind Krauss claim that obsolescence has enabled reinvigorated formal innovation by the reinvention of media, thereby liberating modern technologies like analogue photography from their various complicities, they thus subvert the real relationship between artistic form and photographic desire. I argue, to the contrary, that it is a linkage of photographic materiality to enchantment with the world that – for better or for worse – these practices in fact bring into relief.

This paper will begin to probe that assertion with a survey of the way that cameraless photochemical technologies have been mobilized in a range of discursive and institutional settings in the digital age (specifically in the art world, fine art photography, and commercial contexts), employing a methodology informed by new thinking about materiality. After establishing the connection between photographic materiality, abstraction, and an aesthetic of enchantment, it will ask of these practices: What, exactly, have these strategies been mobilized to mystify? And with what consequences?
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Lynette Zeeng (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia).
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“Prussian blue – cyanotype and the digital age”

Throughout photographic history, one-off processes have been developed, each with specific nuances and technological variances. Each one of these processes have sort to create an instantly tactile image to possess, a unique representation of a single, unrepeatable moment in time. As a practicing Photographer, this uniqueness is extremely important to my personal practice.

Advancements in photographic technologies, which accelerated with the onset of digital photography, have rendered the one-off image a thing of the past. The digital age has allowed us the ability to infinitely replicate, enhance and store images. This paper will reflect on modern practice and argue that there is still a place for one-off photographic techniques. By embracing available technology such as scanners, digital negatives and modern chemicals, historical one–off processes may be given a new lease on life without losing their veracity.

This paper will in particular examine two areas of exploration relating specifically to the Cyanotype process. Firstly, it will describe the historical framework of this one-off process, and secondly the use of new technologies in a personal body of work. It will investigate Sir John Herschel's original research and application of the cyanotype process and examine the legacy left by Anna Atkins. Her prolific botanical studies over two decades using cyanotype, was heralded for its scientific, as well as artistic merit. It will explore the use of Dr Mike Ware's formulae for the “new cyanotype”, and will discuss how this beautiful Prussian blue process can be sustained. Lastly, this paper will explore a personal body of work using the cyanotype process, to document an area of endangered forest in Victoria. As Christopher James maintains “The future of photography is in the past”
13.00-14.00: Lunch break (lunch provided in room EM2.09).

During lunchtime we will project "Gustav, Graham and Lee", a 9 minutes film by Anna Lucas (De Montfort University).

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“Gustav, Graham and Lee” is a short film in which we see a technician unpacking works held within the Tate’s moving image collection. Operating a bit like a demonstration film, the analogue anatomy of slide and 16mm film projectors is revealed step by step as he cleans the mechanics and lenses, teasing their fragile parts into action. As technology develops, these once familiar machines become increasingly hard to maintain, but without them the artwork itself will not be visible. The preservation of the nation’s contemporary artworks becomes a challenging task for the conservators, bringing them into contact with a dying breed of experts, and amateurs who have the equipment and skills required to activate analogue film and slide works. The camera moves from the storage warehouse where we see iconic artworks packaged, racked and stacked, to the close focus of activity in the workshop. Responding to the notion that, in contrast to much visual art conservation, film and video work is preserved and remembered through its display, this film prompted Tate to bring a time based media work out of storage to be screened as part of In Site of Conversation in December 2012.

The work is one of a series of my 16mm films observing amateur experts and technicians with a vernacular knowledge frequently related to the natural world, folklore or to pedagogical institutions. The presence of the camera, process and films’ materiality are exploited to propose a quieter, slower document, devoid of voice over, and perhaps a resolutely unentertaining quality at odds with the contemporary (digital) mainstream. Gustav Graham and Lee was commissioned as part of a research project In Site of Conversation, by Tate Learning and has been screened at Tate Modern, toured UK as part of OutpostOpen Film 2012 and at Modern Edinburgh Film School 2013.
14.00-15.30: Processes and Social Practices (room EM2.10) – Chair: Beatriz Pichel

Alan Duncan, Benjamin Dolman, and Terry Kavanagh (Loughborough University, UK).

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“Exploring traditional photographic processes in the digital age”

During the last five years the School of the Arts at Loughborough University has made significant investments in its photographic facilities. In particular, it now has one of the best large-format photography resources in Europe. Current research relates to relationships between the digital and the analogue, exploring traditional processes in combination with emerging technologies, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary research in the areas of innovation and novel processes, and value-added in production.

Although many historic photographic processes have all but disappeared, or are difficult to replicate, there has been a significant rise in interest because the resultant images are often of outstanding quality, both technically and aesthetically. A recent project combines some of the chemical processes developed in the late 19th and early 20th century, such as the use of ‘Noble Metals’, along with digital print technologies and new materials. There is no doubt that many of these traditional methods have potential significance for contemporary artistic practice. The challenge, however, is that the materials employed are expensive, potentially dangerous and are not fully understood or exploited. The objective, therefore, is to enable future widespread utilisation by establishing systematised, quantified, optimised and commercially viable processes.
Katie Cooke (Photographic History Research Centre, De Montfort University, UK). Email: Katie.cooke@gmail.com

"Authenticity and mysticism in modern wet plate collodion photography and its digital emulations"

By exploring the reception of Sally Mann’s collodion works in the mainstream media, fine art criticism, and specialist wet plate forums as a case study, this paper will show how the use of visual process artefacts has created a new aesthetic that foregrounds the physicality of process and the role of chance rather than a nostalgic replication of nineteenth century photography.

Analysing the emotionally charged language employed by viewers, critics, and amateur collodion practitioners reveals a range of contradictory assumptions about the motivations for working with historic processes, and the sense of value imbued by visible traces that emphasise complexity and materiality.

Identifying where these artefacts are assumed to be an inherent part of the process, a deliberate strategy, or a sign of poor technique illuminates contrasting attitudes towards the roles of craft, play, and accident in a digital age where technical perfection—or at least competence—is readily achievable, but not always sought. This helps unravel the paradox of adopting the appearance of “flawed” making or decomposition as shorthand for authenticity in digital emulations of wet plate photography, a technological advance originally celebrated for its clarity and precision.

Echoing the earliest debates about the role of the artist versus the camera, modern collodion practice can therefore be understood within the wider context of both analogue and digital work that seeks to reintroduce visual evidence of the artist’s active involvement by disrupting mechanical perfection, through degradations of the image that range from faux-vintage filters, and the use of toy or primitive cameras and damaged film, to software glitch art.
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“The practice of referencing in contemporary Chinese photography”

This paper explores the current trend of resuscitating analogue photography in contemporary China, with a particular emphasis on what I have termed the practice of referencing. This concept conveys three phenomena: the use of old photographic techniques, the act of ‘rephotographying’ iconic images, and the evocation of traditional paintings. Over the last decade, Chinese photographers such as Liu Zheng, Adou and Wang Tong among others have embraced late nineteenth century technologies and/or have drawn their inspiration from early photographs. How then have contemporary Chinese photographers used past-image making? To what extent has analogue photographic practice diversified the practice of photography in the digital age? How can this practice draw attention to social changes and different sets of values ascribed to photography in contemporary China? The growing utilization of the collodion process among other ancient techniques and turning C-prints into seemingly analogue photographs appear as a means of coping with today’s increasing non-physicality and loose definition of digital photography. Besides, the changing faces of Chinese society, the growing market demand for early photography, the need to transmit individual and collective memory in face of the loss of photographic archives, all these factors might have triggered this new approach to photography. This paper illuminates the impact of analogue photography on the transmission of historical and aesthetic knowledge, and indicates how contemporary photographs in China can be employed to revive and rethink China’s cultural heritage.

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15.45-16.30: Plenary Lecture (room EM2.10) – Chair: Gil Pasternak

Professor David Frohlich (Director, Digital World Research Centre School of Arts, University of Surrey).
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"Re-inventing the family album"

Photographic practice has changed radically in recent years with the digitization of image capture and sharing technologies. One consequence of this has been a decline in the materiality of photographs, as experienced through loose prints and photograph albums. In this talk, Professor Frohlich draws on a new history of analogue and digital photography to illustrate the birth and possible death of the family album, alongside recent technology developments that could re-invent the album in various ways. These include networked photo displays for dynamic image collections, digital scrapbooking and media crafting systems, and augmented paper.

Professor David Frohlich is Director of Digital World Research Centre at the University of Surrey and Professor of Interaction Design. He joined the Centre in January 2005 to establish a new research agenda on user-centred innovation in digital media technology. Prior to joining Digital World, David worked for 14 years as a senior research scientist at HP Labs, conducting user studies to identify requirements and test new concepts for mobile, domestic and photographic products. David has a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Sheffield and post-doctoral training in Conversation Analysis from the University of York. He has also held visiting positions at the Royal College of Art, Universities of York and Manchester and is founding editor of the international journal Personal and Ubiquitous Computing.

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