Biennale 2015: The Post-Photographic Condition

Selected photographs from this year’s Mois de la Photo Montreal (https://www.lensculture.com/mois-de-la-photo-montreal)

As easily as you can reach into your pocket, take out your phone and snap a photograph, you might just as easily be tempted to ask, “Well then, is photography dead?”

In one way, of course not—it’s as popular as ever! But given the aforementioned instantaneity of capturing a photograph, the craft of image-making has become secondary and no longer requires a set of skills that shooting in film once did. We are also no longer constrained by the 36 frames of our film roll—a dozen shots can be captured without so much as a conscious effort. As a result, we are living in a distinctly new era of visual culture characterized by the mass (nearly infinite) production of images.

“While Cartier-Bresson (in 1952) presented us with the idea of the ‘decisive moment,’ today it is about the non-decisive moment, the banal instance. Today we photograph everything and everywhere, even if it’s not a historical or solemn moment,” explains the renowned Dutch photographer Ed Van Der Elsken was part of the hipster, bohemian scene in Paris, when, in 1956, he published a groundbreaking photobook called Love on the Left Bank. That book has been beautifully reprinted, and it captures the joie de vivre of that seemingly carefree era.

Erica Simone wondered what it would feel like to be naked in the big city. So she embarked on a project of self-portraits in some unlikely public places.
Catalan photographer Joan Fontcuberta, curator for this year’s edition of Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal.

In exploring the theme of “The Post-Photographic Condition,” Fontcuberta takes us on an eclectic, if necessarily selective, tour of contemporary photographic practices that are pushing us to question our most fundamental beliefs about the field. Is this the decisive moment? No—but it is one filled with possibility.

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Today, billions of images circulate the internet, demanding, in their volume, “How can photography be defined amidst this wave of imagery?” Other interesting questions follow: Who can be considered the author of an image when technological devices and non-human beings can legally claim ownership? How has society appropriated the use of photographic devices into all levels of culture? And finally—what does this all reflect about us?

Fontcuberta’s show features the works of 29 artists who explore these ideas and try to answer some of these ontological questions about the medium—and about ourselves. Across the festival, Fontcuberta claims our relationship with images has significantly changed and that images now occupy a wholly new role in our lives. The shift from analogue to digital and the almost universal appropriation of photography has created fundamental shifts in our era’s social values and our visual understanding of the surrounding world.

Fontcuberta writes, “I believe that post-photography is not a style or a historical movement but a rerouting of visual culture. It is a concept we should express serious interest in because it defines a new relationship we’ve adopted with our images. Photography is an instrument that allows us to consider who we are today, what our society stands for and what it will become.”

One of the festival’s most exciting projects is from Argentinian photographer Leandro Berra. His series “Autoportrait Robots” explores notions of identity, appearances and memory. Berra asked volunteers to produce self-portraits of themselves without the use of a photograph or a mirror. Instead, they used the Faces program—an advanced computer technology used by Interpol, the FBI and the CIA—to photo-realistically reconstruct their own facial features from their own memory. The final product puts a virtual image and a “classical” portrait of the subject side-by-side. This project highlights the gap existing between our mental perceptions of ourselves against the external, visible reality.

Among other changes, our society has clearly developed scopophilia, a pleasure of looking. Eased by the accessibility of information and the transparency of our lives, a universal voyeurism has become commonplace. We live, now, in a time of saturation—Fontcuberta identifies this phenomena not as “Big Brother,” but “Big Papa.”

For example, since February 2015, Facebook adopted new policies that immortalize the accounts of deceased individuals. Their profiles become virtual memorials—they can be viewed but not actively managed. A collective named After Faceb00k explores this curious feature through their project “In Loving Memory <3.” The artists browsed through thousands of preserved profiles to document the circulation of photographs and how mourning occurs on the social network. Although seemingly voyeuristic, the photographs expose the wholly public nature of these internet memorials.

As Fontcuberta tells us: “We live in screens now, as well as in reality. We make major life decisions when we choose where to place ourselves (virtually). We custom-create different identities depending on the circumstances. We each have the ability to create new public identities from thin air, which in turn dissolves privacy, making intimacy transform into

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extimacy (http://nancyfriedman.typepad.com/away_with_words/2009/03/word-of-the-week-extimacy.html). Today we are members of a community where sharing is the primary principle...

However, this hyper-visibility is not without costs. As the work of Laia Abril (https://www.lensculture.com/laia-abril) demonstrates, we have become increasingly aware and sensitive about our physical appearances and our visual impressions on social networks [or completely numb to them, as she shows in a different series, "Tediousphilia (https://www.lensculture.com/articles/laia-abril-tediousphilia)]. In her series "Thinspiration," she documents the tyranny of the image—as well as the social pressures we have placed on ourselves—by looking at anorexic men and women. Abril questions whether photography is a tool for therapy, helping the subject become aware of his/her reality, or if photography merely increases the aggravation of each person’s condition.

Abril’s project also raises another key preoccupation of Fontcuberta’s festival—the question of authorship in the world of post-photography? For example, in "Thinspiration," Abril photographed her subjects’ selfies from her computer screen. In other words, she never formally photographed them in reality.

In Fontcuberta’s mind, this represents a bold step for photography: “A new status of the author is born. […] There is a different aesthetic to our access of content, which is immediate. This aesthetic of immediacy brings us to an aesthetic of excess. There is currently an epidemic of images, a bulimia of images, so if creating no longer consists of the creation of artworks, then it now consists of a prescription of meaning.”

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The field of photography has never been more in a flux of change or experimentation. Post-photography is a transitional period that is challenging our conventional perceptions of what images should look like and represent. In addition, as the new role of the author continues to be defined, this broader definition will be utilized to produce more innovative visual aesthetics. Whether or not we approve of the direction in which the field is heading, one thing seems certain—photography is here to stay.

—Athina Lugez

Editors’ Note: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2015 (http://moisdelaphoto.com/en/) features 29 artists from five continents, and presents more than 100 works. The festival will run from September 10 to October 11, 2015.

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