Significant Surfaces

by
Michelle O'Byrne
BFA(hons), Ryerson University, 2010

A THESIS ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF APPLIED ARTS

in

Visual Arts

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART & DESIGN

2014

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper explores the conventions and limitations of the photographic medium, both material and representational. Suggesting that photography is situated at an important point within its evolution, the paper searches for new directions within a photo-based practice, which continues to challenge and push the limits of the medium.

Examining the way in which photography mediates and shapes experience, this thesis engages with popular photography, as a language with its own syntactical and semantic rules. Through explorations of the syntax of photography, parallels are drawn between the structure of language and the structure of photography. Metonymic structures within photographic language are discussed, with examples of the artist's work that aim to reveal and disrupt the metonymic nature of images.

The role of collecting in the practice is defined as a first step in a process of coming to understand the world and its representations. Asserting the power of collage to disrupt and challenge representations, through a process of play and embracing ambiguity and uncertainty, the thesis culminates with a discussion of the development of genre mixing within the practice as a necessary evolution.

List of Images

Acknowledgements

My thanks to all community members at Emily Carr University who have assisted me in this process particularly my advisor Kyla Mallett who has offered invaluable mentorship and support throughout. To all my family and friends, thank you for inspiring and supporting me. Special thanks to my parents who have always encouraged me to pursue my passions and to my sister Maeve who is also my best friend. Finally Pascale, Patryk, Maddie and Amiel, thank you for two years of conversation and growth, I look forward to many more years as colleagues and friends.

Introduction

With a practice that had exclusively used the photographic as a mode of expression, I commenced the Master's program with investigations into the syntax of photography. Attempting to come to an understanding of the syntactical features of photography through manuals and images, I sought to examine, understand and deconstruct photographic conventions. Contemplating the power and desires of the photographic image through critical theory and my daily experience, I developed the belief that it is imperative to take agency over images in a world which is dominated by them.

I wondered what might lie beyond the material and representational limits of photography. What was photography unable to do? What could it not say or evoke in its viewer? My practice evolved into exploiting and exploring this oscillation between the sayable and unsayable, to question and point to conventions of photographic representation.

This thesis asks what it would be like to try and make a new experience of a photographic representation beyond its original form. Furthermore, it queries what the translation of a flat image into material form might reveal to the viewer. It questions the metonymic nature of images and their resulting power to exclude other ways of being. In the chapters that follow, both my methodology and values as an artist are established. A practice emerges in which the method and methodology struggle against absolutes, instead embracing uncertainty and ambiguity as states in which creative expression can thrive.

Photo-Dialogue

If we define language as a mode of communication with given rules and limits in order to facilitate mutual understanding, photography is clearly a language in itself, with its own unique set of limits and conventions. Walter Benjamin declared that the illiterate of the future would be those who could not read photographic images (*Little History of Photography,* 527). While this may have been true at that point in the history of photography, we could perhaps extend that to say those who are unable to enter into the dialogue of photography today are at a marked disadvantage in a time when images have taken an increasingly important role in communication, whether it be through advertising or social networking. [1]

The proliferation of the photograph has led theorists to question the effects of the ubiquity of images on lived experience. Jean Baudrillard, well known for his critiques and observations of capitalist consumer society, famously argued in *Simulacra and Simulation* that we are in "the desert of the real" (1); a place where all experience is mediated through images. Vilem Flusser and WJT Mitchell have further explored facets of society's dependency on images, and the implications and possibilities opened up by this dependency, in their respective texts *Into the World of Technical Images* and *What do Pictures Want?*

Flusser posits that the prevalence of technical images has led to "a mutation of our experiences, perceptions, values, and modes of behavior, a mutation of our being-in-the world"(22). Here, he defines two divergent trends within image making. The first is one in which a feedback loop leads to the creation of the same images over and over leading towards a totalitarian society.[2] The second is the dialogical approach in which citizens engage in a dialogue using images, engaging with others' images and creating their own. The practice that is discussed in this paper embraces the dialogical mode, refusing to be passive in the reception of the image.

In WJT Mitchell's *What do Pictures Want?*, he likens photographic images to living organisms, which by nature have desires, suggesting, "the question of what pictures want is inevitable." (11). The agency of the image that is suggested in this text is problematic as it could lead to an abdicating of responsibility for images on the part of the maker. The image may take on a life of its own after being released into the world but we must recognize that people with agency produce images, under specific ideological systems using a particular apparatus. The apparatus, the ideological system

[1] On Wednesday March 12, 2014 instagram.com reported that an average of 55 million photos are uploaded every day. While according to a Facebook white paper 'More than 250 billion photos have been uploaded to Facebook, and more than 350 million photos are uploaded every day on average.' ("A Focus on Efficiency: A white paper from Facebook, Ericsson and

[2] The society would be totalitarian in that there would be one view of the world promoted by the dominant ideology.

under which the image is made, and the subjectivity of the individual making the photograph all contribute to the creation of the photograph. This in turn determines what the photograph may want, as Mitchell would put it. I suggest that the image cannot ask anything that it has not being given the words to ask when it was created. Furthermore the questions we hear from images are culturally determined.

WJT Mitchell's question *What Do Pictures Want?,* recognizes the way in which power can be embedded within an image and how the image can exert power over the viewer. In my work I ask 'What Do Pictures Want?' yet suggest that neither I, nor my viewer, need to give them what they want, in fact we can do with them as we please. I propose that we are the masters of the images that surround us. They are entities, which only have the power we grant them. Through my practice I enact my own agency on the images and objects around me and through these interventions draw attention to their interpretive ambiguity. This gives the viewer not only a view into my interpretive space but also encourages them to exploit the interpretive ambiguity of the photograph for their own ends. This ambiguity does not only manifest itself in the images and objects but in ideological standpoints. It is my hope that through interventions in manifestations of dominant ideology the viewer will be encouraged to question not only the images and objects surrounding them, but the system that perpetuates them.

Interjecting within the photographic dialogue in order to reveal its constructions and its flaws has been a tactic used by artists for quite some time: notably by the 'Pictures Generation', which includes Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, Phillip Smith and Tony Brauntuch, who were all represented in the original *Pictures* show curated by Douglas Crimp at Artist's Space in New York City (1979). Other artists of the same generation, working in a similar mode were later recognized in the exhibition, *The Pictures Generation,* curated by Douglas Eklund at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (2009)[3] In the text accompanying the original exhibition, Crimp asserts the interpretive ambiguity of the photograph emphasizes its "resistance to specific meaning" (25). Through making interventions in the photographic dialogue, the artists refused passivity in regards to representation. This resistance allowed for a multitude of interpretations of pre-existing images.

[3] The number of artists included in The Pictures Generation exhibition was much larger with the following artists being represented: John Baldessari, Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Bloom, Eric Bogosian, Glenn Branca, Troy Brauntuch, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth, Rhys Chatham, Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Thomas Lawson, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Allan McCollum, Paul McMahon, MICA-TV (Carole Ann Klonarides & Michael Owen), Matt Mullican, Richard Prince, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Michael Smith, James Welling and Michael Zwack.

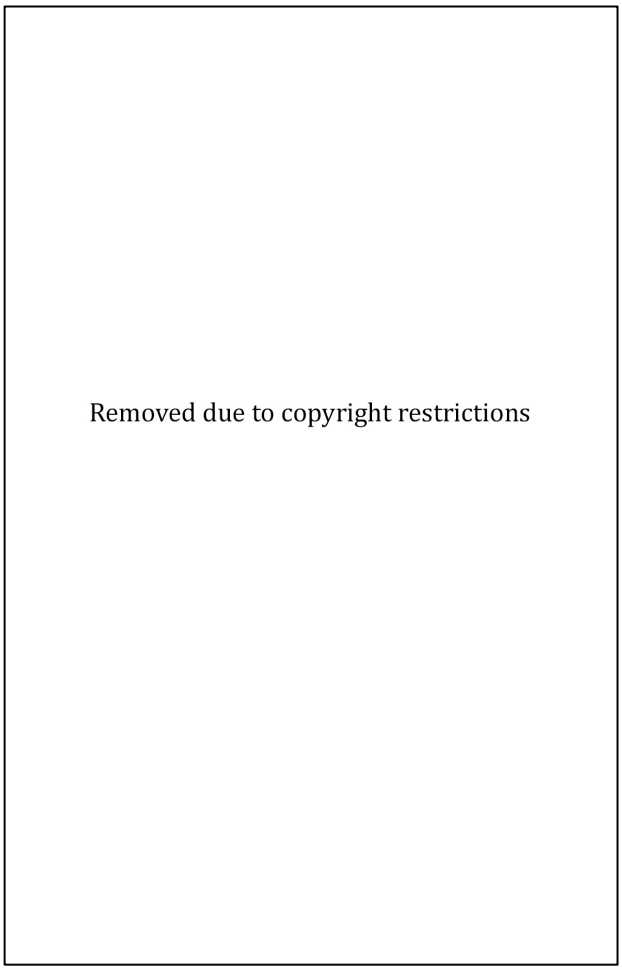

Figure 1: Sherrie Levine, *President Collage: 1*, 1979,
cut and pasted printed paper on paper, 24 x 18 inches.

In *President Collage* Series (Figure 1), Sherrie Levine uses images taken from women's magazines, conveying seduction and cuts those images into the form of a presidential silhouette, which signifies both power and exchange value. Levine's use of collage creates uneasy relations between two sets of images which both reflect the values of patriarchy; on the one hand the glorification of strong male leadership and on the other hand the disempowerment of women through reducing them to sexual objects.

Historically collage has often been used to challenge dominant and repressive ideologies, as seen in the work of Hannah Hoch (Figure 2) who took up collage as a way to criticize the Weimar Republic in the post-war years. Collage has a unique ability to strip imagery of its pretensions and to allow artists to bring popular imagery into new contexts and juxtapositions. Hoch's photomontages often critically

addressed the Weimar New Woman, bringing together images from various magazines of the time. More recently the work of Wangechi Mutu explores stereotypes in the representation of black women, her work uses visceral and ornate imagery to expose the way in which the conception of the black female body is constructed. Similarly, through exploring and unveiling the metonymic nature of imagery, I aim to challenge the dominant ideology that creates those metonymic images through enacting my agency over them.

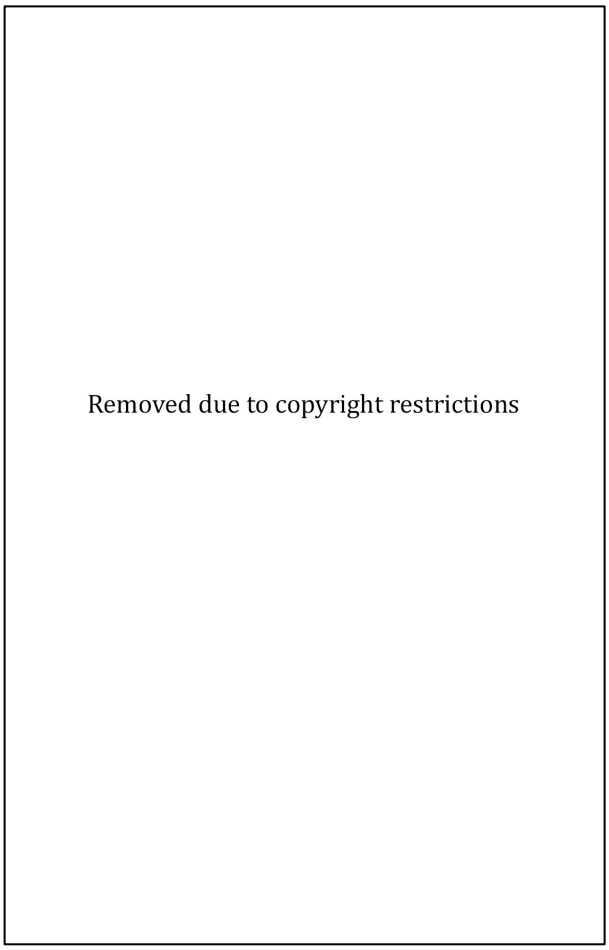

Figure 2: Hannah Höch, *Grotesque*, 1963, Photomontage, 9 15/16 x 6 11/16 inches.

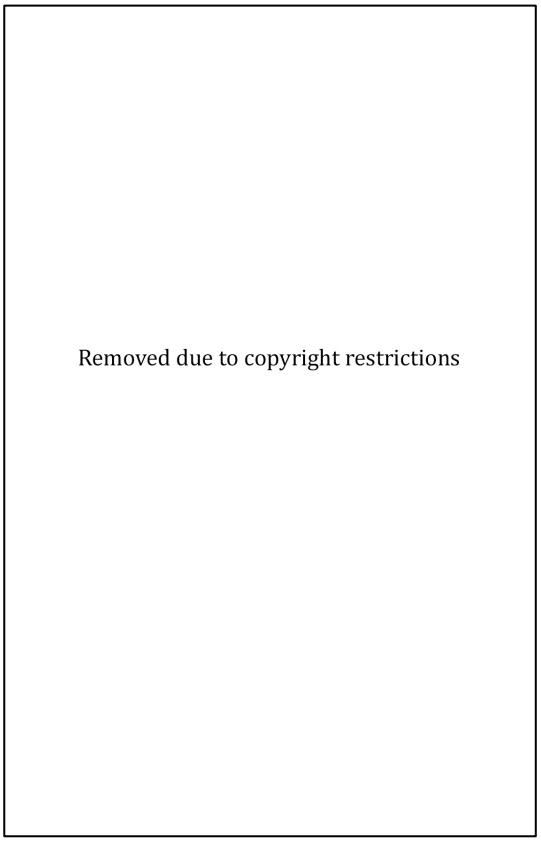

Figure 3: Wangechi Mutu, *Adult Female Sexual Organs*, 2005,
packing tape ,fur, collage on found medical illustration paper, 18 x 12 inches.

The two examples of collage artists above are both women using collage as a way of challenging representation. Art critic and theorist Lucy Lippard recognizes the political power of collage and points to why it is used so profusely within feminist art "Collage is born of interruption and the healing instinct to use political consciousness as a glue with which to get the pieces into some sort of new order. " (168). Those who feel disenfranchised by popular representation frequently use collage. Often these people are women or minorities; it is a way in which people are able to operate agency over the images that surround them.

Flusser similarly recognizes the need to take agency over the world of images. He focuses on the role of the apparatus within photographic dialogue, observing that photographs are created by an apparatus which has its own set of parameters. The possibilities and limits for image making are then dictated by the way in which the apparatus functions, implying a finite amount of possibilities (*Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 21). Flusser goes on to argue that freedom is reached through mastering the apparatus and thus being able to exploit the possibilities within the programmed apparatus (*Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 80). While agreeing with Flusser's thoughts on subverting the apparatus, an argument could be extended that freedom can also be exercised through

refusing passivity in the consumption of images through engaging in a practice of appropriating images for one's own ends.

Fascinated by the way in which photography functions as a language, I began to examine photography manuals and the descriptions they contained of how, when and why to take photographs. I became interested in these prescriptive models and how I could subvert them. I was thinking of the photographs role as a souvenir and of ways of creating less prescriptive images from the photographs in the manuals. I began to construct miniatures, which combined series of images into three-dimensional forms, enclosing them in a mirrored plexi-glass box (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Michelle O'Byrne, *morning light, afternoon light, evening light*, 2013, book fragments, plexi-glass, mirror, 4.5 x 4.5 x 4.5 inches.

The title *morning light, afternoon light, evening light* functions to draw attention to the prescriptive language used within manuals, while producing a new experience of the photograph. The piece draws attention to the limits of the photographic medium, with the photograph being transformed into three-dimensions, with all sides viewable through the mirror. The miniature encapsulates three images from different lights from different times of day. As it pushes against the limits of the medium of photography, it also emphasizes the preciousness of the photograph and its role as a souvenir through its presentation and its miniaturized nature. Much as cubists revealed different viewpoints on a singular canvas, the reflection in the background allows for an uncovering of multiple views of

both the original image, and the new structure created from the fragments of the image. The shadow falling on the wall behind brings to mind the importance of light in the process of photography, echoed in the title of the piece, and abstracts the photographic image further.

Another body of work in which I enact agency over popular images is titled, *US, People.* In this body of work (Figure 5 & 6) collages are created from fragments of the pages of *US* and *People*. The collages create a strange world, with abstractions of the bodies and riches from the gossip magazines. The images present in publications such as *US* and *People* present a homogenised world in which all people share a particular set of values. An example might be a specific ideal of beauty, an admiration for monetary wealth, fame and power and a fascination with the suffering of others particularly with those who have the former attributes. This view of the world hides from view all that is other than it and, as a result, is oppressive as it limits representation so strictly. While not addressing patriarchy in the direct terms of Levine, the very act of creating new images from these oppressive images is a political act.

Figure 5: Michelle O'Byrne, *Untitled* from series *US, People,* 2013, magazine fragments on paper, 11 x 14 inches.

Figure 6: Michelle O'Byrne, *Untitled* from series *US, People,* 2013, magazine fragments on paper, 4 x 6 inches.

Using images of celebrities and wealth, the collages allow for a fantastic world to be created[4] which mocks the origin of the images in a playful manner. The overtly sexualized content of the images is emphasized, with a man's nipple forming a facial feature of sorts and a white cat, haloed with a container of foundation arises from a woman's bejeweled crotch. The ridiculous and playful nature of the images allows the viewers to consider new ways of approaching images they encounter regularly. The reimagining of the surfaces that are disseminated and consumed readily by an audience is an important way to question and enjoy images which may otherwise have the effect of bolstering societal and cultural norms, which do not take account of the many different ways of being in the world.

[4] Notably collage has been used and continues to be used to evoke the surreal through juxtapositions and combinations impossible in reality.

Limits of the Photographic

All languages have limits; these limits allow us to communicate effectively but also delimit ways in which we can view the world.

Throughout history, artistic mediums have come up against their limits and pushed and questioned these limits. The iconoclastic crisis which painting went through in the twentieth century allowed painters to move beyond representation into experiments with abstraction, gesture and materiality.[5] Photography in its traditional form, using analogue processes and light sensitive materials, is faced with a crisis as it is replaced by digital image making. This is a critical time for the photographic medium to undergo a new examination and for new forms to be generated. As screen-based images remove the materiality of the image, or at least change it drastically, there has been a movement towards practices which investigate the materiality of the image. As digital sensors are used to record light, artists have also turned to experimental practices that push the limits of the alchemic process of analogue photography. Though some of these practices are driven by a misguided nostalgia, many of the practices have furthered the understanding of the both the material and immaterial elements of the photograph.

Joanna Sassoon in her essay, *Photographic Meaning in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, recognizes that the digital can displace the material photograph, "if an assessment of the relationship between the material photograph and its digital referent is based on image content alone, then the digital translation can be seen as a substitute for the material item" (188). This, along with her observation that in the move towards digitization, images are standardized, eliminating physical distinctions (190) allows us to understand the move towards studies in materiality within the photographic medium.

Recent, sculptural interventions in photography, such as the work by Letha Wilson, Matthew Stone (Figure 7), Allison Rossiter and Laurie Kang, and photographic abstractions seen in the works of artists such as David Hockney, Uta Barth and Eileen Quinlan and the monochromatic *Silver 71* by Wolfgang Tillmans (Figure 8), have all questioned the representational and material limits of the photographic medium.

[5] Painting developed forms of abstraction and explorations in materiality due to technological developments such as the camera (which created accurate representations freeing painting from that burden) and various socio-political conditions that differ from movement to movement.

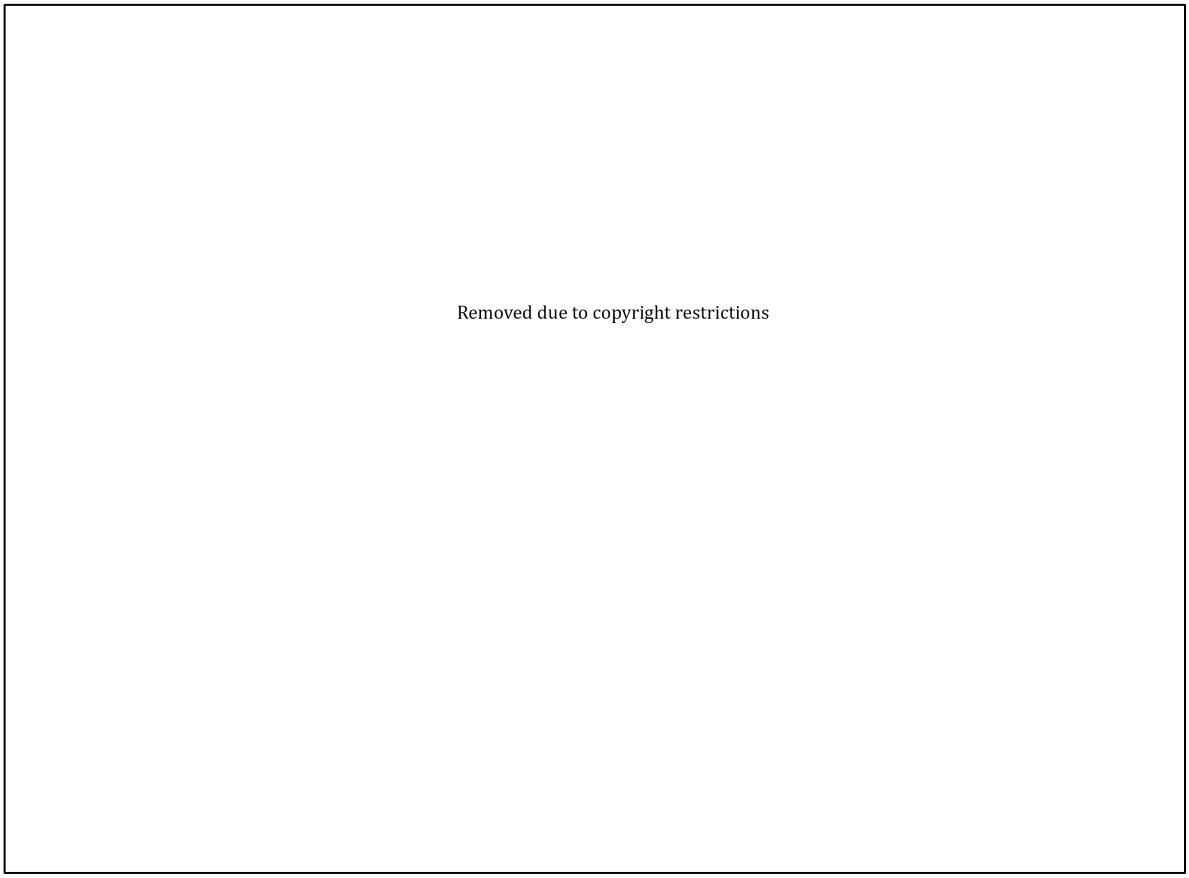

Figure 7: Matthew Stone, *Rules Forever* (Installation shot), The Hole, New York City, 2011.

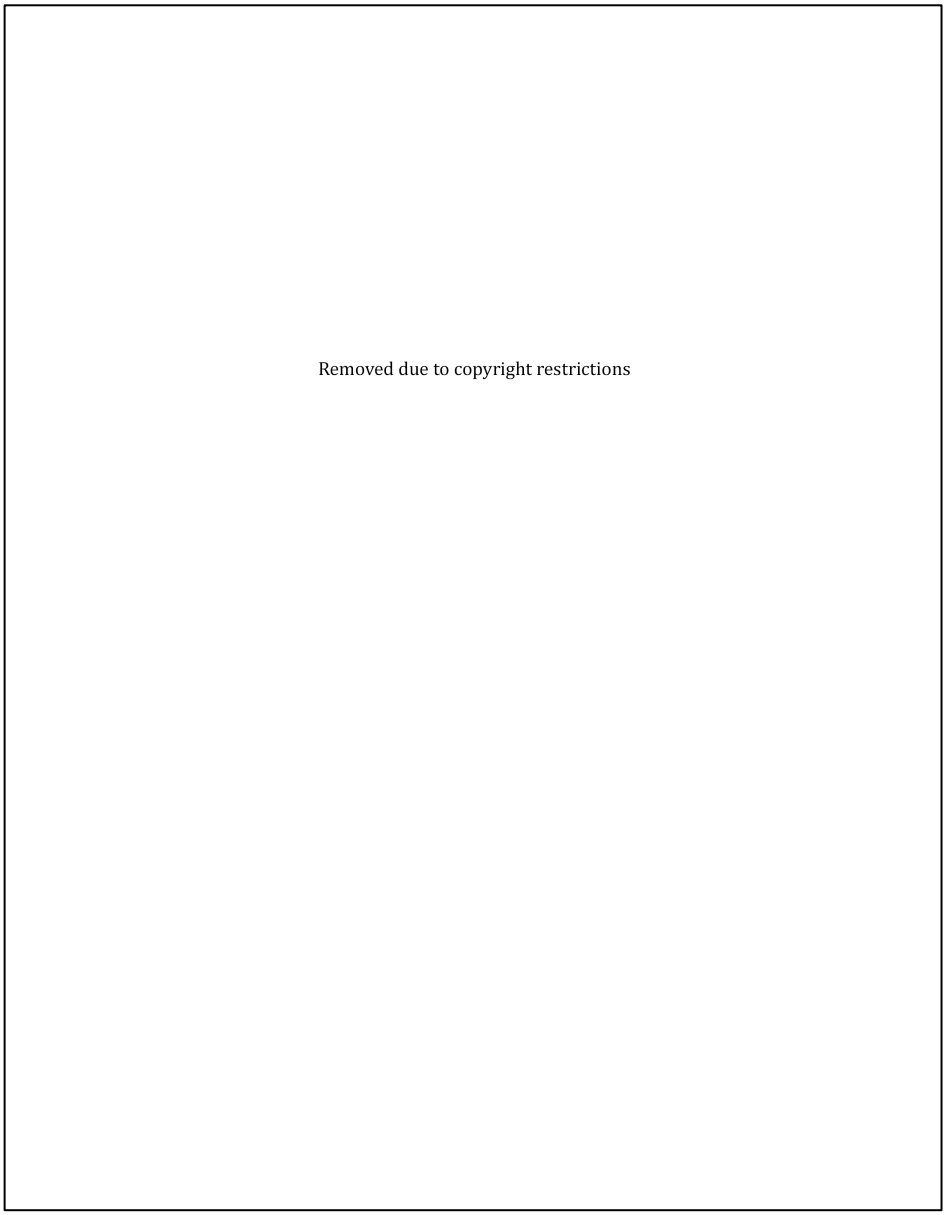

Figure 8: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Silver 71*, 2008, C-print, 89 5/8 x 67 1/4 inches.

While thinking about the limits of the photographic medium and the similar dilemmas that painting had faced, I created a series of abstract collages titled *Lacerations* (Figure 9). Drawing inspiration from Lucio Fontana's sliced canvases[6] as well as Constructivist compositions I cut into the smooth monochrome surface of inkjet photo paper. I thought of the image as a living thing and had fragments of images of the body appear from the slices in the paper.

Figure 9: Michelle O'Byrne, *Laceration II (*detail), 2013, magazine fragments, inkjet paper, 30 x 30 inches.

[6] An example would be Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept: Expectations,* 1960.

In Seamless I (Figure 10), I sought to disrupt the smooth surface of the photograph, to inscribe time and a sense of presence to a dead zone in the photograph. I was interested in the convention of the seamless in the image, how to draw attention to their form and function. With a sense of play that is often apparent in my work, I introduced seams back into the seamless. I was inspired by monochromatic paintings, and was contemplating what photo-based work could look like if we pushed it beyond representation, and if the usually clean and smooth surfaces were interrupted.

Figure 10: Michelle O'Byrne, *Seamless I*, 2012, curtain rod, brackets, seamless paper, 72" x variable.

Metonymy, Imitation and Kitsch

> "Without marking, all ancestors become abstractions, losing their proper names; all family trips become the same trip – the formal garden, the waterfall, the picnic site, and the undifferentiated sea become attributes of every country." (Stewart, 138)

My recent work has drawn inspiration and materials from sources such as stock photography archives. The stock photograph without reference to a certain place or person is metonymic[7] in nature. The picture of a tropical drink by the seaside represents more than that, it represents time away from work, an ideal of what a holiday should be like, and it represents the holiday itself. An image of a family around a table with a turkey comes to represent the idea of Christmas. When an image takes on a metonymic role it can become oppressive, excluding other ways of being and shaping the way we expect or hope our world to be. For this reason, it is necessary to reveal these metonymic structures and to interject in these images in order to take ownership of them, and to deny them the power to stand for all things or to dictate any particular ideological stance.

There are many conventions and expectations of what is photographed and how it is photographed, (as reflected in my early work exploring the illustrations of photography manuals). It becomes easy to fall into complacency and perpetuate these conventions, creating images that we have been taught are supposed to be made, and accepting images to which we have become accustomed. [8] Photographs are in fact abstractions of space and time. Furthermore, they offer only abstractions of reality due to their often pre-meditated construction. The conventions of photography affect the kinds of images we take, with constructs in place to promote the taking of certain images and discourage the taking of other images.[9] One use of photographic images within popular culture is as a souvenir of travels or special events.

---

[7] A metonym is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept. An example of this would be an image of a chimneystack that represents industrial pollution, or when one says 'suit' to refer to a businessman.

[8] Photographic discourse has the ability to naturalize certain things; I like to think of the photographs I choose to work as myths in the same way Barthes identifies myth in *Mythologies as "*depoliticized speech" (174). These images have been naturalize to the point that they are often overlooked or treated as unimportant but they are in fact very political and perhaps more dangerous because of their pervasive and seemingly innocuous presence.

[9] Examples of when photographs are encouraged and shaped are organized photo-ops or roadside viewpoints while in places of worship and government offices photography is often very controlled. But besides named conventions we also very rarely take photos when family are mourning for example or of sick loved ones, while we almost certainly take them at a wedding or birthday.

In *On Longing*, theorist Susan Stewart recognizes the metonymic nature of the souvenir writing "The souvenir is by definition always incomplete. And this incompleteness works on two levels. First the object is metonymic to the scene of its original appropriation, in the sense that it is a sample."(136)

Furthermore she states that

> "We might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable; rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin." (135)

If we consider Stewart's statement that we desire souvenirs of "events whose materiality has escaped us" (135) the pieces I have most recently produced demonstrate a desire for an event which I have never experienced, whose materiality has escaped me completely, whether that be a beautiful woman in the park or a businessmen shaking hands. Through my practice I create souvenirs that demonstrate a longing for these experiences that constantly evade me.

The supposed universal appeal of the stock photograph seems to be related to the kitsch nature of these photographs, which are meant to arouse certain emotions in the viewer, while encouraging them to disregard the embedded politics in the image.

In Milan Kundera's novel *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (a novel about two men and two women during the Prague Spring which also explores several political and philosophical questions), he writes:

> "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!" (251)

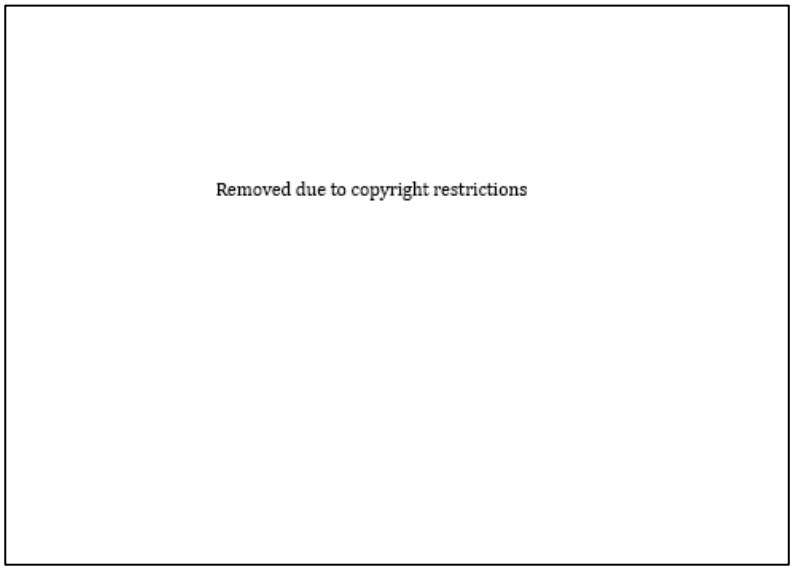

Figure 11: Sergev Novikof. *Large group of kids running in the dandelion spring field Image ID: 151850882*, digital image, date unknown, retrieved from shutterstock.com

Kundera's analogy of kitsch speaks of a naturalizing universalizing feature. His definition of kitsch describes the stock images from which I have been working lately; they are images, which "exclude everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (248). In Kundera's estimation Kitsch arises from dominant ideologies. It is used to naturalise images and to exclude from view anything that would make the viewer question the dominant ideology. However, these sites of kitsch or sites of depoliticized speech provide fertile ground for intervention as they have the potential to be denaturalized through actions such as decontextualisation and juxtaposition, as well as physical interventions on to the image object itself.

Susan Stewart recognizes that "In all their uses, both kitsch and camp imply the imitation, the inauthentic, the impersonation" (168). This is evident in the construction of stock photographs and is often reflected not only in my choice of photograph, but also in the choice of materials in the work presented. As I have started to incorporate the non-photographic, I am drawn towards imitative materials. The materials used often stand in for something else, they come to represent something more than they are. This inauthenticity not only relates to kitsch and the metonym but also to the sense of loss that pervades the work.

Figure 12: Michelle O'Byrne, *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park*, 2013, wood, synthetic foliage, synthetic stuffing, fluorescent lights, 120 x 40 x 20 inches.

The use of imitative materials in my practice is evident in the assemblage *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park* (Figure 12). The inspiration for this assemblage is a stock photograph, with the title derived from the descriptor attached to the photograph in an online database. The stock photograph represents a placeholder; it is an image which is placed in different contexts and stands for all images of that type. Its construction is deliberate and it is artificial; a hyper real scene. In this piece the fluorescent light and the fake foliage are all materials that stand in for their genuine counterpart. The fluorescent light imitates the daylight in the photo; the foliage is a stand-in for the plant material, while the synthetic stuffing is a very noticeable plasticized material when viewed in the person. On a literal level, the synthetic nature of these objects refers to the artificial nature of the representation of a beautiful woman in the park, but more importantly they speak to a longing. The assemblage expresses a longing for the material reality of the beautiful women in the white blouse in the park, for a genuine experience of that moment. Fully aware of the fact that the image was constructed, I long for it nonetheless. There is a double-longing present in this piece; it exhibits a longing for not only the image of the stock photograph, but also for an experience of that moment captured in the image, an experience that the flat, smooth surface of the image or the screen cannot provide.

Collecting as Process

The process of collecting activates my practice. Undertaken as a way to face the anxiety-inducing proliferation of images and serial objects, a collection of the contents of everyday life is assembled. Prescribing to the belief that 'authentic' experience is elusive as experiences become increasingly mediated and abstracted, it becomes imperative to grasp the concrete as a souvenir of the world around me. Taking on the role as Artist as Tourist, I hold on to these souvenirs to more fully understand the way in which identity and worldviews are materially manifested in the everyday.

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart describes the lack of authentic experience as a "process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside self and thus presenting both a surplus and a lack of significance" (133). In a world where experience has become mediated and lived through the sign-value[10] of images and objects, these objects and images become an important way to remember and to construct identity. They contain a surplus, symbolizing something beyond their material form. Through subverting normal usage of representations and objects, the fragility of the meanings attributed to them becomes apparent. Through a process of both deconstruction and aggrandizing of the objects and images in question, façades are revealed, slippages in meaning occur, and we become more aware of the constant creation of desire through the material culture of the contemporary world.

In *System of Objects* Baudrillard speaks of an initial phase of collecting in childhood, suggesting that "For children collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating." (93) The act of collecting remains the same for me– it is a rudimentary way of mastering the world and is the first step towards a more developed mode of exercising my agency over images and objects, to be proactive in ascribing and revealing meaning.

Through the act of collecting I infuse the oft banal and robotic act of consuming that is a feature of life today into a productive and unpredictable activity. The act of collecting becomes a way of channeling obsession, an exercise in 'worldmaking.'[11] The practice emphasizes a feeling of living within a system but feeling without.

[10] Sign value is the value of an object due to its prestige and other things it signifies beyond its material value and utility derived from the function and the primary use of the object.

[11] I borrow the term world-making from Nelson Goodman's, *Ways of Worldmaking,* in which he suggests that we make and remake the world from versions of the world already available to us. This seems like an apt term for my practice of collecting, collage and assemblage.

As soon as an object enters my collection it is transformed. Abstracted from its original function Baudrillard suggests that the object now gains significance through its relationship with the collector who "strives to construct a world, a private totality" (*The System of Objects*, 92). Benjamin emphasizes the way in which the object now becomes defined by the relationship with the other objects in the collection, stating, "the object is detached from all its original functions to enter into the closest conceivable relation with objects of the same kind" (204).

For both Benjamin and Baudrillard, in the process of collecting the object is detached from its original function. However, for Benjamin the object is re-signified through its relation to other pieces in the collection, while for the Baudrillard, the re-signification results from the relationship between the object and the collector. Within my process of collecting and compiling, both occur. The objects I collect gain a new significance to me as they join my collection, the signification is based on its meaning within the existing ideological structures, but also through my own subjective experience and interpretation of the object or image. As the image or object comes into contact with the other contents of the collection, the act of collecting becomes a way of worldmaking, much like my process of collage and assemblage.

Stewart emphasizes the act of collecting as play when she states "The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and the manipulation of context" (152). The concept of play within my practice is key; my practice values humor and play as a tactic to challenge the simulacra that surround us. Through a process of recontextualisation and subversion of the use and surplus sign value of the objects and images, slippages in meaning are created and attention is brought to the oft overlooked. This is discussed further in the final chapter in which I will explain ways in which usage and surplus value are employed for my own ends within the work.

Figure 13: Michelle O'Byrne, Studio Work/Play in Progress, studies for *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park* March 10, 2014 6- 10pm, dimensions and materials variable.

The mode of collecting I engage in, and the medium of collage, bear some similarities in that they are both engaged in an endless project of becoming. This process of becoming is captured in Figure 13, which shows some snapshots from a session of making in the studio. In *Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art*, Donald Kuspit observes:

> 'The incongruous effect of the collage is based directly on its incompleteness, on the sense of perpetual becoming that animates it. It is always coming into being; it has never "been," as one can say of the more familiar, "absolute" type of art. It is always insistent yet porous never resistant and substantive." (43)

Collage contains an amount of uncertainty caused by subjectivity and a wide range of choices that are often easily done and undone. Similarly, my collection exists in the same way; it is in a constant state of flux as I purge and collect and arrange in an erratic manner. The collage and mode of collecting I engage in mirrors my own restlessness in the project of becoming, and my discomfort with any "absolute" categorizations of my identity. Kuspit recognizes collage "exists against all forces which would absolutize one kind of being at the expense of all other beings, thereby destroying the individuality of being"(49). This reflects my interest both in the unmasking of the metonymic nature of stock photograph and the use of the method of collage, and is a method of working that I have come to through my own process of becoming.

My artistic process is necessarily informed by my life experiences. I have lived as an immigrant for the majority of my life in various places, often where I did not outwardly appear to be an immigrant. I was brought up in a nuclear family, of which I am not a product. I don't prescribe to many categories

that might often offer comfort; I occupy a space exterior to these categorizations people often use.[12] It is not to romanticize it, or to claim myself as special, just a product of circumstances that have allowed me to live within yet feel exterior to a lot of situations. As a result, I have curiousness about things which people may find simple or banal. When I say 'Artist as Tourist' I do not mean that I am leisurely exploring the role of artist, but instead that I undergo my research as a tourist might wander the streets of a strange city. The world is a curious place to me. I collect in part to remember and marvel at its strangeness.

One of the items I collected recently was a cinderblock. I saw a cinderblock holding a door open and I was immediately struck by it. I thought it was a beautiful object; considering its use as a staple building material and thinking of how the block's beauty is so often obscured. I remembered seeing cinderblocks used in some design magazines and noted that I was not the only one to feel this way about the form. I became curious about how something so functional and utilitarian was now being used by high-end designers, and found it intriguing that a $2 concrete block was being incorporated among extremely expensive furniture and how this change in context increased its value dramatically. I liked the repetitive nature of the rectangles of the cinder blocks; it reminded me of a businessman and so I thought it would be useful for a portrait in the future. Several cinderblocks of different sizes entered my studio and stayed there for some time before I introduced one into a piece I had formed in the back of my mind when I encountered the cinderblock.

[12] I am interested instead in the eradication of all identity categories as all are too confining. I believe that it to encourage collective identity above individual identity is harmful and that the perpetuation of categories of identities is totalitarian in nature. My investigation within the politics of representation comes from an interest in challenging, mocking and pulling down metonymic structures.

Figure 14: Michelle O'Byrne. *Business Man Isolated on White Background*, 2013, leather, foam, magazine fragment, plastic, glass panels, string, metal.

The cinderblock found its place in *Business Man Isolated on White Background* (Figure 14). In this piece I used display items to depict popular images derived from a stock photograph of a businessman. In this piece, display materials are transformed into figures. The glass shelves recall the towers in which these men reside. Things that are part of the fabric come into contact with each other and become seen as a gestalt; the cinderblock is no longer just a cinderblock, but comes into relation with all the other contents of the gallery. A sense of play is evident in the creation of the relationship and the exploitation of the materials in unconventional manners. Subverting their usual utility, the play allows for the subjective part of the collection, bringing the objects into a particular relationship to each other, which is my own particular view of the world. It harks back to Baudrillard's contemplation of the child's preoccupation with collecting as a way of understanding the world (*System of Objects*, 93).

Cross-Syntactical Phrases

In *The Future of the Image* Jacques Rancière introduced an expanded conception of image and an articulation of how mixed genre work operates, which allowed me to more fully articulate the way in which the mixed genre work I am producing is operating.

Exploring the possibility of art that circulates between the "world of art and the world of imagery'"(26), Rancière speaks to the forming of paratactical phrases using heterogeneous elements. Rancière suggests that these mixed-genre practices straddle the boundary of schizophrenia and consensus (45). He proposes that when the mixing of genres is successful a sentence-image is produced. These sentence images do not slide onto either the side of consensus or schizophrenia, instead they form a paratactical phrase, which simultaneously undoes and creates. The sentence-image undulates between continuity and fragmentation, the dialectic and the symbolic and between heterogeneous mediums.

Rancière's conception of the sentence-image is a theorization and solidifying of a mode of bricolage.[13] Rancière's thinking seems to be a logical next step in approaching a practice, which has embraced various forms of making for their accessibility and rejection of hierarchical systems. Bricolage allows an artist to move beyond the syntactical limits of one language, instead being able to combine heterogeneous elements to create a more complicated and less limiting sentence-image. Contemporary practices embracing bricolage and the sentence-image include the assemblages of Rachel Harrison and Isa Genzken.

[13] Bricolage is the practice of making from various materials that are on hand. The term bricolage is used in several areas including, interestingly enough, interior design, which reflects the thoughts of Baudrillard in *System of Objects* and in Cultural Studies. In studies, such as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, an examination of the appropriation of objects, and subversion of usage value of objects, such as the safety pin allow movements to create their own identity.

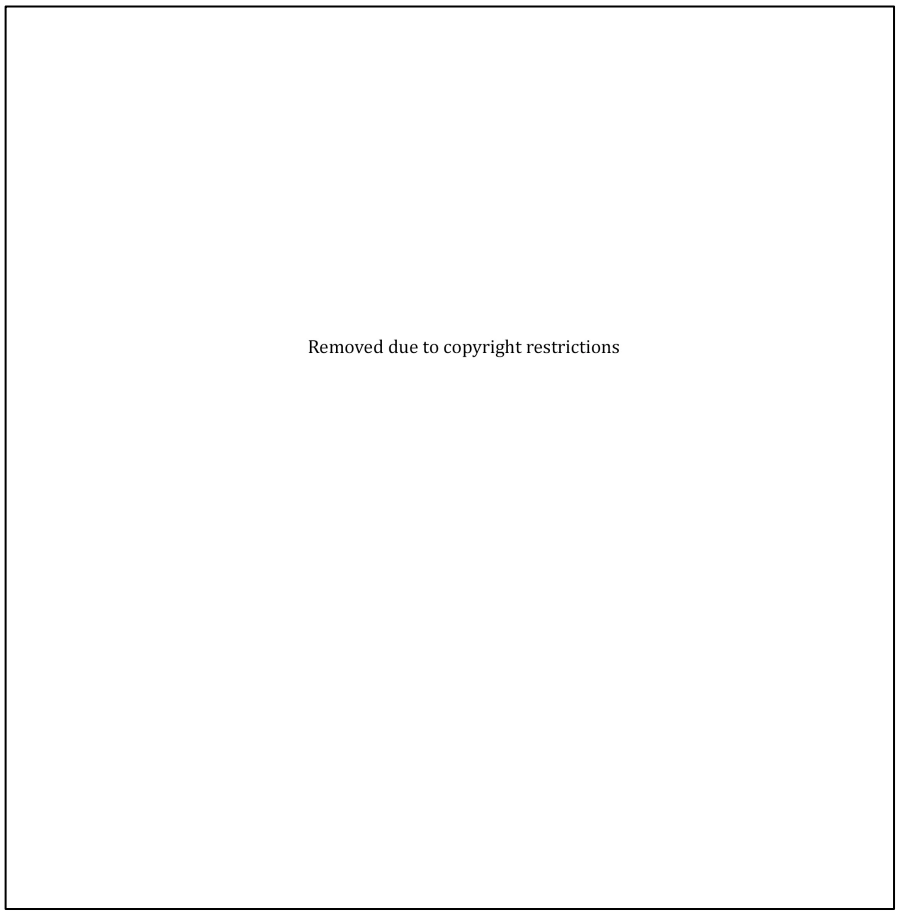

Figure 15: Isa Genzken, *Urlaub*, 2004, glass, lacquer, plastics, wood, metal, photograph, 89 x 65 x 21.5 inches

Genzken's work embraces the use of various available materials and imagery to construct an image.[14] Her totemic sculpture *Urlaub* (Figure 15), which uses mirrored panels and plastic foliage among other things, oscillates between a portrait and a ridiculous still life. The mixing of mediums re-constitutes the relationship between the parts and draws a myriad of references from different sources. Her lack of hierarchy in materials allows her to convey multiple meanings in unexpected ways.

Creating work using paratactical, cross-syntactical phrases necessarily requires developing certain approaches to the materials at hand. While form dictates some things compositionally within the pieces, the work concentrates on exploiting the usage and surplus value of the materials used.

[14] Genzken's and my own practice use a variety of available materials and imagery, and can be defined as post-production practices-a term coined by Bourriaud in his essay, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. Much like the work Bourriaud describes, my practice explores the "eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work" (13).

In *Critique of Political Economy,* Karl Marx; philosopher, economist and revolutionary socialist recognizes that "consumption is simultaneously production" (196). A product only truly becomes a product when it is consumed; "a dress becomes really a dress only by being worn"(Marx, 195). In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Michel De Certeau takes up the idea that usage can define an object. He examines the relation of production to consumption emphasizing the "ways of using" (20) as essential to the process of production-consumption and furthermore asserting that through transgressive ways of using objects, the individual is able to exercise agency and disrupt the system, albeit in a small way.

My works are created using additive methods- predominantly collages and assemblages. This process allows for play and reworking, the finished product often demonstrates this through the elements looking as if they could be structured in an infinite amount of configurations. This feature allows the viewer to consider what their approach to the material may be. It eschews an authoritative stance. The work is meant to stimulate the viewer to think about the lack of permanence or fixedness of the images and objects. They are passive entities, which have as little or as much meaning as we attribute to them, and can be used in manners in which they were never intended to be used. The pieces are small gestures in this direction, but even small deviancies contribute towards change.

Baudrillard, linking theories of semiotics to the Marxist notion of surplus value, asserted that the surplus value of the commodity is created by the capitalist system. This system is based on the consumption of products for their sign-value rather than their usage value. The products of a capitalist system contain a surplus value created by the claims of status, social standing and identity which they offer to the customer: "Through objects, each individual and each group searches out his/her place in an order, all the while trying to jostle this order according to a personal trajectory" (*For the Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* 38). The work created, which is complemented by this thesis, plays with the surplus sign value, looking to exploit this surplus to create slippages in meaning and enact agency over images and object. This is done not only through the recontextualisation of the objects at hand, but by subverting usage and bringing the images or objects into relation with others within the collection of quotidian objects.

As I moved forward I decided what I would like to do would be to make sculptures of photographs, through translations such as the one seen earlier. I began to combine materials, in attempts to make new structures based on stock photographs.

A few examples of early attempts at cross-genre works are below (Figure 16-19). In each of these I attempted different ways of combining images and objects, which allowed the pieces to oscillate

between figurative and abstract, encouraging the viewer to have a new experience of the representation that was not available through the original photographic image.

Removed due to copyright restrictions

Left: Figure 16: Best Photo Studio. *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park, Image ID:* 81323038, digital image, date unknown, retrieved from shutterstock.com.
Right: Figure 17: Michelle O'Byrne, *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park*, 2013, wood, synthetic foliage, synthetic stuffing, fluorescent lights, 120 x 40 x 20 inches.

Removed due to copyright restrictions

Left: Figure 18: Kzenon. *Bride and Groom dancing their first dance at their wedding day, Image ID:* 76210792, digital image, date unknown, retrieved from shutterstock.com.
Right: Figure 19: Michelle O'Byrne, *Bride and Groom dancing their first dance at their wedding day,* 2013, metal retail clothes rack, wood baluster, foam, pvc, zip ties, spray paint, paper, plaster, 165 x 40 x 30 inches.

Moving away from purely photographic materials. I endeavored to translate stock images into three dimensions using collected materials in an attempt to see the photograph differently, as well as to restore aspects of the original scene that are not felt in the stillness and two dimensions of the photograph. Initially investigating freestanding sculptural configurations, my idea was that the viewer would be put into the position of photographer, circling the subject. The pieces retain a textual link to the original image with the keywords used to describe the stock photograph now forming the title of the respective pieces. The pieces use direct representations of items, which are in the original photograph such as the foliage in *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park* (Figure 16 & 17) and the corsage in *Bride and Groom dancing their first dance at their wedding day* (Figure 18 & 19).[15] In other instances, the objects oscillate between being formal devices and being referents to their original context. In the *Bride and Groom dancing their first dance at their wedding day* the baluster, a curved white shape and domestic object, references the bride in the original stock image, while the fluorescent lighting in the *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman*

[15] I realize that the stock images that I use, and the resulting work also call up art historical references. The woman in the park, and the couple dancing are popular images. The references are unavoidable when dealing with metonymic images as these representations by nature, were developed over time through the repetition of certain scenes.

in white blouse at park refers to the sunlight on the woman's face and the synthetic nature of the image. I see these pieces as translations from one medium to another, or what I like to refer to as second order abstractions. The first abstraction is the photo itself, which is an image abstracted from space and time. The second abstraction is the one I perform through the act of translating the image from the screen to the sculptural. As I look at these initial attempts I find them problematic, as they appear too direct in their translation. Translations in language are rarely successful if they are literal word for word translations, as each language contains its own unique vocabulary and syntax. As I moved forward, I kept this in mind and considered reintroducing images into the pieces to complicate this beyond a work of translation, to truly mix genres.

Figure 20: Michelle O'Byrne, *beautiful young woman in white blouse at park II,* 2013, metal, plastic drawer liner, synthetic foliage, image fragment, wood floor sample, florist's foam, 170 x 30 x 12 inches.

Figure 21: Michelle O'Byrne, *beautiful young woman in white blouse at park II* (detail), 2013, metal, plastic drawer liner, synthetic foliage, image fragment, wood floor sample, florist's foam, 170 x 30 x 12 inches.

The most recent works (Figure 20 – 23) represent a move towards an integration of images and objects, they attempt to break from the cold flatness of the photograph and give the viewer a new experience. They emphasize the conventions of our photographic language while denying these limits by bringing the photograph into relation with material quotidian objects. The work expresses a longing for something beyond the image, and a sense of loss for the material reality of these unattainable images.

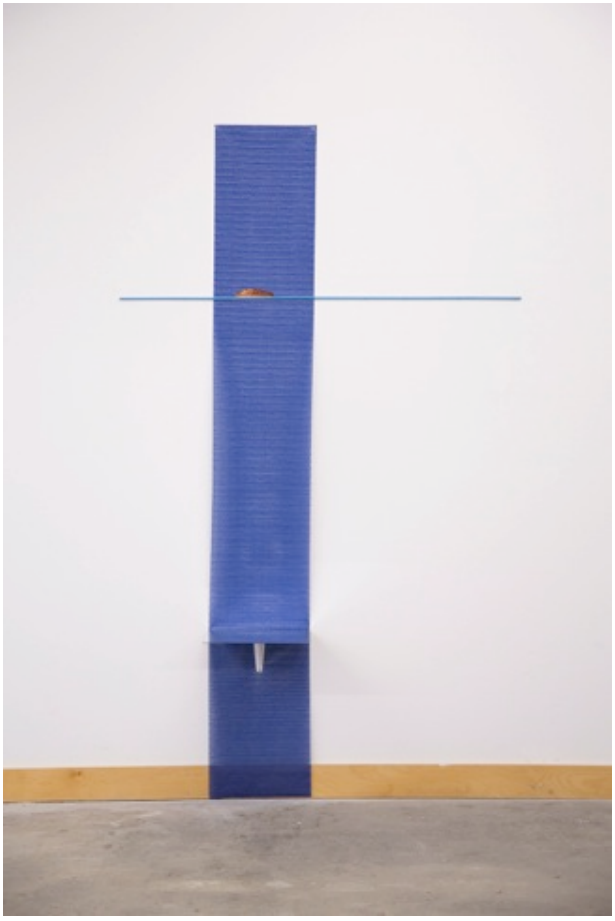

Figure 22: Michelle O'Byrne, *A young man and woman embracing as a romantic couple on a tropical beach destination,* 2013, mirror, metal bracket, plastic drawer liner, wooden rod, paint, image fragment, 170 x 48 x 12 inches.

Figure 23: Michelle O'Byrne, *A young man and woman embracing as a romantic couple on a tropical beach destination* (detail), 2013, mirror, metal bracket, plastic drawer liner, wooden rod, paint, image fragments, 170 x 48 x 12 inches.

Conclusion

Focusing on the limits of the photographic medium, the practice has become an expanded practice beyond the purely photographic, understanding the image as a wider field of inquiry. Through subverting usage and surplus sign value of these images and objects, the practice is moving towards a cross-syntactical poetics as a mode of unveiling and interpreting metonymic representations.

Using Rancière's term sentence-image as a theoretical basis, the practice has begun to embrace a cross-genre mode of production. This work is ongoing and developing. I would like to cultivate further my understanding of *sentence-image* and how it operates. With greater command of this new way of working, I hope to be able to construct more sophisticated structures and complex paratactical phrases, which will allow me in turn to create poetry rather than phrases.

Rancière suggests that images in cross-genre work are "interrupted, fragmented, reconstituted by a poetics of witticism that seeks to establish new differences of potentiality between these unstable elements." (26). Moving my goal towards the poetic potentialities of cross-genre work. The challenges I face include embracing the role of the sub-conscious in my choice of elements and composition and becoming more fluent across mediums. In order to exploit the potentialities of working across mediums, I must come to more fully understand the interactions between the mediums and the generative space created through the relation of two components from different mediums. This is a task best undertaken through continued explorations within the studio and observations of the interactions of elements within the world around me.

While I started this thesis looking at the limits of the photographic language, I have found myself in a place in which there seems to be no limits, in which objects from multiple genres can be combined in an unending array of combinations. The trouble now is to embrace the multiple potentialities of this way of working and to apply myself rigorously to explorations in what could appear on the one hand to be a daunting field of inquiry through its sheer expansiveness and on the other hand to be a space for boundless amounts of play and creativity.

Works Cited and Consulted

"A Focus on Efficiency: A white paper from Facebook, Ericsson and Qualcomm" *Facebook.com,* Facebook, Ericsson, Qualcomm, September 16, 2013. PDF. Accessed February 4,2014.

Azoulay, Ariella. "Archive." *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon no. 1,* 2011. Web.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.

---. *Image, Music, Text.*, Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Print.

---. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *For the Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.* Trans. Charles Levin. New York: Telos Press, 1981. Print.

---. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. Print.

---. *System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict. New York: Verso, 1996. Print.

Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2*, 1927-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press, 1999. Print.

---. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Elland & Kevin Mclaughlin, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2002. Print.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World.* New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002.

Butler, Cornelia and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, eds. *Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution.* Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007. Print.

Crimp, Douglas. *Pictures.* October, Spring 1979. Web.

Debord, Guy, and Ken Knabb. *Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 2006. Print.

Debord, Guy & G. Wolman. "Methods of Detournement" *Situationist International Anthology* ed. K. Knabb, Berkley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981. Print.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984. Print.

Dillon, Roberts, ed. *Ruins*. London : Cambridge Mas.: Whitechapel gallery ; MIT Press, 2011. Print.

Ellegood, Anne and Johanna Burton. *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture.* Washington DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2007. Print.

Evans, David, ed. *Appropriation.* London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2009. Print.

Flusser, Vilem. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000. Print.

Flusser, Vilem, and Nancy Ann Roth. *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Print.

Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking.* Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Company, 1978. Print.

Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Routledge, 1979. Print

Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* New York: Harper & Collins, 1999. Print.

Kuspit, Donald. "Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art." *Collage: Critical Views.* Ed. Katherine Hoffman. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press. 1989. 39-57. Print.

Lippard, Lucy. *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art.* New York: The New Press, 1994. Print.

Marcoci, Roxana. *The Original Copy : Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010. Print.

Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.* Ed. Maurice Dobb. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970. Print.

---. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy; Volume I*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1983. Print.

Merewether, Charles, ed. *The Archive.* London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2006. Print.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Print.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image.* London: Verso. 2007. Print.

Rose, Aaron and Mandy Kahn. *Collage Culture: Examining the 21st century's Identity Crisis.* Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2011. Print.

Sassoon, Joanna. 'Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction' *Photographs Objects Histories: On the materiality of images* ed. by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart London:Routledge, 2004. 186-202. Print.

Schapiro, Miriam and Melissa Meyer. "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled – FEMMAGE." *Heresies I,* no. 4 (Winter 1977-78): 66-69. Web.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. Print.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.

Turkle, Sherry. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007, Print.

Weibel, Peter. "An End to the "End of Art"? On the Iconoclasm of Modern Art" *ICONOCLASH:Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art.* Ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002. Print.

Wolfram, Eddie. *History of Collage: An anthology of collage, assemblage and event structures.* London: Cassell and Collier Macmillan, 1975. Print.