2016

JPG Artifacts

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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JPG Artifacts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of
Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

JPG ARTIFACTS
By Abbey Lee Sarver, MFA

A thesis submitted only for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016
Major Director: Paul Thulin, Graduate Director, Photography and Film

This thesis examines my artistic practice over the past two years at Virginia Commonwealth University, which has led to the installation of my thesis exhibition, JPG Artifacts. My work inspects the current process of image making within a responsive studio practice of deconstructing the digital image into a physical space. While my thesis exhibition is just one culminating formal installation of my experimental studio practice, this paper will examine some main points of reference towards what has led me to the most present public iteration of my work. I hope to position my research in context of contemporary art and artists that have most heavily influenced and shaped my work.
Introduction

During the past two years of my graduate studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, I have focused my research and experimentation on digital photography and its relationship to our physical space. Through my work, I seek to understand the nature of the digital image and situate it within photography’s constantly updated history while addressing the invisible anxiety between the digital and the physical. Through an intuitive process of ever changing digital and physical image manipulation, I create works that challenge what photography is today and where it sits within interdisciplinary contemporary art. In this thesis, I will address how and why I manipulate the image outside of digital editing tools with a variety of non-conventional materials, resulting in works of art that equally straddle the line between sculpture and photography, considered through the lens of installation, commercial culture, and staging. This thesis will chronicle my studio process in an effort to contextualize my work within contemporary constructs of digital space, sculpture, and photography.
Loss of Physical / Invisible Data

I began to think about the evolution of the photograph through my own personal memories of rummaging through family photo albums (fig 1). These images are paper thin, but in comparison to the nature of digital images and ways in which we share and disseminate photographs today, they have an object status that contemporary digital imagery seems to lack. They are broken, often torn at the corners, and have holes where my grandmother used pushpins to attach them to her bulletin board. There are only a few copies of each, unless they were professionally created in a portrait studio. What is most important to me however is that these images were touched repeatedly by human hands. Despite the likelihood that the film was processed in varying models of automatic processors and printed by machine, they were still handled physically throughout their making and are themselves something to engage with the hand as well as the eye. In contrast, a digital image is untouched, illustrating how the physicality of the photograph is transforming.

I am interested in the lifespan of the contemporary digital photograph: its lifeline to Photoshop and other photo editing software, its ever shifting psychological effects on culture, its copies and reproducibility, and its possible future death. While in the studio, I work simultaneously backwards and forwards in its history, with a focus on materiality and physicality, which is a direct reaction to a personal anxiety of digitization.

As of 2015, most images are first and only a digital file; most popularly a JPG. Images can also take shape as a PNG, TIFF, BMP, or even a PDF. As critic and media theorist Boris Groys points out in his essay, “From Image to Image File and Back: Art in the Age of Digitization,” the image file is not an image, it is invisible. Each digital image
is a visible copy of invisible data, and therefore is operating like a Byzantine icon: “a visible copy of an invisible god.”¹

Groys examines how iconoclastic religions have dealt with the image of the invisible, not through any specific picture but through the ambiguous history of appearances and interventions. From a critical point of view, one could argue that the bulk of my work is closely tied to Groys’ theory regarding each new instance of visualizing invisible data:

Looking at digital images we are also confronted every time with a new event of visualization of invisible data. So we can say: The digital image is a copy—but the event of its visualization is an original event, because the digital copy is a copy that has no visible original. That further means: A digital image, to be seen, should not be merely exhibited but staged, performed.²

My work engages Groys’s theory by using the digital image through a sculptural method of studio and exhibition staging, allowing not only myself but viewers to more directly participate with the image. For my thesis exhibition, I installed many Photoshop created drawings and images that were transferred to mirrored Plexiglas using a laser cutter and CNC router. Both the laser cutter and CNC router use computerized programs to mechanically perform the invisible data. The final result is never simply exhibited, but staged in an immersive installation utilizing various substrates (fig. 2). Specifically, the mirrored Plexiglas pieces allow the viewer to physically confront the layering of multiple imagery with a new and unique version including their own reflection. The final


result for each viewer is what I would consider an exclusive event which would be difficult to reproduce exactly.

The heart of my artistic inquiry romantically investigates the loss of physicality and inherent invisibility of the digital image by temporarily separating it from its space on a screen and attempting to manipulate it in my own space, the studio. I do so with a variety of materials and processes found in digital image making. For example, I am able to create an inkjet print on synthetic fabric which allows me to remove the image from its conventional, static two-dimensional viewing angle and instead treat it as an object. In my thesis exhibition, images are wrapped and warped around physical architecture in the space of the gallery, creating unconventional or surprising appearances of images (fig. 3). In former years, I have always been drawn to digital collage, and much of my work was created as photographic yet sculptural digital constructions. A consideration for collage techniques comes into play when I ‘cut’ the image physically into odd shapes and arrange the debris in space. I consider this act a performance and the result a prop that could be used for staging another layer of imagery.

There are countless ways to manipulate an image in Photoshop, which has now been around for twenty-five years. Photoshop has reconfigured our understanding of images and in turn, our understanding of the natural world. I am able to scale, rotate, skew, distort, warp, change perspective, or flip an image vertically and horizontally with a click of one finger using Photoshop’s Transform tools. The repetition of this inaction has left me severely unsatisfied and led me to engage and later images with my own hands.
Transforming an image on screen has become commonplace, since it is physically easy and requires a few innocuous clicks of a mouse. Transforming an image materially is, however, a much more demanding task, but my experimentation with material alteration allows me to experience the invisible and violent nature of image manipulation. This tie to the physical is quite satisfying as an artist who previously worked primarily with images on the screen. Aside from capturing an image, the most physical moment in my early working process involved picking up the prints from the print shop.
Abandoned Conventions

I question the standard existence of photography within a fine art setting: the flatness of the plane and the preciousness of the print are ripe to be torn apart. Must the photographic art object be a mounted and framed inkjet print on the wall? Why is fine art photography’s default material paper? In 2016, this line of thinking is outdated and archaic. The conventional photograph disintegrates and so often needs to be pressed against glass, incapable of living outside, and is falsely portrayed as flat (can be bent, creased, poked, ripped easily). My work is competing with the larger-than-life-sized UV printed Gap Model. My audience is not counting pixels.

I further question our consumer ties as artists to high-end materials used to fabricate the fine art print. This mode of thinking has allowed me to reinterpret the photographic image through scrap materials and processes typically found in commercial graphics or sign shops.

In my current process, I begin by either taking a photograph, scanning an object, or finding an existing digital image online. Where the image comes from is not as important to me, as my work attempts to call attention to its intervention than the actual source. I print the image to an alternative substrate such as adhesive vinyl, steel, fabric, or Plexiglas. Each of these substrates have their own unique physical properties that afford me varying opportunities to interact with through physical manipulation, experimentation, and play. In the studio, I allow myself to respond to these new iterations of image that begin to operate in physical space, thus becoming image objects, or photographic props that I am able to include in installation work as well as subjects of
new original photographs. My interest in two dimensional collage begins to take over in three dimensional space, using each image object as a prop which helps build a new set. While arranging these objects in space, I take into consideration how art is not only displayed in museums or galleries, but how it may be influenced by consumer culture.

A singular photograph remains the flattest art form, tied to its appearance. I believe to work with photographs is to linger on this two-dimensional surface of superficiality, and my interest in the superficiality of the medium leads to me to my interest in consumer culture and advertising techniques.

Consumer culture works within the realm of shallow appearances much closer than fine art. In his renowned 1939 essay, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” art critic and theorist Clement Greenberg proposed a qualitative divide between the visible remnants of popular culture and fine art that elevated art to an extent that I believe to be an alienating and elitist point of view. As we propel ourselves into the future with technology, I see these lines of distinction disappearing, or perhaps not being taken as seriously as before. I attempt to borrow the seductive formal tactics of consumerism and advertising as a means of addressing Western culture’s shortened attention span and obsession with surface appearances.

While embracing the rules and techniques of graphic arts, advertising, and consumerism, I abandon the conventions that have long-defined the fine art photograph—the frame, the paper, the rectangle. Through my research on the advanced technologies of commercial printing I collaborate with local print houses in an effort to leap beyond what resources I have accessible to me within the university’s walls. In a severely market driven economy, the most advanced methods of production and artistic output are now

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found within the commercial realm. I believe it is my duty as a photo based artist to engage and react to the latest technological advancements in image production.
Final Resting

The pursuit of physical imagery materialized in countless fashions, I believe, is a direct result of the vast images we see dematerialized on screen. The internet and social media have drastically altered our understanding of images and art, and my work addresses questions raised in a cesspool of digital photographs. I believe there is an unnamed type of anxiety that exists between what we see in images and what we see in our day to day lives off screen. With these ideas in mind, I highly consider the documentation of my three dimensional and installation work, which eventually and almost always ends up back on a two dimensional screen space. This is where the majority of my networked audience views my work, and what I believe as the final step in my process of creating work.

The internet, screen space, and online image dissemination greatly influence my work, which could easily be read as “Post-Internet,” for lack of a better term. The term was defined by a group of writers and artists; Gene McHugh, Artie Vierkant, and Marissa Olson, and first appeared in McHugh’s blog of the same name. Post-Internet describes the current moment of time in which the web is less of a novelty and more a banality. A catalog accompanying the 2014 group show, “Art Post-Internet” at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art defines the elusive term in the curators’ words:

This understanding of the post-internet refers not to a time “after” the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind — to think in the fashion of the network. In the context of artistic practice, the category of the post-internet describes an art object created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception. As such, much of the work presented here

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employs the visual rhetoric of advertising, graphic design, stock imagery, corporate branding, visual merchandising, and commercial software tools.⁵

Contemporary artist Artie Vierkant’s work addresses the shifting virtual and physical space of the image and photograph, and the invisible space between these two realms. His project, Image Objects, a series of Photoshop abstractions printed on fiberboard and displayed in a contemporary gallery setting, rely on altered documentation images. These images are again Photoshopped, virtually manipulated and posted online, creating a shift between the physical work and the digital (fig. 4).

Vierkant’s essay, “The Image Object Post-Internet,” brings forward questions that now arise in creating artworks that bounce between the virtual and reality:

The strategy employed by myself and others towards this physical relationship has been to create projects which move seamlessly from physical representation to Internet representation, either changing for each context, built with an intention of universality, or created with a deliberate irreverence for either venue of transmission. In any case, the representation through image, rigorously controlled and edited for ideal viewing angle and conditions, almost always becomes the central focus. It is a constellation of formal-aesthetic quotations, self-aware of its art context and built to be shared and cited. It becomes the image object itself.⁶

Vierkant’s ideas help illustrate my continual, cyclical, and over-worked practice of physical and digital image manipulation (fig. 5).

Artist and critic Lauren Christiansen further adds to this conversation in her essay titled “Redefining Exhibition in the Digital Age,” which first appeared on the art website “The Jogging” in 2010. The Jogging was an art project started by artists Brad Troemel

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⁶ Artie Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet,” Jstchillin.org
and Christiansen that took the shape of a Tumblr blog. It focused on new media art by incorporating image, text, and video, and allowed anyone with a Tumblr account to contribute. Christiansen asserts, “Allowing a small geographically-bound group roughly a month to attend a venue cannot hold a candle to the efficiency of Internet exhibition.” These ideas have helped shape my final understanding of why I am creating three dimensional works arranged in space, in order to re-photograph them and rework them again in a digital space, which, according to Christiansen, is their final resting place (for now).

New York City-based gallery Foxy Production specifically probed how artists today negotiate both gallery and online space in a group exhibition in 2012 titled “Image Object,” featuring Artie Vierkant, Travess Smalley, Kate Steciw, and Andrea Longacre-White. These artists are all responding to the idea that the internet has enabled art and image to never be in a fixed state. Vierkant explains, “Culture Post-Internet is made up of reader-authors who… regard cultural output as an idea or work in progress able to be taken up and continued by any of its viewers.” This same reason is why I create work that is constantly in flux and reworked in multiple interventions, stages, and documentations.

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Photo + Sculpture Influence

In my second year at VCU, I have primarily focused on constructing images with a combination of vinyl applied to thin-gauged steel (Fig 6). These materials enable me to bend, twist, and manipulate the photograph physically, using only my own body and a table or a floor in which to work against. Through these series of manipulations, the image begins to take shape as something in between an image and a sculpture. I have made a number of discoveries with this process, which has driven my studio practice in the past semester. Creating a two sided image that folds over itself has proven to be visually confusing and stimulating, and standing the work up on its own without the help of a frame or device is satisfying for me as a photographic artist (fig 7).

This mode of display begins to call attention to its sculptural qualities, so my research begins to enter a new conversation of the intersection of photography and sculpture, and where these two mediums can meet and overlap. They begin to reference the idea of texture mapping, which is a digital process of creating a photographic ‘skin’ for computer generated three dimensional objects. In texture mapping, a two dimensional surface (image) is wrapped around the CGI 3d object. My reference to this process through alternative means and materials is important, as it is what I consider the screen equivalent to what I do physically in the studio.

My work has been particularly informed by Letha Wilson, an artist who works between the lines of photography’s two dimensional existence and its sculptural possibilities (fig. 8). I relate to her ideas on photography and situate myself in discussion with her work. From an interview with Wilson, she frames the conversation to which my work responds:
I think the interesting thing about photography is you’re trying to capture that moment because you want to hold onto it, this vision, this view you see that’s encompassing you, so you’re using photography as an attempt to capture, but then there’s something interesting when you look at that photograph in a different place and time; it conveys another place, a third meaning. That’s what I’m trying to do with my work, using physical or structural components to bring that third element in so it’s not really here nor there, and make it more present at the moment of viewing. I think it fills a gap. I’m really drawn to sculpture, and as a viewer I think it has a lot of possibilities and potential, so I’m really trying to mix the physical presence of an artwork with an image.\(^9\)

Wilson’s works are as much photographs as they are sculptures. They begin with what she calls amateur color photography, images she takes on trips mostly throughout the American West that are pretty mundane. Yet in her studio, Wilson transforms these otherwise mundane images in a variety of physical ways: images will bisect walls, mix with flowing concrete, and fold over themselves in poetic gestures typically unseen in contemporary photography (fig. 9).

At VCU, I was fortunate enough to meet with Letha through our visiting artist program. After speaking with her one on one and hearing her speak about her work in a formal artist lecture, I was not surprised to learn that our practices carry many parallels. While the end product of both our work is typically somewhat sculptural, calling attention to the physical space it is occupying, our in person conversation was not only focused on formal qualities of the work. At the risk of speaking for her, it seemed our main passion was still the photograph and its references within the natural world, and through a love/hate relationship with the medium, we create new appearances and interventions through material exploration.

Wilson of course is not the first to attempt to marry photography and sculpture. Photographic sculptures have some roots in a 1970 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which was claimed by the curator, Peter Bunnell, as the “first comprehensive survey of photographically formed images used in a sculptural or fully dimensional manner.”¹⁰ The exhibition, titled “Photography into Sculpture,” did not garner great reviews, despite traveling to several locations worldwide, even up until 2014. In the New York Times, critic Hilton Kramer asserted the claim that the work debased the photographic medium while simultaneously failing to achieve sculptural interest.¹¹ I would agree with his claim, as the overall work was very flat, monochrome, and small in scale. In one iteration of the show in Dijon, France, the work appears to be simply adhered to boxes or cut out and put into a diorama like display (fig. 10). While I consider the concepts in this show to be of high importance, I would argue that without today’s technologies, the work was unable to achieve a fully sculptural quality.

Another important influence in this conversation is Barbara Kasten (fig. 11 & 12), who experimented with ideas of staging and its relationship to the photograph. I consider her a sculptor, who used photography as a final means to showcase the exact framing of her arrangement of minimalist forms, props, and architectural elements. Her work has resurfaced in recent years in a comprehensive exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2015, which called attention to the lack of recognition she received during her career since the 1970s, and situated her practice within the current conversation of sculpture and photography.


My attention to Kasten stems from my studio practice of arranging bits and pieces sculpturally in space in order to arrive at the final form of a single photograph. By combining Vierkant’s post-internet ideas of image dissemination in fine art and Kasten’s mastery in staging a set ultimately in order to be photographed, I act out my process (fig. 13, 14, 15). By virtue of the complexities of online image culture today, my procedures are compounded within digital space, while Kasten worked with analog large format photography.

I assert that there is an overwhelming resurgence and deeper consideration of this theme occurring in the contemporary moment. Charlotte Cotton’s book, *Photography is Magic*, for example, presents thirty contemporary artists, many of whom not only work with the image as a sculptural object, but also experiment with how these objects interact with other objects.

Katja Novitskova, Anne de Vries, Rachel De Joode, and Kate Steciw are just a few of the artists that work within what Cotton calls “purposefully destabilized photographic practices” in which “photographic objects no longer necessarily constitute the formal conclusion—the end result—of artistic inquiries.” 12 Aside from technological advancements, one main difference between now and 1970s photographic object inquiry is our current cultural ties to image making and dissemination through the internet and social media. As medium-pushing photographic artist Kate Steciw states, “In our day-to-day lives, omission, repetition, and juxtaposition become the primarily creative gestures or points of agency over an otherwise highly prescribed matrix of use.”13


Conclusion

A successful reading of my work up to the current moment would conclude that it is highly process-based and therefore constantly evolving. My work is in dialogue with itself and technology, always reacting with expanding energy. Images exist through appearances and interventions of invisible image files, manipulated and reimagined as props through material studies which are brought back to life as future images. I aim for my work to move quickly and in multiple directions intuitively, therefore articulating its personal context with language is difficult. One definite intention of my work is to explore the unseen anxiety between our physical and digital space, while participating in a discussion of contemporary art practice. Ultimately I want to create artifacts that formally engage the fine art world as well as society at large, that function as an expression and response to the invisible nature of the digital.
Images

Figure 1 Photograph of my mother and father, Linda and Mark Sarver, from the 1970's

Figure 2 Abbey Lee Sarver, JPG Artifacts installation view at Anderson Gallery, Mirrored Plexiglas and adhesive fabric, 2016
Figure 3 Abbey Lee Sarver, JPG Artifacts installation view at Anderson Gallery, Mirrored Plexiglas and adhesive fabric, 2016

Figure 4 Artie Vierkant, Image Objects. Prints on aluminum composite panel, altered documentation 2011-ongoing
Figure 5 Abbey Lee Sarver, altered documentation of studio installation view, 2015. inkjet prints on adhesive vinyl, polyester, galvanized steel, plexiglas, plastic chains, holographic film, vinyl

Figure 6 Abbey Lee Sarver, studio view, vinyl adhesive and galvanized steel, 2016
Figure 7 Abbey Lee Sarver, installation in FAB Gallery, 2015

Figure 8 Letha Wilson, Skyfall Wallbreak California, 2014. UV print on dibond, wood, hole in wall
Figure 9 Letha Wilson, Badlands Concrete Bend, 2015. C-prints, concrete, emulsion transfer, aluminum frame

Figure 10 Photography into Sculpture traveling exhibition, installation view of 'The Photographic Object 1970', Le Consortium, Dijon, France, 2013
Figure 11 Barbara Kasten, Metaphase 5, 1986, Cibachrome

Figure 12 Barbara Kasten working in her studio, 1983
Figure 13 Abbey Lee Sarver, installation view of JPG Artifacts at Anderson Gallery, 2016

Figure 14 Abbey Lee Sarver, Self Portrait as documentation of JPG Artifacts at Anderson Gallery, 2016
Figure 15 Abbey Lee Sarver, documentation of JPG Artifacts at Anderson Gallery, 2016
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