

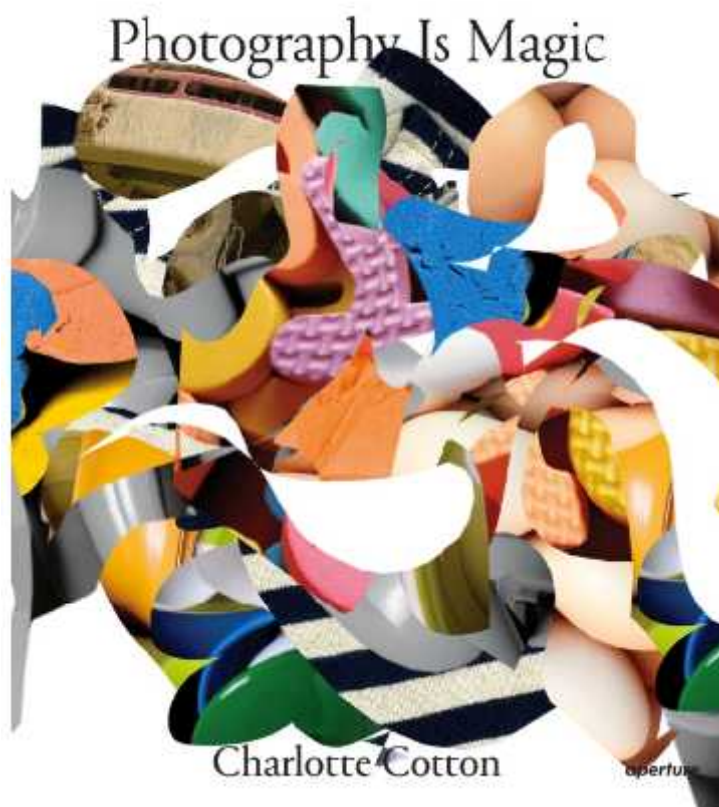
## FORUM

**CHARLOTTE COTTON**  
*Photography is magic*  
Aperture, New York 2015

Discussants:

Oscar Meo  
Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger  
Denis Curti  
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Ed. by Chiara Spenuso



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**BEYOND REPRESENTATION: PHOTOGRAPHY'S POSSIBLE  
WORLDS AND THEIR 'MAGICAL' POWER**

Throughout the history of aesthetics, it has often been said that art has an 'enchancing' and 'evocative'<sup>1</sup> power – that its objective is metaphysical and that it has metaphysical properties itself. With this in mind, the title of Charlotte Cotton's latest book on photography could be read as implying that she agrees with this outdated point of view. The sentence «Photography is magic» could also be interpreted as being similar to naive exclamations such as «Oh, that's magical (wonderful, sublime, etc.)!», that usually make art experts smile. However, Cotton's arguments show that she cannot be blamed for dusty traditionalism, or, worse, for sharing the same commonplace and meaningless 'view' as a culture-Philistine.

Cotton holds that her use of the word 'magic' does not refer to the tricks performed by magicians at the theatre or the circus, but to 'close-up magic' – a more intimate form of magic, which is «often performed for a tightly knit sphere of fellow magicians and small, discerning audiences» (Cotton 2015a, 1)<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, in his uncharitable review of Cotton's book, Daniel C. Blight considers her 'magic' to indeed be the magic that entertains adults and children at the circus, and criticizes it for playing a part in contemporary consumerist society (Blight 2015). I think that Blight is wrong. Cotton's survey of contemporary photography has no reductionist aim, and does not address the general public but a particular group of viewers who are fully aware and watchful of the tricks performed by the photographer: their eye is not 'innocent'. I believe that Blight is also mistaken in his conclusion that «photography's magic lies not in its aesthetic preoccupations, but in its digital spirit as algorithmic information, with, or ideally without, an image». There is no 'magic' in obtaining images from algorithms, just as there was no magic in the 'magic lantern' or in analogue photography, but simply a clever use of the laws of physics

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<sup>1</sup> 'Evocative' here is used with the literal meaning of the Latin verb *e-vocare*: 'to call out'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Close-up magic', also known as 'micromagic' or 'table magic', is performed very close to the viewers. A typical example is street games based on sleight of hand and performed on a table with playing cards or dice, balls, bars (such as domino tiles) and cups. Unfortunately, often it is not 'magic', but a fraud.

(and, in the case of analogue photography, chemistry). Cotton is aware of this, and is not interested in 'low-cost' illusions (such as at the circus), nor in those at a high price (such as the 'illusions' involved in the art market to convince buyers of the 'value' of a certain piece), and does not consider the mere use of a medium to be 'magical'.

Reading Cotton's opening «Essay», she clearly believes that what makes photography 'magical' is its ability to connect with the viewer's imagination: as magic, photography «creates the conditions for us to explore imaginative possibilities, while sharing in a slice of the real» (Cotton 2015a, 2)<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately Cotton does not explain why she uses the philosophically 'outdated' concept of imagination, and she does not investigate what 'real' end the imagination can lead to when it is set in motion by images. Does she consider the imagination to be a mental tool which we use to construct the aesthetic and conceptual meaning of images? Can we use it to better understand the visual world and our relationship with it? Does Cotton believe that photography invites us to use our imagination to enter meaningful 'possible worlds'? If this is her thinking, the less radical group within visual studies (i.e. those less critical of contemporary 'iconocracy') would perhaps agree with her.

At the beginning of the «Essay», Cotton quotes the philosopher Vilém Flusser in a passage where he considers the space and time peculiar to an image to be «the world of magic» (Flusser 2009, 9). Flusser too bases the idea that photography is magical on its relationship with the viewer's imagination, but – unlike Cotton – he thinks that imagination and magic have a more perceptive character:

Images are significant surfaces. Images signify – mainly – something 'out there' in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions). This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as 'imagination' (Flusser 2009, 8).

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<sup>3</sup> See also: «Magic is something that happens in the viewer's imaginations» (Cotton 2015a, 3). She has elsewhere stated that what she wanted with the image sequence «is an unfolding of pictures functioning very much like a magic trick» (Cotton 2015b).

According to Flusser, «the significance of images is magical» (Flusser 2009, 9) because scanning an image with our eyes produces semantic relationships between different elements of the image: theoretical concepts, such as ‘white’, ‘black’ and ‘colour’ appear to the eye to be «states of things» (Flusser 2009, 43). In such a way, after the *Entzauberung* (the ‘disenchantment’) of the world effected by written texts, photography (as well as figurative painting) causes a ‘re-enchantment’.

Flusser is obviously referring to representational (and analogue) photography. I think that the works collected in Cotton’s book tell another story. Even when objects are real, photographs are never representations of a three-dimensional reality, but are greatly reworked *presentations*. Therefore, no re-enchantment of the world occurs. The more that an image confuses the viewer’s perception, the more it attracts his or her attention, and makes him or her conscious of the act of looking. It is the semantic role of photography and imagination that is involved: both of them *create* and *interpret* signs (or symbols). In this sense, I think that Cotton would agree with two of Flusser’s remarks: that the magic of the images obtained through technical methods is ‘post-historic’, struggling against ‘textolatry’, and that it is ‘of a second order’, since it is not designed to change the world, but rather the *meaning* of the world (Flusser 2009, 17-18, 25).

Unlike in Cotton’s previous book, *The photograph as contemporary art*, the book *Photography is magic* does not provide the reader with a detailed map of artistic production, and the photographers represented in the book seem to have been selected according to her personal view of the way they stir the viewer’s imagination<sup>4</sup>. This organizational chaos can be justified by the very impossibility of tracing a linear path between the artists’ points of view, motivations and solutions. Various genres, styles and techniques intertwine and overlap, and the viewer is under the impression that this creative chaos is evidence of the fluctuations, the fluidity and the fragmentation involved in contemporary art. Cotton herself states that what all these practices have in common «is an immeasurable quantity of active choices being made – in a subjective and nonlinear fashion – by their creators» (Cotton 2015a, 10). This is confirmed by the collection of artists’ «Statements» at the back of the book: while only a few of them refer to a

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<sup>4</sup> This lack of a clear point of view is strongly criticized by Knoblauch (2015).

'school' or a 'current', most of them claim that their work is a hybrid, based on various art forms, techniques and genres. On this point Cotton observes that «the very idea of separate disciplines of art is now defunct» (Cotton 2015a, 12). This view is put into practice throughout the book, where the reader finds a mixture of photographs of installations which themselves contain photographs, pseudo-sculptures and pseudo-paintings, photographs of photographs, collages, intermedia works (whereby photographs interact with videos, inscriptions, sculptures, paintings, and *objets trouvés*), references to the *trompe-l'œil*, and so on. This mixture could make a malevolent reader think of the taxonomy of animals in Borges' *Chinese encyclopaedia*, but he or she would be wrong in this association: the book is a mirror of what happens in contemporary art.

The works represented in the book highlight how the use of digital technology largely contributes to the polymorphous character of contemporary art and to media mixing. Can we consider this explosion of subjectivity to be proof that photography is 'magic'? According to one meaning of the term 'magic', my answer is yes: Cotton's survey shows how photography can interact with other arts, mix together forms and structures, and make up compositions based on modalities which are impossible in a three-dimensional reality. To put it simply, I think that we can consider contemporary art to be magic because it entails endless possibilities, and opens up worlds to us which are different to, but just as meaningful as, our own.

Cotton's book shows that Flusser's view is no longer relevant. The aim of digital photography is not to turn three dimensions into two, or to transform concepts into 'states of things'. In the age of the Internet (or – to use the term preferred by Cotton – 'post-Internet') and Photoshop, photography is following the same path as that taken by painting since the beginning of twentieth century. At that time only a few innovators (for example Paul Strand, Duchamp, Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky) experimented in 'abstract' photography or mixed 'abstraction' and 'reality', whereas today there is continuous experimentation<sup>5</sup>. Technological development both requires and stimulates the crea-

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag wrote already in the Seventies that «far from confining itself to realistic representation and leaving abstraction to painters, photography has kept up with and absorbed all the anti-naturalistic conquests of painting» (Sontag 2005, 114). Her statement is even more true today.

tion of new language and a 'meta-photographic' consciousness, i.e. a reflection on photography within photography. The view that photographs are presentations is an essential part of this consciousness<sup>6</sup>. Would Cotton subscribe to this claim?

Where 'presentation' and 'meta-artistic' consciousness are concerned, it is impossible not to refer to Duchamp's readymade – 'artwork' that is indistinguishable from the object because it is the object itself. According to Cotton, «the readymade is a resonant concept for today, in the sense that many artists are co-opting existing object-commodities (including photographic images) into their work – intact and unmanipulated» (Cotton 2015a, 15). It would perhaps be necessary to specify that a work is not a *pure* readymade when the artist includes *objets trouvés*: if he or she puts a photograph together with other objects (and, among them, readymades), the result is an 'assisted readymade'<sup>7</sup>, and if he or she modifies a photograph, the result is a 'rectified readymade'<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the result is *not* a readymade if the artist takes a photograph of a work that has been realized in such a way: he or she only performs an authorial and traditional action, and the product is not a presentation, but a representation.

A well-known form of magic is using a particular medium at the same time as deceiving viewers about it being a medium. When art succeeds in concealing itself, it succeeds in being art: *ars est celare artem*. According to a 'strong' interpretation of this ancient saying, artwork must appear to be natural (not fictitious, forced, or artificial), confuse the perceiver, and lead him or her to take the representation of reality for the reality itself. This aim has

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<sup>6</sup> That does not mean that the great 'representational' photographers are not aware of the fact that every representation is an interpretation of the world and also of photography itself, and therefore that the 'subjective' point of view is essential. An excellent example is Robert Frank's *Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey*, where the artist plays with our 'imagination' (or with our skill to interpret signs in order to detect meaning) and includes some 'abstract' elements. He shows the wall of a building, the lower part of a flag, and two women standing at the windows of their apartments. The face of one woman is in the shadows, while the face of the other is occluded by the flag. They are watching an event that we cannot see, and are only indirectly informed of by the title and a symbol (the flag). We have in front of us two anonymous people (two 'nobodies') in an anonymous building, who are watching something that is – for us – a non-event, a non-thing. Abstraction vs. reality, invisible vs. visible, sign vs. referent, imagination vs. perception: Which one wins?

<sup>7</sup> According to Duchamp, even paintings are «'readymades aided' and also works of assemblage», because tubes of paint are «manufactured and ready-made products» (Duchamp 1973, 142).

<sup>8</sup> A famous example is Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*

posed a serious philosophical problem as long ago as ancient Greece: is the enchanting and deceptive power of art positive or negative? While Plato criticized art in general as a lie, Gorgias embraced it: «He who deceives is more honest than he who does not deceive, and he who is deceived is wiser than he who is not deceived»<sup>9</sup>. Gorgias was not aware of that powerful instrument that artists use to open up a world to the receiver, and that Cotton binds to magic: the imagination. Nevertheless, he understood an essential element in the relationship between artist and audience: from the artist's end there is the production of an illusion, and from the receiver's end there is a favourable attitude, a specific aesthetic delight in being deceived. This argument is in keeping with a 'weak' interpretation of the motto *ars est celare artem*. There is no sign of an artist's efforts, physical help (as regards painting, the geometrical scheme, outline, etc.), or trick of the trade: nothing at all can be detected. Receivers can immerse themselves in the fiction, even if they are aware of the trick. I think that the following quotation from Cotton's «Essay» gives an example of this weak interpretation:

We see [...] artists using classic 'in-camera' techniques [...] with digital tools, outwitting default settings to create the improbable [...] [T]here are [...] contemporary artists using classic SLR cameras and precise lenses to create intensely information-laden and layered images of details from the real world that mimic the filter settings of Photoshop (Cotton 2015a, 11).

The 'magical' action is, so to speak, doubled: artists create an illusion by pretending to use a different technology to that actually used. Nevertheless, unlike street magicians who performs tricks, they do not commit fraud. They try to realize the kind of agreement that Sartre called a «pact of generosity» (Sartre 2001, 271), but that is also a 'pact of complicity': the artist 'honestly' leads the receiver in the illusory world, invites him or her to share the trick and, sometimes, to indulge in imagery; the 'wise' receiver agrees, freely deciding to play the game. Perhaps forcing Cotton's intention, one could say that an artwork becomes 'magical' when this pact is realized, and both artist and receiver contribute to the construction of the meaning of a work, i.e. when semantics develops in a pragmatic direction.

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<sup>9</sup> Gorgias, fr. 82 B 23 Diels-Kranz.

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### THE TRICK BEHIND THE TRICKS

Written and curated by Charlotte Cotton, the book *Photography is magic* offers visual delight, eye candy, and conventionalism. It is ambitious to bring together works by more than 80 contemporary artists who use photography in their art but whose artistic premises and contexts are very different. These are complex photographs, which are referred to using terms such as post-photography, post-internet, new aesthetics and interface, because, roughly defined, the works and photographs take advantage of tools available on the internet and of digital methods, as they recreate objects and surfaces that exist in the real world. The works, in a sense, give physical form to digital structures. The common denominator between these artists is that they «shape the possibilities of our contemporary photographic landscape» as it's written on the back cover of the book.

Cotton ties together more than 80 different artists who use photography in their art, using a concept that I think is, on the one hand, visually enticing, and on the other, surprisingly conservative and art-centred. I will clarify what I mean below.

Of course, linking photography and magic is not an original idea in photographic history. The middle ground between photography and magic has been staked out since the *camera obscura* captured the three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional image inside a box. The world changed into an image governed by the laws of perspective, and verified by mathematical formulae. The change from the three-dimensional world of noise to a two-dimensional image might have felt like magic, even if the central perspective made the space into the realm of reason and science. Historically – and perhaps even today – it is precisely the mimetic and representative character of photography that seems magical.

Charlotte Cotton's approach to photography and magic is different: Cotton's magic is 'close-up magic', involving conjuring tricks, deception, and surprise. The focus is not on magic, which is associated with the world understood and managed through science, but on conjuring tricks, created in social and performative situations. The audience is deceived, and the trick is successful in



an intimate and intense interaction with the participants. The approach chosen by Cotton creates an analogy between the photographic works selected for the book and a magician's tricks. According to Cotton, both offer visual frames, to which we direct our attention, and which also hint at our collective habit of looking at the visual phenomena around us. Cotton also draws a parallel between the tradition of magic tricks and the history of photography – from the fresh and experimental point of view of contemporary magicians and artists. Consequently, the tricks of pulling a rabbit out of a hat and sawing a woman in half are presented parallel to references to the history of photography, cut-and-paste photocollages, black-and-white photography, the darkroom, and Polaroids.

### **1. What's behind the tricks?**

Admittedly, the idea of 'close-up magic' is fascinating. Magic is wonderful. And, certainly, readers will have reactions and feelings of surprise when encountering many of the photographic works in the book. However, in spite of Charlotte Cotton's enthusiastic and personal approach, her contextualising essay seems, in itself, to be a conjuring trick. By drawing the reader's attention to a collection of fancy tricks as part of the history of photography and especially history of art – Marcel Duchamp, Cubism and some other interruptions of the art history of 20<sup>th</sup> century – she limits her discussion to a rather institutionalised context of art photography, while at the same time, I think, ignoring the more essential questions of the social and societal use and circumstances of photography and photographic art.

I was surprised by Cotton's concept, since, in our times, photography and the photographic, visual technology, and visual control strategies pose huge social questions that relate to humans and human activity. The circulation of images; the function of images as part of human sociality and the creation of communities; questions of authorship; the human relationship to technology; the effects of digitisation; information technology; the military-industrial complex; control mechanisms; the environmental crisis... The questions are huge, and photography and art institutions cannot use magic tricks to make them go away. Sure, they can make people look the other way – as they do in conjuring tricks – but then the role of photographic art and photography institutions is diminished and almost nullified. If – and when – art and photography created in an artistic context have a place in the visual

world order, it is currently being forcefully redefined precisely by the use of photography-based media. These are the questions on which I was missing Cotton's insight and curatorial expertise. Cotton is known for her critical views on photography institutions. It was precisely this critical approach and any new visions related to the roles of photography institutions that I would have found truly interesting. In her text, Cotton writes about artists, but a critical analysis of the art institution that produces the artists and of its potential new roles is missing. Or is the book's target audience so obviously aware of the discursive framework of the images that there is no point in addressing this? If this is the case, the art audience is predominantly people who frequent galleries and museums, buy art, and consume art in very traditional gallery and museum environments.

## **2. Artists as *prosumers*?**

Within her book, Charlotte Cotton has curated extremely interesting artists, whose artistic premises, motives and photographic practices are insightful and varied. Collage, montage, appropriation, or the *prosumer* culture that we live in are visualised in the artists' works featured in the book. The book offers the selection of artists to spend time with and return to. It gives tastings of many fascinating artists and tempts a reader to look for more information about them. It brings the reader back to on-line environment. Among the artists included, there are well-known names who have offered acute insights into the post-internet or post-photography debate. They also provide the context for the less well-known artists. An example of these is Lucas Blalock, whose comments feature prominently in Cotton's text. I would like to have seen Cotton's references to some artists or to certain photographers more clearly identified, thus providing a frame of reference for the artists and linking the «Essay» to the photographs selected. As things stand, the text and the images seem slightly disconnected.

One of the most interesting issues touched upon by Cotton is the question of the role of the viewer, and consequently the relationship between photographic artists and everyday photographers. As Cotton states, never before in history have viewers had this much skill and understanding of photography equipment and tools, when compared to the artists whose images they view, and neither have they had similar distribution opportunities for their

images as they do today. Although it is possible to reach huge audiences, there are strong image-driven subcultures or communities of like-minded people.

In the so called 'prosumer culture', the roles of the producer and the consumer are becoming blurred, as consumers produce content for social media services and consume content produced by themselves and their peers. The term 'prosumer' was introduced by the futurist Alvin Toffler in 1980, when he described the «pro-active consumer»<sup>10</sup>, who demanded mass-produced products that were highly customised. Since then, the term has been used in various senses, but often it refers to people who both produce and consume media, or produce and consume creative content (for example, the use of image-sharing or social media platforms). *Prosumerism* is essentially linked to the market economy and, more specifically, to the production of customised products. Indeed, companies are increasingly handing out their products for testing and customisation, not to experts, but to consumers, who improve them in order to get the company to produce products that are customised just for them.

A large number of the artists create and distribute their images for a community, which not only shares a specific visual discourse but also produces and adjusts it, like its own visual slang. Commercial organisations and their commercial interests have always had a strong influence on photography. It is precisely commercial mass production that once enabled the democratisation of photography, turning it into an everyday thing for any man or woman. It is no wonder, then, that contemporary artists are tempted to blur the commercial use and control of photographs, but today their methods are new and more targeted.

### **3. The contemporary role of a photography book?**

After Cotton's «Essay» at the beginning of the book, all the images of the works are laid out in uninterrupted succession. With each image, the caption includes information about the artist and the work, while the artists' statements are placed at the end. The images include exhibition documents from galleries, photographs of objects and installations, photographs of photographs, and photographs printed in the book. When studying the book, I wondered whether the layout was designed to produce a feeling similar to

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<sup>10</sup> See Toffler (1980).

browsing through a stream of images on a screen. When surfing online, images without context are almost norm, and the differences between collages, documentaries, installation documentation, and images generated by an algorithm may be irrelevant, but in this book I was expecting to find photographs that are grounded in context and an analysis of the motives of the photographers. Readers looking to contextualise the works have to rely on the brief and partly disconnected artists' statements at the end of the book, which is a shame. The artists' statements are almost an ironic part of the book: with their short snappy comments, they are part of the machinery behind the art trade and the neo-liberal market economy that, unfortunately, simplifies the debate on works of art.

The selection of photographs in the book is visually consistent, and although, in her «Essay», Cotton writes that the artists are taking a critical position in relation to the media system, this does not come across in the selection of non-contextualised art photographs, and instead, the result is a conventional art book. This is a shame, because it is not only photography exhibitions but also photography books that are facing new challenges and opportunities, as they come into contact with digital environments and image formats. Like digital information network environments, the way of viewing images predominantly on-screen challenges both the physical exhibition medium and the photography book as a user interface, as well as the organisations presenting photographs. When the interaction between people increasingly involves information technology, that is, when we increasingly interact with each other using social networking sites, videos, blogs, vlogs and live streams, our connection with each other relies partly on images displayed on-screen. In interaction enabled by information technology, when viewing images on-screen, the medium of the image diversifies. As, in most cases, photographs are taken with a camera and made visible using various methods, photographs cannot be explained only with reference to the visual interaction during which the images are made visible. The materiality related to images resists simple symbolic interpretations.

The digital culture revolution concerns the level of technology, software, and various platforms, but, more importantly, it concerns the content of art and the realities emerging along with digital culture, such as those brought about by biotechnology and genetic engineering in artistic practice, immersivity, interactivity,

online identities, and so on. It fundamentally influences issues such as the status of a work of art (object vs. immateriality), interdisciplinarity between fields of art, and the change in the visual language, or the 'new aesthetic', which means that pictoriality permeates various forms of art and even retroactively influences analogue technologies. Digital platforms and communities enable the emergence of various communities (projects, collaborations), and the presentation and dissemination of art, and the free distribution of art on the Internet, outside traditional institutions. What will happen to photography and art exhibition media when exhibition documentation, live streaming, and online distribution become more important and even replace physical experiences of space?

How has the fact that screens have become the primary method of experiencing photography changed photography, and how do images produced and used in a digital space work in a photography book? An image printed on paper and laid out in a book is an element within the social and cultural practices of consumption, exchange and representation, which are challenges – and opportunities – for a screen-based image. Does a photograph become a new or a different work or medium in these contexts? In what sense is a photograph the same *object* when we see it on-screen, in an exhibition space, or printed on paper in Charlotte Cotton's book?

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### **WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY**

«We look at the world and see what we have learned to believe is there. We have been conditioned to expect [...] but, as photographers, we must learn to relax our beliefs»<sup>11</sup>. This brief but meaningful thought by Siskind is my starting point to take part in the debate about the book *Photography is magic*, curated by Charlotte Cotton, in which she presented more than 80 artists who operate in the field of 'photographic magic'.

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<sup>11</sup> Quote by Aaron Siskind, very well known and often repeated even though the original reference is unknown.

The first matter I would like to address is about the lexicon used in the book, which is, in my opinion, only apparently universally acknowledged. I do not think it is appropriate to refer to photography and magic in relation to the images that the book presents. Those presented by Cotton, are indeed not photographs but images. Images often created artificially or heavily reworked with IT softwares. Therefore, when one refers to the magic of photography, I think, naturally, that it is due to chemistry and that is has to be attributed to the wonder caused by shapes appearing slowly on photosensitive paper. There should not be any aesthetic or content-related classifications. Photography (when referring to the art that was invented in 1839) is one thing, the rest belongs to a different world: the world of images.

This research, according to Cotton, is bound to change the relationship between the audience and the artist. The curator's premise on which the book is based is the idea that photography really is magic, not because of the alchemy of materials, but as a result of the imagination of the viewer. Magic lies in the viewer's power of finishing the artwork by using their fantasy, and, above all, in the new relationship between the artist and the audience.

This vision moves the artistic act to the background: reducing its action to the mere image leaves no space for the development of an artistic project. Once again I believe that photography is at the same time a chance for storytelling, a document, a project, a way to develop the artist's memory and their interpretation, and I think it is really impossible for photography to play this role with poetics that only favour mere images.

After all, Cotton, who worked on this book with Harsh Patel, has focussed greatly on building an editorial project that does not need the reader to have a deep knowledge about photography and this is one of the reasons for which I find the title of the book strongly misleading.

Cotton actually declares her awareness about having written a book which does not address a niche of photography experts, but a wider public who is interested in the theme of digital, regardless of photography.

The confirmation of this position comes as one reads the three chapters: «Introductory essay», «Photographs» and, particularly, «Declarations of the artists». All the artists presented in the book have a great knowledge about the Net and this represents to Cotton's eyes a great change, which started roughly ten years ago

and is now expanding. It is by now clear that the fact that anyone has easy access to social networks and to the Web in general produced a closer and never-seen-before relationship between the artist and the viewer, whose main traits are participation and direct dialogue. At the same time, specifically, the debate between artists has developed around the topic of how photography evolved or has allegedly been superseded.

It is interesting to read that Cotton thinks that photography has not at all been superseded, but it is now oriented towards knocking down the wall that divides the artist and the viewer. However, once again, I believe Cotton should not refer to photographs but to images when she declares her point of view.

Technology changes, culture changes, the perception of the artists and their work changes, so Cotton clarifies her position: the analogy with magic refers to the relationship that artists developed with the public and their imagination. Nowadays, the artist must not worry about underlining the virtues of photography – their main worry is how their work is viewed by an increasingly sophisticated, informed and demanding audience. This point is met with optimism by Cotton, because it deletes the dividing line between the artist and the audience – with the risk, in my opinion, of permanently deleting the role of critics in the production process.

Cotton writes that in this historical moment there is a great inclination to experimentation, with photographers working more and more with sculpture, music, painting, etc. The institutions who work with images should understand the direction in which contemporary photography is going. And this is true, but this book has the ambition of being a guideline about contemporary photography and a powerful counterweight to those who claim that photography is over. But I believe Cotton is not on the right path: all images presented in the book are to be considered artificial creations and have nothing to do with reality.

BENEDICT BURBRIDGE  
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### **MEANING, MAGIC, METAPHOR**

What is *Photography is magic* [PIM]? What does it do? And how does it do it? This short essay addresses these questions in rela-

tion to two reviews of the book written by Loring Knoblauch (2015) and Daniel C. Blight (2015). The decision to pair these critical responses is based on the remarkably similar approaches they adopt. Each, it seems to me, addresses *PIM* primarily in terms of what it fails to do: a model of critical enquiry based on the view that absence equates to deficit. To unpack the tendency and its implications for an understanding of *PIM* a bit further, I identify three *types of absence* that cut across observations central to both reviews, along with the negative value judgements to which they become attached. From here, I revisit the absences from an alternative perspective, sensitive to their potential as the creative and critical tools through which meaning is produced, rather than as the regrettable omissions maligned by critics. The intention is not to endorse one view over another but, rather, to reflect on the implications of the values we assign to absence, the agendas that inform those value judgements, and what these might suggest about relationships between different forms of creative, critical and cultural expression today.

The reviews share at least three observations/contentions:

### **1. *Photography is magic* is not about what it should be about**

Knoblauch is very clear that she had hoped *PIM* would address the same task as *The photograph as contemporary art*, Charlotte Cotton's popular 2004 Thames and Hudson survey, which is now on its third edition (Cotton 2004). It didn't. *PIM* is «neither a summary of all the photographic work made in the new millennium, nor a narrower subset of digitally-minded so called formalist work». Where Knoblauch measures the new publication against an earlier book by the same author, Blight believes it fails to deliver on its title, focusing on the wrong type of photography *and* the wrong type of magic: this is not a book about «photography's enduring and complicated relationship to...“spirit”, and its various esoteric traditions». It does not look at anything other than art photography. And, contenting itself with an examination of relationships between art photography and 'close-up magic', it does not explore potential links to the occult.

### **2. *Photography is magic* does not engage closely with any of the individual art works featured**

For Blight, this is mainly a matter of what he describes as the varying quality of the projects: there are lots of different series fea-



tured and the book does not appear to differentiate between them based on aesthetic or conceptual attainment. Blight's own judgement regarding the quality of the projects appears to take originality as its primary criterion, setting the 'very interesting' against the 'derivative' and concluding that the derivative 'overshadows' the very interesting due to the 'sheer volume' of work included. Knoblauch, by contrast, is concerned with the fact the book does not explain or discuss any individual project and neglects to link specific works to the different types of practice mapped out in Cotton's accompanying (?) essay. As a result, «thoughtful curatorial analysis [...] is undermined by the lack of concrete and illustrative examples».

### **3. *Photography is magic* should not say that it does not make claims for the quality, value or historical importance of the projects featured**

Cotton is explicit about this and both reviews quote the same sentence from her «Essay» in full: «the artists in *Photography is Magic* are not approached as the contemporary end to a linear, canonical history of art photography». For Knoblauch, this amounts to a form of cowardice – an act «astonishingly and head-scratchingly timid». For Blight, efforts to disavow a canonizing project ignore the implications of the large-scale format and glossy production values of the book itself.

The three points illustrate the extent to which important parts of both reviews rely on the negative interpretation of absence, even when that absence takes the form of a double negative (*PIM should not claim that it does not claim...*). In every case, these judgements are based on alternative views of what the book 'should have been', what it 'should have done', what it 'should have contained'. The failure to meet these criteria is attributed, by implication at least, to a series of negative characteristics or faults: to cowardice, to arrogance, to ignorance. These traits sit in natural opposition to a series of positive characteristics or virtues – including courage, humility and intelligence – that, by implication at least, the critics attribute to their own, alternative models. But are there other ways of thinking through, around and about these absences? What happens, for instance, if they are attributed positive characteristics – understood not in terms of a series of deficits and/or failings but, instead, in terms of critical and creative tools 'central to the production of meaning'? Let's recap: *PIM* does not

offer an analysis of individual projects, make judgements about the quality of projects in relation to each other, or systematically carve up the landscape it explores in ways that would allow readers to place works of art within distinct and specific categories. What are the possibilities here? The book consists of three components: an essay, the footnotes that accompany the essay, and a long series of images. The «Essay» talks about a diversity of topics without referring to particular works of art, the footnotes introduce a range of quotes from diverse sources that map loosely onto the «Essay», and artists' projects are not – to quote Knoblauch – «organized chronologically, thematically, geographically, or even alphabetically». So how *are* the three components linked? What relationships *do* they share? How *do* the meanings of these three authored statements shift and slide in relation to each other? The footnotes, it seems, do not only reference sources cited in the «Essay». Instead they offer up a series of discrete quotations that move freely between instructional and theoretical literature on the topic of 'close-up magic' and scholarly accounts of fields including photography, contemporary art, and networked digital culture. Sitting within, yet also apart from, the main essay, could these sources help to reveal a shared terminology and a set of parallel concerns, *enacting* the photography-as-magic analogy that the essay itself *describes* in relation to the images? This line of analysis can be extended to relationships between essay and image, and between the different images, where motifs, ideas and techniques recur, intersect and collide within a variety of iterative sequences<sup>12</sup>.

This positive characterization of absence would raise some larger questions. What, for example, are the responsibilities of writers faced with a body of visual material? Do they respect the conventions of rational analytical prose, pinning down examples like butterflies in display cases? Or can they take a lead from the subject they set out to explore, working through its implications not just for 'what is said', but also for the 'tools used to say it'; enacting lessons at the level not just of content, but also of form<sup>13</sup>?

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<sup>12</sup> Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa makes a similar point in his account of the book (Wolukau-Wanambwa 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Knoblauch comes close to entertaining such a possibility when she describes the high level generalities' on which Cotton's written analysis relies. The potential of this model of knowledge production is swiftly dismissed: being «left [...] to puzzle it out for ourselves [...] is [...] frustrating [...] and] smacks of tin-eared arrogance, like we know exactly what she is referring to».

Where would 'this kind of book' sit in relation to the field of performative critical enquiry gaining ground among academics, curators and the artists with which they sometimes collaborate<sup>14</sup>? How would we assess this alternative form of knowledge production? What criteria could we use? What are the political and cultural consequences of these questions?

What of the claims made not to endorse the practices *PIM* explores, the disavowal of canonization, and, particularly, the tensions between such a statement and the book's glossy production values? When negative values are applied, these points are suggested to demonstrate anxiety regarding the historical longevity of the judgements made or, more simply, blind ignorance to the claims about status and value typically associated with a publication that looks and feels like this one. Reframed as critical and creative devices, those failings have the potential to establish what may have already been a productive tension between content and form, with each serving to complicate claims made by the other. More questions ensue: why can't a glossy coffee table book examine works of art as cultural symptoms rather than as high points in a lineage of creative production? Could the posing of precisely that question be what *PIM* is actually *about*? Such a strategy would not be new: examples stretch back through the twentieth-century history of institutional critique, described by Blake Stimson and Alexandro Alberro in terms of a dialectical formation<sup>15</sup>. When radical content is used to place pressure on specific aspects of a conservative container, each can pose challenging questions of the other. While synthesis is easily mistaken for cooption, this ignores changes to both parties that this *process* and *interaction* involves (Ribalta 2012, 64). The potential of such a strategy may already be clear in parts of the reviews cited here: when Blight asks (rather than states), *if* this «is [...] not precisely what a book of this nature attempts to do, by default?» and Knoblauch entertains the possibility that Cotton may not even be a 'be-

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<sup>14</sup> In the UK, the main research assessment now groups Art History and Art Practice together, for example, a point with significant implications for the approaches to research and its public presentation adopted by art historians. The possibilities of knowledge production through means other than rational analytical prose were the subject of *Beyond Text*, a major initiative launched by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2007. See <http://www.beyondtext.ac.uk/>. Blight has produced a number of interesting texts that adopt a similar approach.

<sup>15</sup> See Alberro-Stimson (2009).

liever' in the works she has assembled – a point «which would be interesting in and of itself».

This leads to a third point, pertaining to photography's relationship to magic and its particular manifestation in the book. Here, Knoblauch breaks from the absence-as-deficit model, reflecting on Cotton's detailed unpacking of her central analogy: «she dives into aspects of repetition, distraction, misdirection, scripted performance, "mistakes", imagination, historical tradition, active discourse with other practitioners, shared expectations, and camouflage». And yet the negative value judgments are never far away: the «time spent explaining the details leads to the conclusion that she is both worried that we might not find the comparison as compelling as she does and inordinately intent on proving just how perfect this clever connection is». Read positively? *PIM* explains the links very clearly, unpacks their potential in detail, and supports this using meticulous research. This is a point with which Blight actually appears to concur: his extended and very interesting critique of the art-as-close-up-magic analogy based not on the quality of the parallel drawn but, instead, on the social and political values that this version of magic photography is seen to embody.

All of which raises a final point, linked to aspects of the previous two. Blight sets up a distinction between art-photography-and-close-up-magic and photography's relationship to what he describes in terms of 'digital spirit'. Aligning the former with post-modern consumer culture, entertainment and trivial distraction, he links the latter to modernity, politics and belief. If we set aside the rights and wrongs of this distinction (and the extent to which, as with so many binaries, the dividing line may be more porous and/or uncertain than it initially seems) it is possible to reflect, again, on the implications of the deficit-based thinking involved. Blight *takes for granted* that *PIM* represents an uncritical and unwitting symptom of the late-capitalist distraction it is also *assumed* to endorse: a negative value judgement that relies on the previous assumption that the book is either disingenuous about, or ignorant to, the tension between its format and the insistence that canon formation is not its goal. Set the first negative judgement aside and the potential of the book *to produce* the socio-political analysis *made explicit* by Blight becomes altogether clearer. Where some scream critique, perhaps others prefer to smuggle.

The potential to offer a positive interpretation of absence has important implications for the discussion *PIM*, but it does not

close down the space for critique. Instead, it requires the task of critical enquiry be approached in alternative ways, as attention moves from the failure not to write some other kind of book and onto the 'delivery of what has been promised': addressing strategy, its effectiveness, its potential limits and the internal contradictions involved. The indeterminate meanings of absence as a critical tool, for instance – the capacity for slippage, misunderstanding and multiple interpretation – could itself be held up to scrutiny. In which case, critics would face the vexed issue of intentionality in our post-postmodern culture: a complex question indeed.

In summary: photography is magic. Appearances deceiving (particularly in a culture as superficial as ours). Believing is crucial, but you have to believe in something. The most important question here: 'believe in what?'

CHARLOTTE COTTON  
(Independent Curator)  
**REPLY TO COMMENTATORS**

Reading the critiques of *Photography is magic* by Benedict Burbridge, Denis Curti, Oscar Meo and Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger has been a somewhat challenging experience for me. I reacted the proposal made to me by Chiara Spensu that she would find willing (for which I am grateful) participants in her project to critique *Photography is magic* with the inevitable dread that anyone outside of academia might feel. What choice did I have other than to acquiesce and wait for the day when four textual projections onto my most recent book would come into my email inbox? Like every woman's woman within the cultural sector, I do my utmost to respect and support other women's initiatives. I could have slyly suggested that this wasn't a great time for me to commit to such a thing and for Chiara to come back to me at a later date; could I have tried to shut down Chiara's suggestion and not agreed to participate in this editorial program? Instead, here I am, many physical, emotional and creative steps away from an intentionally transient gesture contained within the not-un-ironic format of a trade book, attempting to respond to these eloquent critiques. If there is anything that I can do in this situation it is to be permeable and ingest these very thoughtful and intelligent texts. Like any human being who is lucky enough to have the luxury of spare time in

which to think, I know it is my responsibility to accept the relative failure of everything I do and create.

The greatest challenge for me to participate in this editorial project has been to find a tone and a truthful structure for the thoughts that have been prompted by reading these texts. Perhaps in desperation, perhaps as a way to quell my anxieties, my mind has thrown up a host of memories that reassure me that I have been here before; my past is refreshed by its encounter with this present situation. The first memory is of standing in a monographic exhibition I curated at Los Angeles County Museum of Art the day before the opening with the artist, who had avoided confronting his deeply personal body of work in exhibition form (it had been a book previously) until the final hour. He didn't thank me, nor berate me but pragmatically endorsed the exhibition by saying that he knew that his reading of the work – what he saw – was unlike any other person. He acknowledged that I possibly had a better understanding of what someone who didn't know him required of a context and vantage point to engage with the work. I suspect this came to mind for two reasons; that these thinkers here can do what I cannot, which is articulate a certain context for *Photography is magic* against which I don't defend myself or dispute their valid points of view, set within the framework of academia where I neither belong nor from which do I actively elicit attention. I also think that this moment in my biography came to the fore because it was a tense clarification of my role as a curator, which in this instance was to deftly craft an encounter with an artist's practice that represented *and* protected him, while trusting that the diverse audience who would come into that gallery would feel a connection to this epic and vulnerable personal expression because of the way I had curated the exhibition. Related to this, I remember giving an awkward presentation to my colleagues in the Research Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1999, about my book (and exhibition) *Imperfect beauty: the making of contemporary fashion photographs*, when asked if I could (perhaps I was urged to) link recent fashion photography to the art history of 17<sup>th</sup> century court portraiture. I thought that you could, if it was a useful entry point for you but I didn't think that contemporary fashion photography needed that kind of alignment to gain its cultural significance. I remember this exchange as my first articulation of a preference that has manifest in pretty much all of the projects that I have undertaken – to let my engagement

with the material culture, its makers, and its present day context, be the guide of an idea as I shape it for public viewership. I like to be 'in it', to move amongst, to channel, to scribe. With *Imperfect beauty*, my quest was to create a cultural context that photography's largest industry would personally recognize (as opposed to experiencing as some sort of gross caricature or unsuitable coopting of their production into the culture industry), and that each teenager who stumbled on the book in their college library, or visited the exhibition version, could potentially feel an affinity between the collaborative spirit of fashion photography when it was open to new talent, with their own youthful creativity. I also have a vague recollection of the mutterings from the fashion theory clique about my right as a 'non-specialist' to enter their terrain without the academic credentials or their permission, and also to conduct inherently suspect research from amongst fashion's image-makers. The *Imperfect book* was designed by Phil Bicker, the art director who had been the commissioner of many of the first editorial stories by this last generation of fashion photographers to make their mark on the genre. As with all of my publications – as sole author, editor, and commissioner – aside from *The photograph as contemporary art*, design collaboration is absolutely crucial to the intentional meaning and the end result. As distribution has become a less closed-off facet of publishing, collaboration and some sort of say on the dissemination of my projects has also become important criterion for what I produce. As with Phil Bicker, David Reinfurt with the *Words without pictures* website and book, Alex Rich with *eitherand.org*, and Geoff Han with the graphic identity of the new ICP, NY and my co-curated exhibition *Public, private, secret*, Harsh Patel brought his authorship to *Photography is magic*. I appreciate the authors here who picked up on his hand in shaping the book, and I consider this careful working out of every action to realize this book, along with (principally) the text editor, managing editor and production manager entirely in line with my continued belief in curating as an act of 'taking care' of the subject at hand. Harsh joined me on this project because we both wanted to create a container that was definitely a good value trade book that would make its way onto thousands of bookshelves within the Amazon.com-determined shelf life of a year (if you are lucky). The ostensible 'definiteness' of a big book for an encounter with emergent and transient practices was our own version of surreptitiousness, and a conscious attempt to embed these artists' critical

stances and versioning of existing photographic conventions within the commodity system of trade publishing. Both of us have paid our dues in the niche contemporary-art-and-photography-meets-publishing arena where you can practically make a list of the 500 - 1,000 or so photobook buyers who will likely add your offering to their library and then have to watch the secondary market escalate the price of said offering, and seal its fate. The majority of the artists included in my book have similarly operated in this book territory. My aim for *Photography is magic* was to realize a popular book that my ideal reader (I am a curator, I always have a fantasy viewer in mind) – somewhere between the age of seventeen and twenty-two – would receive as a gift from a loved one because they are ‘into photography’ – no specialism or experience necessary. I wanted more than anything for this book to be there for that wonderful and fragile point in a creative life where seeing your own predilections celebrated is a wonderful thing. I knew from my extensive teaching in the 2010s that many of the artists included in *Photography is magic* are the ones that BFA and MFA students who haven’t run to the hills of conservatism are looking at, reading their interviews and artists’ statements, just as I knew that many photography students visiting the V&A’s print study room wanted to study work by the young fashion photographers who were setting out a counterargument for commercial image-making. Additionally, Harsh and I aimed to create an image sequence that was analogous to the style of books and exhibitions deployed by the included artists, and to not divide up these various practices before their connectedness has had a chance to percolate, or reduce differentiation to a matter of technique or production values or, indeed, make claims beyond my own reading of these practices through the conceit of secular magic. That would have been deathly – for me and the still breathing and changing practices I have represented – or at least premature. The image sequence, based on the flourishes and seeming repeats of close-up card magic, slips between installation shots, images, and reproductions of framed works and I hoped would be taken as in the spirit of a gathering of artists who consciously work with the image-object/photograph duality at play within contemporary art.

In 2012-2014, I was at a point in my life where I was ‘consciously uncoupling’ from photography’s institutionalized obsession with its own demise, and what I was seeing as the limits of photography-as-a-subject, especially within museum culture, and



the marking of this artist-led wave of photographic unfixing. The footnotes that run underneath my essay that the writers here refer to represent the self-determined reading that nourished me during this time. I thought long and hard about what it meant to add footnotes to my essay, whether this would be the red rag to academia since they are quite transparently the footnotes of an autodidact taking cues from writing where the intentionality of their authors to navigate their cultural landscape and express what they felt was at stake at that moment is pretty loud and clear. Just as many of the artists who contributed to the book are explicit and even literal about the historical and contemporary citations in their art works, I felt that my essay should do the same. Including the short statements from the contributing artists (the majority were written for the book at my request to each artist to think about a quotation that they could imagine a young practitioner reading, writing out and pinning to their wall) was not ironic in intention, rather a way for me to avoid the almost entirely coopted trend of including artists' short bios in survey books, and also to make a nod to the artist-led thinking that prompted my book. The red rag turned out to be the title of the book. Admittedly, I should have expected that given my full cognizance that in combination with the sheer loveliness of the book as an object, the second meaning of the title would prevail – a giddy, unquestioning, and generalizing hurrah for this slippery medium. I think that I was hoping that the photo-photo world would receive *Photography is magic* as an invitation to meet new photographic art practices half way, and not entirely hand over the future to the contemporary art world (who clearly have less problems with the semantics of Post-Internet practice), nor leave it up to visual culture, and network theorists to position photography-as-art in a broader cultural narrative beyond the separatist history of the medium. For that, I suspect I do deserve an intellectual slap on the backs of my legs and to be told to stop showing off.

The strangest sensation for me is seeing here, as with other critiques, and oxygen-grabbing trashing of *Photography is magic* that Benedict Burbridge thoroughly unpacks, is the way in which a previous book of mine, *The photograph as contemporary art*, acts as a standard by which my most recent book gets judged. To be clear, *TPACA* is part of Thames & Hudson's World of Art series, an enduring format with a transparent brief for its author to map out an entire artistic field in a series of thematic chapters. Thanks to

the brilliant 2004 first edition editor Andrew Brown, and Jacky Klein for the second and third editions, I undertook the book writing equivalent of a jigsaw puzzle motivated by my gratitude as a teenager to World of Art books the night before my school exams, and as the possibility to write the story of photography in the barely-started 21<sup>st</sup> century where 50% of the artists whose work is included are women. The power of a very affordable book within a highly respected art history series, geared towards non-specialists, was beyond the expectations of everyone involved. As a side-note, the book reviews in 2004 that I remember described the book as 'lazy', without clear-enough boundaries or intellectual merit, and an invalid perspective on photography. The fact that it is taking a while for other such aerial views onto the subject of photography as contemporary art to come along at a low price point has definitely contributed to the book having been published in over ten languages and with over 100,000 copies in circulation. Twelve years on, I am of course used to this book going before me and I have no hopes or interest in imagining that any book that I have crafted since then will have the same impact – either culturally or pedagogically. It is precisely a year ago that *Photography is magic* was published, now well into its second printing and I take that as a sign that it is circulating as widely as I hoped, and I have some anecdotal evidence-of-sorts that it has been a useful spur to young people who are about to dip their toes into the cultural arena. As I write now, thinking about these first serious and thoughtful critiques of *Photography is magic*, I sense that its beauty has faded, its transience feels tangible, and I have to deal with whether the passing of my intentions as its meaning, diminishes its worth for me. Perhaps it is the sensation that has made this response so difficult for me to write. I'll take solace, as I sit in my home at sunset, just above Sunset Blvd, that I can pull my one copy of *Photography is magic* from a cupboard, with all its failings and now-present expiration, and put it between some thrift store finds that excited me because of the particularity of their design and their deviance from the prevailing stories of historical moments in photographic practice and crack a not-un-ironic smile.