

Kelsey Olson's Photographic Trials

It is surprising how little progress has been made in the “field” of concrete photography in the last 175 years.¹ Concrete photography has been an important territory for artistic practice in the last decade. Its twenty-first century examples trace their immediate lineage to James Welling's photographs of the 1970s and especially 1980s. Many current practices are simply restagings of ones from the early 20th century, but some artists working in this field have made new and relevant work that takes into account the developments of the 21st century—work that is genuinely different—but these artists are exceedingly rare.

Concrete photography is a type of photography that is often made without a lens, and usually acknowledges or references its own materiality. Early examples of this are William Henry Fox Talbot's “photogenic drawings” from the 1830s, made by laying plants or fabric on light-sensitive paper and exposing it to light.² These types of photographs, which were taken up again in the 1910s and 1920s by the Dadaists and Surrealists, later became known as photograms. In important ways, concrete photography begins within the early 20th century avant-garde.

It was the avant-garde impulse that made concrete photography what it was: a full-blown interrogation of photographic practices aimed at overturning the assumptions of traditional photography.³ What is necessary in a photograph? Can it record non-visual phenomena? Can it make us see differently? What can or can't it depict? Must it depict anything? Can a photograph picture itself?

Unfortunately, current concrete photography too often does not bother to ask these questions, and instead simply rehashes century-old practices. The work of Moholy-Nagy gets revisited and updated in color, for instance. The prints are large and colorful, ideal for the contemporary art market. They are hand-made and ‘real’ in a way that conventional wisdom says digital photographs, no matter how sharp and spectacular, are not. They are indexical.

It is here, in the indexical nature of the conventional photograph, that important contemporary problems lie. One of the things that set many early concrete photographs apart from their conventional counterparts was their claim to truth. Somewhat ironically, concrete photography did not rely on visual evidence, at least not in the same way conventional photography did. In conventional photographs, the image is projected on to film through a lens, which plays the role of the eye. The photograph is indexical in that the light bounces off the original object, goes through the lens (which “organizes” the light) and lands on the film in the proper place. What one relies on in conventional photography

¹ What is the first “concrete” photograph? I am using Henry Fox Talbot's work in the mid-1830s as a starting point, though one might make an argument for Niépce's work, specifically his contact prints of the engraving *Portrait of Cardinal d'Amboise* (1826), as the earliest concrete photograph. As you might guess, this is an exercise without end, at least in terms of pinning down a decisive origin. One could make a convincing argument that it wasn't until the 20th century that concrete photography actually developed.

² One could argue that this is not “true” concrete photography.

³ This was often compared to the developments in abstract painting by artists of the time.

is that the projection of the image is “true”, coherent and orderly, even in a blurred or optically degraded image.

The photogram dispatches this reliance on the visual – there is no lens playing the role of the eye. The object is laid directly on the photographic surface and exposed to light. The photogram is indexical because the object depicted throws its shadow across the surface, but more importantly, it touches the photographic substrate. Touching, rather than seeing, is believing.

Why has this type of photography been revisited at this historical moment? One answer has to do with the rise of digital photography. Conventional analog photography became mistrusted long ago; its timing, perspective, and framing could be manipulated to show someone or something in a distorted light. Digital photography has never been trusted. Add to the suspicions of analog photography the ease with which one can manipulate an image, even make one up entirely, and the distrust and anxiety felt towards digital images make a photogram seem all the more comforting. But this sets up a problematic binary where the analog stands in for the “real” and the digital represents the ephemeral and the suspect.⁴ The concreteness of concrete photography, grounded in touch, leaves little room for doubt, especially when compared to the dematerialized nature of the digital.

This is the binary so much contemporary concrete photography uses to ground itself. It makes claims to the “real” by driving a wedge between the analog and the digital. This is where Olson’s work is most subversive and progressive. Many of her works don’t just use both methods, but tread back and forth between the two, working them against each other and undermining their conventional logics.

One series of works Olson has undertaken involves placing adhesive tape and/or magnetic audiotape on the surface of large pieces of color sheet film and then exposing them to light. These get developed, but in chemicals meant for black and white film. Sometimes the tape is left on through the developing process, resulting in odd color effects and opaque patches within the burnt-orange cast of the film. These pieces of film often comprise works in themselves, but are also used to make others. Olson scans these pieces of film, leaving the scanner settings on “automatic”. Due to the unusual color palette of the film, the scanner tries to correct what seems to be errant color, leading to unpredictable results. Olson could print these out on inkjet paper and leave it at that, pushing concrete, analog photography up against the digital, helping to diffuse this binary, but she doesn’t.

Instead of printing these scans on inkjet paper, she often prints them on black and white photographic paper, which is allowed into the light, but is not developed. The paper will darken over time, depending on the brightness of the light in which they are viewed and stored. Some of these photographs are fixed, arresting the darkening process (and sometimes washing off some of the ink from the inkjet print). Many are allowed to continue to darken, losing contrast over time.

⁴ Here one might claim the digital represents the mental or conceptual—highly suspect territory in this day and age, unfortunately.

This is where the binary of digital and analog is shown to be specious. Here both digital and analog are shown as producers of errors, falsehoods, irrationality, aesthetic pleasure and insight. In Olson's work the digital and the analog are intermingled. No hierarchy is set up between the two. This work is not dependant on reinforcing false binaries. It is where contemporary concrete photography finally finds its update, embracing digital practices that have been largely sidelined until now.

This work is fugitive. It has a life, and a life span, however unpredictable. It visibly changes over time and has an end point, when the print darkens beyond the point when you can clearly see the inkjet print on its surface. These pieces also mimic life by having snapshots taken of them. Scans and prints (on inkjet paper) are made of some of these prints at different points along their shift into darkness. The parallel to family snapshots is hard to miss; the mortality it evokes is unnerving.

Olson develops her work in a way that is very uncommon. Most artists work by mimicry. This is not a slight; it is simply the way people tend to think.⁵ Artists are inspired by multiple sources and mimic these sources to a greater or lesser extent, often mixing them to develop something more or less new. Olson is instead inspired by processes. She explores them, pushes them to their limits, and combines them, each one contaminating the others. Photographic techniques are in for a rough ride as tiny details and small anomalies conventional photography tries to hide come to bloom in Olson's work. The process of making images is turned inside out, investigated, reinvigorated and transformed into one of the subjects of the work. These photographs depict things, but more meticulously, problematically and complexly than most photographs would dare to dream.

It is difficult to imagine a contemporary photographic practice that simply turns its back on digital technology, and Olson shows why it must be taken into account. Good, purely analog work can be made, but it cannot turn a blind eye to historical conditions and retreat to past practices. Neither can digital photographic processes entirely escape, or entirely mimic, for that matter, their traditional analog past. If art is to remain relevant it must retain an element of criticality, and by extension, self-criticality. This criticality is often hard to achieve—it takes a novel approach to making work as well as an awareness of its precise placement within a historical framework. Kelsey Olson's work hits this sweet spot in a way that few other people can claim to.

—*Aaron Van Dyke*

⁵ The simple example here would be language itself, the medium of thought. Words themselves are mimicry. One must mimic, by accurately reproducing a word, to be understood.