

BREAKING NEW BOUNDARIES OF PHOTOGRAPHIC SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses to what extent contemporary photographic sculptures can distinguish themselves from similar movement in the past. The first part of this research explores the historic exhibition in 1970 - "Photography into Sculpture" - to find out what drove the ideas of the artists involved. Afterwards, its outcome connects to the current photographic context in which the photograph as the three-dimensional object arise. It was found that contemporary photographic sculptures investigate, uncover and challenge photographic depiction and representation by application of sculptural qualities, such as referring to the Here and Now, its multi-perspectivity and the possibilities for the use of diverse materials. The result is a hybrid object that carries both photographic as well as sculptural qualities. It reveals in a photographic sculpture: both image and surface, flat and spatial, visual and material, reproducible and unique, inside and outside, and both 'that was has been' with the Here and Now.

Keywords: photographic sculptures; photography; sculpture; hybridity; creativity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Philip Martin Gallery in Los Angeles and The Hauser & Wirth Gallery in New York in 2014, invited '*Photography into Sculpture*', an exhibition that was presented by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. '*Photography into Sculpture*' was put together by MoMA's Curator of Photography Peter Bunnell and brought together a varied group of artists who all worked with photography in combination with a broad variety of techniques and materials. The outcome of their works had one factor in common: it was "photographically formed images used in a sculptural or fully dimensional manner."² Their unique ways of supporting, mounting and framing images caused the work to balance on the boundary of being sculpture on the one hand and photography on the other hand.

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² Bunnell, Peter C. (1970). Photography into Sculpture. *The Museum of Modern Art*, (36), 97-106.

'*The Photographic Object, 1970*', as the gallery version of the show was titled, brought together a selection of works from the original show and was integrated with other works from the participating artists of the time. Presenting '*The Photographic Object, 1970*' was not an accidental choice since the objects on display seem to mirror the current experiments with photography and sculpture. In several writings and reviews of this version, critics have noticed this affinity. Despite the emergence of different contexts of works, on the basis of formal similarities, the assumption can be made the current experiments are simply a continuation of an earlier crossover.³

This article, therefore, scrutinizes to what extent contemporary photographic sculptures can distinguish themselves from this preceding movement.⁴ The first part of this research explores the historic exhibition to find out what drove the ideas of the artists involved. Afterwards, its outcome connects to the current photographic context in which the photograph as the three-dimensional object is able to appear.

1. PHOTOGRAPHY INTO SCULPTURE

Although today's fusion of photography with other media might have found a new appearance in a way that the medium doesn't seem to have had before, a retrospective perspective reveals a refreshing light on this phenomenon. The outward appearance might look new, but its concept is far from original. In the 1960s and 1970s, particularly an explosive use of photography within the art world took place. Today's division of 'taking' and 'making' a photograph is inherited from these years. The white and black, high-quality print, cleanly framed and presented on the wall emphasized the idea of the artwork. The photograph was exploited as an instrument and a tool for documenting an event rather than the artistic qualities of the photographic medium. It created a 'crack' between the dominant modernist style of art photography and the experimental approach in which photography was mainly considered as "means to an end"⁵.

Driven by these ideas and attitude of Conceptual artists, the sculptors, painters and photographers of the time demonstrated experiments in which they challenged and expanded the way in which a photograph could become an important part of an artwork.

³"Photography into Sculpture". (2011).

Artforum. <https://www.artforum.com/picks/photography-into-sculpture-29118>

⁴ With regard to this research, this part is limited to objects that were on show in the 1970 exhibition.

⁵Fogle, D. (2003). *The Last Picture Show*, in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 10.

Their ideas were reflected in a variety of forms and subjects, which often resulted in a hybrid convergence of two or more practices. Among others, photographs printed or mounted on material or images that were cut, layered or folded onto another support. In a more subtle way, photography played a significant role in new forms of performance art of the time. Not only pure record-making but performance actions were also orchestrated with the intention to photographically render the results of the event.⁶ An interesting question emerged; what exactly forms the artwork, is it the performance, the photographic object that documented the performance, or both?

In a similar way, sculpture transcended boundaries, resulting in what Rosalind Krauss termed as sculpture's expanded field - it broke away from the traditional idea of sculptural object as a physical art object. As pointed out by art critic Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, the photographic medium emphasizes concept that uses the passage of and manipulation of time and space as the essential element. This was often employed to 'dematerialize' the sculptural object which resulted in a broad recording of these 'sculptural' works.⁷ As argued by David Green, photography paradoxically re-materialized the sculptural object, yet this time by its imprint in the photographic image.⁸ A different expansion of sculpture is seen in the exhibition '*Photography into Sculpture*' in MoMA in 1970. This expansion fits hitherto conceptual experiments to go beyond the boundaries of media. Mary Statzer writing on the exhibition states that the image and surface of a photograph are disregarded more often by drawing and painting upon the image's surface or by experimental printmaking. She highlights it was a novelty to transgress photography's surface by rendering it in a three-dimensional way.⁹

Despite different timeframes, - contemporary photographic works at the 1970 MoMA exhibition - there exist remarkable similarities. Firstly, they share spatial qualities, in multi-perspective objects. Secondly, artists create the photographic objects in question. The resulting objects often have multiple layers of different materials that therewith result in unique photographic objects. Additionally, their genesis can both be explicated in

⁶ Wall, J. (1995). 'Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', in Fogle, D. *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 35-36.

⁷ Lippard, L. & Chandler, J. (1968). The Dematerialization of Art. *Art International*, 12(2), 218.

⁸ Green, D. (1996). 'Between Object and Image' in *Creative Camera, Thirty Years of Writing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 263-4.

⁹ Mary Statzer on *Photography into Sculpture*, New York, 1970. (2014. February 10). Aperture: <https://aperture.org/editorial/mary-statzer-photography-sculpture-new-york-1970/>

light of technical innovation. Today, due to the advanced digital nature of photography, photographic sculptures can be seen as a form of returning to a material presence. Simultaneously, the currently available, digital techniques facilitate artists with new tools, through which 'new' forms arise.

The photographic sculptures from 1970 evolved not by digital techniques but by different media practices, newly available toolbox, filled materials and techniques that previously were not possible. The works in the exhibition show the use of different types of photographic images, ranging from high-quality prints to images retrieved from magazines, books and transparent packaging materials. Photographic prints were frequently combined with materials ranging from wood, plastic, plastic, glass to textile. *BLT* (1965) by Robert Watts (Fig. 1) is a flat and photograph of lettuce, bacon and tomato, which achieves form, depth and weight by sandwiching it in transparent plexiglass.

Michael de Courcy's work consists of many 12-inch pasted 100 cardboard cubes, each of which has a photograph printed on every side with silkscreen images of nature (Fig. 2). The clouds, water, bird, trees and plants depicted Courcy's surroundings on the West coast of Canada. The boxes were installed randomly at each exhibition. Bunnell states in the text of the exhibition:

"Photography into Sculpture embraces concerns beyond those of the traditional print, or what may be termed 'flat' work, and in so doing seeks to engender a heightened realization that art in photography has to do with interpretation and craftsmanship rather than mere record making."¹⁰

Reading Bunnell described works that now date back 50 years, his words appositely describe contemporary photographic works. While the objects seem similar in attempt to combine sculpture and photography into a new image/object convergence, the two bodies of work do come about in different contexts that instigate the ideas behind them. In contextualizing *'Photography into Sculpture'* the works were described as exploiting "the properties unique to photography itself"¹¹. While the works supposedly challenged and repositioned experience of photography, this lead role for the medium is fascinating. The use of the photographic medium within conceptual art is most often explained as opening up new ways for exploring the possibilities and notions of other media such as painting or performance, in this case, sculpture. *'Photography into Sculpture'* is best understood through its particular brand of hybridization, in which the accurate depiction

¹⁰Stretching the Truth of Photography. (2014, July 18).Hyperallergic. Review. <https://hyperallergic.com/138490/stretching-the-truth-of-photography/>

¹¹Brunnell, P. (1970). Wall label for *Photography into Sculpture*.

of space in the photograph is combined with the tangible space occupied by sculptural objects.¹²

Even though the exhibition was organized by the MoMA's curator of photography, the works on display in MoMA were mostly lead by sculpture category. Photography then was a convenient constructing material. Note that there is exception such as the works from Robert Heinecken that interrupt the unity of one photograph by dividing it into multiple separate pieces (Fig. 3). The effect of the images was not really 'transformed' by their transformation into sculptures. That means the representational and indexical workings that belong to the idea of photographic documentation were maintained as we continue to see portraits, bodies, landscapes, birds and food. The material condition is therefore of minor importance for the meaning of the artworks. Thus we can see, despite consciously abstaining from using tactics that could have questioned photography's depictive qualities, the majority of the artists cling to conventions. Instead of providing new ways of perceiving photography, the photographic material added an informative visual reality to the sculptural objects.

2. BEYOND THE BURDEN OF DEPICTION

This paper explores photography's characteristics that distinguish the majority of the 1970's '*Photography into Sculpture*' vis-à-vis contemporary photographic works. In posing questions on the nature of photography many contemporary photographic works go beyond putting tension on the photo as both image and object. For example, Harriet Riches, Sandra Plummer and Duncan Wooldridge, who write on a material in contemporary photography, make a similar distinction, stressing that "...what distinguishes contemporary self-referential photography from previous reflexive practices is that its exploration of medium occurs by transcending the characteristics of the photographic."¹³ Instead of fitting photography into sculpture, today sculptural qualities are naturally imbued into photography, changing the photographic medium rather than the sculptural medium.

When comparing the work *Form of Landscape 1* (Fig. 4) and *BLT* (Fig. 1) these distinctions become more visible. While both are presented as spatial objects with a photographic character, *BLT* is not necessarily exploiting photography's unique properties. The applied image clearly is a recognizable photograph of bacon, lettuce and tomatoes. It is primarily

¹²Plumer S., Harriet R., Wooldridge, D. (2012). Photography's New Materiality: An Introduction, <http://eitherand.org/photographys-new-materiality/photographys-new-materiality/>

¹³Plumer S., Harriet R., Wooldridge, D. (2011). 'Photography's New Materiality?' in: *Photoworks. Futures Past: History, Memory, Nostalgia*, (18), 29-30.

documenting the character of photography that is put to use here. *Form of Landscape 1* remains leaning on similar indexicality but this indexicality is disturbed by a layer of material at the same time. In contrast to *BLT* photography here, *Form of Landscape 1* doesn't immediately serve as an informative and representational record. Conversely, it is composed of a form of representation that doesn't exist in reality. It therewith questions and reflects on the effectiveness of photography's documentation. John Tagg formulated this as "The Burden of Representation".¹⁴ That said, no matter how small or abstract an image might be, photography is haunted by the confidence that it depicts something. What is at stake in many contemporary photographic works is that this burden is put to play in order to show that it is photography's flaw and limit, but it doesn't confine artists to at least think beyond this burden.

'*Photography into Sculpture*' photographs were mainly used as visual or narrative additions in the sculptures. At the present, it is the other way around. Today, ready-made objects or materials are added and combined with photographs in order to reveal photography's depictive, singular indexical qualities. However, this singularity are insufficient to tell a complete story or reality. Objects, materials and techniques might at once disturb the visual qualities and narrative possibilities of photography but can strengthen them at the same time. Geoffrey Batchen demonstrates in his essay "Ere the Substance Fade: Photography and Hair Jewellery" how the application of other materials onto the photographic surface can extend the indexical trace of the photograph.¹⁵ It can thus extend the understanding and effectiveness of the photograph. The latter is only visible when the chosen materials are further analyzed for their more metaphorical meanings.

In *Sweaty Sculpture* (Fig. 5) by Anouk Kruithof, this particular strengthening of indexicality through the use of additive materials is clearly reflected. In *Sweaty Sculpture* the images of sweat stains play as a symbol of physical stress and psychological embarrassment. The photographs of sweat-stained shirts are the starting point to go beyond the image and to look for materials that convey a similar thought as what is depicted in the photographs, which symbolizes an absorbing effect at the same time. For example, the sponges absorb moisture. The styrofoam blocks are then sealed with transparent foil, partly making the photographic surface opaque. In this way, the material, both literally and figuratively speaking, locks up the photographs, through which air and moisture regulation is obstructed in a more symbolic way. This analysis shows the used materials, the integrated techniques as an important part of the concept and content of the work. In *Sweaty*

¹⁴Tagg, J. (1993). *Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Minnesota: University Of Minnesota Press.

¹⁵Batchen, G. (2004). *Photography: An Art of the Real*, in: *What is a Photograph?*, New York: Prestel Publishing, 32-47.

Sculpture, the idea of transpiration is not only translated into a picture but gains a metaphorical content layer through the chosen materials. The artist herewith stretches and expands the photographic language; the indexical is supplemented by the imaginary and the symbolic. Instead of seeing sweat as primarily as a sign of stress or as something embarrassing, Kruithof transforms sweat into a colourful, playful and aesthetic experience.

Blur (Fig. 6) has a similar aim. The choice for use of material not only gives weight and dimension to the seemingly flat photograph but also strengthens the depicted subject substantively. While in *Blur* a high level of narrativity is lost through the application of concrete, it gained a new form of communicability. In writing about the overpainted photographs of Gerhard Richter, Van GelderenWestgeest quote the artist who states that his overpainted photographs display an interplay between “two realities”¹⁶. By submitting the photograph of the car with concrete, not only integrates the visual properties of the car in an image but also take the physical and tactile materiality of the car into reality. Through these interventions, it attempts to compensate for the photograph’s failure to encompass the physical site it represents¹⁷. On the one hand, the color and glossy piece of paper depict the car. On the other hand, the matt and roughcast of concrete bring the hardness of the concrete to the Here and Now. Therewith what is depicted gains a haptic experience - one that photography alone is insufficient for.¹⁸

To conclude this material analysis, contemporary photographic work function as separate, stand-alone objects, unfolding a more complex internal meaning within the totality of the object itself. In these work, photography in its most singular form suddenly no longer seems the most sufficient form to translate and represent reality. That is not to question photography’s seemingly truthful and real character; we all know by now that photography is as much truth as it is fiction. While the subject matter is an important part of them, the works centralize decoding of productive workings of photographic imagery in one and the same action. From its rectangular frame towards the power of the index, attenuating the dominance of depiction, while embracing photography’s nature but highlighting its limits and flaws.

¹⁶ Van Gelder, H. & Westgeest H. (2011). *Photography theory in historical perspective: case studies from contemporary art* Chichester etc, Wiley-Blackwell, 53-54.

¹⁷ Letha Wilson (2014, October 9). Galerie Christophe Gaillard. Press release. https://galeriegaillard.com/en/exhibitions/79-letha-wilson/press_release_text/

¹⁸ The conceptual 1960s and 1970s might be characterized by Lippard’s and Chandler’s idea of dematerialization, paradoxically, the conceptual approach of my work is only to be interpreted by close analysis of the materials used.

By comparing the historic exhibition '*Photography into Sculpture*' with the contemporary crossover between photography and sculpture, as seen in the case studies of this paper, it became clear, besides many similarities between the two, important differences were discovered. For example, the works from the 1970s fit in the, prevailing tendency to go beyond the boundaries of media categories. Photography was often taken as the enabling medium. In this view, what was considered to be sculpture was stretched to an expanded form. In contemporary photographic works, this expanded form of the sculpture is also reflected. However, upon careful material analyses, sculptural qualities, such as the Here and Now, its multi-perspectivity the use of diverse materials, can now be used and applied in order to re-activate the thinking and reading of photography. Inspired by previous generations of artists, current artists feel the freedom to go beyond media categories and to work with characteristics of both photography and sculpture, resulting in photographic sculpture. The result is a hybrid object that carries both photographic as well as sculptural qualities. In the selected case studies photography does not serve as merely a depictive medium, but also as a medium that speaks of a reality that was there at some point. These photographic sculptures ask their viewers to do the identifying.

CONCLUSION

When looking at contemporary photographic sculptures, one would not immediately categorize them as 'photography'. It is as much a photograph as it is a three-dimensional object with a hybrid material composition that is placed in space as an autonomous entity. Given the emergence of more such work, which carries photographic characteristics, and expands in materiality and spatiality, it is important to indicate which aspects of such works relate to more spatial disciplines such as Sculpture. By exploring both the similarities and differences, this research is an attempt to contribute to an understanding of contemporary photographic sculptures.

This paper explains current photographic sculptures and a similar-looking group of conceptual works from the 1970s. It clarifies that contemporary photographic sculptures investigate, uncover and challenge photographic depiction and representation by application of sculptural qualities. The materials used to create this spatiality support and resonate with the content of the image. The expressiveness of materials combined with the image content ensures that contemporary photographic sculptures move beyond photography's primary aim that is the dominance of depiction.

The result is a hybrid object that carries both photographic as well as sculptural qualities. In the selected case studies photography does not only serve a depictive medium, but also as a medium that speaks of a reality that was there at some point but also a sculptural object. It reveals in a photographic sculpture: both image and surface, flat and

spatial, visual and material, reproducible and unique, inside and outside, and both 'that was has been' with the Here and Now.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. Robert Watts, *BLT*, 1965

Black and white photo transparency embedded in Plexiglas,
15.24 x 14.29 x 3.18 cm

Retrieved from: <https://www.iheartmyart.com/post/12015143418/robert-watts-blt-1965-black-and-white-photo>



Fig. 2. Michael De Courcy, *Untitled*, 1970-1971

100 photo-serigraph and corrugated cardboard boxes, variable dimensions

Installation view

Retrieved from: <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/5074-the-photographic-object-1970?modal=media-player&mediaType=artwork&mediaId=16147>



Fig. 3. Robert Heinecken, *Fractured Figure Sections*, 1967

Photographs, wood, 21 x 7.6 x 7.6 cm

Installation view

Retrieved from: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/177/2345>



Fig. 4. Sunyoung Park, *Form of Landscape1*, 2020

Mixed media, 59 x 42 x 11 cm

Installation view

Retrieved from: <http://www.sunyoung-park.com/Form%20of%20Landscape%201%202020.html>



Fig. 5. Anouk Kruithof, *Sweaty Sculpture (spectrum)*, 2013
styrofoam blocks, photo stickers, cellophane foil, plexiglas sheet, sponge 101 x 24 x 50
cm (blocks), 120 x 80 cm (plate)
Installation view
Retrieved from: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/portfolio-52/>



Fig. 6. Sunyoung Park, *Blur*, 2019
Mixed media, 41 x 41 x 6 cm
Installation view
Retrieved from: <http://www.sunyoung-park.com/Blur%202020.html>