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ART REVIEW

Photography's Shifting Identity in an Insta-World

By **Holland Cotter**

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The International Center of Photography is back, and welcome. Two years after losing its Midtown Manhattan quarters, the center has reopened on the Bowery, across from the New Museum. The duplex galleries, on street and basement levels, are, technically, larger than the old ones, though they feel boxy and closed-in, at least for the opening show, “Public, Private, Secret.” As if to offset this impression, the show gives evidence that the center’s view of photography itself has expanded.

In its 2014 Triennial, the center made a serious move toward embracing digital media, and now it has fully done so. Photography no longer means pictures printed and framed. It also means images, infinite in number, flowing in real-time data streams and captured on webcams, video blogs, Twitter and Instagram. This institutional shift in emphasis from hard objects to the broad field of visual culture will make old-style connoisseurs crazy, but it is in line with the center’s history.



Kim Kardashian's "Selfish" (2015). Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

It was founded in 1974 largely as a showcase for street photography, war photography and other socially committed and essentially journalistic genres: Content was as important as form. The inclusion of digital media maintains that interest, with the internet now functioning as both boulevard and battlefield, and — this really is new — where photographers were once a distinctive and specialized crew, now almost everyone is armed, for better and worse, with picture-taking devices and the means to distribute images.

The defining of better and worse forms the basis for a stimulating and unsettling exhibition. Its digital orientation is established right at the start with a projected video based on borrowings from social media. The piece, by Natalie Bookchin, is divided into thematic sections, each a visual patchwork of talking heads, mostly of young, English-speaking men and women gathered from online video diaries. In one sequence, all the heads speak of their experience with psychiatric medications, in another with losing jobs.

Natalie Bookchin's "Testament" (2009-16), left, is a visual patchwork of talking heads, from online video diaries. Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Ms. Bookchin's editing is inventive and revealing. Every time a word or phrase common to all the diaries occurs, all the heads say it in unison, interrupting film's otherwise random-seeming this-speaker-then-that-speaker flow. The overall effect is twofold: You get a sense of the

existence of a digitally connected community of suffering, one with a shared vocabulary and set of emotions. You also begin to wonder, as you do when you overhear public cellphone conversations: How is it possible that so many people are living such clichéd lives?

The raw material for a 2012 video by Doug Rickard is also digital, but of a different kind: found images of American crime scenes and police actions uploaded from cellphones and posted on YouTube. Mr. Rickard collages excerpts from various postings into fictional narratives, notable less for their plotlines than for the atmosphere of danger they project. That atmosphere is similar to one generated by news media and the film industry, an adrenalin-fueled mood of fear, suspicion and emergency, encouraging violence.

Marc Garanger's portraits of Berber or Muslim women hang over old mug shots.
Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

In one way or another, much of the show — assembled by Charlotte Cotton, the center's first curator in residence, working with Pauline Vermare, associate curator, and Marina Chao, assistant curator — is built around the basic elements of Mr. Rickard's work: surveillance crossing into voyeurism, visual fiction standing in for truth. But then, hasn't photography always had a predatory streak, an eye for existential dirt, an impulse to lie if that will grab attention? Sure, and there are plenty of predigital demonstrations of that here.

Among them are old French and Mexican mug shots of criminal suspects, and a 1942 shot by the Bowery habitué Arthur Fellig, known as Weegee, of two drunk-and-disorderly swells cowering behind face-hiding hats in a paddy wagon. Far more complicated are four mug-shot-style portraits of Berber or Muslim women taken in 1960 by Marc Garanger in Algeria, when he was working for the French Army. The women, confined to a concentration camp, were forced to unveil for the sittings and stare at the camera with undisguised, level-eyed fury.

Martine Syms's video installation "Lessons I-LXVIII."
Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

These are images of violation. There are others, several associated with celebrity culture. In a 1971 photograph we see Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis dashing across a lawn in Central Park, apparently fleeing the photographer, Ron Galella, who had been stalking her for years. Two internet-savvy contemporary artists, Ann Hirsch and Marisa Olson, turn the humiliation of losing highly visible competitions — a reality dating show, an "American Idol" audition — into

triumphs of self-engineered failure. And in a flawless win-win power move, the media star Kim Kardashian assumes the role of auto-stalker, publishing a book consisting entirely of her own selfies.

I can't speak for Ms. Kardashian, but many of the show's younger participants are clearly well aware that they, and we, are being observed, photographed, biometrically tracked and profiled whether we want to be or not, and that this is a problem. And at least one artist, Zach Blas, is doing something about it. He has designed a blobby pink plastic mask to thwart facial recognition scanning, a technology with the potential, possibly already realized, of using racial and sexual stereotyping to isolate groups of social undesirables.

The International Center of Photography's new location on the Bowery.
Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Racial stereotyping has, of course, a long history and artists have tried all kinds of ways to deal with it. A decade or so ago, the intriguing Chicago-based photographer and filmmaker Barbara DeGenevieve (1947-2014) hired five homeless men, all African-American, to pose nude for her in a hotel room. When she exhibited the results as "The Panhandler Project," she took serious critical heat, with many viewers calling the work exploitive. Some will still find it so, though as the mechanics of American economic privilege grow starker, her attempt to confuse roles usually dictated by ethnicity, class and gender looks more and more useful.

Ms. Cotton includes only a single photograph from Ms. DeGenevieve's project, and it's hard to get much from that. But another meditation on race, and specifically on blackness, Martine Syms's video installation "Lessons I-LXVIII," is the show's most substantial piece in terms of length. It's composed in 10-minute units, each made up of randomly sorted 30-second clips related to African-American life, lifted from online videos and visual blogs, including home movies, video diaries, police webcams and advertisements. Many of the fragments are hard to grasp on their own, but together they turn the black presence, still marginalized in mainstream American art and culture, into something substantial, integral and self-sustaining, a whole and sufficient cloth.

Ms. Syms's ambitious work, dated 2014-16, brings us again into the digital realm, which can be uneven ground to visit. A set of flat screens streaming real-time data from Twitter and other social media sources keeps the show in the 24/7 now, where it should be. And the information, organized by Mark Ghuneim, an internet entrepreneur, and students from the center's New Media Narratives program and sometimes presented in the form of online addresses, gives a good sense of the pervasive influence of digital technology on daily life, whether in police surveillance or assignment of pop star status. At the same time, the piece offers few visual rewards, and demands smartphone finger work to access its information.

And if Ms. Bookchin's conglomerate snapshot of a video diary culture hints at a condition of passive narcissism as the dominant malady of life inside the digital bubble, Jon Rafman's short, composite 2014 video "Mainsqueeze" is infinitely more damning. Its seven-minute sequence of found Google Street View images drops you into a deep pit of physical and psychological cruelty, and cracks the door on a dark side of the social media age that this exhibition otherwise barely hints at. No wonder 21st-century karma is in such horrendous shape.

The visual content of this piece is a far cry from the museum quality images usually associated with the center as a collecting institution. And the exhibition itself, with its mirrored walls and jumble of unlike works, has a looseness that most museums, intent on writing clear narratives, would clean up. At this point, though, visual culture — digital production, including photography — is so abundant and changing so fast that no clear narrative is possible. Photography fans hoping that the return of the center will mean a return of its vintage collection may have to wait awhile. This institution, so often ahead of the curve, has other, challenging ideas on its mind, and the less it acts like a museum the better.

"Public, Private, Secret" runs through January at the International Center of Photography (I.C.P.), 250 Bowery, Manhattan; icp.org. A related exhibition, "Weegee's Bowery," is at MANA in Jersey City, which houses the I.C.P. archives, staff offices and exhibition space.

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