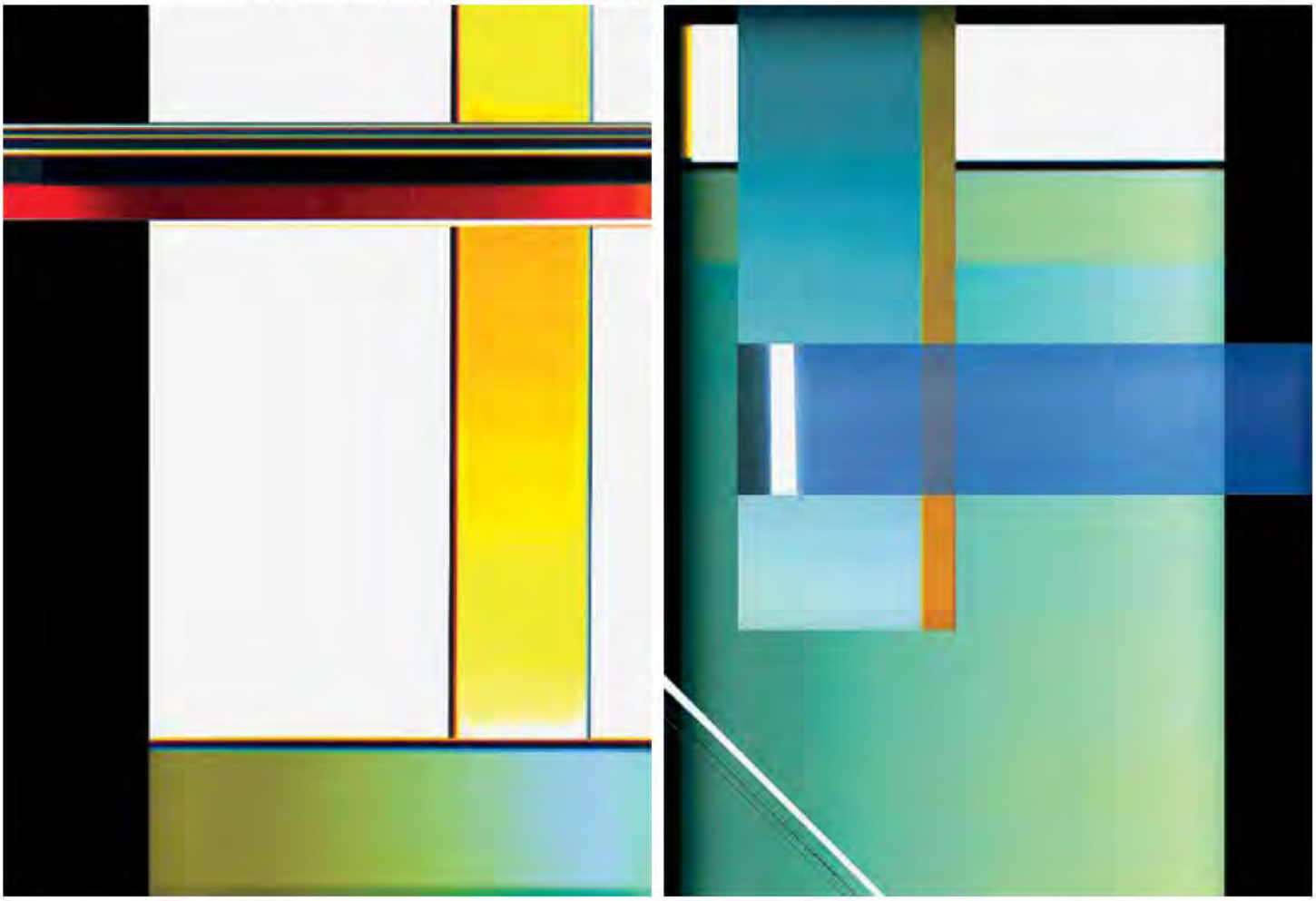
PHOTOGRAPHY SPECIAL

New Think

THE AMAZING IDEAS THAT SHAPE OUR WORLD • EDITED BY JULIAN SANCTON



THIS IS A... PHOTOGRAPH?

Now that we all carry cameras in our pockets, no sunset goes unshared. But while digital technology turns us all into would-be Cartier-Bressons, a handful of artists are redefining photography itself. **By Philip Gefter**

The history of photography is one of constant innovation. From its inception in the 1830s, each incremental chemical discovery, technical modification, and material refinement broadened its practical applications. Today the paradigm shift from the chemical process to digital technology is nearly complete, and photography has come to permeate every aspect of our lives.

The photographic image is now instantaneous and ubiquitous. Cameras point at us wherever we go, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. The smartphone has made every one of us a photographer (if not always a skilled one), to the point where our experiences don't seem real anymore unless they are shared in a parallel digital reality.

The daguerreotype seems prehistoric by comparison, although that magical phenomenon in the 1840s was the height of modernity in its day. People sat still before the cam-

Israeli artist Assaf Shaham creates his "scanograms" by putting scanners face-to-face and having them scan each other's insides; above, from left, FR (500 DPI) *and* FR (700 DPI)*, 2012, from the series* Full Reflection.

era in a studio for a 10-minute exposure. Seeing one's own likeness permanently fixed in time was like a miracle.

The introduction of the handheld camera, with refined lenses and fast film, had been an early-20th-century paradigm shift. Life could be captured with greater mobility. Spontaneity became a viable photographic subject, and authentic moments captured on film became empirical evidence of fact. Henri Cartier-Bresson would later describe the great pleasure of pointing his Leica and seeing "the spare elements of a collage suddenly jump from the street into the lens." The handheld camera is what led to photojournalism and, later, street photography. And yet it was still a lengthy process in the darkroom to develop film. Who can be bothered with such tedium today?

Currently 1.8 billion photographs are uploaded daily to sites like Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and Snapchat. The challenge for artists and curators is to make sense of the flood of pictures that drowns out "the photograph" as a singular object worthy of contemplation. So how to find gold in this datalogical bounty?

Several notable contemporary artists have been poking at photography to address the ways in which the Internet is affecting—and reflecting—our contemporary experience. New York–based Penelope Umbrico mines social media for material. The first time she searched the word *sunset* on Flickr nine years ago, 541,795 pictures came up. Her *Suns (From Sunsets) From Flickr* series is composed of wall-size grids with thousands of images of suns that she cropped out of Flickr pictures from a single day's search and copied onto four-by-six-inch machine prints. Each of her changeable *Suns From Flickr* installations includes the total number of sunsets posted online the day of the search. The day's number on one grid from 2011 was 8,730,221. Umbrico's beautiful tableaux succinctly illustrate not just the overabundance of images online but also the growing anonymization of the photographer.

California artist Doug Rickard's work comes out of a social-documentary tradition in photography that harks back to Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Robert Frank. But in Rickard's groundbreaking *A New American Picture* (2012), he didn't photograph the disenfranchised people in his pictures himself—Google Street View cameras did. Rickard works entirely on the computer. In one common method of searching online, he entered the initials *MLK* to find streets named after Martin Luther King in cities across America. Though King's name stands for hope, the streets named for him are often in neighborhoods that offer little of it. Rickard "drove" on Google Street View through these neighborhoods until he found a scene he wanted to capture. His large prints of the Google Street View images have an unnatural digitized look with angles distorted by this new mobile technology. At the same time, they're eerily invasive, exuding a ghostly intimacy. His images underscore the way we are increasingly conditioned to see the world—at a surveillance camera's remove.

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Not every boundary-pushing contemporary photographer deals with new technology, nor even—strictly speaking—with photography. The German-born Marco Breuer uses the chemical process but without the aid of a camera or a lens for exposure. After sensitizing photographic paper, he draws on it, folds it, scores it, or abrades it, leaving markings and patterns that show the results of its exposure to light. His images look halfway between a photograph and an abstract painting.

Other artists, such as Los Angeles–based Walead Beshty and Israeli artist Assaf Shaham, are making camera-less images. Beshty exposes objects directly onto photo-sensitized paper, making photograms in the tradition of Moholy-Nagy, albeit with contemporary social and political implications. Shaham, meanwhile, creates "scanograms," placing two flatbed scanners together, facing each other, and scanning the interiors of each one. The result is a kind of flatbed geometry that evokes early modernists such as Mondrian.

Photographic art-making is no longer a direct visual representation of the actual world. It has stepped back from reality by one degree, just as life has. In that sense, it does continue to document the human experience. The visual world we live in today is a future that those daguerreotype sitters could not possibly have imagined, just as amazing to us as photography itself was to them. It feels like the future, even as we are in the process of living it. ♦

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No. 82.948842, Detroit, MI (2009), *2010, by Doug Rickard, from the series* N.A. *Rickard's oversize photos are screenshots of Google Street View.*

2
541795 Suns From Sunsets From Flickr (Partial) 1/26/06, *by Penelope Umbrico, who mines social media for material.*

3
Untitled (S-219), *2012, by Marco Breuer. The German photographer works directly on photo paper, exposing it to light without a camera.*