

Contagious Magic

In 1890, Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer coined the term 'contagious magic' in his famous book *The Golden Bough*. A form of sympathetic magic, contagious magic 'proceeds upon the notion that things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other.'¹

Based on the belief that any part of a body remains permanently connected to it after having been separated, magic could be performed on the remaining fragment – be it hair, fingernails, teeth, clothes or even a footprint left on the sand, to affect or influence, from a distance, the person it comes from. Amongst many other slightly condescending examples, Frazer related the story of the 'natives of South-Eastern Australia' who thought that harm could be made to a man by placing sharp pieces of quartz, glass, bone or charcoal in his footprints.

Contagious magic assembles works by seven artists who work across photography and video. Dealing with a vast array of forms, techniques, concepts and emotions, their works have very little to do with magic or supernatural actions. However, presented under this umbrella title, the exhibition is an invitation to question the relation we develop with images and the power we bestow upon them whilst challenging the so-called indexical nature of photography. Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, it also offers an opportunity to indulge in captivating music.

The relation between photography and magic is integral to the history of the medium, from alchemic reactions to the representation of ghostly phenomena that crystallise in the darkroom or in the dark chamber of the camera. What should be highlighted here are the similarities that exist between Frazer's concept and the photographic theory that prevailed in the 1980-90s. Led by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and Rosalind E. Krauss, to name a few, they largely borrowed the vocabulary and perspectives of semiotics and sociology to define the indexical nature of photography. Researcher Moa Goysdotter² and academic Piotr Sadowski³ have traced these connections between the photograph conceived as a trace, an imprint of the real, and Frazer's principle of contagious magic.

In his series *Memory Loss*, Vivian Cooper Smith proposes more than a sculptural and photographic play on colours, light and textures. His intriguing images of rocks carefully lit and delicately placed on a colourful background challenge our perception and defy representational expectations. Given by the artist's grandfather a few months before he passed away, the rocks are reminiscent of prayer stones. Whilst the artist intimately reflects upon memory, loss and permanence, the photographic act cements the complex emotional, memorial and physical connections that exist between the objects, their owner and the artist through the photographs.

It is appropriate to suggest with Sadowski that 'the indexical nature of a photograph creates a subjective impression of a surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing, a possession based on an implicit assumption of identity, on an inseparable sympathy between a photograph and what it represents'⁴, and reflect on the 'talismanic uses of photographs', which according to Sontag, 'express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality'⁵.

In his work, Simon Del Favero attempts to pierce the mystery of matter. With the precision of a microbiologist, the artist has photographed a drop of liquid on a digital screen and filmed a chemical reaction. Still or moving, the mesmerising images slowly reveal the density of the substance, specific colour gamut, and tiny floating particles. Almost inscribed within the pixels of the image, Del Favero's images are nonetheless more than 'literally an emanation of the referent'⁶ but an investigation of what lies beyond the scope of human vision.

Defining the photographic specificity based on the mechanical means by which images are produced and therefore their resulting objectivity, these theories find their roots in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* by André Bazin and its underlying principle of the 'obsession with resemblance'⁷. However, in light of the endless plasticity of the medium and the digital revolution, the ontological strategy has been increasingly challenged, if not considered as a mere caricature of the complex relations that images maintain with the real⁸.

In his video work, Harley Ives inverts the conversation of indexicality, countering the relationship that images owe to the real through an evocative return to painting and a focus on the material specificities of analogue and digital images. Breaking down the codes, his complex process involves on-site digital captures, before recording and playing images in a deteriorating process through VHS, and ultimately digitally manipulating the footages in post-production. Adding and celebrating glitches with a hint of nostalgia and Turner-esque romanticism, Ives' video suggests the existence of another reality that only art can create and resonates with Oscar Wilde's anti-mimesis idea that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life'⁹.

Similarly, despite different strategies, Charles Dennington creates composite images that resist the representational logic of photography. Combining direct physical interventions and post-production digital manipulations, the artist fragments and obfuscates the figure. Receding and advancing, the human form becomes an uncertain space, simultaneously visible and hidden. By disturbing the basic elements of the photograph - light, tonalities, contrasts and forms - Dennington takes the viewer on a bewildering journey between islands of light and darkness that echo Surrealism and Bergman's *Persona*. Here the juxtaposition of two still images introduces a slight sense of animation, as if drawing attention to the invisible movement and subject that emerge not only within one image, or hors-champ, but also between and after the frames.

Coming back to Bazin, and we should remind the reader here that *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* is above everything else an essay about cinema rather than photography, the theorist of Cinematic Realism, whilst discussing surrealist photography, stated, 'a photograph is true hallucination'¹⁰. Adopting an expression by French critic and historian Hippolyte Taine, Bazin welcomed hallucinatory gestures and invisible subjects within his theory of cinematic realism to indicate that unconscious manifestations within the images expand realism, as 'an apotheosis of the real in the image'¹¹.

Positioned before truth or falsehood, Jess Bradford's ongoing project *Haw Par Villa* on the Tiger Balm Gardens in Singapore explores the representation of cultural identity through video, photographs, paintings and ceramics objects. Built in the 1930s, the park became a tourist destination and the embodiment of Chinese culture with its attractions and sculptural decors inspired by traditional myths, legends and folklore. Since having been publicly bought in the 1980s, the features of the park have been modified, repurposed or left derelict, creating a whimsical representation of Chinese culture, at once absolutely authentic and wildly imaginary. In her installation, Bradford explores the impossible mission of images, be it still or moving, two or three-dimensional, to represent identity - a collectively constructed reality from changing dreams and desires. The artist plays with the limitations and characteristics of each medium to highlight the inherent contradictions of the site and make the viewer aware of what 'representing' implies, a creation of imagery from reality, fantasy and memory.

If, according to Bazin, 'photography embalms time', it also exists between perception and imagination, just like hallucination. As Taine wrote, 'The objects we touch, see, or perceive by any of our senses, are nothing more than semblances or phantoms precisely similar to those which arise in the mind of a hypnotised person, a dreamer, a person labouring under hallucinations, or afflicted by subjective sensations'¹².

A mesmerising hallucination, a healing ritual, a kind of dark ex-voto, Tina Havelock Stevens transports the viewer into a mystical universe. Giant Rock in California is the world's largest freestanding boulder and is considered a sacred site by Native Americans. It became a subterranean home of German prospector Frank Critzer during the 1940s before being converted into a gathering point for UFO believers. Shot with a drone, the artist is seen drumming a spontaneous composition under the colossal rock. A fragile human being lost in the immensity of the arid landscape, the artist takes possession of the site in a trance-like performance. Visceral and hypnotic, her video piece and photographs encapsulate the history and emotions that haunt this fabled beast.

Contagious Magic is both the title of this exhibition and of a musical piece by Brian Eno and Jon Hassell from their collaborative album *Fourth World Vol. 1: Possible Musics*. It is a sensual, dreamlike and otherworldly piece of music that melts jazz, minimalism and ambient sounds. With its wobbly tones blending high technology and mysticism, Brian Eno and Jon Hassell's *Possible Musics* has been said to be an exercise in science fiction¹³.

Wading through the overflow of existing images, David Greenhalgh stitches up archival images, music and sound from many different sources. Isolated from their original context, the conflated fragments gain and develop new meanings, expanding beyond what they were originally intended for. Greenhalgh's process of 'sense-making' opens more or less consciously doors to amusing and daunting speculative science-fictional narratives. Extending a hand to the future, through acting as a bricoleur of the past, Greenhalgh proposes a prescient glimpse toward the near future or perhaps the recent past. Together, the images and sounds gathered by the artist abolish the boundaries between truth and falsehood, past and future, memory and imagination.

Hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames...

... Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information ¹⁴.

Magic here is about the evocative and contagious power of images to reveal what exceeds the real.

Claire Monneraye
for Galerie pompom, Sydney. June 2017

¹ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Macmillan and Co., United Kingdom, 1890 (first edition).

² Moa Goysdotter, *Impure Vision: American Staged Photography of the 1970s*, Nordic Academic Press, Sweden, 2013

³ Piotr Sadowski, *From Interaction to Symbol: A systems view of the evolution of signs and communication*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam / Philadelphia, 2009

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London, 1977

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981

⁷ André Bazin, *The Ontology Photographic Image*, in *What is Cinema?*, Vol 1, 1967. First published in French in 1945.

⁸ Joel Snyder, *Photography, Ontology, Analogy, Compulsion*, in *Études Photographiques*, Issue 34 Spring 2016

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying – An Observation*, in *Intentions*, 1891

¹⁰ Ibid. André Bazin.

¹¹ Jean-François Chevrier, *The Reality of Hallucination in André Bazin*, in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, edited by Andrew Dudley, Oxford University Press, 2010

¹² Hippolyte Taine, *On Intelligence*, Holt & Williams, New York, 1875

¹³ Review of Brian Eno and Jon Hassel's 1980 album *Fourth World Vol.1: Possible Musics* by Aaron Leitko published on Pitchfork.com, 2014

¹⁴ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace, 1984