

# WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY?

Less a question and more the environment that photography inhabits right now, writer Sean O'Hagan wanders around its different landscapes in preparation for Unseen 2015.





‘What is photography?’ The question has echoed to various degrees through the medium’s history from its very inception. It’s implicit in the creation of Hippolyte Bayard’s mischievous, elaborately staged Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man, which was made in 1840. It’s even more implicit in the work of pioneering conceptualists like Jeff Wall and Richard Prince as well as in Andy Warhol’s Polaroids, Ed Ruscha’s cheaply produced sixties photobooks and the provocative appropriations of Sherrie Levine.

In a world where photographs tend to be made – and increasingly re-made or re-contextualised or remixed – it is a question that resounds even more loudly in our post-postmodern, image-saturated, endlessly referential times. It is the unspoken question that echoes loudly at the photography festivals, exhibitions and book fairs I have attended over the last few years and in many of the photobooks being made, either by small independent publishers or artists who have chosen to self-publish their work. And nowhere does it echo more loudly than in the exhibition halls, performance spaces and book market at Unseen.

Unseen, by its very nature, tends to favour the new and the now: the exciting as well as the confusing. In fact, at Unseen, excitement and confusion can often go hand in hand. It used to be called ‘the shock of the new’, but now that nothing ever seems entirely new, that term no longer carries the iconoclastic charge it once did. Today, photography, like everything else, from pop music to painting, constantly refers to its own past in order to assert its contemporaneity. Call it post-postmodernism or put it down to the cultural exhaustion that attends late-capitalism, but photography about photography – or, in curatorial speak, photography that interrogates the medium – is now the norm rather than the exception.

It was, to a lesser degree, ever thus. Hippolyte Bayard was interrogating the medium as was László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray and the conceptualists mentioned above. Today, that interrogation has become both more playful, more knowingly self-conscious. Indeed,

if one wanted to identify a touchstone for the spirit of contemporary photography, it would be an artist of ideas like John Baldessari rather than a photographer like Henri Cartier-Bresson – or, indeed Robert Frank or even Jeff Wall. It is Baldessari’s perpetually mischievous mind that informs, unconsciously or otherwise, most of the work on show at Unseen, where ideas come thick and fast and not always fully formed in photographs.

At Unseen 2014, photography was, among other things, Lorenzo Vitturi’s surreally constructed, vividly coloured, giant sculpture-come-performance, *A*

Lorenzo Vitturi  
campaign installation  
at Unseen 2014 ©  
Tsuyoshi Yamada/  
Unseen



subverted, pulled apart and put back together again. You will encounter photographers as performers, making prints and books in public; photographers as visual archaeologists excavating memories, their own and others; and photographers as storytellers, merging fact and fiction in often wildly ambitious multilayered narratives.

Consider the work of Regine Petersen, who was the recipient of the 2014 Outset | Unseen Exhibition Fund, chosen from all the artists exhibiting at the fair.



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*Durian Growing a Swinging Sponge on a Fractal Evening*, taking shape hour by hour in the open air. It was the quiet, intense power of Awoiska van der Molen’s meticulously composed, mysteriously elemental, monochrome nocturnal landscapes from her first publication *Sequester*, launched at the Book Market. It was Augustin Rebetez’s wilfully primitive and madcap collages and Melinda Gibson’s performance, *The Smoke House*, where she placed pristine copies of her new photobook in actual smoke houses arranged in a circle.

At Unseen 2015, the definition of photography is once again stretched,

Her extended project, *Find A Fallen Star*, is about meteorites and those who have come into close contact with them. It is also, more intriguingly, about the stories that these otherworldly objects leave in their wake. *Find A Fallen Star* reached completion this year with the publication of a beautifully designed three-part photobook of the same name. It is a project that has themes in common with Cristina de Middel’s groundbreaking book *The Afonauts*: outer space, myth, the real and the imagined, but Petersen is essentially a storyteller and an excavator of memory and myth rather than a re-stager of imagined events.



Petersen is an artist for whom the camera is only one medium in the creation of a narrative fabric that is meticulously layered and intricately woven, made up of old and new material: her own quietly metaphorical photographs, found images, recovered texts and transcripts as well as first person testimonies that often contradict each other.

If we have grown used to the idea that the camera is not a reliable source of truth(s) or a trustworthy reflection of reality, Petersen's approach reaffirms that notion, while also questioning the veracity of words, written or spoken, and memories, collective and personal. She mixes often conflicting personal testi-

is also a relentlessly creative artist who describes herself as a "frenetic artist book maker". Her recent project, *AUTOMAGIC*, is another journey into memory, but one rooted in both her love for images and image-making – and an attendant suspicion that those same images are shaping and, indeed creating, her actual memories. "My memories may be not rooted in my mind as actual memories of events," she says, "but as unreal memories created by me taking photos, looking at them, writing upon them and reworking them."

Funded through Kickstarter, *AUTOMAGIC* began as an idea back in 2011 and has metamorphosed since into

overload is doing to the creative imagination, but to our collective imagination, and how a frenetic artist-come-photographer can respond. At the root of her practice is not just the question, 'What is photography?' but 'What is photography doing to us?'

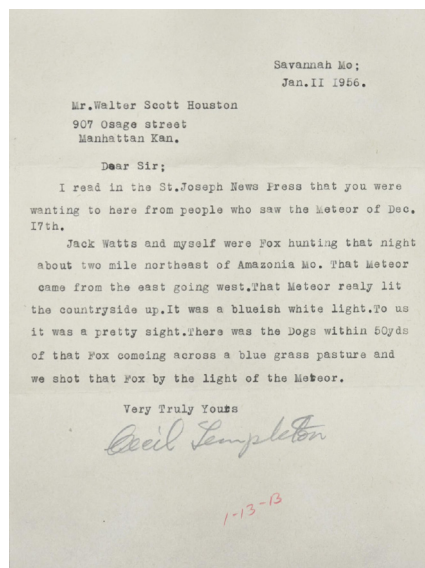
Against all this vibrant uncertainty, photography is still a place to explore silence and, in particular, the quietly luminous hinterlands between reality and dream. Both Adam Jeppesen and Awoiska van der Molen undertake their journeys into this liminal space, where the mysterious meets the elemental, with a degree of dedication and patience that seems to be becoming increasingly rare.

the sustained sense of atmosphere that defines his journey: the sense of silence, both elemental and intimately personal. His photographs are evidence – though often blurred, grainy and impressionistic evidence – more than documentation. The marks and blemishes on the negatives provide another level of testimony. They say, I have been there, made this record, and brought it back. Jeppesen is working in, and pushing the boundaries, of the photographer as explorer tradition.

Similar, but in a different way, is Awoiska van der Molen. Her images of landscapes are infused with an almost eerie sense of emptiness and silence, the only suggestion of sound being the sense



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Merkel's Junkyard, from the series Stars Fell on Alabama/Find a Fallen Star, 2012

monies from Alabama and Rajasthan, with official documentation as well as media reports and press photographs, while her own understated, observational landscapes and portraits add yet another layer of mystery and memory.

You could say that, on the evidence of her own work, Petersen is one of those quiet documentary photographers like Vanessa Winship for example, but Find A Falling Star is not primarily a documentary work but more a poetic meditation on the fallout – personal, psychological, mythical – of meteorites. Revealingly, Petersen describes these space rocks as "time capsules from the beginning of our solar system" and "like photographs of a time long before there was any life on Earth."

The Dutch artist Anouk Kruithof

something almost impossibly ambitious: a reflection on the past 12 years of her life in which images – taken and remixed – will collide with fragments of various texts – personal, critical and theoretical.

The materiality of the book is central here: *AUTOMAGIC* will eventually become a bulky, perhaps slightly unmanageable, art object. It is both a statement against the endless production of images that float free and unmoored in our digitalised universe, constantly transmitted, but either relatively unseen or instantly forgotten. But, it is also evidence, in its very weightiness and wilfully fractured, impressionistic structure, of how post-digital ideology is shaping even book making.

Kruithof's concern as an artist is not just what this unprecedented image



Zioncanyon, 2014, ©Adam Jeppesen / Galerie van der Mieden

The results are very different in style, but not in tone and suggestion.

Jeppesen, a Danish artist, often travels long distances alone. His images are loaded with a sense of solitariness, even loneliness. For *The Flatlands Camp Project*, he travelled from America to Antarctica over a period of 487 days. His landscapes are vast and empty: dust, sand and arid earth are the constants as well as cold, still seas, ice and fog. Jeppesen's vision would be extreme if it were not for

of the wind moving among the leafy trees. Here the real is made luminous and mysterious, even otherworldly, by an eye that looks patiently and with a quiet, but intense, concentration at what James Joyce called "the whatness of things". Van der Molen's image of tall trees at night on a steep mountainside is a case in point. The landscape of moonlit foliage seems both tangibly close in terms of its physical presence and yet forbidding in its dark sense of almost supernatural



mystery. Like Jeppesen, van der Molen seems to be insisting through her attentive approach and the lingering silence of her landscapes on the essential nature of photography: its ability to evoke atmosphere and a profound sense of place as powerfully as writing or painting.

Through all of this, the question ‘What is photography?’ echoes even more insistently – and impossibly – than ever. At Unseen 2015, photography is, among other things, performance, fiction, memoir, sculpture, storytelling, book making, remixing, installation, animation, deconstruction, psychogeography, politics, still life, the archive, digital rendering... as well as documentary, landscape and portraiture.

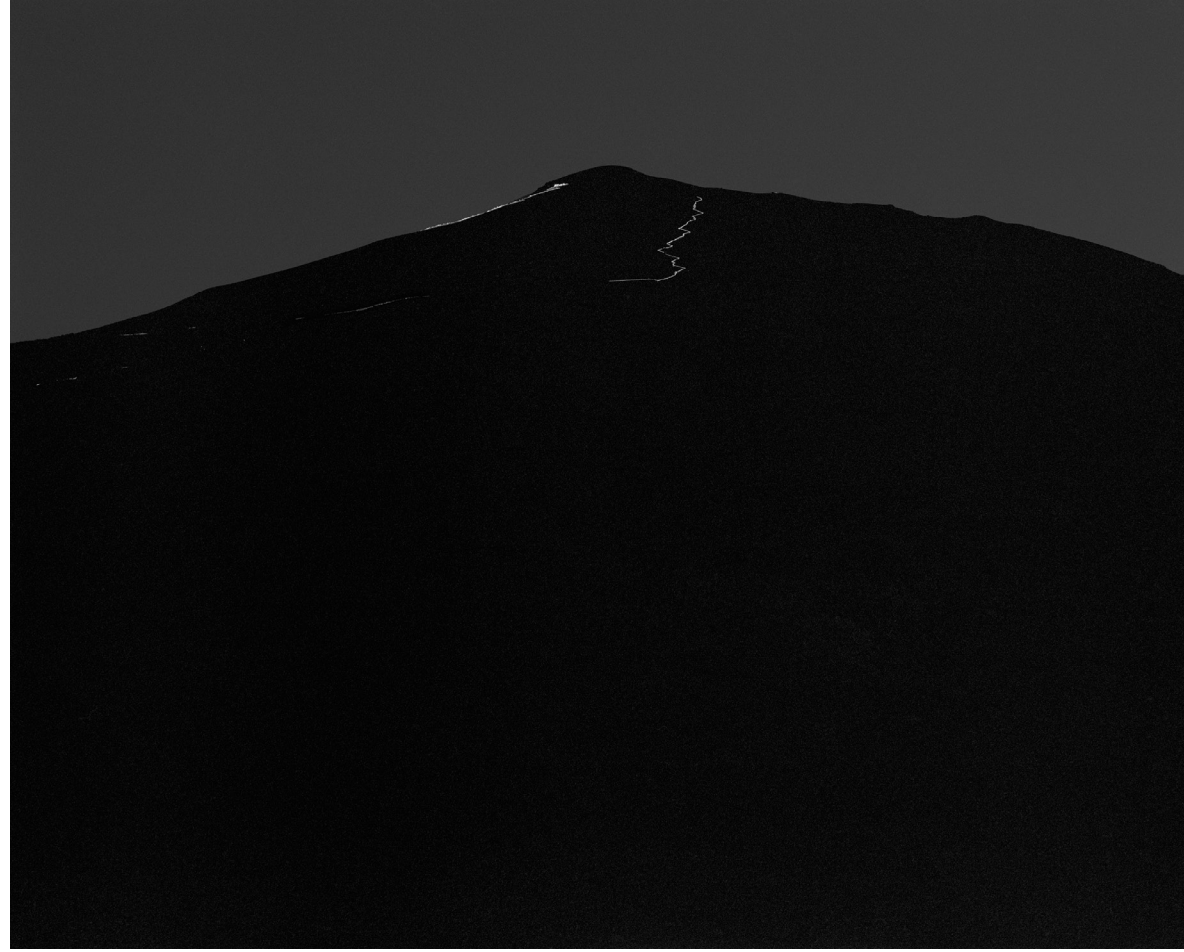
There is no doubt that photography shapes our way of seeing the world, not only deepening our ways of looking, but, as Kruithof senses, increasingly altering and even distorting them as images multiply and lose their meaning as personal records of our lives and experiences. As Unseen also shows, in its abundance of images, styles, approaches and

practices, photography alters our way of looking at – and making, showing and disseminating – photography.

Contemporary artists, whether as relentless as Kruithof or as quietly patient as van der Molen, seem acutely aware of the mercurial nature of the photographic image, its history of recording and deceiving, illuminating and obscuring. In fact they often seem suspicious of the medium and make work accordingly, either pushing us onwards and outwards beyond the traditional or employing traditional methodologies in new and surprising ways.

“I wanted to break down the rules of photography – the conventions,” John Baldessari once said. In doing so, he added, “I discovered I was more of a ‘thinking’ person than a ‘working’ person.” That urge to subvert conventions underpins much of the work on show at Unseen, but so too does the urge to think as much as to do. ‘What is photography?’ is not so much a resounding question as the place where we live right now – as frenetically or as quietly as we choose.

Untitled (212-7), 2012 ©  
Awoiska van der Molen



## The Artist's Studio

**The artist's studio is a laboratory of ideas and experiments. An attic, a home, a street, the studio is both personal and particular; it can tell us about an artist's process at the same time as giving a glimpse into the daily routines that underpin artistic practice. Unseen speaks to five artists across the world to find out about the diverse relationships they have with their workspaces.**