Premier’s COFA Visual Arts Scholarship

Generation Touch Screen: Beyond the Instantaneous Simulacra

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This investigation focuses on the syllabus content of Practice and the dynamic and transformative flux that is contemporary photography and its impact on pedagogy. My interest lies in the tangible and material nature of photography and photographic experience provided by a selection of educational institutions within the United States. It is intended to propose questions and spark ideas about what is on offer for photographic practice.

The premise of my study is that "photography is at a revolutionary stage of its short history.” Transformed by digital technologies and propelled globally by the instantaneous Internet, photography has become the ubiquitous language of our times, transforming a culture obsessed by the word to one increasingly bound to the image. The implications of the radical social and political metamorphosis are experienced daily, turning each of us into a producer and consumer of photographs, each of us a critic. At the same time, the speed and the ephemerality of the digital image had tended to obscure what remains of photography's unique gift: close and attentive looking at fragments of lost time."

As educators we encourage students to experiment liberally with the latest tools and materials, introducing new working methodologies. Technological advancements continue to energise the practice of photography and create new visual language. With large technological steps forward to image production there has been a strong interest to return to handcrafted, more tactile, intimate and historic processes, (alternative processes) of image making. The hand of the student plays a skilful role in the physical production and manipulation of the work, returning to the photograph what artist Brenton Hamilton refers to as the ‘eccentric mark’ in a time of ‘tectonic changes’ in the media. “Light transforming silver now becomes light waves creating a mathematical algorithm with infinite variation”.[[1]](#footnote-1) All become relevant in the practice of photography for student consumption.

“As the photo world becomes more digital, we are finding a greater interest in older traditional methods.” Glenn Ruga, PRC Executive Director and Loupe Publisher. The rationale for this may lie in the ‘burning with desire’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

How do we facilitate students’ consideration of the expansive possibilities of photography beyond the instantaneous simulacra, capturing the image – to contemplation of content and light capture? What is the position of materiality in contemporary photographic practice? What is cutting edge in photographic practice? How do we focus on intentionality?

It is always important to find the correct marriage of intention, image and process.

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

In conversation and debate with the very committed temporary Chair of Department of Photography Aimee Beaubien and Professor of Photography Robert Clarke-Davis who teaches the Alternative Processes classes, which he refers to as 'slow photo' we conclude that these processes are slow in time and slow in sensitivity.

At the School of Art Institute, Chicago all specialised studio spaces, black and white darkrooms facilities are predominantly located on the fringe of a centralised digital studio, open, light and dedicated workstations complete with IMac or Eizo screens, flatbed scanners and localised printers - most Epson 4880 printer connected to iMac, specifically for those students particular interested in specific colour profiles and specialist papers, and not wanting to use the rip system for fast printing (satin, matte and glossy). Some high tech large format Imacon scanners, large format negative scanners allow the many students working with large format photography opportunity to scan negatives. Many students engaging with film technology are doing so for the very first time as they have had minimal exposure to film prior to attending SAIC.

The hybrid process of art production is embraced and encouraged alongside a dedicated approach to a singular technology. If a student enrols in a black and white class, they will select darkroom or digital process.

A current student working with analogue capture – a common starting point in the workflow for many tertiary students of photography, a Linhoff medium format camera, Leica lens, all purchased off eBay, had produced a lens test for an unevenness of exposure, work was conceptual and technically meticulous, influenced by Robert Frank and Joel Meykerweiz, had been at the Art Institute the previous day to view a print of Joel Meykerweiz to comparatively view a traditional colour print. He was overwhelmed and in his opinion, digital is only 10% in terms of quality. This opinion is argued against by Australian photographer and educator Dr Les Walkling who marvels at the advancement and sophistication of digital output.

New Trier High School

The mission of the New Trier art department is “to teach artmaking materials, tools and techniques, encourage divergent solutions to problems, foster visual literacy, and provide an understanding of past and contemporary visual culture.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Photography facilities cater for traditional and progressive practices, a new lab for video editing with its own cage, black and white dark rooms, dedicated alternative processes room.

The school operates like a university in that there is a Chair of Photography, Mr Stephen Murphy, who oversees the implementation of photographic programs and the technicians who operate the cages for equipment loan and upkeep.

Their dynamic photographic curriculum incorporates image making from the traditional origins of historic or alternative processes, offering cyanotype, platinum/palladium and gum bichromate, a favourite with students for its capacity to incorporate pigments with the a light activator. As these processes are slow, when waiting for prints and coatings to dry – students are encouraged to go and feed the mind in the art library.

History informs contemporary practice. Not only do students work with large format cameras, very traditional practices reframing how they see their world, but students may work with these processes in conjunction with projects such as the iPod touch project. Chair Stephen Murphy considers the conceptual engagement as critical as the technical prowess.

The yearly photobook publication, Point Of View, photography III/IV offers a nexus of expression and ideas in the student’s world.

International Centre for Photography, New York

One of the best single discipline facilities equipped for all photographic processes I have seen for the purpose of photographic education is the International Centre for Photography, New York.

The space opens with a light filled gallery of student work. On display was the final graduate exhibition from the Documentary Photography program. Recognisable was the strong interpretive use of a photographic visual language, multiple forms of display and presentation offering synergy with concept. The tour was taken with Karen Lindsay, a scholar in Art History, and part time educator at the ICP. The facilities space was designed by Adam Eielberg and still maintaining a working Colour darkroom.

In an interview with Nayland Blake, Chair of the ICP/Bard Masters program in Advanced Photographic Studies and who teaches Critical Thinking and Visual Culture, Nayland discussed the conceptual vision of the program, in which students are taught to construct a point of view through this process of inquiry-based learning from a position and process from which they are uncomfortable and utilising multi-modalities. He believes there is a lingering amount of nostalgia for and preoccupation with for analogue processes, as evidenced by Instagram. .

The Book in Photographic Practice

Value of the book in contemporary photographic practice and thesis submission is two phase: it provides digital image making tools and accommodates the rise of digital image distribution. Books have a democratic distribution, provide opportunity for expository writing, integration of image and word, dis-mediation, and elimination of the “middle man” in distribution of ideas.

Alison Nordstrom – ‘the photobook has become its own collectible object and allows photographers to become their own publishers.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Studio based assignment tasks are quite raw, materially, economically and conceptually, and designed to challenge the comfort zone of students, with the intention to establish what is common in their practice as an artist without the “bells and whistles” of equipment. A couple of practical examples are:

1. Tell a story using 24 shots from a disposable camera
2. Deconstructing a world that you have never been part of. Students are to buy a magazine that they have never read before, such as *'dogs world'*and write a report about the magazine analysing any aspects that relates to culture -images and design, social views... Nayland believes that “focusing on the technology you ignore the ideaology”. Specific tasks are designed to deconstruct culture and respond in a social, political or personal way.

Photographic objects in collection and on display

I spoke with Edward Earle, curator of collections at the International Centre of Photography who lectures on the collection in the MFA program.

He referred to images in the current exhibition, "A Short History of Photography", images from the ICP collection curated by Brian Wallis. It explored photography and its many contexts: social, political, economic, illustrating how our Conceptual Framework is foregrounded in Photographic Practice, at least from a curatorial perspective.

Collections management of over 100,00 images, collected since 1974, is based on an interpretive view and more for public purposes - photographer- audience, or photograph – audience. It is cultural and non- linear in structure.

The moving image is defined as computer based time-based media - a move from video in respect to terminology. Film, television and video require a form of interactivity, audience is central.

The upcoming exhibition by curator Carol Squires - *What is a Photograph?* is testament to the state of flux of contemporary photographic practice, as is another at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Faking It,* focusing on the pre-Photoshop manipulation of negatives to construct meaning of the world.

The Centre for Alternative Processes (CAP) is a developing institution in New York that fundamentally supports the photographer and their development of and engagement with alternative processes. As a not-for profit institution, its vision is to build a community that is passionate about photography. Located in the old photographic neighbourhood of the city, east 30th street, the building is shared with an operating film lab on the ground floor. With recent connections in the last three years with the International Centre of Photography, CAP runs workshops as part of the ICP summer program.

Geoffrey Berliner is the director and visionary for the development of the organisation. Geoffrey is a passionate, educated “lens geek”. Name a lens for a large format camera, graflex, or stereoscope and it is most likely sitting in his jam packed 'lens cupboard' clean, ready for use. He physically alters most digital cameras with a new lens to achieve *optical simulacra* of historic pictorial devices. The centre offers workshops, development of outreach programs, film darkrooms, an alternate process studio, studio lighting spaces, a well-equipped library and lens and camera repair.

On reflecting upon the purpose of teaching alternate processes in this democratic age of digitisation Geoff believes there is a need in the community for 'slow processes that provide greater physical control of the image, raw images that are unique, with unique physical imperfections.” There is consideration in camera, observation, the revisiting of the contemplation required through the process of looking.

What processes should we be teaching in schools? Cyanotype is the most obvious owing to its simple chemical formula. But Geoff believes we should be demonstrating a variety of processes to students so they have a solid grasp on the history of the permanent, tangible image, just as a painter understands traditions, then knows technically how to alter, replicate and move beyond in an intelligent and informed way.

Tertiary Institutions for graduating students

The Cooper Union in New York City occupies a unique position within tertiary education offering fully funded scholarships for BFA students. They take only 60 students each year with a strong high school enrichment program that mirrors the integrated curriculum. In interview with Steven Lam, Associate Dean at The Cooper Union he outlined the philosophy of offering an integrated curriculum with a Visual Arts focus, as opposed to commercial practice of photography and other art disciplines. Students’ artistic practice can draw from the history and traditions of all practices, technically and conceptually. In the foundational year there are technical workshops in historical and contemporary processes, a type workshop is offered, as is 16mm film process. Within the photography area the responsibility of education is to maintain traditional processes with new technologies to keep all alive in the imagination. The Tisch School offered a more traditional approach and maintains its mechanical processes of darkroom and alternative practices, similarly to Pratt University.

Impossible Project – Instant Analogue

The medium of photography has always been interested in showing something more than surface. The invention of Polaroid bought the ‘instantaneous image’ to the table of photographic tools, the ability to immediately scrutinise and critique, currently inherent with digital, practice but a new social form of picture making, the ‘warm human exchange of the peel apart’.[[5]](#footnote-5) With the discontinuation of Polaroid in the 2008, Impossible has provided a variation to the ubiquitous Fuji instamatic films. Both are negative films.

‘In October 2008 The Impossible Project saved the last Polaroid production plant for integral instant film in Enschede (NL) and started to invent and produce totally new instant film materials for traditional Polaroid cameras. In 2010 Impossible saved analogue instant photography from extinction by releasing various, brand new and unique instant films. There with Impossible prevents more than 300,000,000 perfectly functioning Polaroid cameras from becoming obsolete, changes the world of photography and keeps variety, tangibility and analogue creativity possibilities alive.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Kisha Bari, education and marketing director at Impossible Project in New York briefly discussed the history of the company but focused on the education curriculum which is designed to engage all ages with their existing Polaroid Cameras and Impossible Film providing a variety of workshops and events.

At present, due the unstable nature of the new film (both a positive and negative factor) scanning is always an integral component / concept within each workshop. As the film remains unstable in its exposure to any light source, it will continue to alter, change, develop, wash, bleach and otherwise shift unless scanned for permanence. Awareness that the film surface is reflective and the formation of Newton rings needs to avoided. Anti- Newton glass on scanner or Photoshop process in removal is ideal.

Artists are invited to demonstrate technique

One exhibition, Ryan Nabulsi - Manipulating the Science of Chance - uses multiple photographic technologies to create new forms of image making. Opening the sealed film pack to light, Nabulsi destroys any representational potential of his images. All that is visible is the chemistry of the Impossible material, and the physical marks Nabulsi makes. Each frame is treated as a palette of paint rather than a photographic material.

Initiating Outreach programs to schools: On initial meetings at schools we found that there was a revisiting of the basic language and concepts of photography because students lacked fundamentals such as light reflecting upon a sensitised surface, producing a latent image, or the chemistry developing the latent image into a tonal representation. This revisiting of the basics also occurs at the university level allowing the subtleties and nuances of the photographic language to be observed and reflected upon and the enjoyment of working with Impossible Film to be experienced.

Analogue feedback, affectionately known as 'Analogue Geekville' night, invites all ages to engage in informal conversations about images, cameras, or anything relevant to their personal photographic work.

Pioneer Program - artists who supported the company in the first 12 months are invited to create work and test the film within their work, providing an interconnected discourse of the analogue film. The website demonstrates specific manipulation techniques.

**Photoville** a new photography festival has emerged with exhibitions in shipping containers, workshops, talks and vendors all in an industrial setting in Dumbo, Brooklyn.

There was a particular panel discussion with Ariel Shanburg, Akemi Hiatt, Michael Foley and Lesley Martin, artists who interrupt the surface of the print, on *Surface Tension*. Material manipulation and tangibility of paper within practice is key – interfering with the emulsion of negatives, lighting a fire cracker onto gelatin paper with the reduction in film stocks more artists may start to work with the paper stock, equating photography with other practices. The excitement with contemporary photographic practice is innovation and how we contribute to photographic language.

Exploring Alternative Processes and Digital Printmaking

In an interview with Craig Stevens, who teaches digital printing at Savannah College of Art and Design we discussed the theme, ‘Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should’. Craig completely embraced digital photography at the moment it became archival, and printing standards achieved continuous dot tone. A traditional photographer curious to explore digital possibilities, his pedagogical philosophy is to look for ways for students to invent their own process. He teaches Platinum/Palladium printing, as he is masterful in the process and considers this a noble process. Students are encouraged to invent a process. Invention and intent are the philosophical precedent.

Brenton Hamilton, a passionate artist and educator specialising in alternative processes, in particular Gum Bichromate, is dedicated to the vision of Fox Talbot. Attending his *Exploring Alternative Processes* workshop at the Maine Media Workshops was an experience in cultivating artistic discipline and historical knowledge of chemistry based 19th century photographic processes. He is particularly passionate about history and on a practical level, substrates, the complex nature of the papers, their surface, weight and hydroscopic nature as variables if something goes wrong.

Elizabeth Greenburg, Dean, Maine Media College Director of Education, Maine Media Workshops believes in a holistic curriculum where all photographic processes provide a cross pollination of modalities.

The Cyanoype process as inquiry into light activating materials is an economic and exciting process. Any alternative process is direct. The image is tied to the size of the negative or objects used to make the print; no enlarger is used. The combination of light/ photons/ chemistry/ paper are fundamental to the making of the photographic print. Ph and sizing in paper are used to keep pigments on the surface and can be problematic. Ideally hot pressed, heavier weight paper provides a surface for a more luxurious coating of emulsion. One skill is in the successful coating of paper with cyanotype fabrics available pre-coated and requiring only the addition of water and hydrogen peroxide to complete the process together with UV light. Toning options are also readily available. Cyanotype, Albumen, Kallitype, Gum Bichromate and Ziatype (a 1980’s Palladium based process) provide breadth and depth of the nuances of each process.

Digital has entered the realm of alternative processes enlivening accessibility to alternative processes. The digital negative has been around for 12 years, however, within the last two years there have been much technological advancement to improve the quality of digital film substrates and printers, in particular, Epson technology. Each process requires a different 'curve' to obtain optimum contrast, tone and density. These alternative processes are slow in sensitivity and flat. There needs to be great highlight density in the negative for the print to maintain its whites or highlights.

Reflecting: The Critique and Methodologies

Craig Stevens, photographic lecturer at SCAD proposes that the critique allows reflection and articulation of concept and technique through proposing questions - opens with intent- what do you want it to be? What is it that you have made, what have you thought you made, what have you actually made?

The structure is inquisitive rather than judgmental. There is always informal peer learning in the critique and it is always about the work, not the student.

Steven Lam refers to the critique as a “conversation rather than a position, it is a social experience”.

Reflections on the Historic Processes

My personal experience making photographic prints utilising alternate processes has certainly enriched an understanding and appreciation of the history of photography, and the remarkable technical innovations by scientists combining components of metals with light activators to make sensitised emulsions. The processes are challenging, there is a skill and craft within technique. There is the need for an investigation into a foundational visual language enhancing the pedagogical value of the discipline.

Why are these alternate processes loved and practised at all levels of education? They speak to the nature of photography, they employ colour through chemistry, not ink. They are current, so very different to the majority of photographic images we live with on a daily basis. The challenge is to create investigative experiences for students that challenge their intent, “the magic is not in the materials, it is in the intent”,[[7]](#footnote-7) to move beyond the point and shoot to an in-depth consideration of materiality and the reflective processes of contemplation through the visual language of photography.

Film does not appear to be going away, and although it is becoming rare and expensive it remains an integral part of the workflow for photographic artists.

Photography is at a revolutionary and transformative stage of its short history. This study tour gave me the opportunity to explore contemporary artistic practices of photography in world-class institutions.

1. This is : After Photography 1839/1851/1975/1980 by Brenton Hamilton, posted June 18, 2011 on Obsuraweb.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lois Daguerre wrote in a letter to Nicephore Niepce, in 1929, “I am burning with desire to see your experiments from nature.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Murphy, Department Chair, Steven Gaeth, Department Coordinator. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. interview by Erin Wederbrook Yuskaitis with Dr Alison Nordstrom curator of Photographs at George Eastman House, posted on June 4th, 2012, PRC program & Exhibition Manager at Boston University [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Instant, The Story of Polaroid, Christopher Bonanos, 2012, Princeston architectural Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From [Impossible](http://www.the-impossible-project.com) website [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with Craig Stevens, Lectures in Digital Photography at SCAD, Savannah, July 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)