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Against Distinction: Photography and Legendary Psychasthenia*

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The difference between resemblance and identity is essential. . . . Here . . . death is only a mask of life, a mask behind which life maintains its difference while pretending to renounce it.

—Denis Hollier[1]

Returning to the subject of photography now is both a matter of things left unsaid and things not worth saying. Like arguing over old wounds with an ex-lover, one is inclined toward the remedial and the personal, to impotent summaries and well-worn frustrations. Flipping through the dog-eared volumes that introduced me to theories of the medium, or, more precisely, to the very idea of theorizing media, I find little relevant to the problems of the present. So different was the world at the time of their writing, so distinct and urgent were the stakes, that the only thing made evident by revisiting them is distance. And distance is where one might want to start, where so much writing on photography starts, with what is unknowable and mysterious about a depiction, what lies beyond or behind or between it and us. A medium is simply this, a separation, a marker of distance and difference. It is an untraversable boundary; that which conveys but also

* This text was first conceived as a talk to accompany a project initiated by Dana Faconti’s invitation to edit an issue of *Blind Spot* magazine; neither the text nor the project it describes would have been possible without her. It was first presented as an introduction to a roundtable discussion with George Baker, Joanna Fiduccia, Douglas Fogle, and Alex Kitnick held on the occasion of the launch of *Blind Spot* issue forty-six on April 26, 2013, at Regen Projects in Los Angeles. Each of their contributions to the discussion did much to affect the direction this paper later took. I am grateful to Matthew Witkovsky, who first invited me to write on this topic and encouraged me to adapt my talk for publication; the initial drafts benefited greatly from several rounds of editing and discussion with him. This final version is deeply indebted to George Baker, who patiently coaxed me into revisiting the possibility of publishing it, and whose tireless efforts as an editor, a respondent, and a friend allowed it to achieve its final form. I also owe sincere thanks to Noam Elcott, who managed to lend clarity to my understanding of the text at a moment when it was at its most confused.

1. Denis Hollier, “Mimesis and Castration 1937,” trans. William Rodarmor, *October* 31 (Winter 1984), p. 13.

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obscures, that which places things in the past as it draws them near. It is a boundary invented to explain the differences between things and their representations, to delineate what of a thing persists in its representation, if anything persists at all. These distinctions are aggregated into a spectral entity and lent solidity through naming. The act of naming christens the theoretical object that exists only so that the mind can hold it steady, make it discrete, and move on to less unruly things. The ontology of a medium is never more than the search for a static and stable boundary whose contours in truth only exist when in action, a thing that we assume must have solidity because convention necessitates it. It is a void constructed through exegesis, which pushes and pulls at its fixity by reimagining its edges in every moment of deployment, a constantly renegotiated social contract that refuses to be isolated from its place in the world and resign itself to being a thing in the world, no matter the efforts that are set forth to perform this alchemy.

The search for ontological certainty, the struggle to dominate this nebulous thing through the clarification and expansion of terms, continues to pervade much of the writing produced in the service of media. Photography is exemplary of this instability; the sheer range of the photographic object's sites of reception, not to mention the technological diversity of photographs themselves (the term being inclusive of a multitude of objects and attendant conditions of production), makes nailing the term down the equivalent of herding cats. Despite the column inches devoted to its discussion, a sense of imprecision remains when "photography" is used to designate something discrete, separate, categorical; that is, when it is theorized in and of itself.

Photography's resistance to definition becomes, then, its character, variously understood as a tool of victimization enacted by some remote power shrouded in ideological subterfuge, or the source of metaphysical connectivity, drawing some elusive subject tantalizingly close but just out of reach. As Richard Bolton pointed out in his introduction to the seminal 1989 anthology of photographic criticism *The Contest of Meaning*, this heterogeneity "raises the possibility that photography has no governing characteristics at all save adaptability."[2] And so we are left with a "photography" that is constituted by its lack of coherence and, when in more poetic hands, is regularly conceptualized as a site of loss, or a testament to absence, permeated by wounds, able only to rearticulate, ad infinitum, its lack of life. In truth, the melancholic overtones that pervade much of the writing on the medium are a symptom of a problem inherent to the taxonomic structure of media analysis and its inability to describe dynamic circulatory systems. This is not simply a matter of discursive sites of reception, but rather a question of wholly distinct apparatuses of production and distribution and the networks they create. At one ideological extreme, we see only the agendas of power, at the other, some sort of ethereal authorial intent or absent subject that persists and yet is unquanitfiable, but both fail by trying to hold the elusive sense of medium constant. This is, as I've argued

2. Richard Bolton, "Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography," in *Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. xii.

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before, less a crisis for the producers of photographs than an indication of a fundamental problem facing the art historian/critic, for whom the distinctions between media are axioms around which have proliferated elaborate academic, professional, and institutional bureaucracies, the very bureaucracies that guarantee their roles as arbiters over the field and tacitly justify the foundation of their expertise.[3] The instability that such approaches find when they confront the "death mask" of the photographic object is a reflection of the ontological problem produced by the model of differential media. Pursuing this line of thought, one swiftly reaches the point where ontology becomes an empty gesture, the equivalent of looking for meaning in the dusty folders to which departmental specialties and their bureaucratic fiefdoms dutifully adhere. The more pressing questions pertain to what depictions do, how they formulate an audience, how they situate us as bodies in space, how they produce political arrangements in real time, and how we in turn are a medium of their distribution, extending their fields, propagating their logics. Political stakes lie in the particularities of things, in the human beings that animate them, and the generalization necessitated by the recourse to the categorical renders concrete political relations woefully abstract.

Perhaps what is most interesting about these arguments over medium identity lies not in their substance but in their presence as a symptom of larger methodological issues. As Peter Bürger noted in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the critical issue is not whether the autonomy of art is true or not, but rather why such a drive exists at all, what it satisfies, and why it emerges at a particular time in relation to a particular set of conditions. We have seen these impulses before: Sculpture, for example, was granted an expanded field when it ceased being capable of keeping up with the practices it had once so comfortably corralled; painting as a category became the object of scrutiny when it became apparent that it was a tragically outmoded means by which to achieve a mass audience, rendering certain formulations of its political stakes tenuous; and photography became the theoretical object of choice for the academy when it was adopted by the institutions of contemporary art and thus cordoned off from the din of mass culture that had, until then, given it explicit purpose. That these discussions arose in a relatively narrow time period should give us some indication that what was at stake was, in fact, a broader methodological issue, and that the actual object of debate was expertise and discipline, i.e., the role of those who were meant to bring systematic order to their chosen field, who were meant to divide one thing

3. I have written several times on the subject of photographic ontology. For the most in-depth address, see "Abstracting Photography (Some Notes on the Problem of Allegorical Critique as It Relates to the Conditions of a Minor Art)," in *Words Without Pictures* (New York and Los Angeles: Aperture/LACMA, 2010), p. 109–25; revised and republished in *33 Texts: 93,614 Words: 581,035 Characters, Selected Writings (2003–2015)* (Zurich and Dijon: JRP|Ringier and Les Presses du Réel, 2015), pp. 135–57. For a treatment, albeit cursory, of the relation of medium distinctions to the bureaucratic structures of institutions, see my "Untitled Response, 'Is Photography Over?' Symposium, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art," first delivered as a response to a prompt on the occasion of the "Is Photography Over?" symposium at SFMOMA, April 22–24, 2010; and "Untitled Response, 'Forum on Contemporary Photography,' the Museum of Modern Art," first delivered as a response to a prompt on the occasion of "Forum on Contemporary Photography" at MoMA, May 26, 2011; both are republished in *33 Texts: 93,614 Words: 581,035 Characters.*

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from another, who were meant to judge. This is, in short, a juridical crisis glossed over by terminology. When medium-based distinctions are called into question, eliciting anxious recovery from the threat of dissolution, one must ask, What is actually being rescued? Certainly artistic conventions reach through these boundaries more often than they are contained by them; once the divisions between media are reinscribed and artists' works are successfully bracketed within museum departments, academic specialties, and their attendant markets, one ought to ask what sort of historical insight has been facilitated. Museum biennials, art awards, and retrospectives go to those who make photographs as frequently as they do to those who do not, and this takes place with no disclaimers necessary. Critics still exist, as does the predilection for apocalyptic forecasting, complaints about the art market, and endless lamentations for the loss of critical engagement. The ubiquity of optical images has not waned, nor have images lost their agency in formulating the life world of the present. If anything, they have exploded with the ferocity of finance capital as a cultural currency that zips through subterranean networks, is beamed over our heads, and shoots from continent to continent under the sea. All around us the infrastructure of digital transfer pulses, and optical imagery takes up the lion's share of our bandwidth and server farms. What does gelatin-silver have to do with this? Assuming a connection prima facie seems a willful blindness to the world that surrounds us.

When it comes to the conservation of outmoded convention, contemporary photographic practitioners are no more liberated than their critic cousins, whether one considers the fascination with large planar surfaces that pantomime the conventions of beaux-arts genre painting or the investment in archives and typologies, replications of the nineteenth-century technocratic deployment of aesthetics at the hands of state power. Even beyond their pictorial conceits, the presentational conventions of photographic work are material extensions of the contemporary institution. Sheathed in aluminum frames and glazed with Plexiglas, they both incorporate the materials of contemporary institutional architecture and reflect these surroundings back at the viewer on their slick surfaces. We not only gaze into the frame of one of Thomas Struth's museum photographs with the awareness that our own postures mimic those depicted before us, but we also view ourselves looking at ourselves and the thing in front of us in real time, left to contemplate ourselves in relation to the thing we behold, and our and its belonging in the place where we stand. Such photographs are mirrors of the worlds to which we and they have been delivered. Tautology is their most potent tool, and subjugation and reification their lesson of choice. Regardless of what they depict, contemporary photographic practices share a pathological fascination with the aesthetics of power, of institutional inclusion, speaking in the numb drone of gridded taxonomies native to repressive state bureaucracy, or prompting us silently to contemplate sublime expanses in a hushed connoisseurial whisper, while simultaneously resisting the broader contemporary discourse the word *photography* implies, i.e., multiplicity, mass production, distribution, and the functioning of aesthetics in daily life. Rather than things in the world, they act as things to look through, to stand at a distance

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from, like immense migratory picture windows, virtual drawers within which to stuff the matter of life, all the while performing institutional pantomime.

For these and many other reasons, I met the invitation to organize an issue of a photography magazine—and, even more problematically, a fine-art photography magazine—with ambivalence. Almost three and a half years elapsed between the invitation to edit and design an issue of *Blind Spot* and my doing so late in the summer of 2013. In the end, the impetus did not come from the broad concerns outlined above, but from a sense of obligation to the particular, as the issue took shape around an unfinished segment of a project I initiated some six years before. The work that enticed me to accept the invitation, and from which the issue grew, serves as the cover: a rather unassuming piece by Morgan Fisher titled *Actual Size*, which depicts his reading glasses at 1:1 scale. Fisher's work connects the *Blind Spot* project to a project I organized for *Cabinet* magazine in 2007. The *Cabinet* project, called "CMYK: There Is Always a Background," was smaller in scope: a ten-page magazine portfolio consisting of eight works by the same number of artists, all conceived expressly for the issue. Included in that project were Matthew Brannon, Amy Granat, James Welling, Morgan Fisher, Leslie Hewitt, Corey McCorkle, Liam Gillick, Dari Lorenson, and Elín Hansdóttir (the last two submitted a work together). The title and introductory text for *Cabinet* were appropriated from a chapter of a high-school textbook on four-color industrial printing processes, and the prompt I gave the artists was to make works that treated the magazine page as their raw material and their subject matter. That project began from the basic idea of making the reader conscious of the magazine as a thing in itself, not simply a mute carrier for other media. I was interested in presenting a project that negotiated the material existence of a "medium" (in its technical sense) that was generally treated as transparent or neutral with regard to its "content" (a word I am apprehensive about but for which I lack a more meaning-

Blind Spot, *no. 46, 2013, cover with Morgan Fisher,* Actual Size, *2013. (All subsequent images are spreads from this issue, represented at 1:4.5 scale.)*

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ful replacement). I was actively negotiating this set of concerns in my art and writing of the time. It was within the context of the *Cabinet* project that Fisher presented the first version of *Actual Size*.

The *Cabinet* project was a failure for several reasons. Editorially speaking, the biggest problem was that the magazine ceased to function in a conventional way in the pages that I organized. Instead, "CMYK" presented itself to the reader/viewer as an insert with completely distinct conventions from those governing the rest of the issue, acting as a break with the logic of the magazine, which created the impression that a consciousness of the material conditions of the magazine page was incompatible with the functioning of its depictive or communicative qualities. What I hadn't realized was that the emphasis on materiality needed to be balanced with a consideration of the magazine's stated and conventional functions in order to avoid making the project purely pedantic. Failing to maintain this balance, the project reinforced the opposition between materiality and representation, implying that reflexivity and signification—an opposition that the project had been conceived to undo—were, in fact, mutually exclusive.

There were also shortcomings in the project's execution, the most significant of which was that *Cabinet* accidentally printed Fisher's work at less than actual size. This arose from a technical glitch in the production of the photograph itself: It had been made at a resolution lower than the magazine required, so the designer simply made it smaller to maintain the proper pixel depth in printing. When I was approached by editor Dana Faconti about putting together an issue of *Blind Spot*, my thought process started with a reconsideration of these mistakes, which opened up onto what was an unfinished or unrealized idea about using a magazine in a self-reflexive manner, but this time being especially sensitive to the maintenance of its instrumental function. The first step was to meet with Fisher and rephotograph his glasses at the proper resolution. Conveniently, the invitation offered the opportunity not only to reprint Fisher's work properly but also to revisit the question of the magazine as a distribution form, an interest that was at best latent in the original project. Maintaining the magazine's ability to convey content external to itself was of chief importance, for that is any magazine's primary reason for existing. With the exception of Fisher, I chose to use only reproductions of existing works, rather than commissioning works for the printed page as I had for the previous project, because I wanted to keep the instrumental function of the magazine as a platform for distribution and commentary on works of photographic art intact. One could think of Fisher's work on the cover partially satisfying this mandate, as it exists somewhere between a reproduction and the thing itself. His work could be considered a reproduction of the work first shown in the pages of *Cabinet*, albeit a different photograph at a different scale, for it too was in a context for which it had not initially been intended, even if that initial context was simply another magazine at several years' remove. In other words, the work was Fisher's response to a specific prompt made at a specific time, and the current deployment of that work necessarily recalled its initial context. Thought of in that way, the new version of *Actual Size* had some of the same attributes of reduplication and distance from its original object that the other reproductions in the issue had, sitting

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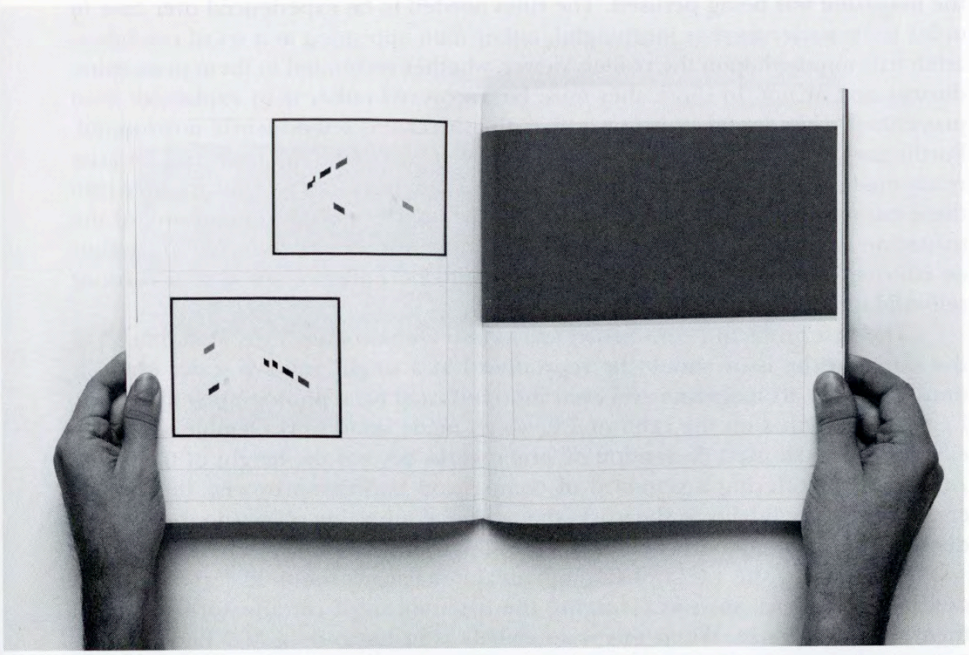
precariously on the line between a work and its reproduction. On the cover of *Blind Spot,* Fisher's work indicated a transition from the concrete world of objects to the abstract world of depiction contained within the magazine, making the correlation between the contents of the magazine and the conditions in the world more apparent than it would be otherwise. Furthermore, if we think of it as a reproduction, it is a reproduction that is in fact more "correct" than the original; it was a reproduction that realized the original work in a way its initial printing did



Morgan Fisher, Drawing for Pendant Pair Paintings (isometric)*, 2007, and detail of Wade Guyton,* Spreads from Wade Guyton: Zeichnungen für ein kleines Zimmer*, 2011.*

not. The cover became an edge, a hybridized boundary between the object world and the logic of abstraction (i.e., photographic representation) that was at work within the issue. In Fisher's *Actual Size,* the magazine page was both a container to be filled and a surface upon which things are laid, a site of both pictorial depth and resolute flatness, continuous with the world around it, while it performed as an image, a likeness. *Actual Size* exemplified the aspiration of the project as a whole, treating the question of material presence and conveyance/representation as continuous rather than oppositional functions of aesthetics. To have the whole issue operate on this boundary similarly relied upon the preservation of the

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instrumental function of the magazine; again, if this was lost it would render the magazine inert and pointless, and any insight into its material condition would resolve at the level of the superficial at best. Reflecting on its materiality in the absence of function would yield little more than contrived hollowness.

In addition, the editorial conditions of the project needed to be self-evident and clear, so I approached the layout of the magazine with a few strict rules. I strongly believed that these rules should be legible to a viewer without textual explanation, such that the parameters of the project would become apparent as the magazine was being perused. The rules needed to be experienced over time in order to be understood as meaningful, rather than appearing as a set of conditions arbitrarily imposed upon the reader/viewer, whether recounted to them in an introductory text or not. In short, they must be discovered rather than explained, must prove themselves useful in action rather than declared self-evidently meaningful. Furthermore, I realized the conventions used to structure the issue had to arise ready-made from the magazine itself for the same reason, so that inquiry into these parameters would lead the reader/viewer back into the functioning of the magazine rather than into speculations about the intent of some distant editor or editors, which without this reference would be misunderstood as a form of self-validating expression.

The first problem I confronted was how to address scale. I decided that all of the works in the issue should be reproduced at a single, relative scale, which is unusual for an art magazine and even more unusual for a photography magazine. I eventually settled on the ratio of 1:6, which made small works legible while not expanding the shortest dimension of larger works beyond the height of the magazine page. By offering a standard of comparison between artworks, this choice created a greater fidelity to the works themselves, connecting objects to their reproductions along another axis beside that of simple compositional resemblance.

Maintaining the 1:6 ratio throughout the magazine required some unorthodox manipulations, such as changing the orientation of certain works to make them fit on the page. When this was needed, as in the case of Mel Bochner, Liz Deschenes, and Jack Pierson, to name a few, the page number was likewise turned, and the works were run across the gutter. This would, it was hoped, stimulate the reader to turn the magazine, a physical manipulation that would underscore the thematics at work in the issue and encourage a sensitivity to the magazine as a discrete physical object rather than a dematerialized window onto the world. In other instances, works too long to fit on a single spread (such as those by Wade Guyton or Karl Haendel) were extended for multiple pages. In either case, maintenance of relative scale caused momentary disruptions of the standard presentational conventions of the magazine. These decisions would have been highly problematic if they were nothing more than a compositional choice, but framed within the logic of the *Blind Spot* project, they served to emphasize the transformation that all works of art undergo in reproduction. The boundary between the editorial organization of the issue and the work of art became most clear when there was friction between them, when a work fit uncomfortably into the design. It was also impor-

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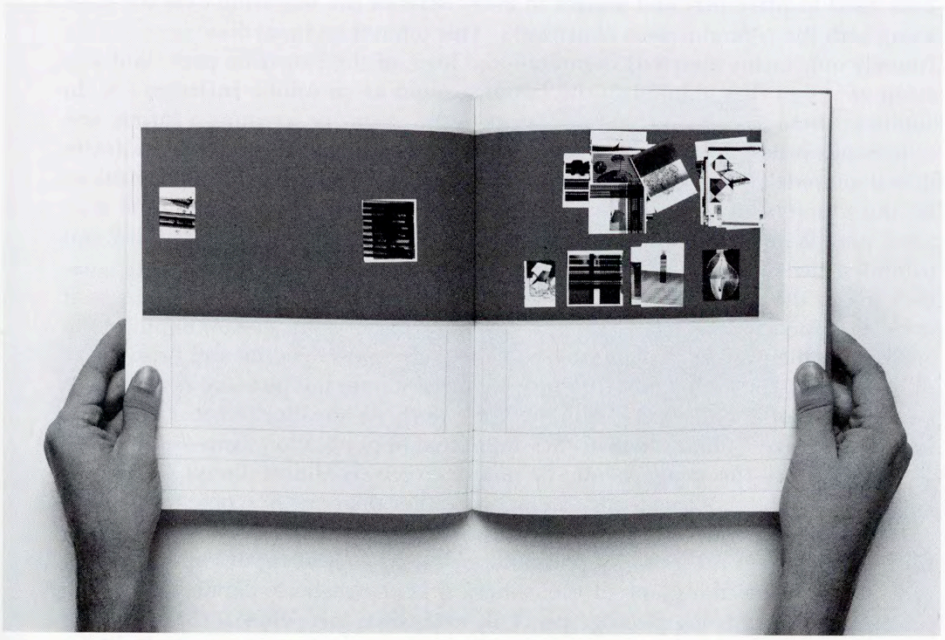
tant that the question of scale, which is often concealed or repressed in the magazine format and relegated to captioning alone, could be made both visible and comprehensible without the need for an explanatory text.

Transparency was an ethical choice intended to be felt at the point of reception, realized both in terms of the agency of the audience (editorial transparency was a form of accountability of the producer to the receiver) and with regard to the accurate depiction of works of art, such that the viewer would know more pre-



Detail of Wade Guyton, Spreads from Wade Guyton: Zeichnungen für ein kleines Zimmer. *2011.*

cisely the difference between the original work and its presentation in the context of the magazine rather than tacitly assuming the nature of this difference in the general sense without qualification. This allowed a reader/viewer access to the logic behind the arrangement of things, a move that also served to denaturalize the aesthetic and editorial choices being made. An additional conceit was to reproduce all the works as they would be exhibited, including frames, pushpins, or other display devices. This created a noticeable layer of mediating distance and pointed to a life for the work that was both external to the magazine and prefigured it. Incidental light effects, such as shadows and reflections falling across the surfaces of works as they were photographed for reproduction, furthered the sense

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of mediation; one could imagine a telling confusion for readers between the glare resulting from light hitting the magazine page and the glare from the light hitting the art object when the photograph was taken. In the space of the magazine, these instances had the potential to be momentarily and productively conflated.

On their own, these two strategic decisions—constant scale and the inclusion of framing or other display devices—would have made the magazine exclusively a site of representation, of abstraction and simulation. To offset this emphasis, I printed the template that *Blind Spot* provided me—the generic grid of thin guide lines used to place text and images in every issue of the magazine—on the page along with the reproductions of artworks. This offered an immediate sense of the (usually only tacitly asserted) organizational logic of the magazine page, and also acted as a sign that pointed to the layout's origin as an Adobe InDesign file. In addition, these guides spoke to the history of the magazine, creating a formal link to previous issues, the artworks those issues contained, and the editorial strategies they deployed. They also pointed to the conditions of the magazine's production, for the adherence to certain margins for the gutter and outlying edges of the magazine page is meant to prevent clipping the images in the process of binding and trimming the magazine. Materially speaking, the guides were important because they traced the physical surface of the paper, indicating the perceptual planes at work in the magazine, such as the surface of the page or the shallow depth of the artworks in their frames. Furthermore, as the pages turn, bending and twisting the picture plane, the arcing lines of the template reiterate the pictorial distortion as an extension of the material condition of the work. As a reader physically manipulates the magazine, then, she becomes aware that in publication form—as opposed to wall display—the image plane, or image screen, is almost always contorting before us, an object of touch and interaction rather than one of scopic remove.

Beyond these design decisions, there was the editorial theme of the issue, which centered on the genre of photography called copy work, or copy photography, in which the film plane of the camera is kept rigorously parallel to the flat plane of the thing being photographed. By extension, this editorial theme led me to the trompe l'oeil tradition in painting. Copy photography and trompe l'oeil are lowly genres, articulations of a base usage of representation as transcription, and carry with them the implication of neutrality or transparency. Copy photography was, of course, necessary to reproduce the works for publication in the magazine, whether with or without their frames. In truth, this type of photography is beginning to disappear, being supplanted by the scanner, or usurped entirely by the use of direct-to-print digital files for the production of photographs, which, in this case, situates the magazine reproduction as a parallel manifestation of the art object, acting as simply another "print," in a sense as close to its origin as a digital file as a print on the wall. Copy photography, at least in the case of the reproduction of art photography, is a mode of distribution that is no longer ubiquitous, the objecthood of the photograph being less a concern than the rendering and reproduction of photographic depiction. This issue was circumvented by photographing all the works as they would be seen in an art context, avoiding the conflation of

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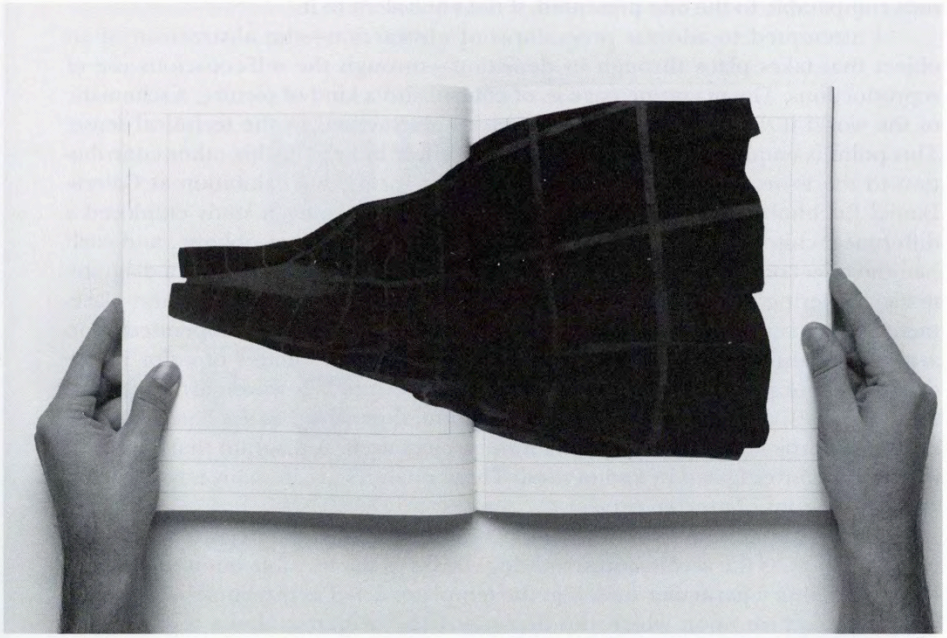
the magazine page with the art object, which in this instance would have misrepresented the intended mode of distribution of the works contained in the issue.

The project, perhaps shortsightedly, therefore didn't investigate the different weights placed on the varied manifestations of the photographic depictions, which are based primarily on the framed prints' ability to be circulated within the conventional financial exchanges of art objects. With copy photography as a point of departure—a photographic specialty intertwined with the history of illustrated



Mel Bochner. Color Crumple (#2). *1967.*

magazines—the project organized itself around a recursive and reflexive investigation of flatness and depth, of reproduction and verisimilitude, a thought process that was initiated by Fisher's work. So in three senses Fisher's work is the face of the project. It literally came first, is seen first, and in addition it diagrams the core set of concerns and perceptual shifts that occur within the magazine itself.

The title of this project could have been "Revisions" (as in looking again, but also in the sense of editing or revising). Or it could have been "Copy Work," both in honor of that affectless photography where the camera is used to "copy" flat objects before it and for its inversion, "working copy," indicating a provisional form. When one looks at a magazine, one looks at a working copy, a palimpsest that shows traces of what has come before yet also serves as an open space for

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future engagement. In truth, all pictures provide a starting point from which improvisation may commence; the magazine presents itself as forever open to being refinished or modified, a form that will be filled with other material at some time in the future. This is the case both literally, in the sense that each issue is an implicit commentary on previous issues, and schematically, for one could easily imagine its reproductions shifting around on the template that undergirds them—as this issue suggested by making the template itself visible, a template that, with its many empty spaces, indicates that there are a multitude of possible alternative layouts comparable to the one presented, if not equivalent to it.

I attempted to address procedures of abstraction—the abstraction of an object that takes place through its depiction—through the self-conscious use of reproductions. The magazine page is, of course, also a kind of picture, a schematic of the world it describes, and all pictures are abstractions in the technical sense. This point is emphasized not only by Fisher's cover but also by his other contribution to the issue: a series of preparatory studies for a 2007 exhibition at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne titled *Pendant Pair Paintings*. Each study employed a different architectural drafting style, from isometric to cabinet oblique, and each had the effect of appearing at once as an autonomous composition and a diagrammatic rendering of real space. Not only did the work provide a key to the placement of the paintings in his exhibition at Galerie Buchholz, it also operated as an artwork consisting of a sequence of mini-paintings (the squares of color in the drawings were painted with the same paint as the canvases whose arrangements they describe). After the work's initial exhibition, they served as documentation of a previous project and as a possible future project itself. A diagram that is also an object to be investigated in and of itself: These dualities are in many ways the core set of conditions of my own project.

Fisher's work echoed another aspect of the role of the template within the magazine. Just as the architectural drawing speaks to the invisible but foundational logic governing a particular building, the templates acted as the bones of the magazine, a structure upon which the depictions the magazine draws together are hung. The grid indicates that the page is a site of organization. Rather than simply a container for pictures, as mentioned before, the magazine page is itself a picture, a space of abstraction, and in this instance, it represents itself as it acts as itself, just as Fisher's works did when they were originally displayed. To put it another way: Just as the images a magazine contains schematize a physical object, the design template is a schematization of the physical properties of a magazine, and in this project the object and its abstraction are rendered together. The magazine becomes a thing that is a model of itself.

These reflexive gestures are reinforced by works like Erlea Maneros Zabala's Xerox printouts of microfiche copies of the *Los Angeles Times* stripped of their original text. The sequence of lines and shapes produced in and around the content of the newspaper produce a diagram of its organizational logic that is also a nonfigurative composition. When we look at the magazine page with her work, we see

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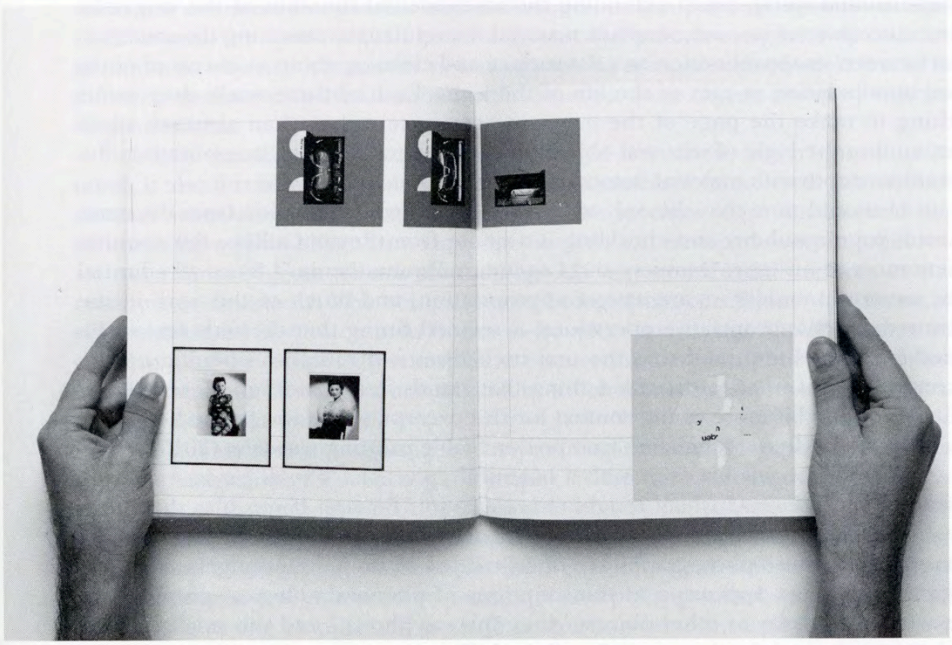
a reproduction of a printed page that is similar to the one we are holding in our hand. Embedded within the magazine, Maneros Zabala's work draws forward the awareness of how the magazine page functions as a picture in its own right, and in the context of the *Blind Spot* project it acts as a picture in a picture, drawing out the editorial logic of the project. Mel Bochner's crumpled grids present another productive friction. In these works, the grid, which is the infrastructure of every contemporary picture, is compressed, made irregular, and then subjected to pictorial



Kelley Walker, Bug 85_01, Bug 75_01, Bug 78_01, *and* Bug 164_01, *2012, and Miljohn Ruperto,* Studio Portrait by Jose Reyes, Hollywood, CA. 1940 (medium, Cheongsam), *and* Studio Portrait by Jose Reyes, Hollywood, CA. 1940 (medium, sitting), *2010.*

flattening by being rephotographed (in essence, "regridded"). The final work results from Bochner's physically distorting or crumpling a picture, which is then translated into a pictorial compression in its reimaging twice, once for the print on the wall and again when it is photographed for inclusion in the magazine. On the printed page, this "regridding" occurs once more, compressing the exhibited work into the grid of the magazine page. Once this occurs, we could imagine a second crumpling, this time of the page of the magazine, as it eventually finds its way to the wastebasket. The eventual destruction of the magazine could even be experienced as an extension of the work itself. If we follow this logic, not only does the

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work extend further out into the world, but by acting as a support of the work, the magazine's instrumental existence is extended as well. Kelley Walker's digitally rendered Volkswagen ads, bent and turned, also play with our conceptions regarding the "space" of the picture and the "space" of the printed page, through his rendering of the magazine page curling like an infinitely thin sheet, only to be compressed a second time as a four-color screen print on Masonite, and then as a depiction of this object on the page. And as we turn the page of the magazine, his images turn further into the surface of the page, creating an illusionistic three-dimensional spiral, again extending the instrumental function of the magazine into the space of its commonplace material manipulation, activating the moments in between its apprehension as a flat surface and claiming those moments of physical manipulation as part of the life of the work. Each of these works does something to make the page of the magazine concrete rather than abstract, while extending the logic of material objects into the pictorial realm, complicating illusionistic depth with material flatness and vice versa.

I should note that the only text in the *Blind Spot* issue (aside from the masthead, page numbers, and checklist) is a quote from Roger Caillois, the opening sentences of his essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia."[4] Since all editorial or curatorial endeavors are acts of appropriation, and much of the work in the issue deploys appropriative operations, it seemed fitting that the only text included be a cited text, and that the text itself discussed mimicry, opening up the conundrum of what to do with a thing that stands in for another. Here I would like to offer a bit more of the context for this excerpt, which was printed opposite a depiction of Lucy McKenzie's trompe l'oeil table painting *Quodlibet* (2010).

Caillois begins his essay with a beautiful epigraph, "*Prends garde: À jouer au fantôme, on le devient*," which roughly translates to: "Beware: If you play the ghost, you will become one."[5] I found this particularly appropriate for a photography magazine because photographs are often treated as simple messengers, stand-ins for other things, appearing as transcriptions of phenomenological presence; in essence, they "play as other objects," they "play as ghosts," and this might be why photography and death are so often linked. This is not to say that we mistake the photograph for what it depicts—that would be a descent into madness—but we do mistake photographic qualities for those of their referents, and we do, regardless of context, rely on them to model the world around us. Facial expressions or posture, for example, are often attributed to the thing photographed rather than the conventions and technologies of the photograph. While this is no revelation in and of itself, our cognitive awareness of the distinction between the photograph and the thing it represents masks the way the representation infects our thinking about the world in experiential terms. The assumption that we can consider the photograph and the thing it represents independently reduces the photograph to

4. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1936), trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (Winter 1984), p. 17.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

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an ontologically stable carrier, implying that there is a concrete division between the photograph and what it represents, and that one could separate and understand each independently through the experience of the photograph alone. The familiarity, even obviousness, of this epistemological confusion conceals its most corrosive implications, for the false division between production and distribution leads to far more subtle issues within the theorization of the photograph; indeed, it leads to questions about the very premise and possibility of theorizing photography as a discrete entity. The irony is that distinctions of medium, although intended to call attention to materials and techniques, in fact privilege abstract categorization over the specific qualities of a given object. Such categories discourage attention to objects; they hinder potentially useful comparisons of works made in different media and invite false similarities between those objects grouped within a single medium.

While the *Blind Spot* project was conceived with these larger questions in mind, it also forced me to realize my conceptual concerns in concrete rather than abstract terms, such that the negotiation with the specifics of production and distribution for a given object (the magazine in question) trumped sweeping theoretical assertions. Objects are not abstract, nor do they ever dutifully adhere to the contours of taxonomy. The confusion of photographic conditions with those of objects depicted in photographs began to be addressed in the *Blind Spot* issue by undermining the supposedly transparent connection between photographs of art and photographs as works of art, an area in which conflations of media are prevalent yet rarely acknowledged.

Of course, this issue is germane to any art magazine, but it is especially resonant when the magazine's focus is art photography. Within an art context, photographs, regardless of format, are instrumentalized to convey the presence of art objects (and this includes art photography as well). It was Dan Graham who first made the dependency of art objects on these distributive carriers clear, stating that a work of art doesn't exist until it's been written about and photographed, his version of "If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?"[6] With an artwork, the answer Graham offers is a definitive "no." What Graham laid bare is that the public character of a work—its display, its being known and considered as art and thus entering into discourse—requires photographic transformation and distribution, and this entry into discourse alone was what makes it art. This process, far from being external to the work, in fact conditions and guides its production. Simply put, artworks in our times are made with the understanding that they will be, perhaps primarily, experienced as a photographic depiction, regardless of form. Rosalind Krauss's idea of "exhibitionality," the artwork's internalization of and negotiation with the conditions of display, should then be expanded to include the distributive system of photography and text in addition to the architectonics of the exhibition site and production of the

6. Dan Graham, "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art,'" in *Dan Graham*, ed. Gary Dufour (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1985), pp. 8–13.

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object itself.[7] In fact, because the photograph conveys the work of art in the absence of the object, it could easily be argued that the circulation of photographs has a far more pronounced effect on the development of the meaning of the work of art than do the conventions governing the architectural conditions of exhibitions. This situation is currently expanding further, as art critic Michael Sanchez recently pointed out: "Art is no longer discovered in biennials and fairs and magazines, but on the phone."[8]

This blurring of media distinctions is unmistakable when looking to the broader field through which photographic images are distributed; in this sense, photography is the dominant medium through which the world is formulated, while simultaneously being wholly dissolved into the world it represents. When it comes time to separate it from its point of reception, we find it is impossible without recourse to grand abstraction or poetic inference. It results in a kind of disappearance of the photograph beneath the weight of what it represents, as it becomes indistinguishable from the currents that surround and flow through it as part of the information landscape.

Caillois referred to this sort of disappearance into one's surroundings as "mimicry," a process of merging that, in extreme cases, leads to the loss of identity. Taken to its endpoint, mimicry is a complete loss of boundaries—the loss of a capacity for distinction, and the loss of a fundamental hierarchy between things. He claims this loss of boundaries leads to the conflation of life and death, and he goes to great lengths to show us instances where playing dead makes one dead. For Caillois, mimicry is a force that works against the original intent of self-preservation; for him, self-preservation is synonymous with the conservation of difference, the assertion of distinction being the assertion of life itself. He describes mimicry as a "dangerous luxury," citing the case of the Phyllia (a genus of the geometer moth), an animal that is prone to eat its own kind when, fooled by its own camouflage, it mistakes fellow moths for leaves.[9] Cannibalism is the threat that lies at the heart of Caillois's formulation, a horror that reappears in different forms in the repeated assertion of the need for distinctions between media and objects.

Caillois begins his text with the problem of distinction, or mimicry as a pathological impulse. Below is an excerpt that includes the sentences that served as the epigraph to the *Blind Spot* project (I am including the sentence preceding that passage, which did not appear in the magazine):

> From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc.—all of them, in short, distinctions in

7. Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982), p. 312.

8. Michael Sanchez, "2011: Michael Sanchez on Art and Transmission," *Artforum*, Summer 2013, p. 297.

9. Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," p. 25.

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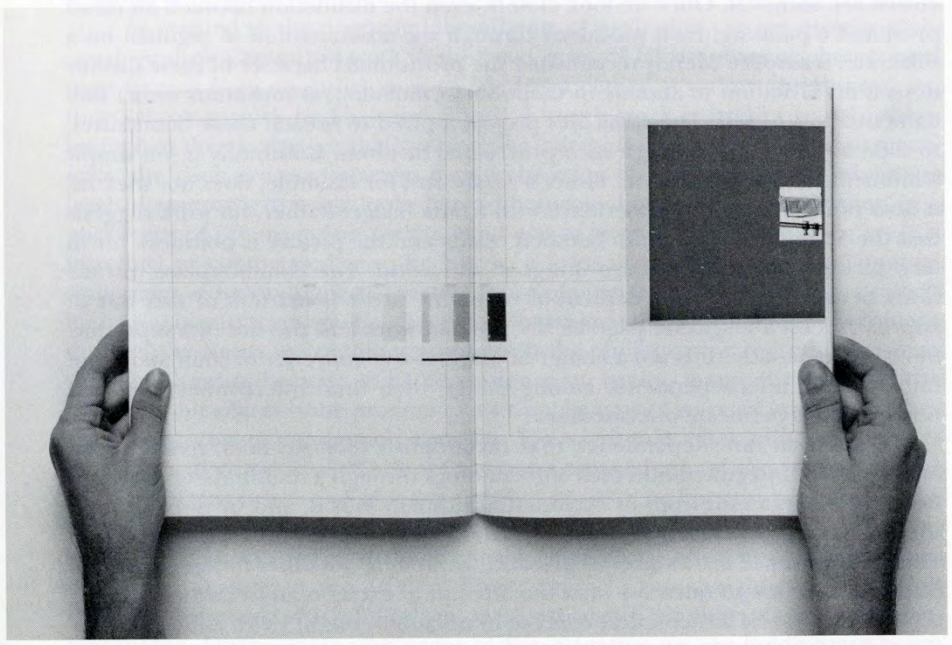
which valid consideration must demonstrate a keen awareness and the demand for resolution. Among distinctions, there is assuredly none more clear-cut than that between the organism and its surroundings; at least there is none in which the tangible experience of separation is more immediate. So it is worthwhile to observe the phenomenon with particular attention and, within the phenomenon, what is even more necessary, given the present state of our knowledge, to consider its con-



Andrew Cameron, Message Compression (EbnrFrXmpl)*, 2011, and detail of Wade Guyton,* Spreads from Wade Guyton: Zeichnungen für ein kleines Zimmer*, 2011.*

dition as pathology (the word here having only a statistical meaning)—i.e., all the facts that come under the heading of mimicry.[10]

Distinction here implies hierarchical relations rather than simple distinctions among equals, and the loss of this hierarchy precipitates, in Caillois's words, a "*descent into hell*" through a "generalization of space at the expense of the individual."[11] The horror of mimicry is the confusion of an individual for its surroundings; for the individual, in Caillois's formulation, is of greater significance than her context.

10. Ibid., p. 16.

11. Ibid., p. 31.

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To put it bluntly, my project for *Blind Spot* turns on the question of distinctions and hierarchies: between the work and the photograph of the work, the photograph of the work and the printed page, the printed page and the individual whose hands are holding it, etc. These could all be considered the work of art's "surroundings" in the sense intended by Caillois, and moreover, these hierarchies are produced through language. Referring to an image in the magazine as a photograph or an artwork or an offset print transforms our understanding of what we are looking at and what its implications are, even if the objects being discussed are identical. Once we look closely, even the distinction between an offset print and a painting, each produced through the accumulation of pigment on a substrate, is suspect. Merely recognizing the provisional character of these distinctions is an invitation to anomie in Caillois's formulation, synonymous with a fundamental loss of self. The *Blind Spot* project aspired to breach these boundaries, to slide between and through such provisional divisions. Continuity is not simply a moment of false perception. Fisher's *Actual Size*, for example, does not trick us, it does not replace a real experience with a false image. Rather, his work suggests that the attempt to distinguish between reality and the picture is pointless, for in fact, pictures are real, they are things in the world. The commonplace distinctions between reality and depictions of reality are not matters of fact but of approach. Can a magazine page be the site of a work and the site of a reproduction simultaneously? It is not a matter of original and copy, nor of simulation, but rather of the interdependence among things, their fluid interconnections, and how all things permeate one another.

This is an interdependence that taxonomists seem to miss, namely, that organisms are integrated into their surroundings through a multitude of pathways. Isolating an organism from its surroundings usually kills it, and by pinning their specimens in tidy vitrines, taxonomists claim to study life as they traffic in death. This is how science makes atrocity possible, by holding "all other things equal." All of this causes one to question what the attempt at excision and examination—or the construction of a theoretical concept in isolation—might yield, aside from further tautological evidence of our curious proclivity to reproduce the juridical violence of the sovereign.

The same holds true for photography, or any medium, when subjected to categorizations that assume ontological solidity. When subjected to the isolation of the taxonomic gaze, the object in question is rendered inert, dead, a husk of its past use, death conveniently being the endpoint to which nearly every ontological treatment of photography leads: The search for essence yields a distant spectral entity that rings with its own hollowness, whether we call it artistic intention or ideological instrumentalization. This is not a claim against specificity, a claim that everything simply merges into everything else, but rather a claim that specificity cannot properly exist when a thing is excised from its context, for the isolation of an object of study produces false conceptions of its specific qualities. In truth, the world is visible in all things, but the view of the world is transformed by the things

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through which we view it. Repeated claims that photography is not only preoccupied with death but in some sense *is* death rely on cleaving it from the contexts that enliven it with meaning in the first place. Isolating a photograph (or any art object) from the world of its circulation skewers it like just another specimen, and what does such a specimen frozen in its transparent prison indicate more clearly than its very distance from life? In the midst of its traffic among individuals, the photograph is anything but dead, its function giving it purchase on the world of the living, its immersion in the flow of mediations and remediations putting it in a situation of constant renewal.

As realized in the magazine, these layers of mediation can get quite complicated. Andrew Cameron's work in the issue, a set of 1:1 drawings of photocopied page spreads from an earlier issue of *Blind Spot*, copied at various "brightness" settings, shows a work by Shannon Ebner. Ebner's work is itself a set of rephotographed sheets of paper that mimic a photographic exposure test print or a gray scale, the same process Cameron deploys by using the copy machine's brightness levels. Cameron's drawing looks like a photocopy but is, in fact, a drawing of a photocopy of the magazine. So the hand acts as another mediating layer, yet it is inscribed or compressed into the Xerox, a form that shares some fundamental similarities with drawing, e.g., the adherence of pigment to a sheet of paper (albeit by heat and electromagnetic charge). It bears mentioning that while we might think of the Xerox as continuous more with the photographic reproduction than with the drawing because of its dependence on optics, materially speaking the photographic object is the product of a stripping away of layers of emulsion rather than the accrual of pigment on a surface. We might then offer a lineage that sees painting and drawing as the more germane antecedents of the offset print or Xerox. But this is just one of many possible stories a taxonomist might tell; here the drawing is itself compressed into the rephotographing of the work for the magazine, then appears as what it originally depicted, an offset print. These operations were at work in the original Ebner reproductions in the magazine that Cameron Xeroxed, which follow the same process of photographing and rephotographing. Furthermore, the pages of the magazine we are holding are being reproduced within the magazine itself, an instance of *mise en abyme*. Once this story begins, it quickly becomes endless and intricate, a veritable *Holzweg* full of false cues that present themselves along the pointless trek to some elusive origin point.

These mediations approach the imperceptible, they are "infra-thin," to use Marcel Duchamp's term. For Duchamp, the infra-thin was an instance of communication through an intermediary (a medium) where the sender and receiver come as close as possible to direct contact without achieving it; a kind of proximate touch, a kind of physical continuity that exists within the mediation. This idea of touch, of the haptic, is embedded in the notion of the screen, the dialectical antipode of Alberti's *finestra aperta*, and only when both are present—the boundedness of the frame and the uniformity of the screen—do you have the possibility of picturing. While the frame is the organizational logic, offering the geometries of perspectival formulae,

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the screen is the medium, an impenetrable boundary stands between the viewer and the thing viewed. I am inclined to refer to Barthes's notion of the photograph as a "shared skin" here, and posit that I am describing the genesis of a meaning that accrues rather than is revealed, like an accumulated scarring and bruising. We should remember that photographic emulsion, that membrane that contains the darkened and pigmented silver crystals, is literally rendered flesh, and in its surface we might still catch the faint whiff of industrial farming.

But I again have digressed, and should move on by saying that representations are ever-growing accretions rather than end products with stable points of reference; once this premise is accepted, production and distribution, along with medium distinctions, collapse. Within the magazine, the layers of mediation become intertwined, and one realizes that connectivity exists between what one sees and what one is holding, the distinctions between them evaporating into a momentary phenomenological unity. The magazine posits a world within worlds, a lens transforming what is seen through it; it acts as a gateway and an obstacle at the same time.

In concrete terms, the printed page contains possibilities that the original work does not: It can slip into a mailbox, under a door, sit on a shelf, be brought along on a trip. This is what the magazine adds to the artwork's existence, a portability arising from the artwork's integration with its distribution. The magazine, we all accept, is designed to do this, but artworks in the age of the magazine are also designed to facilitate this. This portability is a possibility opened up by the disappearance of the object in front of us, its infra-thinness as it performs as that which it depicts. This is what Denis Hollier calls the "pleasure in playing dead."[12] For mimicry is the imprint of the surroundings upon oneself, not as a copy but as an articulation of interdependence. Mimicry acknowledges one's distribution across a field of perception, the extension of oneself through a network of appearances. Early photography was instrumental to the decentralization and democratization of aesthetic production during the Industrial Revolution. Its current manifestations, such as Instagram, produce an even more radical dehierarchization. Where once the original and the copy were the concepts most thoroughly destabilized in photographic discourse, now the very discreteness of objects is slowly disappearing into a broad distributive field. For example, when we look at an image through the Instagram app on our cell phone, what "thing" are we looking at? A phone, a screen, a digital file, an application, an algorithm, a photograph? Which museum department or specialist has purview here? Or, are all of these conflated to the point that the assumed discreteness of object-based designations should be abandoned and a new methodology put in its stead?

If the photographic tradition is uniquely responsible for the coming of age of this decentralized image-world, does this mean that the photograph has cannibalized its own specificity as an object? And by diffusing the objecthood of other media through itself, just as Caillois warned of mimicry, does it lose the stable boundary

12. Hollier, "Mimesis and Castration 1937," p. 10.

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between itself and its surroundings? The answer is yes, but this is only negative if one subscribes to the history or criticism of photography as practiced by Michael Fried, Jean-François Chevrier, Jeff Wall, or John Szarkowski, in which an antiquated form of objecthood is preserved for art objects, and a midcentury conception of artistic autonomy is grafted onto the photographic object, anointing photography as the last steward of the Western pictorial tradition as it endlessly re-presents tableaux. This is not to say that close object-based study is not necessary or fruitful, but none would be definitive. Any such object contains within it a sequence of manifestations that are articulated in a succession of moments of reception that together constitute a work, and the particular conditions relating to those moments of reception are all the more significant and in need of precise exegesis.

The problem with privileging a certain hierarchy of manifestations—a magazine over a jpeg, or a gallery experience over a photographic experience, or the object over its reproduction, and so on—is that these hierarchies can be easily reversed, leading to a completely different view from the other end of the chain of distribution. Rather than the disappearance of the photograph and the printed page under the heft of the things they convey, we could think of the things they convey as disappearing, or diffusing, into the photographic—the object essentially consumed by its mode of distribution. This should be a familiar story to the reader, the apocalyptic flip side of the democratized utopia of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction that has repeatedly been delivered in the drone of academic dissection. In the magazine, distinctions between objects are obscured by an assumption of photographic transparency. The term *medium* itself refers to the divisive; media produce division. A medium is that which stands between, and that which makes communication possible. It is what is between us that we do not usually see, or rather what in daily life we must ignore in order to be able to see. It allows us to see one another, rather than it. In daily life, mediation works best when it disappears, but this is also its threat, for it can cause the loss of one's footing, and we are subjected to endless alarmist calls that in our immersion in a world of multiplicitous visions we have in actuality become blind. What a representation presents it also threatens to erase under its seeming transparency; we act as though we are seeing through media, but we fear that in reality, it is all we see. And so we have the plethora of popular narratives that play with this anxiety, from *The Matrix* to *The Truman Show,* but it permeates much more than entertainment. We could think of the conventional magazine as consuming the work of art by distributing it, creating the circumstance against which Caillois inveighed; but once the mediating function is made clear, it releases an understanding of the continuity of flows and the distributive network that every artwork implies. The artwork then is little more than one of many static nodes in a dynamic system of relations, a cursivity existing between it and each of its expressions throughout this system.

Perhaps, in this way, the photograph, when subjected to the categorical gaze of the art-historical taxonomist, corrodes the categories applied to it, pointing to errors, inconsistencies, and paradoxes that are elided when one strives to make

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secure ontological divisions between object categories. In short, we should return to the specificities of things, rather than the unending reparation of organizational structures. A logical conclusion of this system of medium-based distinctions—painting, performance, photography, sculpture, etc.—is the claim that objects, not observers, produce distinctions; or that somehow these tidy categories preexist the objects they order, rather than the understanding that every categorical delimiter is a contract to be rewritten in each and every moment of communion with an object and then retroactively applied. This logic makes it seem that, rather than allowing objects, by our own imaginations, to act or perform an idea of medium, a concept of medium is somehow contained within the object itself, such that objects "represent" or "refer" to something outside of themselves on their own, without interpretation. A rather vulgar anthropomorphism lies at the heart of this conundrum. The claim that it is objects that "play" as something else is offered in place of an acknowledgement that it is we who are playing. We project our fantasies onto our objects, and by doing so we pretend that we are ghosts who rely on objects to provide us bodies to inhabit. For, as Caillois's epigraph warns, when we play as ghosts, we run the risk of becoming what we perform, investing our objects with personalities while we become things. This is the horror inscribed in the taxonomic, that life, by escaping its ledgers, is alienable from the world, and that we can see the world while turning a blind eye to that which animates it. This is how the taxonomist imagines death inscribed in all things. But if we embrace indistinction and interconnectivity, Caillois's disease becomes a freedom from obstruction. For what is a disease but a running wild of life through the boundaries meant to contain it? Infection, reproduction, and infestation are the means by which life always prevails over the inertia of divisive stricture. Divisions so fragile that they are collapsed when a brush of the hand reveals an errant eyelash to be just a trace of ink on a page, and with this momentary confusion and a flick of the wrist, the tactile world of things forces itself into the arid space of depiction.

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