

Hatred of Photography

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Katy Grannan

In a strange conjunction, photography comes to the Saatchi Gallery in an exhibition called *Out of Focus*. Photography has been utterly transformed in the last twenty years, first by the widening availability of digital cameras and camera-phones, and then by the ability to show images on social networking sites. Oliver Chanarin, one of the artists in the Saatchi exhibition, challenged the idea that 'photographer' was a specialist category: 'has anyone here', he asked his audience, 'not taken a photograph?' And more and more you could add: 'Has anyone here not published

one?’ Amid this vast outpouring of images, many of the old photographic professions—photojournalism, stock photography and even fashion—are eroded by the tide of amateur image-making. It is a particular problem for artists who use cameras to try to make things that must stand out from the billions of photographs that circulate online.

The Saatchi Gallery is highly popular with the public, and its free exhibitions are among the best-attended in London. It is a private institution owned by Charles Saatchi, one of the pioneers of that form of art collecting that encompasses dealing, curating and exhibiting. He was closely associated with the ‘young British artists’ in the 1990s, and many people thought of them as his creatures, the product of his dominance at that time over the British market for contemporary art. As the art world has grown and become global, the power of any single collector has waned, but Saatchi is still rich and prominent enough to generate considerable hype around the art he chooses to collect and show. His ‘gallery’ has many of the hallmarks of a museum. It is housed in a grand Georgian building in Chelsea, a very wealthy area of London; the entrance is marked with a gigantic portico; the gallery rooms are large and immaculately presented; the hang of works is sedate and conservative; the staff uniformed. All is designed to give the viewer the ambience and the assurance of museum quality.

Saatchi Gallery exhibitions purport to survey an area of current art, divided up either by medium or more often nation (there have been recent shows of Indian, German, Chinese and British art). So the Saatchi take on photography could be seen as an opportunity to glimpse the current art world engagement with this rapidly changing, challenging medium. Long ago, shows at the Leicester Galleries carried the title ‘Artists of Fame and Promise’, and this is just the Saatchi mix, in the hope that the famous (Broomberg and Chanarin, Matt Collishaw, Mitch Epstein and John Stezaker) will draw in the crowds and media attention, and buoy up the values of the merely promising. Such shows are one tool in a sustained campaign of speculation.

As a result, there can be scant curatorial direction, and what the viewer sees is a record of what one dealer-collector believes to be valuable or will be valuable. This is made quite clear by William A. Ewing’s catalogue essay in which he lists the concerns of the work on display: the body, the face, landscape, the mind and social bonds. The list does not exclude much.

Yet, within these broad trends, there is one element on plain display: a hatred of photography. Saatchi has occasionally flirted with the medium but showings have been few, and his last exhibition devoted to it was over a decade ago. So this is a photography show in which there are only a few straight photographs: there is a lot of collage (Stezaker, Michele Abeles, Luis Gispert, Daniel Gordon, Matt Lipps, A.L. Steiner and others), some photographs of installations that in which photographs appear (Noémie Goudal, Sara VanDerBeek), objects that include photographs (David Noonan, Hannah Satwell, Meredyth Sparks), and mosaic tile pictures that take photographs as their source material (Collishaw). These moves are accompanied by many examples of an over-bearing and insistent referencing of art history. On a quick survey, there are references to Ansel Adams, Diane Arbus, Louise Bourgeois, Carleton Watkins, Man Ray, Cubism, Surrealism and the Bauhaus. The source-chasing quite quickly gets wearisome. While it is, of course, the surest way for someone who works with photography to get what they are doing seen as art, all this referencing gives the impression of a medium in terminal lassitude, eating itself.



Hannah Satwell

The great wave of documentary art that has been so dominant over the biennial scene since the late 1990s is largely absent. The exceptions are telling: in this setting, Mikhael Subotzky's large prints of poor folk in South Africa appear as performances of exotica acted out for the camera, in which the subjects knowingly present themselves as freakish. Much the same can be said of the prominent display of Katy Grannan's 'Boulevard' series, in which people parade their bodily and social ruination before her lens. Broomberg and Chanarin have long developed a critical relation to documentary photography, and while it is apparent from the Saatchi display that they have drawn upon and appropriated various archive images, since the gallery does not deign to show any interpretative material, the viewer is left to see them as pure image-objects, torn from an unknown context, and made safe for the market by the artists' act of creative borrowing.

The problem that the art market has with photography—that, like all digital artefacts, it is perfectly reproducible, weightless, uncontrollable, and may be subject to endless reworkings and reframing by anyone—is not a problem for photography, which is in excellent health. It has never before been so regularly practiced by so many people or so much seen. It is a problem for the art world, for money, for exclusivity and elite culture. The responses, as seen at the Saatchi Gallery, seem weak and mannerist: a rearguard attempt to wrench a portion of the medium out

of its free and common circulation so as to guard it as rare, curated and literally objectified—in two-metre-high prints or sculptural cut-outs or unique rolls of photographic paper. In much of this, photography is despised and destroyed.

One aspect of Saatchi's activities that makes his gallery look like a museum is that he shows things that he has collected. The collection is far from static, unlike most museum collections, since objects are regularly disposed of. Even so, despite the themes and titles of the exhibitions, what the viewer sees is a sample of the collection. Lots of critics have played with the *Out of Focus* title to suggest a lack of coherence in the Saatchi Gallery's take on photography, but the analogy is inexact: there is no curatorial lens here, soft or sharp, and in this speculative enterprise, there cannot be.