

The clock slowly ticking, it's brutal mechanism severing one moment from the next, locking us in an ever present now. The mechanics of Instagram: one image after the next in an endless scroll. We frantically swipe until we have caught up to where we once were, struggling to catch up with the past to ensure our standing in the present. The railroad united us in a common time, the clock divorced us from the fluid temporality of flowing sand, and the iPhone rendered the clock and so many other tools stylish accessories. The photograph also delivered a spatio-temporal cut from an enmeshed continuum of being: **there then** transformed into **here now**.

The problem of the contemporary photograph's **here now** is its proclivity for hiding the manner of its emergence. Today photographic images are apprehended in a vacuum, they appear without warning; displaced from everything and everywhere but their present being. Contemporary photography's vacuum is produced by many coalescing forces: our collective inundation with commercial imagery, the persistence of image-based representation through social media and the ways we interface with new technologies. This dislocation from an inherent materiality is accompanied by several impassioned reactions. Some may retreat to the tactility and history of the image's production, treating the image as object, making c-prints, silver gelatins or engaging with sculptural concerns. Others will point to the construction of the image, playing with its surface, the image's enclosed materiality. Yet another will forgo production and focus instead on content, filling the frame with something charged or something empty. This is contemporary photography: a sea of deconstruction, reconstruction, self-aware pointing, over-earnest cries for sincerity and a whole lot of cynicism.

Sincerity as we knew it is dead and cynicism is poisonously unambitious. Hyper-formalism is as irresponsible as perpetuating a naive belief in the efficacy of merely representing a political being or state of affairs. This is to say that photography is both a **surface and a vessel**, and that these two modalities are intertwined upon a subterranean landscape of labor; operating within a network of power. Whether it is a 35mm, full frame digital or an iPhone, the apparatuses which facilitate the image come teeming with politics. What a fool's errand to attempt to separate our Instagram feed from the plight of Baotou villagers suffering from grossly under-regulated rare earth mines. The aesthetic appreciation of contemporary photography's **here now** comes at the cost of the depreciation of **now (and future) elsewheres**. In a world where millions of images are produced and uploaded everyday across a multitude of platforms, the images we don't see, **will never see**, loom like a silent specter behind the shallow, polemical pool of Richard Prince's **New Portraits**. While there is no questioning the problem of white male art trolls abusing their positionality, who is talking about the preexisting power of **being able to represent oneself through Instagram?** The problem of any virtuous app is the exclusionary price and necessary language required to have and use a smartphone in the first place.

The different modes of technology's inaccessibility (whether it be new medical equipment out of reach of those who need it or a grandparent struggling to utilize their grandson's iPhone) is incorporated into the form of the technology itself. Google Maps is not generated by rogue cartographers all generously uploading sketches into some open source map-plication. The new wears the skin of the old in the age of the skeuomorph, cloaking its true nature with a familiar design. Technology creates its own images: objects with sexy, opaque surfaces that mask the manner of their production, hide the way they truly work, and contemporary photography follows suit. Artie Vierkant's **Image-Objects** takes on this dialectic directly. The works are minimal sculptural forms that interface with digital photographic technologies. When these pieces are documented, and wherever and whenever this documentation is displayed, Vierkant alters the images of the work, creating an ever changing "life" for the pieces. On the surface this work is interesting, neatly encapsulating discourses around the contemporary images (image as currency, object v image, constant mediation, et al). The problem is that this gesture is too neat. It is a slick, technical poetics which makes no mention of the qualitative and deeply specific transformation which occurs when images are deracinated from their contexts. The ability to replicate a technocratic mechanism through art is not enough; one must also reveal its remainders. When one says that images on the Internet are "free," liberated from their suffocating contexts, what gets overlooked are the repercussions of this divorce. What is Vierkant eliding? Well fortunately, and unfortunately, not much except a messy politics and a controlling disposition. "Image anarchy" is not dissimilar to a political anarchy: both are all too often touted by the privileged few who are insulated by conditions which preclude the experience of possible material consequence. In the case of Vierkant, the only liveliness that seems to be charted is the continued attention the image-objects receive and indirectly the rise of his sticker price. At this point, one might question the efficacy of art: what is art really capable of doing?

I believe art is capable of reflecting and diffracting the world while simultaneously being an active agent within. There is no one-to-one relationship between art and anything else: misapprehending the relationship between art and secondary financial markets is what gave bloody birth to Damien Hirst. Art is nothing but itself, and what it must always be is political. This is to say that **art is political**. The problematic commingling of technology, art and photography, lies not in their existence, specialization or medium but in the intractable politics of their use. Iggy Azalea and the dissidents of the Arab Spring all tweet from the same platform. Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson both shoot with Yashica T4s. Politics is an opening up of a space for negotiation, whereby hegemony may come under scrutiny, wherein pernicious consensus may be destabilized. A work of art is a crystallization of the subjective and the common, a transmutation of space and time, whose coalescing incorporates many others, through a specific body or bodies, into a thing. This art thing is therefore boundlessly contingent, inextricably tied to worlds outside itself through the specificity of the artist's entanglement and its subsequent travels through worlds unknown. It is impossible to sever art from politics, to deny an ideological embeddedness, to deny its relationship to power. This is what gives art its potent charge and its revelatory capacity. This is not to say that the efficacy of the photographer is the same as that of the electrical engineer or lobbyist. Rather it is to say that all should be held accountable for the things they bring into the world, all should be tasked with providing an answer to the question of ethics.

The challenge facing contemporary photography (and indeed all art) is that of **duty**. The duty to do more than represent something, to do more than recalibrate a group of objects in a frame or reproduce an external system of meaning. The thing photography must take into account is the production and context that affords photography its continued existence and dissemination: the networks, peoples, objects and circumstances, in short, the **things** which provide the material supports for photography **to be**. The fact is that **things are as object as they are beautiful**. There is no thing that slips into this world without friction, without pain and anguish, without the involvement of oppressive power. That is because there is nothing that is itself independent of an Other: **everything is through other things**. Photography **is through** technology, labor, space and time, among countless others. Holding photography accountable to histories past, presents abounding and futures unfolding (in all their dirty, pretty glory) is the manner by which we all may contribute to a better contemporary. Photography is **there then - here now - where next?** The future is determined by us **and** the things beyond us. This requires a fastidious attention to the Others we engage with/in our work. What does this look like? God only knows, but when it comes to enacting ethics, our jobs are never done. Perhaps it looks like an unexposed negative, a sensor at the ready, for the inscription of answers to questions: what is my relationship to my subject? Who assembles my camera and with what - from where - by whom? How do I fully address the **unknown** conditions that afford me this very moment? The answer is: one never can. The duty is to try, and never stop.