

## Images among us – Photo Media Conference, Aalto

### Theme 2. Technologies & Cultures

Title - Glass: A substance to look at, not through

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As a material, glass is so interconnected with how we capture, produce, store, conserve and interact with photographic images. Photographers work with it in so many guises - from peering into camera lenses, viewing images through projectors and enlargers, cleaning scanners and screens, carefully holding old plate negatives and touching new digital devices. There are so many interactions with glass occurring without much thought or consideration, it seems the only time we become acutely aware of its presence, is when it is defective. Scratches, cracks and dust obstruct our view and impede our ability to ignore it.

Since focusing on this substance as part of my artistic research, I have been interested in how, through the prism of one material, we may gain greater understanding of the other. I have been surprised at how little the bond between glass and the photographic has been reflected on in the writings around photography, with the exception of Elizabeth Edwards, Michelle Henning and Constanza Caraffa, who all have an interest in the cross-disciplines of photography, material culture and archival studies<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps it is time to view glass as something to look at, and not just through.

For my contribution to the 'Images Among Us' conference, I will focus on a glass-cast camera which was initially created to symbolize the professional status of someone who has worked in the field of photography. More recently, the object has been instrumentalized into signifying the current state of the photographic. The crystal form is a replica of a Hasselblad 500CM medium-format camera, produced by the Lindshammer glass factory in the 1980's and commissioned by the Hasselblad Foundation as a high-end limited-edition ornamental item. The transparent object is very much a facsimile in terms of weight, likeness and scale, but is the complete opposite of its referent, for functioning cameras are essentially black boxes.

Having encountered the glass camera in two very different situations, I would like to explore how these contexts frame its divergent meaning, function and value. Firstly, as part of the permanent collection at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg, Sweden, showcasing the technological advancements of the optical instrument. The second encounter was in a contemporary group exhibition, 'Mercury' at the Tallinn Art Hall, as part of the Tallinn Photo-month in 2019. An exhibition about the post-photographic condition, encompassed multiple works including sculpture, drawing and video works alongside selected found materials, images and artefacts. As a proposition, Mercury is a dynamic 'visual essay' initiated by the artist Simon Dybbroe Møller with curator Post Brothers, but also features works by a number of other international artists<sup>2</sup>. In the catalogue they explain;

*"The exhibition explores how photography has transformed itself from a physical object into a mere reference point. An abstract term that we apply to stuff, a part of the crystalline lens through which we perceive the world, a measuring stick that we carry around with us and*

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to these and other publications. Edwards, Elizabeth and Hart, Janice (eds.) Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images, London: Routledge, 2004. Michelle Henning, Photography: The Unfettered Image, London: Routledge 2018 and Constanza Caraffa, Photo-Objects: On the Materiality of photographs and photo Archives in the Humanities and Sciences by Julia Bärnighausen, Constanza Caraffa, Stefanie Klamm, Franka Schneider, and Petra Wodtke (eds.) Open Edition Press, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> There artists are Thomas Bayrle, Nina Beier, Alexandra Bircken, Georgia Gardner Gray, Edith Karlson, Elke Krustufek, Jochen Lempert, John Miller, Rait Prääts, Heji Shin, Sung Tieu, Sophus Tromholt, Andrew Norman Wilson

*relate everything to. It has become an ecology or, rather, the very terms through which our environment is apprehended and develops.”<sup>3</sup>*

Before getting into this objects’ potential as a metaphor for the future state of the photographic, I will tease out the origins and initial purpose of the glass Hasselblad camera. Why was it produced and what function does it fulfil? To do so, I lean heavily on the writings of Susan Stewart, in ‘On Longing’ where she explains the capacity of souvenirs, relics and collectables to function as ‘traces of authentic experiences’ and as ‘an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia’<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Information found on the Tallinn Art Hall website: <https://www.kunstihoone.ee/en/programme/mercury/>

<sup>4</sup> Stewart, Susan, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection. Duke university Press, 1993.