

'The Creative Potential of the New': A Photographic Dialogue

by Dr Jane Button

Photography as a medium, of both artistic expression and empirical verification, has always been subject to a crisis of meaning. Ever since its inception photography's refusal to be bound to the 'natural' sciences and positivist discourses of 'objectivity', to circulate instead within multiple channels and contexts of use, has destabilised any clear or definitive understandings of the medium.

In an age where 'everyone is considered to be a photographer' the ambiguous and enigmatic nature of photography, as an 'ordinary' and everyday cultural practice alongside its existence as an institutionally sanctioned art form, are magnified and accentuated that much *more* now photography can exist in digital and networked form.

Whilst current debates and contentions over the technological dissolution of analogue photography are all too familiar greater critical attention is needed instead. To the possibilities and affordances that digital technologies now offer to creative practice and to how these 'new' technologies literally enable the practice of photography to be viewed in a renewed light. At the same time as awareness and due significance must be given to photography's multiple histories and 'promiscuous' tendencies'.

The six artists featured in *This Has Been* provide oscillating perspectives, and varying points of entry, for how contemporary tensions and iterations of photography may be navigated in the present. Together, Paul Adair, Kate Beckingham, Danica Chappell, Danny Digby, Benjamin Lichtenstein, and Kate Robertson create a conversation that seeks to open and further extend deliberations over the status of the photographic in its now hybrid and mutating state. To think through a broader lens of what constitutes the photographic and especially how contemporary conceptions and iterations of the photographic are manifested in the creative realm.

Drawing inspiration from the photo-critic Roland Barthes the title for the exhibition *This Has Been* is lifted from Barthes influential text *Camera Lucida*. Within this text Barthes describes what he believes to be the distinguishing elements of a still photographic image. Focussing on the affective capacities of a photograph, as memory image, and the role of subjectivity Barthes proposes a new framework by which photographic consciousness can be understood. At the heart of his personal investigation of photography, Barthes is really seeking and searching to find the 'eidos' – the essential nature of photography – the irreducibility of a photograph as being linked to an index that signifies 'that has been'.

The artists featured within this exhibition take up how we might enter and reactivate such a line of thought, in the present. Through exploring the processes and tools of image making, such as darkroom methods and software programs, combined with enmeshing the photographic in sculptural and installation-based forms, visitors will encounter a more open and fluid interpretation of the photographic in *This Has Been*. By expanding upon restricted or narrow views of the photographic as an object-bound form then together they begin 'to imagine critically how the photographic object is being reconstructed in contemporary artistic practice'² at the same time as they inquire into that which activates and animates the photographic.

If the emergence of abstraction, in the twentieth century, sought to redefine the relationship between art and the spirit, and art's relation to the universe through experimenting with faculties of light and colour, space and form, then the work of Danica Chappell becomes an inheritor of such compositional traditions albeit in hybridised form.

Danica Chappell's light shadow works, (*Light Shadow 12 sec : 3 days : 50 sec + 37 sec + 48 sec; Light Shadow 6 sec : 6.5 hrs : 105 + 25 sec, Light Shadow 4 sec : 6.5 hrs : 110 + 35 sec*), consisting of fractures and relay of light interleaved with prismatic and bleeding colour patterns, stretch and warp their way across the frame. At times, they meet with the geometrically inspired designs of Malevich and Mondrian but in more malleable and flowing form.

Rendering her photographic 'deviations' by way of the darkroom processes,

Chappell's practice is propelled by the need to emphasise the photograph as a unique hand-crafted object and through layering processes and materials, construct a composition that can only appear as the resultant photograph. Embodying contradictory impulses to expand conventional understandings of photography, on the one hand, and accentuating the role of the hand-crafted object on the other, Chappell's methodology accords meaning and value to the physical and haptic processes of image making; to tactile sensations and material forms, to the masking and revelation of detail, to the subliminal and nuanced processes of working up an image *by hand* in the blackness of the colour darkroom.

The constructed nature of Chappell's compositions is influenced by the Constructivist legacy and undoubtedly the work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy who played with the pictorial and optical nature of abstraction in light-based experimental form.³ Just as the constructivists utilised photography to radically extend the directions and trajectories of artistic practice, especially in terms of the new technologies and media at hand, then so too does Chappell revive at the same time extend such a tradition of the medium in the present day.

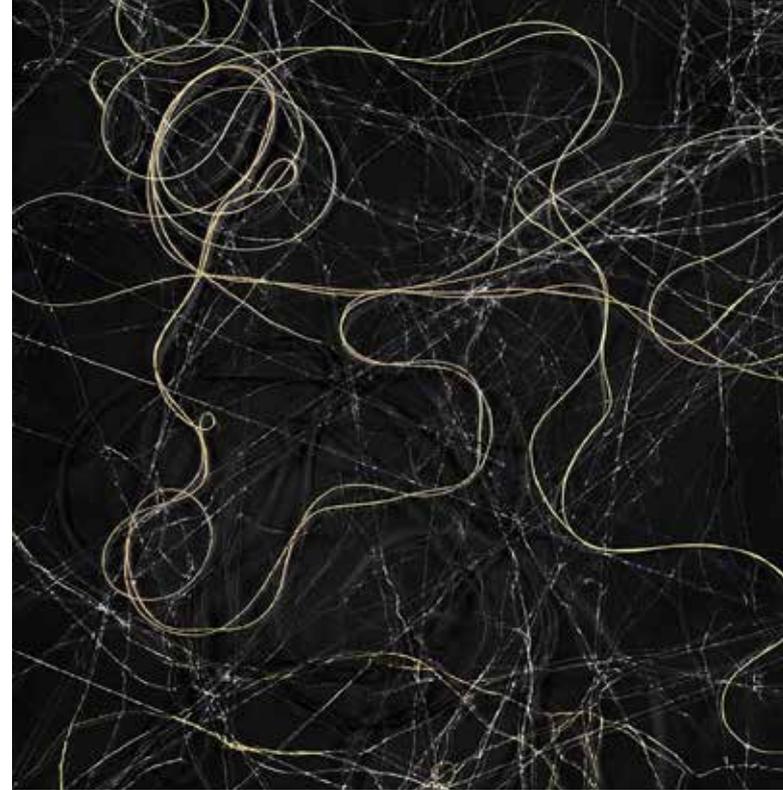
Timing and the concept of duration are immediately recognisable within Chappell's practice through her choice of image titles whilst the astute and complex processes of 're-representing' light through her use of materials and 'haptic actions' denote her adeptness with working between 'slippages of the positive and negative and their co-existence on a single surface'. As much as the contemplative qualities of these camera-less images reassess the perceptual connections between the index and the trace so too must the significance of these images also be attributed to the inner workings and processes of their 'constructed compositions'.

Kate Robertson's *Natural Networks* (an ongoing series) engage with threshold space - between art and ethnography - that explore the inner workings of community and the nature of lived experience. Drawn to the practices and formations of alternative communities Robertson charts how the rituals and activities of healing communities, in particular, provide a way for reflecting upon how self-organising communities' function. The shapes that such rituals and activities cultivate are echoed in the forms of the string 'sculptures'.

Web-like threads, constituted through internal processes of the darkroom, form the basis for the phantasmic structures that intersect and weave their way across the nightscape of the image space. Overlaid across the web-like constellations tendrils of yellow (*Natural Network # 1 (Local Energy Trading System)*) and green (*Natural Network # 2 (Local Energy Trading System)*) string lyrically curl and swirl their way across the foreground of the composition. Fluid and flowing their rhythmic contours not only create and forge new pathways within the web-like apparitions but their dynamism also suggests the different patterns and perspectives that emerge within structural relations and exchanges.

The evolving and mutating silhouettes of these *Natural Networks* are representative of the self-organising communities with which Robertson has sought to 'document' as a participant-observer at the LETS conference in November 2012, from which these images are based. The LETS community, Local Energy Trading System, is as Robertson notes, 'a community based exchange system, where skills and services are exchanged without money being involved'. As a social movement LETS functions by way of a philosophy that seeks to develop and nurture ideas of subsistence and group support. By both fostering and focussing upon community-based relations LETS seeks to reinforce such values whose systems do not rely or depend upon the dominant system.

The movement and string thus became the residue of the experience and activity undergone at LETS in which community members gathered in a circle and spontaneously passed balls of string to each other. The resulting tangled web of fluid, nonlinear and spirited lines became a map for how self-organising communities' function. The 'document' of the experience that becomes re-experienced within Robertson's *Natural Networks* image-scapes activating a divergent representation of how alternative communities are, for the large part, perceived within dominant and mainstream society.



The activation of space works at another level in the conceptual work of Paul Adair. Motivated by a desire to understand how 'strategies of presentation and display of sculptural objects could perhaps be understood as photographic' Adair's *Beach Boys*, as three dimensional objects, enlarge and simultaneously expand upon what constitutes and indeed what *is* considered to be photographic.

Traditionally bar stools are, more often than not, thought of as functional objects: As support structures to provide a place for sitting and dwelling in space. In this sense they serve a functional purpose for aiding with repose and as a practical tool for utilising and accommodating people and also objects in space. So, then how does such a prosaic and utilitarian commodity come to be integrated within an exhibition concerning the photographic?

For Adair, his contention is that these bar stools and their accompanying cushions provide a mode for examining how the framework of both the gallery space and that of the image space operate within a gallery or 'white cube' structure. Aligning this point of view alongside perspectives such as Paolo Bianchi the *Beach Boys* therefore operate 'between pictorial and real space'⁴ and in this sense intersect with 'compositional as well as social space'.⁵ However, the presence of the visitor or viewer within these spatial scenarios is also integral to how the nature of embodiment and disembodiment is understood within such frameworks, to how the viewer literally becomes integrated into the spatial reconfiguration and repositioning of modes of dwelling in space.

Within the exhibition *This Has Been* Adair's work investigates what he denotes as a 'post-medium specific "photographic" logic' that is not solely contingent on the photograph as a material host, but rather, generative of sculptural objects in relation to images'. Elucidating, in part, a relational framework between sculptural and photographic practice, Adair's conceptual premise echoes the logic of Rosalind Krauss' 'post-medium condition' that pivots around the heterogeneity, and arguably the hybrid nature, of weaving together creative and conceptual exchanges of medium-based interactions.⁶ Through his explorations with 'the potential[s] of an ever-changing relationship between photography and sculpture, Adair's practice seeks 'to develop and expand the field or scope which surrounds traditional photographic discourse'.⁷ As noted by Mark Godfrey,

Photography and sculpture have entered a more complex phase of their relationship, folding over each other, reversing positions, flipping back and forth, the one becoming the other.⁸

Adair's *Beach Boys* both draw upon and extend the observations made by Godfrey above as they are aligned with, as Adair himself contends, comparisons of the relation 'between the technique of producing a photographic negative and positive to the sculptural technique of moulding and casting'.⁹ As Adair further contends of the 'post-medium' specific photographic logic there is a direct relation to be made of 'the physical manifestation of sculptural objects to photographic reproduction' which Adair proposes as a "photographic condition".¹⁰

Metaphorically, *Beach Boys* works according to the premises of photography. Illustrating the conventions by which certain features of photography operate

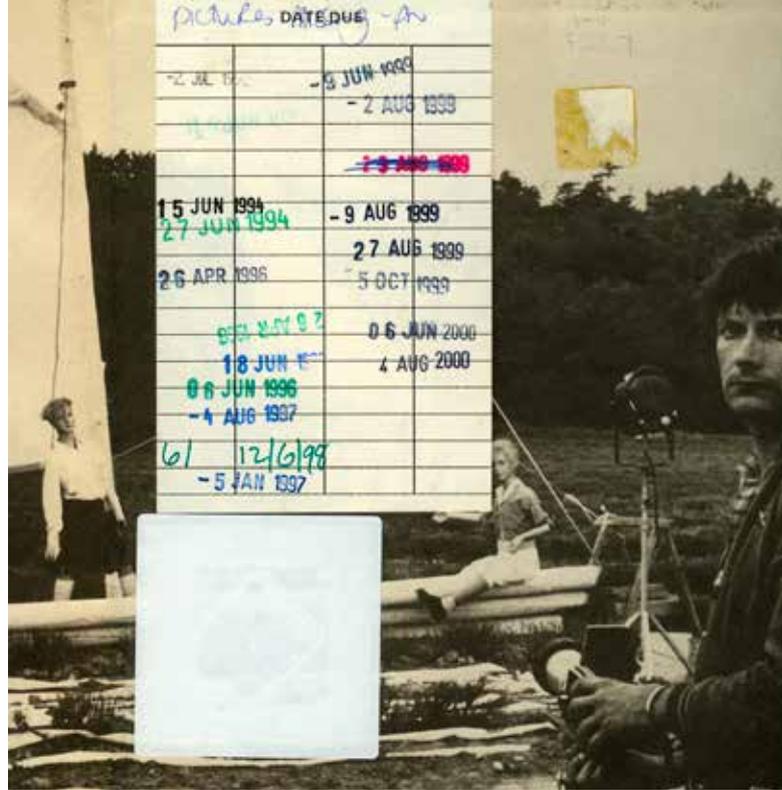
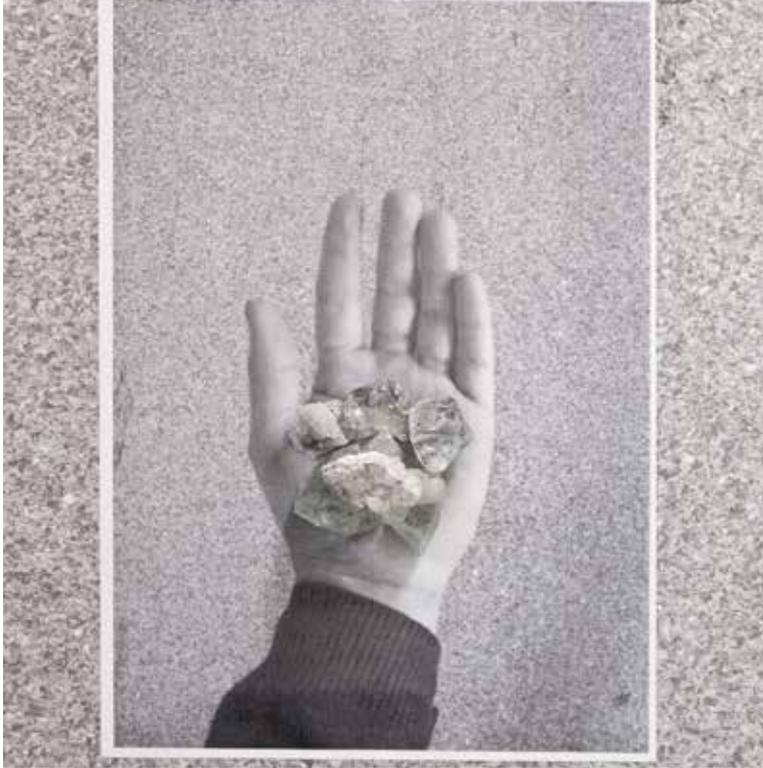
upon such as the frame, the copy, and spatial-temporal relations of image making, circulation and consumption. It seems no mistake that photography features so frequently within contemporary installation-based practice as a mode for negotiating conceptual and lived relations. Perhaps, these formalist and conceptual interests in photography are at the same time discretely and implicitly linked to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's mediations on the 'poetics of space' and the emphasis that he gives to interior domestic spaces, of both the physical and psychical based worlds, where reality is not always subject to reasoning but rather to the role and place of the imagination¹¹.

The processes of materiality and the presence of the hand operate very differently in the work of artist Kate Beckingham. Diverging from the darkroom processes featured so prominently in the work of artists Kate Robertson and Danica Chappell, Beckingham's thought processes and compositional arrangements are instead reflective and motivated by the objects, she selects and more often than not collects to reside, in her studio space for use at a later date.

Perhaps analogous to the contemporary phenomenon of the 'mood board' these objects, such as stones, pebbles and glass acquired by Beckingham as a source of inspiration for a later date may sit inert in her studio for long periods of time before being playfully adapted into her compositions. However, Beckingham contends that such adaptations and re-purposing of these found objects are rather guided more so by 'intuition'. An example Beckingham gives is that of Thomas Ruff's *Sterne*, imaged in *Ruff. Catching* her attention, from within an auction catalogue, Beckingham tore out the reproduction of Ruff's *Sterne* that was subsequently placed in her studio with a collection of shells on top. Only later, when Beckingham moved studio spaces and had reassembled the found sculptural arrangement did she think of photographing the sculptural arrangement.

Of course, Ruff's 1989 *Sterne* is also embedded in the relationship between the found image and the reconstructed artwork, originating from a collection of archival photographs at the European Southern Observatory in Chile. The astronomical images of the night sky were originally captured through a specially designed telescopic lens and it is from these photographs that Ruff later reworked, by enlarging specific elements within the prints to a grandiose scale. Whilst Beckingham may share aspects of Ruff's methodology of re-photographing found images the significance of her process lies in how the objects that accompany such reproductions become a 'reaction' and as much an 'activation' to the elements contained within the images. As Beckingham states, 'they anchor the unreal elements and yet allow the audience to explore the in-between space between the real and un-real'. Investigating the tensions between the ambiguity and concreteness of meaning, between real and manipulated space, in relation to the photographic. Drawing upon the reciprocal relation between all three images, their serial nature, as each individual image offers the viewer a different perceptual experience then so too does each image contribute to the overall image whole.

Oscillating the tensions between the signifier and the signified the physical objects such as the pile of stones which sit atop of *This (Part 1)*, 2013 function as an 'anchor', both in the semiotic sense of the term and in a literal sense as



they actively ground the images to the gallery floor. Conversely, in *This (Part 2)* the stones now find their way into the image space, atop of the artist's hand. Although the image is digitally produced the physical traces of the acquired objects become representative of the artist's hand, of Beckingham's personal interaction with the image. For Beckingham, this interaction also alludes to duration, to the 'passing of time' of the object's collection and representation as well as complicating the nature of what is experienced as real from that which is illusory. The parallel worlds that Beckingham references here in *This Has Been* are no better conceptualized than in the title that she gave to her MFA thesis, *Outer Space: Photographic image space as parallel universe*.

The pressure of parallel universes and their need for alignment differ, skew and ultimately separate in Benjamin Lichtenstein's panelled installation work, *Happy Birthday / A Conversation With Oneself*, 2013, for *This Has Been*. Based on a found birthday card that Lichtenstein's father had given to his mother whilst they were still married, and which had later been scribbled upon by Lichtenstein and his brother as young children, the artist's use and appropriation of the card reflects upon the mirror image and the lens by which we both see and project.

Utilising a flatbed scanner, Lichtenstein has scanned each panel of the card, enlarged the panels to almost double the size of the original card, and then has framed each panel individually, using hinges to connect the frames so as to recreate the concertina form the card originally embodied. The original message, inscribed by Lichtenstein's father, is now open to public viewing: 'Happy birthday darling, with all my love, Gary.' Yet, it is not to this brief message that Lichtenstein's installation is emphasising. But rather to how everything else contained in the card such as the printed message functions not as a dedication to the wife (to which the card is intended) but instead points in every way to the husband, the designated giver of the card.

In the remaining panels that do not feature the father's portrait mirrored glass is inserted. The effect of which is to create a mirror image of his father when viewing the work from front on. In this way the viewer is only able to see either the father's portrait, or the mirrors, from either end of the card-installation. As Lichtenstein notes, 'it's when you come front on that the mirror effect reveals itself', the father's double image; the reflection of him looking at his own image, much like Narcissus gazing upon, and in love with, his own reflection in the pool of water.

Yet, the mirror image becomes a recurring motif in Lichtenstein's installation for *This Has Been*. Echoing the reflection of his father, in the card installation, Lichtenstein has now imaged his mother in the accompanying framed image, *Untitled* 2012, that is lifted from Lichtenstein's personal archive of family photos. Captured in a lift at the eye and ear hospital, in Melbourne, post eye surgery Lichtenstein's mother again addresses the camera directly. Such a context also begs the question of how patients must feel when confronting the mirrored space of a lift post surgery or trauma. How to reconcile with the gaze that looks back? A vulnerable and at the same time tender moment shared between mother and son. Juxtaposed beside the interior scene is another image from Lichtenstein's archives, this time of his father pricking a sausage before putting it on the barbeque at a holiday Lichtenstein and his brother shared with his father's family. For Lichtenstein this image of his father also represents a state of struggle.

States of breakage: The fragile nature of family relations and the memories that accompany times of loss, grief and fractured dynamics are alluded to within Lichtenstein's work. The poignancy of (re) negotiating these affiliations, of times past, through the personal and social archive is that of the wound. As Barthes, states of the punctum, 'it shoots out of [the photograph] like an arrow, and pierces me'¹². The deeply private meanings of these family images, accompanied by the written card, are now exposed for all to see.

Danny Digby's contribution to *This Has Been* also draws upon the archive that simultaneously looks back to an art historical tradition as does it look forward to the possibilities of the 'new'. Digby's three images featured in the exhibition are lifted from a much wider body of work from 2012 titled *Endpaper*. Fascinated by the digitisation of historical photographic records Digby's *Endpaper* series traces the decline of the date stamp loan system, in the endpapers of publicly circulated library books, towards the digitised data replacement that was ushered in circa 2000.

The social history and uses of these books as physically evidenced through the date stamp loan system are manifested in the digital prints. For example, the endpapers of Henri Cartier-Bresson's book *Man and the Machine* depicted with its hand constructed yellow pouch indicates the analogue system of classification. A typological index system grounded in a positivist discourse of categorizing knowledge. The endpapers of John Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye* inserted with the orange catalogue card and its emphasis upon a numbered system refers to the nature of the analogue catalogue as a written documentation system more directly. Finally the addition of Bernard Faucon's *Summer Camp* endpapers, that have migrated towards the date stamp on a paper based index,

To my wife, sometimes I'm absent minded. Sometimes I'm kind of cross. Sometimes I maybe act as if I think that I am the boss. Sometimes I'm kind of quiet, especially when I'm worried. Sometimes I'm plain stubborn when I think I'm being hurried. Sometimes I act a little spoiled. Sometimes I'm lazy too. But there's one thing that I always am - I'm always in love with you. Happy Birthday!

Alluding to common traits of any romantic relationship given the mass reproduced message and apologetic tone of the card for Lichtenstein, however, the selection of the card, by his father, resonates more personally with traits of the ego. Reiterating such a narcissistic understanding of the self, beyond that of healthy development, Lichtenstein has inserted a black and white portrait of his father across three of the card installation panels, appropriated from a picture taken with his then wife on their wedding day. In the original image Lichtenstein's father looks adoringly at his new wife. He is seen in profile, with his hands clasped around his wife's, the wedding ring in prominent view. Contrastingly, Lichtenstein's mother looks directly at the camera; her fingers are curled tightly into clenched fists that do not interlock with the fingers of her new husband. She is captured at ease smiling for the camera. This contextual detail of Lichtenstein's parents, imaged as a couple, is omitted in Lichtenstein's use of the photograph.



Image credits

Inside Spread (left - right):

Natural Network #1 (Local Energy Trading System), archival pigment print by Kate Robertson; *Beach Boys*, cast pigmented polyurethane resin by Paul Adair; *This (Part 1)*, digital c-type prints by Kate Beckingham; *Bernard Faucon, Summer Camp*, inkjet print by Danny Digby.

This page:

(top) *Light Shadow (12 sec : 3 days : 50 sec + 37 sec + 48 sec)*, unique c-type photograph, in 3 parts by Danica Chappell;

(above) *Untitled*, unique state silver gelatin print by Benjamin Lichtenstein.

Special thanks to Dr Jane Button and Jon Butt.

Kate Robertson is represented by Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne.

This Has Been

Paul Adair - Kate Beckingham - Danica Chappell - Danny Digby - Benjamin Lichtenstein - Kate Robertson
c3 contemporary art space, Melbourne
24 April - 12 May 2013

juxtaposed with the white concealed data security tag places this particular image on the cusp of historical change *between* the analogue and digital realms. Interestingly, this book's endpaper is the only one in which Digby has revealed the various times that it has been loaned. It is also the only endpaper which discloses a visual image and yet as Digby notes 'within the Faucon photograph, a library assistant has written "pictures missing"'.¹

As a whole these three selected images continue the discussion of the artist as photographer that bear witness to the medium of photography, to framing the focus out in the field and in the case of Faucon to the relation between the artifice and reality. Part homage to the forbears of analogue photography and their skills in the artistry of the medium Digby clearly locates these works within twentieth century explorations of the medium as does he signify the presence of the digital through his now digital documentation processes and inkjet prints.

Today the camera operates with a lens for viewing, which remains unaltered from analogue times, whilst also integrating digital screens within the camera apparatus. Unlike the artistic forbears photographers are now able to instantaneously view and review the frames and details of that which they have just captured. And as we all know then disseminate such images, at the press of a button, throughout digital networks. More broadly these modes of image production and circulation, as data forms, also evoke a pivotal shift by which images appear. The materiality of the image, its manifestation in chemically emulsive form upon sensitised paper, as that which informs histories of photography is mutating evermore towards pixels and informational forms.

Yet as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy reminds us,

'The creative potential of the new is for the most part slowly revealed through old forms, old instruments and areas of design which in their existence have already been superseded by the new, but which under pressure from the new as it takes shape are driven to a euphoric efflorescence'.¹³

Time will only tell. However, the creative investigations and explorations of the photographic embodied within *This Has Been* vitally engages with the artistic and ontological debates at hand. If anything these six artists enliven the meditations and contestations of what photography can be and where it may be going.

Postscript:

All quotes contained within the text are from the author's correspondence with the specific artist whose work is being referred to. Any other quotes or points of reference are contained in the endnotes.

Endnotes:

¹ See 'Promiscuous meanings' in Scott McQuire's *Visions Of Modernity: Representation, Time, Memory and Space in the Age of the Camera*, Sage Publications, London, 1998, pp. 64-70.

² George Baker, 'Photography's expanded Field', *October*, 114, Fall 2005, p. 123.

³ Integral to Chappell's methodology is her emphasis on abstraction in pictorial form, the possibilities offered by photography's optical nature and inherent connection with light than with a translation of 'reality' as is evidenced in her camera-less, in other words photogram, approach and studies of photography.

⁴ Here Adair is referencing the work of Paolo Bianchi. See Paolo Bianchi, 'In Praise of Atmosphere', in *Men In Black: Handbook of Curatorial Practice*, (ed) Ute Tischler Christoph Tannert, Berlin, Kunsterhaus Bethanien, 2003, p. 113.

⁵ Here Paul Adair is specifically referencing the work of Walead Beshty. Adair makes the following comments: 'Beshty refers to Wolfgang Tillmans installation strategies for presenting his photographic works. He says, "On the subject of Tillmans work he understands exhibition spaces much better than I've seen almost any other photographer really understand them and use them in a really dynamic way [...] there is a maintenance of a certain type of photographic vision, one that we can easily identify and understand and there is an extension into the understanding of the social space of the gallery that follows very much from the thought process of the production of each individual image that I think opens the parameters of the conversation that is possible through his work instead of just staying inside the frame', Paul Adair, *Casting an Ensemble of Objects: Producing Objects Within A Post-medium Specific 'Photographic' Logic*, November 2012, pp. 35-36.

⁶ See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, p. 20.

⁷ Paul Adair, *Casting an Ensemble of Objects: Producing Objects Within A Post-medium Specific 'Photographic' Logic*, November 2012, p. 1.

⁸ Mark Godfrey, 'Image Structures: Mark Godfrey on Photography and Sculpture', *Artforum*, 43, no. 6, February 2005, p. 149.

⁹ See Olivier Krischer, 'Hany Armanious: Plundering the Uncanny Valley', *artasiapacific*, May-June, no. 73, 2011, p. 122 from which Paul Adair relates such a contention to.

¹⁰ Paul Adair, *Casting an Ensemble of Objects: Producing Objects Within A Post-medium Specific 'Photographic' Logic*, November 2012, p. 2.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Trans.) Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. (Trans.) Richard Howard. Flamingo (Fontana Paperbacks), London, 1981, p. 26.

¹³ Laszlo Moholy-Nagy as cited in Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art In The Age of Technical Reproducibility And Other Writings on Media*, The Balknap Press of Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 2008, p. 290.