

# PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE *OBJET MANQUÉ*

Creating sculptures and installations to be photographed and then dismantled, some contemporary artists put a fresh spin on the notion of photographic truth.

BY CLAIRE BARLIANT

IN 1978, IN THE PAGES of this magazine, sculptor Robert Morris bemoaned the “malevolent powers of the photograph to convert every visible aspect of the world into a static, consumable image.”<sup>1</sup> Today, when pictures captured by mobile phones or digital cameras are ubiquitous and photography so pervasive as to have become practically invisible, it’s worth parsing Morris’s statement. Note the vehement stance against photography—he calls its powers “malevolent.” And his other adjectives, “static” and “consumable,” are almost as harsh. Morris called the photographs Robert Smithson made of his outdoor mirror works “perverse,” saying they effectively mislead us as to what the pieces are about. Freezing the mirrors’ reflections and thereby rendering them moot, the photographs deny the phenomenological experience that lies at the heart of the work. Still, according to Morris, in requiring the viewer’s direct experience, the site-specific sculpture of his generation of artists was uniquely positioned to challenge photography’s adverse effects. “Space,” wrote Morris, “has avoided [photography’s] cyclopean evil eye.”<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, nearly 35 years after Morris published his article, photography is our main, if not only, conduit to much of the work that he was addressing. Already in 1947, André Malraux, while compiling the images that made up his “museum without walls,” posited that art history, especially the history of sculpture, had become “the history of that which can be photographed.”<sup>3</sup> In 1989, the art historian Donald Preziosi wrote, “Art history as we know it today is the child

of photography.”<sup>4</sup> For many contemporary artists, a relentless flood of reproductions of artworks raises issues that cannot be ignored. Tino Sehgal, who choreographs live actions (he doesn’t call them performances) that encourage viewer participation, refuses to let any of his work be photographed. In a 2008 conversation in *Bomb* with artist Nayland Blake, sculptor Rachel Harrison lamented that the photograph inhibits the possibility of really grasping an art object: “Maybe I’m starting to think that artworks need to unfold slowly over time



Erin Shirreff: *Signature*, 2011, pigment print, 23½ by 32 inches with fold. Courtesy Lisa Cooley Gallery, New York.

in real space to contest the instantaneous distribution and circulation of images with which we’ve become so familiar.”<sup>5</sup>

Partly in resistance, a rash of artists born after 1970—Talia Chetrit, Jessica Eaton, Daniel Gordon, Corin Hewitt, Alex Hubbard, Elad Lassry, Yamini Nayar, Demetrius Oliver, Erin Shirreff and Sarah VanDerBeek among them—are addressing (or redressing) the issues attendant on becoming familiar with an artwork through its photographic reproduction.<sup>6</sup> Most of them have a studio-based practice that involves more than one medium—some are not even primarily photographers—but thinking about photography is central to what they do. Often their work includes handmade objects as well as photographic reproductions from any number of sources. They might build a sculpture based on a reproduction of an existing sculpture. They might videotape or photograph an object or setup they have created, destroying it after (and sometimes during) its documentation, or create an installation whose sole purpose is to generate photographs. Viewers consider the artwork before realizing that the object or situation they are contemplating no longer exists (a realization that is sometimes accomplished by reading some form of accompanying text). All that is left is the photographic trace—an *objet manqué*, as I think of it, using a somewhat antiquated art historical descriptor.<sup>7</sup>

Today everybody knows that a reproduction is divested of a transparent relation to an original, yet that doesn’t stop collectors from judging and buying work simply by looking at jpegs; indeed, most of us first experience an art object by seeing an image of it in an advertisement, a magazine or online. For artists, it seems natural to start with an object that they then drain of significance as an *original* through its reproduction and circulation.

By absenting the referent, they would assert control over a system of circulation that they see as generally depriving the artwork of its autonomy.

These artists take the virtual, and the idea of the simulacrum, for granted. For them, there is no “punctum,” as Roland Barthes termed it—no lacerating detail that connects the image to a particular time and place. There are precedents in work by Hirsch Perlman, Barbara Kasten, Thomas Demand, James Casebere and James

SEVERAL WORKS BY SHIRREFF INVESTIGATE PHOTOGRAPHY'S "CYCLOPEAN EYE," SPECIFICALLY IN RELATIONSHIP TO DOCUMENTING SCULPTURE.

Welling, to name just a few. Going further back, one might cite the abstract photograms of László Moholy-Nagy—the polymath Bauhaus artist who dubbed photography “the new culture of light.” Brancusi’s sculptures survived, but not the studio arrangements in which he photographed them.

In our postmodern age, the image, the copy and the notion of what is “real” have been problematized many times over. These issues—surrounding the simulacrum and the trivializing of experience as a result of the pervasiveness of photography—came to the fore in the late 1970s, when many of these artists were growing up. Following is a discussion of four of them: artists who begin with the understanding that an image is based on a purely provisional object. They are proving the *objet manqué* newly relevant.

### ERIN SHIRREFF

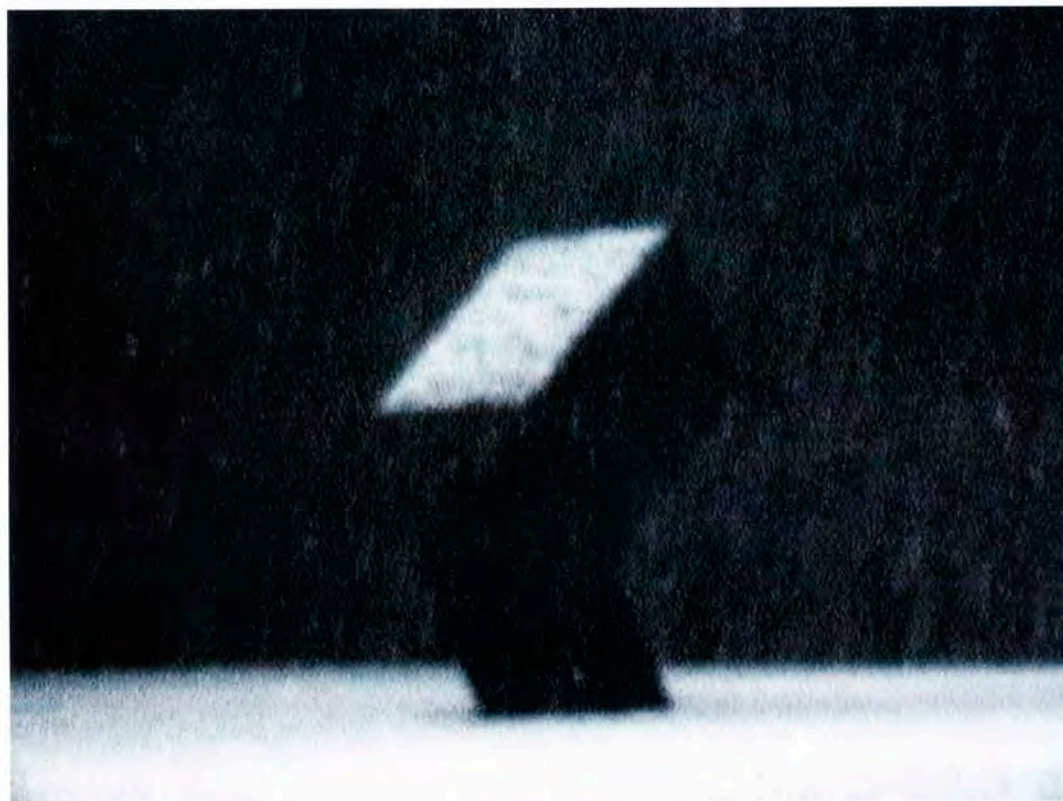
On a brisk day in Brooklyn last fall, a small group of art enthusiasts gathered in the MetroTech Commons for the unveiling of a sculptural exhibition [on view through Sept. 14] under the auspices of the Public Art Fund.<sup>8</sup> One of the works, made of painted aluminum, looks like a partially unfolded origami form. The piece, titled *Sculpture for Snow*, by Erin Shirreff, is based on an iconic work by Tony Smith, *Amaryllis* (1965–68). But of Smith’s original



Above, Shirreff: *Roden Crater*, 2009, HD video, approx. 14½-minute loop.

Left, Shirreff: *Sculpture Park (Tony Smith)*, 2006, color video, 37-minute loop.

Photos this page courtesy Lisa Cooley Gallery.



composition—an angular Minimalist abstraction composed of equally proportioned horizontal and vertical elements—Shirreff’s retains only the vertical element, because the photographic reproduction on which she based her work obscures the horizontal element. The Smith-inspired piece is one of several works by Shirreff that investigate photography’s “cyclopean eye,” specifically in relationship to documenting sculpture.

Shirreff earned an MFA in sculpture from Yale in 2005, but she has become better known for her photographs and videos. These delve specifically into the problem of representing three-dimensional works in two-dimensional form. For an ongoing series titled “Signatures” that she started in 2010, she cuts abstract shapes from card stock, then paints and shoots them using lighting that makes them look like modernist steel sculpture. Separate halves of different constructions are then juxtaposed within a single print, which is folded down the middle, like a spread in a book—except that the two halves do not make a whole. The image “breaks” the sculpture, or rather creates a new one of already purely invented parts. The series, which is photographed in an austere black and white, evokes the dismantled signatures of old books

about modernist sculpture, but the sensibility behind the work’s wry juxtapositions and fundamental fiction is unmistakably contemporary.

*Sculpture for Snow* is not the first work Shirreff has based on Smith. A 2006 video titled *Sculpture Park (Tony Smith)* comprises five episodes depicting individual works by Smith becoming gradually invisible as each one is covered by snow. But the snow is artificial (Styrofoam shavings), and the entire tableau (which consisted of spray-painted card stock and seamless paper) was produced in the artist’s studio. Shirreff has created videos composed of hundreds of different iterations of a single still image, often of an iconic artwork, including an image printed from the Internet of James Turrell’s massive earthwork *Roden Crater*. She shoots the source images in her studio, using a range of analog lighting effects. These images are then stitched together and animated as videos. In *Roden Crater*, it seems as if the sun is rising and setting. A video from 2010 that appears to be of a lunar eclipse was made from analog photographs of the moon waxing and waning over the course of a month, which were then compiled in Final Cut Pro.