

ANNE COLLIER: ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

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The work of Anne Collier occupies a singular position within the history of art and photography. A key figure in the generation of artists that emerged in the early 2000s, her images articulate the seismic transition in photography from the old mechanical, industrial world to the new plurality of what is popularly termed the post-Internet age, in which the basis of what constitutes a photograph has been definitively altered by new tools such as the smartphone, the screen shot, and Instagram. A large part of Collier's subject matter is drawn from found objects from the crucible of this transformation—the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—and their reframing under her gaze shines a forensic light onto the major role that the photograph has played in redefining popular culture and its impact on the way we see and think.

Collier traces this role through a number of interrelated themes that have reappeared throughout her career, and are bound to each other like a Möbius strip: the expression of emotional states such as vulnerability, anger, sadness, anxiety, hope, desire, love, and grief; the ways in which the photographic apparatus has democratized the act of looking, and transformed representations of women both in front of and behind the camera; and the constantly shifting position of the photograph's status in relation to both commercial imagery on the one hand, and the language of art on the other. The material scrutinized by Collier's lens—pages from popular photography books on the female nude; images of film and pop stars on record covers and in movie press photographs; sentimental postcards and calendars; discarded pages and cassette tapes from self-help aids—is drawn from the era that the prophetic cultural critic Marshall McLuhan described as “a total information environment . . . a wired planet” in which man as hunter scans “the midden heaps of the ages . . . objects that are base, commercial [and] trashy . . . provide the wisdom and riches of the present.”¹ Collier photographs objects in conditions that mimic not only those of product photography—a clean white background, deliberate shadows, crystal clear focus, no extraneous detail—but also the classic white cube of the gallery, in which the walls are painted white, the outside world is shut out, and light emanates from the ceiling, suggesting, as Brian O'Doherty argues, that the artworks appear “untouched by time and its vicissitudes.”²

Collier's technical approach collapses hierarchies between aesthetic formalism and the emotive language of advertising and popular culture. Each object in her images is photographed flat, from above, in a static setup using a large-format camera. This vantage point asserts a horizontal plane associated with the action of looking down upon something below our field of vision—an open magazine page, a display surface—and therefore outside the pictorial convention of modernist verticality. The resulting image is ultimately reoriented upward to occupy the vertical plane of the gallery wall. Since the white space surrounding each object belongs to both the mundane horizontal and the exalted vertical, the viewer feels caught between two possible readings of the image, and it is in the perceptual space between these two readings that Collier generates meaning in her work.

This duality mimics the language of advertising—but reverses it. In the commercial world of advertising, unattainable things (happiness, sexual fulfillment, glamour, sophistication, a better life) are linked with those that are attainable, suggesting that the former are within reach. The linking of internal thoughts and feelings with something external, writer Judith Williamson argues, “is a crucial feature in any creation of meaning . . . to

bridge the romantic abyss between . . . personal and universal” and has always been the function of art. The advertisement co-opts this correlation, but evokes not feeling, but “the idea of a feeling.”³

Collier’s photographs invite the same emotional reaction invoked by advertising or pop culture, but do so in order to bring that emotion from the commercial image back into the language of art. The tension between the heat of the strong emotion and the coolness of the conceptual framework that contains it echoes the commodified image; but unlike the advertisement, Collier’s images use the camouflage of associative meaning to very different effect. McLuhan cites T. S. Eliot’s observation that “the camouflage function of ‘meaning’ in a poem was like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the house dog of the mind so the poem could do its work.”⁴ The conceptual tautology of the coupling of Collier’s images of women, objects, or her own body and personal history with their mode of delivery—the book, magazine, record cover, found photograph, or the photographic equipment with which both they, and the images inside them, were made—is the distraction that allows their subtle power as images of grief, mourning, sadness, anger, fear, or the experience of what Collier has termed “the photographic sublime” to take effect.⁵

The sublime, according to Kant, must be simple, and is distinguished from beauty by being founded on pain, as opposed to beauty, which is founded on pleasure.⁶ It is expressed most tangibly in Collier’s images of photographs of the ocean in California where she scattered her parents’ ashes. The void of the vast blue water, the site of a deeply painful loss, evokes Susan Sontag’s description of photography as an elegiac act.⁷ The sublime is also present in Collier’s work more subtly, in the large white space surrounding each photographed object, which she has stated as being partly influenced by the vast open landscape, in movies such as Terence Malick’s 1973 classic *Badlands*. The transcendental quality Malick’s cinematography achieved by setting the small figures in the vast natural terrain of the Dakotas is echoed in Collier’s objects surrounded by a large empty white space bathed in light.

The cinematic appears more directly in Collier’s *Woman With A Camera (35mm)* (2009; p. 18), which introduces time into her work through the 35 mm carousel slide projector—the everyday pedagogical and commercial photographic display equipment used in the 1970s. In *Woman With A Camera (35mm)*, nineteen slides project a sequence of frames taken from a 35 mm print of the film *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978), stretched out as though in slow motion (a classic cinematic technique often used to indicate trauma). The film’s main character, a fashion photographer named Laura Mars (played by Faye Dunaway), has a premonition of a murder at the very moment that she is about to take a picture. Each slide reveals the transition from Dunaway looking through the viewfinder of her camera with one eye closed, her face calm with concentration, to her lowering the camera to look straight ahead in terror as she turns her attention to the horrific image inserted into her mind’s eye by her premonition. The deadpan rhythm of the slide projector, methodically presenting one image after another, creates an uneasy feeling of suspense as Dunaway’s eyes are seen registering her rapid shift from one emotional state to another as each image replaces the next. Collier uses time like a microscope—in the same way that she sets up her clinical photographic staging of objects—to create the conditions for concentrated looking that allow the deeper conceptual and psychological meaning of the subject to rise to the surface. The slide projector stands in not only for the projector in the booth of the cinema but, ultimately, for the director’s camera that filmed Dunaway during the staged moment of trauma that forced her camera away from her eye, her creative act frozen by two unseen sources of male aggression.⁸

The hidden violence in *Woman With A Camera (35mm)* is echoed in *Cut (Color)* (2009; pp. 50–51), a photograph made in the same year, another staged trauma created by the nexus of the eye, the female photographer, and the camera. A black-and-white photograph taken by Collier of her own eye is cut in half and inserted into a paper cutter that is, by implication, the instrument used to slice the eye in two. Here the *mise-en-scène* of the trauma is revealed not with time but through a spatial sleight of hand. The black-and-white photograph and black paper cutter have been photographed from above against a black background, creating a sense of deep space into which our eye is drawn by the board's apparently receding white lines of measurement. As always, Collier tilts the horizontal plane on which the image was shot into the vertical plane of viewing, connecting our intact eye with the artist's ruptured eye, still attached to the instrument of its cutting, suspended in space like an image in a dream. The resemblance of *Cut (Color)* to the classic clapboard that traditionally measures each take in the shooting of a film, in order to enable the syncing of sound and image during editing, indicates a further subtle connection to cinema that can be traced in so much of Collier's work.

Collier's image evokes one of the most iconic *mise-en-scènes* in the history of art and film: the opening scene in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*, in which Buñuel's hand can be seen holding open the blankly staring eye of a woman (the French actress Simone Mareuil), then slicing it in two with a razor in extreme close-up. The artifice of this violent act is swiftly made evident by Mareuil's appearance, both eyes intact, in the next scene, confirming our suspicion that what we just witnessed was not a real event but a cinematic edit that caused the viewer involuntarily to fuse Buñuel's actual slicing of a dead cow's eye (framed by its hairy eyebrow and given womanly definition by an eyebrow pencil) with his anticipated act on Mareuil.

Félix Fanés argues that Buñuel and Dalí's lacerated eye in *Un Chien Andalou* "is that of the romantic artist, sensual and subjective . . ." it is "a metaphor for the replacement of man the artist by the machine [the camera]."⁹ For the surrealist actor and assistant director on the film, Jacques Brunius (in a prediction of McLuhan's arguments), "the image of the sliced eye was an announcement of the end . . . of the predominance of the eye in Western culture . . . 'In the first minute of his film, Buñuel, with one razor slash, hammers into their sockets the glistening eyes of the voyeurs—of beautiful photos—the lovers—of fine paintings—the sensitive—of retina'."¹⁰ The razor, in other words, is a stand-in for the camera, an extension of what scholar Margaret Helen Persin describes as "the penetrating male hand, [that] wounds the space and process of seeing, the site/sight of visual perception. The female eye represents the locus of the elision between subject and object, and the discourse that will communicate that space and process . . ." But the wounding, Persin argues, "writes a new story directly on/about the eye, about the process of seeing, about how to see. . . . The act of wounding effects the cure necessary to detach the see-er/seer from the conventional, and to see in a new and original manner."¹¹

The paradox in Persin's argument is echoed in Collier's stark image of her own eye, whose shooting, printing, and cutting by the artist herself implies a control over her representation of her body, and the apparatus, process, and conceptual meaning that have formed it, at the same time that it is presented wounded by the paper cutter between whose deadly blades it is caught. The hand that controls the blade (arguably, as in *Un Chien Andalou*, a metaphor for the camera, or technology) is in this case not male, but belongs to the artist herself, staging a self-wounding in order to open up a new way of seeing.

The implications of Collier's image reach deeply into the central theme of her work—the relationship between women and the camera. Collier's subject matter is drawn from the modernist era in which the position of women both in front of and behind the camera

changed more dramatically than at almost any other moment in photographic history. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, photography had played a key role in the construction and dissemination of female sexual and emotional archetypes, as the social mores surrounding psychological problems, sex, and nudity loosened up to a degree that allowed an unprecedentedly eroticized objectification of the female body and the emotions hidden within it in advertising and popular culture, reflecting the double bind of a permissive society that both liberated and stereotyped women. The irony of this double bind pervades Collier's imagery, which positions the camera as both a tool in the construction of female vulnerability and a means by which to overcome it.

The struggle for control of the photographic image reaches further into history, playing out across the entire twentieth century in direct correlation to the increase in women's social and economic power, and to the threat posed to male authority. Collier's work distills the paradox contained within this ongoing tug-of-war by returning the camera to its roots as a key to women's independence. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, when the camera was considered to be a minor technology linked to the decorative arts, it was gladly relegated by men to women. Eastman Kodak, keen to develop a new market for its cameras, aimed their advertising campaigns directly at women, creating the "Kodak girl." "Determined, dedicated, good-looking, the Kodak girl was everywhere—the World's Fair . . . or next door, directing her camera at everything and everyone within range . . . the woman in the camera advertisement, portrayed a new kind of freedom, participants in their surroundings, with camera in hand, this woman photographer is active and curious . . ." ¹²

The implications of this democratic access to both the making and appreciation of subjects previously limited to the rarified visual culture of art history address the heart of Collier's work. Their historical roots can be seen again in *Un Chien Andalou*, where, immediately following the cutting of the eye, we see the same woman seated, looking at a reproduction of Vermeer's painting *The Lacemaker* (1669–70), in a book (fig. 1). Buñuel and Dali's camera frames the open page of the book in close-up, in an uncanny prefiguring of Collier's photographs. Dali was particularly interested in *The Lacemaker* because of its iconic power as a symbol of a rapidly collapsing elite culture, whose art in the 1920s was becoming newly available to society at large for the first time, through postcards, books, and framed reproductions. Its appearance in *Un Chien Andalou* as a reproduction in a book after the moment in which the razor (the camera) has just symbolically destroyed the old-fashioned romantic vision of art echoes Collier's images, which breathe new life into dated, clichéd imagery.

Collier's approach bears a superficial relationship to those of Dali, Duchamp, and, later, Warhol, in its embrace of the anachronistic and faintly kitsch as a strategy to rein-vigorate the present. Yet her relationship to the apparatus of advertising is more critical, and her position remains cooler and more distant from the popular culture with which she engages so deeply, even as it expresses a greater subjective, emotional content, and inserts the photographic apparatus of her practice as part of the discussion. Her photographs of objects used in the darkroom printing process—a developing tray, a box of darkroom photographic paper, and a paper cutter—belong to the same analog era as her other images, but differ in their contemporary currency. Still being manufactured today, these objects remain the working tools of the professional technical and commercial photographer, and the artist herself—a fact underlined by her insertion into each object of a highly personal photograph that she has taken. In doing so, Collier stages not her own photographic practice, nor the equipment that produces it, but what both signify in relation to each other. This self-reflexivity is partly inflected by her education at UCLA and CalArts in Los Angeles—with key figures including Michael Asher, John Baldessari, James Benning,

Morgan Fisher, Allen Ruppersberg, and James Welling, among others—who exposed her to West Coast conceptual photography. Anne Collier both internalized and distanced herself from their language of spare, pristine photographic space, light and surface, asserting her position as a woman with a camera in a 1990s landscape that was evolving beyond being solely a man's world.

Alongside her male mentors, Collier inherited the legacy of important women artists who emerged at the end of the 1970s as part of what came to be known as the "Pictures Generation," including Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler, Sarah Charlesworth, Nancy Dwyer, and Laurie Simmons, for whom, as curator Douglas Eklund points out, "gender and sexuality were part of a larger nexus between representation and power," and whose images "were highly coded rhetorical devices that shape, rather than merely reflect" the power relationships between men and women.¹³ But Collier's relationship with her subject matter takes place at a remove and at a greater historical distance within a social culture transformed by the Internet, in which the linear trajectory of history has collapsed into a flat matrix of information, influence, and temporal fluidity. In her hands, actresses, models, and singers appear in the democratic and now anachronistic photographic intimacy of the magazine, LP cover, or promotional photograph, as fragments of a world in which celebrity, scandal, waning success, past glory, and broken dreams are the inevitable fallout of the perpetual rearticulation of contemporary social identity. Collier's images assert the photograph as the stage on which this rearticulation continues to play out, through a powerful material presence that holds its authority even as questions as to what constitutes a photograph swirl around it. This material presence offers a profoundly physical experience of seeing that transposes looking into a form of touching, grounding our visual sense in a corporeal realm.