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Being and Belonging at MoMA

Behind the scenes of the museum's latest showcase for new photography.

By Annika Klein

Two questions have been central to photography since its inception: how do we see, and how do we see ourselves? This year, the Museum of Modern Art takes a contemporary approach to these inquiries by asking “how photography can capture what it means to be human,” as a matter of identity and representation. I recently spoke with Lucy Gallun, curator of *Being: New Photography 2018*, about how photographers are using both conceptual and personal approaches to reckon with the history of portraiture and beyond.

Annika Klein: I wanted to start with the previous iteration of *New Photography*, *Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015*, which you also cocurated. It focused on a post-internet view of images, often ones with a digital element. Three years later, why have you picked a theme that focuses on subjectivity? What's the shift there?

Lucy Gallun: *Ocean of Images* took place on the thirtieth anniversary of the *New Photography* series. The series started in 1985 with an exhibition simply called *New Photography*, organized by John Szarkowski, who was then director of the Department of Photography at the Museum. Prior to the thirtieth anniversary, the new chief curator of photography, Quentin Bajac, decided to expand the scope of the exhibition and hold it a bit more infrequently—approximately every two years instead of every year. Historically the show had presented the work of between three and six participants, and usually the participants' work was shown on its own, and there wasn't necessarily the opportunity to look at themes across the artistic practices.

On the occasion of *Ocean of Images*, we included nineteen artists, gave the show a title, and, as you mentioned, we were really looking at wider themes across the included works, including issues of dissemination and the circulation of images at that moment. The show included works in a variety of formats: some were framed photographs and others took different forms, including projected video, sculpture, and site-specific installation, among others. It was a diverse show: artists at different stages in their careers, from different countries, and very different types of work.

When I started thinking about work for the next exhibition, I was struck by the work of artists considering ideas of representation in diverse contemporary contexts. It seemed to me that many artists were focusing on specific issues of citizenship or nationality, gender, sexuality, specific cultural heritage, and considering the stakes of representing oneself or others in this particular political or cultural moment. Unlike the last iteration, in which most attention was directed to the format of the physical objects, here the focus is on something specific to the subject of these photographs, a subject that is more inward or personal even as it addresses being in the world.

Klein: Do you think the stakes of image making feel higher than when you were working on the last show?

Gallun: No. The stakes of image making have always been quite significant. But there are issues that are specific to this moment, and depending on the circumstances or situations in which the artist is working, or the questions they are hoping to raise, their approaches can be quite distinct from one another. In some cases that means drawing attention to the ways photography has addressed particular markers of nationality, or classification or identification around perceived racial or ethnic categories, such as in the *Cargo Cults* (2013–16) or *Applicant Photos* (2013–17) series by Stephanie Syjuco. In other cases, such as the unique objects constructed by Em Rooney, artists are drawing attention to how a photograph might be a very personal object, how it might serve as a memento or keepsake, reminding us of a special individual experience. In all cases, there is an awareness of the questions raised around representation and, to address such questions, the artists are thinking about the history of representation, particularly through photography. Even in their contemporary approaches,

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they're aware of certain characteristic elements that have been traditionally deployed in portrait photography, for example, and they are working with or through those expected elements.

Klein: Could you give a couple examples of the new ways they're playing with representation?

Gallun: A number of the works deploy conventions that have traditionally been associated with studio portraiture, but they might interrupt or disrupt or underscore those conventions.

For example, there are seven images in the exhibition from a larger series called *Gesellschaft beginnt mit drei* (Society begins with three) (2017), by Andrzej Steinbach, in which the artist employs the format of a group portrait. All of the people are gathered together and are looking at the camera, but Steinbach has only depicted one figure in full in each picture, so the other people who would be around that figure are partially cropped out of the frame. As we follow along from each picture to the next, we start to see that the individual figures have actually switched places within the group and that they've also switched clothing over the course of the series. Confusion starts to set in and we might start to feel disoriented; we're reminded that individuals are always changing, they're always mutable, their relationships to others are always changing. These figures push against or defy easy interpretations of what they represent. Typically, we might look for specific characteristics in each member of a group portrait—who's sitting where, who's wearing what—but when they subtly switch in this way, that mechanism is interrupted.

Another artist, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, often foregrounds elements of the studio itself that we, as viewers, don't typically pay attention to in a portrait. Often that means the relationships between the photographer and the model. The camera apparatus is usually quite visible, and the layered aspects of his studio process are brought forward through multiple pieces of photographic paper that are collaged together in one work, or the use of a mirror to bring together many planes into one composition. The process that goes into making a picture is evident in the final image. In other pictures, he foregrounds the platform or the drapery against which a model would pose. The model himself might not be visible at all, but their presence is palpable. At the forefront always are his own relationships to his models (traditionally something that is kept hidden), underscored by the presence of his camera apparatus or his own hand on the camera lens.

Klein: Even though this exhibition has a very different focus than *Ocean of Images*, it seems similarly concerned with semiotics—in the sense of how images create and denote meaning. This has been a prominent conversation among image makers since, at the very least, when *New Photography* started in 1985. How are these artists questioning systems of meaning in *new* ways, as opposed to how they might have been in 2015, or any time since this exhibition series has been running?

Gallun: I anticipate when people think about a show that's about representation, they'll expect to see maybe a lot of portraits. And, indeed, there are many works that we would immediately call out or identify as "portraits." But there are also works in the show where there is no figurative imagery at all. In such cases, there might be particular objects or other signs that stand in for a particular person. Sometimes those are quite personal objects, such as a work by Em Rooney that consists of a welded metal ladder with photo keychains dangling from the rungs— an homage to a family friend who had passed. In fact, a physical photograph is an object that stands often as a precious or valued object: we might frame it and put it in a special place, for example, so that a physical object stands in for a person.

There's one project in the exhibition—a large project, we've excerpted it—by Shilpa Gupta, in which she gathered together representations of one hundred people who had changed their surnames for different reasons, some political, some personal, some emotional; these are each represented by a picture that has been sliced in half, and the two halves of the picture are near each other in these clusters, but they are read as separate. Often, the pictures that represent each of these individuals are not figurative depictions, but other imagery that has been captioned with short text notations about the particular stories behind those names.

In other cases, a mask might stand in for a person. For example, Sofia Borges often takes photographs in museums or archives or zoos, or other places where things or beings are put on display. Her pictures—which are usually at an immense scale and rendered in brilliant hues—emphasize the spectacle inherent in that way of looking or of understanding “real-

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ity.” A couple figures in a display case representing a particular era or culture are meant to stand in for all the lives that were part of that culture. Or when looking at an ancient mask, we’re somehow transported into the head of that person, and we understand it as a representation of that moment in time or that life.

Klein: The exhibition text talks about “personhood.” Could you say more specifically what that means?

Gallun: I actually quite like that word. We have a sense of what it might mean just because we’re familiar with the word “person” and we’re familiar with the idea of “selfhood,” so maybe we interpret it as the state of being a person, in a straightforward way. It also traffics in other, specific fields: It might be used in philosophical terms, imagining when a person begins to exist—in a more philosophical sense. It’s also used in legal terms, quite often in terms of the rights of a person, and when such rights might be in place. Some works in the exhibition address imagery of birth and death, and living in the world, in a more existential, philosophical way. Other works refer to particular rights that a person may or may not have in a society, and in those cases, audiences might consider the legal characteristics of the term.

Klein: These *New Photography* exhibitions introduce artists who aren’t in the MoMA collection and who haven’t shown at the museum. Is there an artist who you’re particularly excited to be showing at MoMA for the first time?

Gallun: I can’t call out one artist [*laughs*]. But one thing that I will point out is that the artists are at very different stages in their careers. Some of the artists are what one might call “emerging”: they might be younger artists, or showing in New York for the very first time. Other artists are at a later stage in their careers, but their work hasn’t been presented at this museum.

Klein: Such as Aïda Muluneh?

Gallun: Yes, she’s one. Or Matthew Connors. Both these artists have been working in the field for some time, supporting the field of photography. Muluneh is the founder and director of the Addis Foto Fest and also the founder of DESTA, an organization that supports arts initiatives. In that way, she has been directly linked to the circulation and the support of photography. Connors has been the chair of the department of photography at MassArt for a number of years.

Klein: Contemporary photography is a broad field, especially when you’re including image-makers and photo-based artists. What’s the most difficult part of curating a “state of the union” exhibition, such as this one, that people will look to and say, “This is what was happening in 2018”?

Gallun: I think you’ve alluded to it in the question. The hope is that viewers will *not* perceive the show to be a “state of the union,” in that it’s not meant to be comprehensive in any way. There are, of course, any number of artists that it would have been wonderful to include. I do hope that the selection is diverse, in terms of the stages of the artists’ careers, and also their very different approaches. Especially with a theme like this, about representation at this moment, one thing I want to underscore is that these artists are really all very aware of difference, and are looking at diverse circumstances and experiences. So, in this way, it’s not at all a universalizing idea, but instead looking at specific and quite distinct ideas of being.

Klein: Someone walks into MoMA who maybe didn’t study art, or maybe isn’t incredibly versed in contemporary photography, and they enter this show. What do you hope they take away from it?

Gallun: Many works in the show will be prints, framed and hung on the wall. In that way, the language will not necessarily be surprising to visitors. These are formats we typically associate with photography. But even in works that use these standard formats, the artists are often working against or disrupting the particular characteristics that we associate with those standards, complicating them so that they are not so easily legible. And right away, visitors will also find references to the contemporary world—issues of migration or gender play, for example—and they might be surprised by or touched by the ways the artists address these issues. All the works speak to how, through photography, we might capture ideas of being human at this moment.