MUSÉE
VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

JUN 1 PARALLEL LINES: KEVIN MOORE

FEATURE

© James Welling, *4600*, 2015, Inkjet print

Federica Belli The language of photography is still among the most contemporary ones, notwithstanding the diffusion of digital art and AR. Which factors make photography such a relevant medium in our time?

Kevin Moore Photography is still the common vocabulary of news and information exchanges, in addition to being problematically linked to commerce,

whether it is selling a product, or an art photograph being sold itself. What is interesting is nowadays a lot of artists I know seem to use this as the subject of their artworks: they make that commercial exchange the center of what they do. You can't just be naively documentary in your approach anymore, most photographers have realised all these different layers exist in photographs. Also, there are a lot of moral questions about what gets represented, who represents it and how the representation is used. Especially in an art discourse, photography selling in galleries has to raise the level of awareness of what it is actually doing in communicating as an art object.

F.B. Basically photography is evolving to investigate the medium in itself and how it can empower new forms of representation. Rather than documenting reality, we document what we aim to document and how.

K.M. It has become much more self-reflective. That is true for painting as well: painting is more figurative now, but photography has always been aware of its special ability to represent reality. It is a philosophical question, and especially now this question has to be asked: photographers don't only make images but also consume them.

F.B. While painting is getting more descriptive, photographers at times try to get away from documentation, entering the realm of abstract art. Has this tendency influenced the market already or is it too experimental yet to really affect the market for abstract art?

K.M. About ten years ago, photographers were still very much held to a standard of not manipulating their photographs. Even though the tools were there already, there was still an expectation of naturalism in photography. The German photographers, including Gursky, really dominated that time, but something suddenly happened: manipulation, collage and all these tools could be used and accepted as photographs. Collage and abstraction happen when the culture is going through some sort of crisis; this coincided for instance with the 2008

financial crisis: a lot of artists were using collages, fractured and abstract imagery. It seems to me that artists often seem to find a way through that kind of imagery, and it happened noticeably in photography around that time. In most cases it is a way to take the world apart and put it back together in another way. Photographers are just as often visionaries of their future.

© Jill Freedman, Monumental Flute, Resurrection City, Poor People's Campaign, Washington, DC, 1968. Gelatin silver print.

F.B. I am curious regarding your curatorial approach with emerging photographers. In your experience as independent Curator, you have by now worked alongside some of the most renowned contemporary names. Practically speaking, how do you select your collaborations and adapt your approach accordingly?

K.M. Each relationship is different. I am lucky that I get to curate different kinds of projects and exhibitions in various spaces. It is great to work with established artists on retrospective shows as well as group exhibitions that merge a variety of established and never-shown-before artists. Though curating is always a collaboration, some artists do everything on their own and I just sort of unlock the doors of the galleries, while other times I take the lead and propose an approach towards the selection. Many times, the decision to work with artists has a lot to do with common interest and thinking about the same things. In addition to being an Independent Curator, I also work with an organization called FotoFocus in Cincinnati as Artistic Director and Curator: we guest-curate in host institutions and bring projects to New York. Many choices get made based on what the host institution wants to see, and these demands create parameters that define the area you work within. I rarely choose something purely out of my head, it generally comes from a particular institution or in relation to other events going on, such as Biennials.

F.B. While your role of Curator allows you to collaborate with major artists, as an Art Advisor you probably sift through a multitude of emerging photographers as well. When proposing new artists, how do you assess the risk linked to how their career might evolve?

K.M. There is not much risk linked with emerging artists, as they do not cost much money. Their prices are low. Moreover, when a collector has a sense of judgement, a promising never-heard-of artist might get them very excited for a quite low-price risk. When artists start to approach their mid-career or early mid-career and their prices fluctuate around 30K, the risk becomes greater, you ask yourself what is next for these artists. The art world loves young artists and

pushes them out there, until they peak at age 30 or something like that. Then it gets very tough for artists, they have to reinvent themselves or improve their craft. That phase is the trickiest from a market point of view.

F.B. Lately the awareness of a climate emergency and the evolution of capitalism has been affecting consumers'-criteria when purchasing most products. Has the heightened awareness influenced the art market in terms of volumes and trends already?

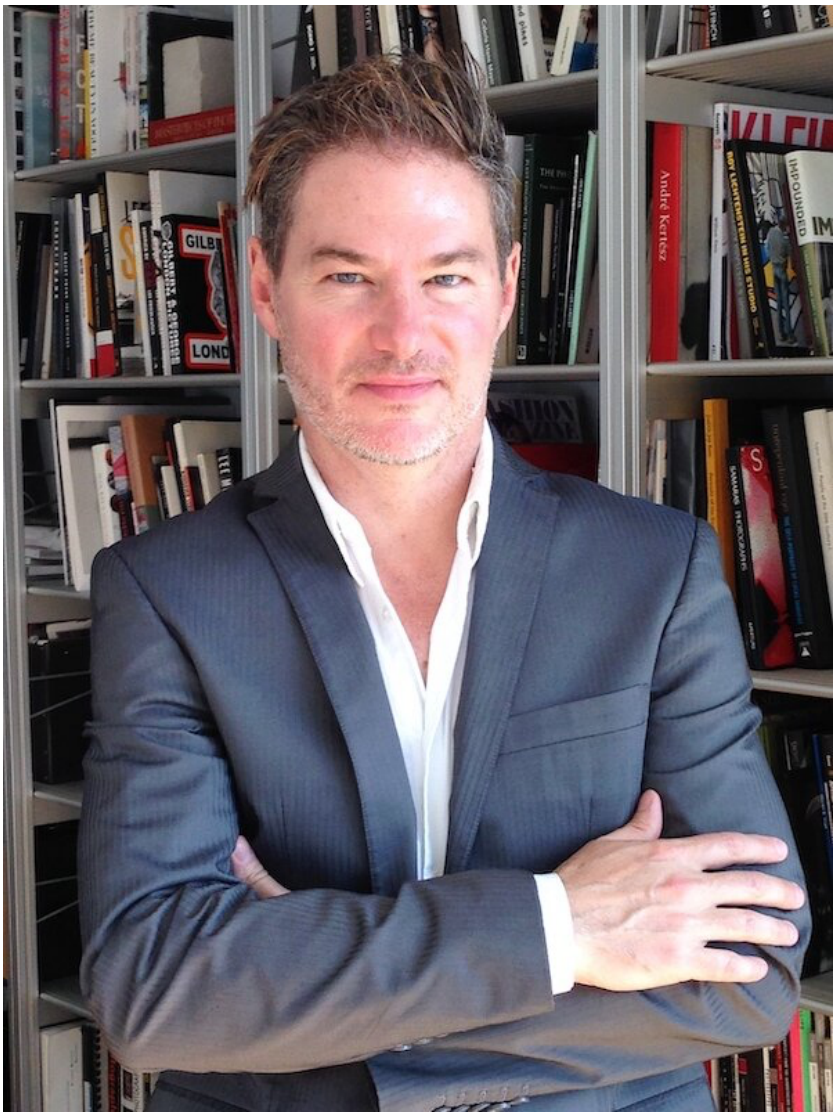
K.M. The climate subject matter is very present in photography, however I find it sometimes problematic that photographers who represent tough issues are shown at commercial art galleries for sale. They certainly make beautiful pictures with important subject matter, however you wonder whether selling these artworks and having someone hang them in their home is the best way to foster the conversation. I did notice that at the Frieze Fair that there was almost no photography. Though there was a quite problematic attempt to include Black Lives Matter and social justice in a curated exhibition within the commercial art fair (which was kind of hard to find), there is a reason why photography was not present: it confronts these issues head-on, and it feels strange that certain things *can be sold*. After all, the people who really collect have a lot of money and have not been affected by the crises, thus they might not want to buy works about the current political state. No matter how politically engaged they are, they tend to separate the two fields.

© Goshka Macuga, Make Tofu Not War, 2018 Tapestry

F.B. Photography cannot be affected completely as it is purchased as a form of luxury, and luxury is naturally concerned with beauty. Though the importance of beauty has been the subject of debates over the past century, when spending large amounts of money collectors still want an object that makes them feel good. And I do believe that beauty can be a facilitator of awareness, as some people can only be attracted towards certain issues when they are presented in a visually pleasing way.

K.M. These are often conversations meant to be had in public institutions, first and foremost. There are great works in the history of "tough art" that collectors would understandably not want to hang in their house. Photography becomes even more complicated in this regard; people are physically participating in the

making of photographs, and this makes the conversations very interesting but somehow market resistant. On the other hand, beauty has been *suspicious* in the art world for a long time. I know advisors who only look for tough and violent imagery. That kind of work is taken seriously, while beautiful pictures are seen as suspicious. There is a bias in the art world, and it is there to stay. The artists who are insistently beautiful in what they do have to push their ideas through beauty, so that people understand there is more going on beyond beauty in their photographs.



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Kevin Moore is an art advisor, curator and writer based in New York. His work focuses on the history of photography, film/video, and contemporary art. He earned a Ph.D. in art history in 2002 from Princeton University and has worked in curatorial departments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. He is the Curator of the McEvoy Collection, San Francisco, and, since 2013, the Artistic Director and Curator of FotoFocus, Cincinnati.

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