

Objects Recognized in Flashes Michele Abeles, Annette Kelm, Josephine Pryde, Eileen Quinlan

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Josephine Pryde,
Who Were You?, 2016

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How are analogue and digital images handled in our largely mediatised society? What is the state of play when it comes to the relationship between material and immateriality, between body, screen and photographic surface?

If one looks at media outlets or social platforms in digital space today, it is easy to glean the impression that the world consists primarily of goods and advertising. Products and commodity aesthetics are ubiquitous and shape our engagement with photographic images to an unprecedented degree. The omnipresence of these stagings creates imaginary standards, which have now become an integral part of permanent photographic self-presentation. The aesthetic strategies of commercial photography also have ramifications for current artistic debates. The fascination and contradictoriness that emanate from product photography are echoed in art that sheds light on the associated mechanisms of enticement and concealment, as well as turning the way it plays with desire, enjoyment, and identification against the mainstream itself.

Objects Recognized in Flashes brings together four artists who respond to the enormous significance of studio, product or fashion photography and address their production forms, distribution strategies and aesthetics in their own work. The surfaces of photographs, products, and bodies as interfaces between optics and object make the contemporary relationship between aesthetics, imagination, and matter just as worthy of interrogation as the economic mechanisms underlying this relationship, mechanisms which are also brought to the surface in some of these works. Michele Abeles, Annette Kelm, Josephine Pryde, and Eileen Quinlan each deploy manifold artistic and photographic strategies within their oeuvre, spanning a still broader spectrum when their work is viewed together. At the same time, significant connections can also be identified.

The works by Michele Abeles selected for this exhibition are based on elaborate photographic arrangements: Although these works may appear to be reliant on digital tools, most are constructed through analogue means, which often reference the aesthetics of computer/smartphone screens, with their windows, layers, and superpositions. The objects she often presents—stones, body fragments, fabrics, etc.—are set in a range of different relationships to the pictorial space through their positioning, lighting, or form. Again and again, it remains unclear whether we are dealing at all with “bodies that matter,” or are confronted instead with hollow dummies, artificial effects, images within the image. Abeles’s preoccupation with the relationship between physicality and symbolic quality against the backdrop of digitisation is carried over into photographs that depict hands, clothes, and technical devices such as card readers or anti-theft systems in retail outlets or other shops. These photos were taken on the spot and subsequently downloaded to tablets. Rephotographed from the glass displays of those devices, with isolated splashes and drops on the screens disrupting images of the economy of used goods and recycling while simultaneously indicating that Abeles’s images are themselves subject to this economy, her works render more acute questions concerning the status of the surface, set between pictoriality and tactility.

Ambivalence about the relationship between surface and space is also a tangible influence in Annette Kelm’s artistic work with studio photography and product pre-

sentations. Combined with an emphatically neutral, objective mode of photographic depiction, the way in which Kelm strips the images of markers indicating location and space imbues the objects presented with an unstable, uncanny presence. Annette Kelm's photographs are carefully balanced arrangements in the truest sense of the term: they show metal springs, scales, a basket chair standing on three legs, or shoe soles, set in front of, on, or next to boxes full of smileys, fabrics with SMS abbreviations, or colour gradients. Objects and their material tension, indicators of weight and physical utilization, stand alongside new symbols of emotionality and other communicative set pieces of our digital everyday life. Together they underpin an antagonistic interplay in which objectivity meets subjectivity while surrealism and beauty take on purported objectivity. This gives rise to scenarios that allow us to experience photography, its forms of staging, seduction, and use, and thus its economy, in all its contemporary contradictoriness. It swings into focus questions of the historical and political contextualization of the depicted objects.

Josephine Pryde periodically returns to photographing objects in the studio in her art practice. Reflective, dazzling, or fashionable surfaces, echoes of enticements for our consumer culture orientated around vision and the gaze repeatedly encounter forms of tactility, the haptic, and corporeality in her work. These two sides of one and the same thematic coin are connected and heightened in photographs such as *Sorry Not Sorry* and *For Myself 2*, both from 2016. They come from a series of works depicting points of contact between manicured hands and mobile phones, tablets, and other touch-sensitive devices, as well as the subjects' own chests. The touch-sensitive, or evocative, nature of further objects like driftwood, or gifts to the artist from her galleries, is emphasized by their inclusion in the series. Highlighting as they do this moment of contact between hand and object means the photographs cannot help but recall types of advertising shots, through the demonstrative nature of the hands in the composition. It is through coming so close to the appearance of a direct promotional strategy that Pryde attempts to demonstrate simultaneously a divergence from this type of all-over marketing. These could be just hands.

It is no coincidence that mirrors and perplexing surfaces also play a decisive role in Eileen Quinlan's work. Her *Smoke & Mirrors* series, initiated in 2004, shows what the title promises: a construct made of reflective surfaces in the midst of which smoke clouds can be seen. Her photographs contain everything required for a sensational staging of a commodity fetish: elimination or abstraction of space and the physical replaced by a spectacular weightlessness that underscores the visual qualities and fetishistic presence of objects and commodities or more generally of what is depicted. The utensils she deploys are foils, studio lights, reflectors, and other simple means familiar to all advertising photographers. The phrase "smoke and mirrors" refers to an assertion that on closer examination proves to be an illusion. These photos, which at the same time can be read as referencing historical hucksterism depict a touch of nothing, which nevertheless looks spectacular and more than attractive thanks to the lighting, "modelling," focusing, et cetera. The contradictory nature of the surface, which becomes acute here, is a leitmotif running through Eileen Quinlan's entire oeuvre. It is expressed in motifs such as artfully arranged and lit yoga mats reminiscent of abstractions of female genitals, bullet holes that evoke mass shootings and issues

in connection with American gun culture in a pane of glass or bodies pressed against glass, with which Quinlan inter alia addresses the eroticism of the aging body, along with stains, streaks, blurring, or other “pictorial disruptions” that refer to the independent life of the analogue photographic material and the materialistic flipside of forced visibility or a fetishistic product aesthetic.

The photographic works of Annette Kelm, Eileen Quinlan, Josephine Pryde and Michele Abeles - despite all their differences - express a poetization of the surface that aims to renegotiate our perception and the meanings we attach to it. In this respect, *Objects Recognized in Flashes* opens up scope for an engagement with the “distribution of the sensible” in our mediatized consumer culture that is as compelling as it is contradictory.

Whereas in the past critical art aimed to rip away societal masks to reveal the truth behind the beautiful surface appearance, we are now confronted with the insight that these masks have become our actual truth. We are captivated by photographic product stagings although—or perhaps because—we are aware of their constructed nature, functional logic, and manipulative potential. Rather than seeking to break the spell exerted by the seductive aesthetics of the surface and the illusions of commodity fetishism, *Objects Recognized in Flashes* focuses on taking the sensual fascination emanating from these sources seriously and rendering their paradoxes, potentials, and problems visible.

Curated by Matthias Michalka

The artists assembled in *Objects Recognized in Flashes* have come to enjoy wide international recognition in recent years.

Michele Abeles, born in 1977, lives & works in New York. Numerous international solo and group exhibitions, including the Lyon Biennale, Lyon; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Fridericianum, Kassel; Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Aspen Art Museum, Aspen; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Künstlerhaus, Graz; PS1/MOMA, New York and the Tate Modern, London.

Annette Kelm, born in 1975 in Stuttgart, lives and works in Berlin. Participated in the 54th Venice Biennale; numerous international solo and group exhibitions including at Kunsthalle Wien; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Ludwig Stiftung, Aachen; Kestnegergesellschaft, Hannover; Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit; Kunsthalle Zurich; Rencontre d' Arles; Witte de With, Rotterdam.

Josephine Pryde, born in 1967 in Alnwick, GB, lives and works in London and Berlin. Professor of Contemporary Art and Photography at Berlin's University of the Arts, numerous international solo and group exhibitions including at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Turner Prize Exhibition, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; ICA Philadelphia; CCA Wattis Institute of Contemporary Arts, San Francisco; Arnolfini, Bristol; Kunsthalle Bern; Kunstverein Düsseldorf; Secession, Vienna.

Eileen Quinlan, born in 1972, lives and works in Boston. Participated in the 57th Venice Biennale. Numerous international solo and group exhibitions including LUMA Foundation, Arles; Bergen Kunsthall; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Paris; The International Center for Photography, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; White Columns, New York; The White Cube Bermondsey; The Langen Foundation, Neuss; Mai 36, Zurich; Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

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