

Q+A: LUCAS BLALOCK VS. ZOE CROSER (PART 1)

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This is the fifth installment in a conversation series initiated by [Lucas Blalock](#) with contemporary artists concerning materiality in regards to current photographic practice.

[Zoe Croser](#) is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles. Her current undertaking is [The Michelle duBois Project](#); a series of investigations into the personal photographic archive of Michelle duBois, a call girl and aspiring flight attendant who worked the Pacific Rim during the 1970's and '80's. The range and depth of the archive is tremendous, owing greatly to the fact that the subject was enthralled by her own portraiture. Croser has approached this archive in ever evolving iterations that highlight the strategies and structures of fantasy as much as they expose anything concrete about Ms. duBois herself. Two independent iterations of the archive can currently be seen in Los Angeles; one as part of the California Biennial at the [Orange County Museum of Art](#), and the other, For Ur Eyes Only: The Unveiling of Michelle duBois, at the Charlie James Gallery with related events at Dan Graham, Royal Pagoda, and [EGHQ](#). This final iteration (the tenth), curated by Emma Gray, will be the last before Croser commits it to a monograph to be published by a new arm of Aperture Books next year. Work from other of the artist's projects are also currently on view in [The City Proper](#) (curated by [James Welling](#)) at Margo Leavin, also in LA.



LB: Can you talk a little about how photographs “act” as material in *The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle du Bois*? They seem to be considered as both images of someones life, but also as objects or keepsakes from that life. For me this doubles the notion of archive in that it is both an ‘archive of her’ as well as ‘her archive’. Is this something you were thinking about?

ZC: Yes it is absolutely something I am thinking about! Not only is this an 'archive of her' as well as 'her archive', but with all these different iterations/shows accumulating over the course of the project and everything gradually collapsing together, it also becomes an archive of my ever-shifting relationship to the work. This cumulative collapse will ultimately play out in the upcoming book to be published by Aperture in the Spring of 2011, where images from previous versions of the book, install shots, various reviews, the recent mock-mock up in the CA Biennial, possibly even this interview will end up as part of the larger archive. This cumulative layering of material and history, playing out through the "Kodak Promise" of every single film type, size and print, add to the impossibility of seeing the archive as a totality of 'her', or whatever various fantasies there are of 'who she is.' The fiction of the totality of 'her' mirrors the fiction of totality that the actuality of the archive can never achieve.

It is here that the materiality of the archive gets sussed out through the photographs themselves. Their (the photographs') object-ness and material-ness become paramount in the connection between the archive's own materiality and the concept of the archive specific to this historical moment of the end of the analog. There is a parallel between the unraveling of her narrative and the unraveling of the material of the narrative, of the end of the analog...Somewhat secondary to this you also have my exploring the physicality of the archive through its materials (through the backs of photographs and the fronts of albums), and furthermore, there is an interest in anything inside the image frame that references things 'kodak'. I am interested in the vernacular tropes of the amateur photographer that become the invisible layer through which you view the images themselves. Neither the 'images' nor the 'photographs' are neutral. Both get read (reconsidered, unraveled, unveiled) simultaneously against the backdrop of this perfect example of an amateur photographer known as Michelle duBois.



LB: I want to continue down this idea of the archive-at-the-end-of-the-analog and it's relationship to narrative. Do you see the digital as the end of a certain kind of narrativity? Said that way it reminds me a bit of Christopher Williams's "period piece" *For Example: Dix-Huits Leçons sur La Société Industrielle* which also comes into itself through a collection of iterations, except that where he is focused on a broad material (Marxist) history your work seems to focus on the problematics of a personal history. Maybe you could even say a personal history as it could be told/collected in the brief 'age' of analog photography?

ZC: I do want to make clear that this idea I'm working with of archive-at-the-end-of-the-analog and it's relationship to narrative was initially rooted in the impossibility of totality concerning a persons' persona (or history) in photographs. This fiction (of possible totality) as regards the archive is in fact nearly inverse in that in fact accumulation does not equal clarity but in fact compromises it. Starting off with my LAX work that played with the fiction of the 'documentary' in relation to the mapping of Los Angeles via LAX, I next wanted to extend this notion of documentary failure to a question of numbers; amounts of images and what that means. The problems I am interested in; the archive and mapping, became intertwined in this project with the problematics of the "amateur photographic history" that the duBois' archive encapsulates. All of which now seems clearly specific to a historical, pre-digital, Kodak moment.

I don't think the digital is the end of a certain kind of narrativity, but I do see it as the end of a certain physicality of the narrative. Information is always embodied, it is just that there is now distance from this type of analog embodiment that is particularly physical and messy; in this case, as messy as the content of her life and fanatical self-documentation, or what I called Autoportraiture. Not only are you dealing with the collapse of her pose over time, of the 'quality' of her image, but you are dealing with a physicalized collapse of the photograph (or film, or polaroid or print.) In the analog the way that time takes a physical toll (in all senses) is so vastly different from the digital and its comparatively immaterial relationship to history; where information be so easily deleted on the spot or forgotten on some hard drive somewhere. The problematics of the narrative and the archive are of course still present with the digital, but in such a vastly different realm.

It's also interesting that you bring up Christopher Williams as he was quite influential when I began to think about photographing the language of photography and the schism between image and objectness (Anne Collier was also very inspiring in this way). He is actually so inspirational that there are a couple of pieces from the duBois project dedicated specifically to him, *Like Mika Smiling for Christopher Williams* and *Like Mika Almost Laughing for Christopher Williams*. There was such an amazingly innocent readymade reference to Williams' faux commercial images of the ladies with the towels on their heads that I ended up extending the reference by mimicking his exact print size, mat size, frame size & type and edition size, which is always the same. This was part of an early investigation into mining the (unintentional) art historical references that duBois had (see also the Cindy-Shermanesque cluster.)

I'll have to think more about the comparison to Williams in regards to the problematics of history, but yes, I am clearly working within that realm, specifically from a feminist vantage point..



LB: That the material (c-print) mirrors the dissolution of a lifetime in the analog is a really resonant notion, and inherently gets to the sense of their being no achievable totality either in identity or in history. I feel to treat the information physically (bringing it's decaying substrate into focus) really does make for a strikingly corporeal photography which for me opens easily to certain traditions in feminism. I am interested in the way that the contemporary explorations of the analogue and it's properties really deconstruct a great deal of the popular mythology about the medium. Popularly, the photograph has often been considered in spite of it's materiality in notions of permanence and objectivity, yet from here (on the digital horizon) it seems we are all-of-the-sudden often relating to pictures through their 'bodies' as it were. I am interested in the way duBois' "amateur-ness" defines this relationship in your work. You said earlier that she was a sort of "perfect amateur photographer" and to me her relationship to the photographs production is the initial point of capture. (Who is this woman? What was she seeking by making these? etc.) I feel like amateur here comes with a fully articulated set of conventions as if it were a genre all its own (even the notes on the back feel like a convention)? Do you see this acting out as implicit in the "Kodak promise"? that she was performing not only a set of fantasy roles in her life but ones that come to necessitate photography? is this a stretch?



ZC: The wonderful thing about the word amateur is that it is based in the root word amour, meaning love. There has historically been a distinction made between the "amateur" and the "professional" in regards to art-making, with Professionalism as a concept going through an interesting bout of self-definition in the last forty years. Howard Singerman speaks a lot about this, a huge shift towards MFAs, formalizing art production, the system of a monied art world dictating terms of production on all levels. This simple and very misleading dichotomy, to make something out of "love" or to make a "living" is also encapsulated in the Postmodern discussion of High/Low art and the questioning (and resulting collapsing of) that so-90s question of selling out. It begs the larger question, how is art judged? In the amateur world, there is no assumption of judgment, or at least no perception of one, and this supposed liberation is key to reading the duBois work.

Her amateur 'liberation' is indeed conventional, all amateur things are, because one lets go any assumption of criticality and can therefore be "free" to do whatever it is they want, from stamp collecting to pole dancing to photographing oneself in many Mae-West like poses all over Asia in the 70s and 80s. This fantasy duBois has of herself, the "freedom", is seen in the quality and, most importantly, the numbers of her photographs. And I agree with your "stretch" – there is no question her fantasy relationship to herself is inextricably caught up with assumptions of the photographic (and the cinematic), especially in relationship to feminism and to how women have been photographed/objectified/posed/etc.

The project swings back around when duBois' agency gets complicated by her relationship to her means of production – she was completely in charge of every aspect of the image, from the materials to the pose to the keeping of the photographic stuffness that begs this embodied question of the digital horizon. The crazy part about the whole thing is that the viewer isn't sure whether the/her/my intent is cynical or not, and that confusion is especially profound. She has all the hallmarks of "art" yet her "work" was made without any self-reflexive relationship to that. Perhaps self-reflexivity is a key to that amateur/professional distinction.

LB: I thought we might leave off this installment w/ an extended quote from Claude Levi-Strauss that I came across in Ann Reynolds book on Robert Smithson. I feel like it has a lot of relevance here. She quotes: "The virtue of archives is to put us in contact with pure historicity. As I have already said about myths concerning the origin of totemic appellations, their value does not lie in the intrinsic significance of the events evoked: these can be insignificant or even entirely absent, if what is in question is a few lines of autograph or a signature out of context. But think of the value of Johann Sebastian Bach's signature to one who cannot hear a bar of his music without a quickening of his pulse. As for events themselves, I have pointed out that they are attested otherwise than by the authentic documents, and generally better. Archives thus provide something else: on the one hand they constitute events in their radical contingency (since only interpretation, which forms no part of them, can ground them in reason), and, on the other, they give a physical existence to history, for in them alone is the contradiction of a completed past and a present in which it survives, surmounted..."



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