

frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture

Issue 131 May 2010




Anne Collier / Tariq Alvi / Rudolf Stingel
***Interviews* – Nairy Baghramian / Vincent Fecteau**
***Survey* – Reasons to be Cheerful!**
***Questionnaire* – Ernesto Neto**

UK £5.95 US \$10 €10





Woman with a Camera
(Cheryl Tiegs/Olympus 1)
2008
C-type print
81x108 cm



Pictures of You

Anne Collier's photographs of images
and objects focus on the stylized
vehicles of expectation and desire
by Dan Fox

You could say Anne Collier makes photographs of ocean sunsets, eyes, women with cameras, famous people crying, famous people crying and other artists' works. You could also say she makes photographs of posters, record sleeves, magazine covers, spreads from books on photography, developing trays, cassette tapes and boxes full of jigsaw pieces. In both instances you'd be right, but only half-right.

Half-right because both lists describe the same thing. Collier makes economic and dead-pan photographs of album covers that feature people smoking or crying; of jigsaw pieces from a Roy Lichtenstein or Jackson Pollock painting puzzle; of the pervy covers of technical magazines depicting female models wielding cameras in erotically suggestive ways. She photographs photographs of eyes – in books, in developing trays, from movie stills – and sunsets and celebrities reprinted on posters or in magazine spreads. These are still-life studies of the distribution vehicles of desire and power. That Collier gives us photographs of unspooled self-help tapes and pages from New Age therapy books is a pretty big hint that her photographs are also about the comforts these apparatuses provide and the unrealistic expectations they instill.

These vehicles for images – magazines, posters, LPs, books – are given centre stage,

photographed flat against a white or black background, or propped on a black floor against a white wall. Collier's photographs speak in the deluxe vernacular of fashion and product photography, a visual language that either shows its subjects in places of extreme desirability – in chicly appointed apartments owned by impossibly beautiful people – or, as in the case of Collier's images, in a kind of clinically pristine nowhere, as if these items of desirability have emerged from

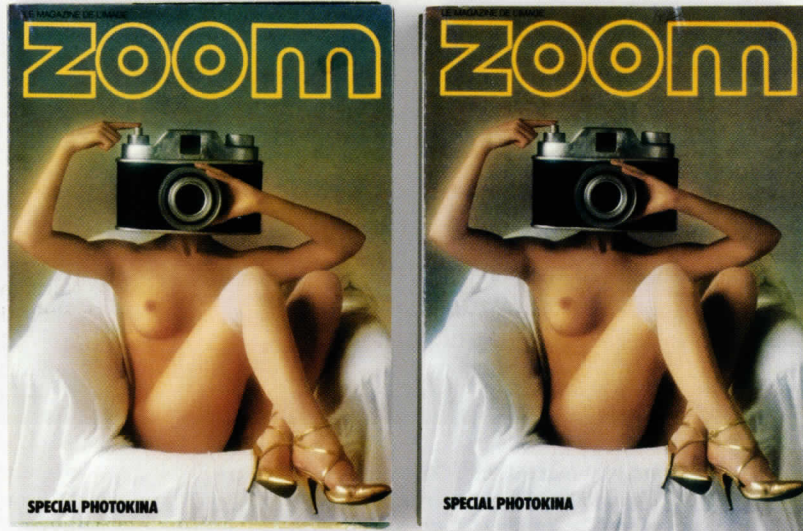
For all their glossiness, the objects Collier photographs are marked by a human touch – the record sleeves are careworn, the books marked with Post-its.

some divine alternate dimension of perfect skin, flat lighting and pure, white infinity curves. When Collier photographs black carpeting, it's of such inky depth that if you stare long enough at the image, you become unsure whether you're looking at an object propped up against a studio wall or hovering against a black and white abstract landscape.

Her subjects could all be described in some sense as 'glossy' – glossy photography monographs, glossy art or fashion magazines depicting glossy-looking people – that adjective so often used derisively by those who think of themselves as immune to its aesthetic seductions and whatever ideology they imagine that particular category of print represents. But for all their glossiness, the objects Collier photographs are marked by a human touch – the record sleeves are careworn, the book spreads marked with Post-it notes, the posters folded. Nothing is new here; they're charity-shop bargains or hand-me-downs from older siblings. They've been subjected to that helpless scopophilia with which we tend to treat the images that live in our domestic surroundings. Her images speak of holding and staring at a record sleeve whilst listening to the music that came with it in the hope that the longer you ogle whatever surreal, funny, sexy or glamorous design it sports, the more chance there is of it somehow yielding its secrets to you. Or sitting in a grim studio flat gazing at that poster of the sun setting over the ocean and wishing that, just for a moment, you might be transported there. But these aren't works of appropriation, since they don't wear the cloak of the image they depict – they're not trying to pass themselves off as anything other than photographs of objects that carry



May/June 2009
(Cindy Sherman, Mark Seliger)
2009
C-type print
104x130 cm



Zoom 1978
2009
C-type print
100×124 cm

photographs. Collier's work hints at why these kinds of images are constructed in the first place – what, for example, is going on in the image of Madonna seen in *Folded Madonna Poster* (Steven Meisel) (2007) or why is Judy Garland crying in *Untitled, Light Years* (Douglas Kirkland) (2009) – but they seem more concerned with what happens after we've got our grubby hands on them.

The objectified female subject who appears in many of Collier's photographs suggests that those grubby hands more often than not belong to men. One category she returns to is European photography magazines from the 1970s and '80s – journals full of dull technical data about f-stops and film speeds, but fronted with cover shots of glamorous women, used to shift copies off the newsstand. Some issues use naked women to traffic in a crude visual economy of sexual objectification – the most grim semiotic compression of which can be seen in the creepy, soft-focus *Zoom 1978* (2009) in which the model's head is replaced with a camera as if it and her body were both commodities of equal value. But alongside these there is another category – seen in *Woman with a Camera* (Cheryl Tiegs/Olympus 1) (2008), *Women with Cameras* (German Photography) (2007) and *Woman with a Camera* (Diptych) (2006) – in which the woman on the cover is play-acting



Folded Madonna Poster
(Steven Meisel)
2007
C-type print
126×155 cm

the role of a go-getting professional photo-journalist, emancipated in the media work-force by the latest SLR technology, or is cast as a serious commercial photographic artist like Faye Dunaway in *Eyes of Laura Mars*, the 1978 film in which she plays a fashion photographer who specializes in violent *mises-en-scènes*. Here is a much more curious intersection of ideas of feminist liberation with the consumer economy.

Throw into the mix *May/June 2009 (Cindy Sherman, Mark Seliger)* (2009) – two copies of *Luomo Vogue* featuring Cindy Sherman on the cover, dressed in white shirt and black tie and holding a cigarette – and we have a complex web of relationships at play. A matrix in which the gazes of real and fictional women photographers ricochet off each other – the reality of a profession bouncing off clichéd depictions of it most probably thought up by men – or one in which a successful older artist best known for a series of photographs in which she assumed the character of a variety of movie heroines and female archetypes is fixed by the forensic stare of a younger artist. The younger artist allows the older one to appear as herself but only as a circulating image within a consumer economy of aspiration and desire. Plus, Sherman is smoking – a category that appears elsewhere in Collier's work, denoting a kind of old-fashioned generic cool – and, just to make the referential layers even more dizzying, is known for a photograph of herself crying.

Men appear less frequently than women in Collier's work, but they too represent their own clichés of masculinity or hetero- and homosexuality. Take, for example, Jack Nicholson smouldering in *Folded Jack Nicholson Poster (One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest)* (2007). Jack is scowling from behind a chain-link fence; it's very clear that he's unavailable. The poster is also signed 'Randle Patrick McMurphy', the name of his character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as if to say 'I'm not who you think I am'. This is in contrast to the image of the Madonna poster, in which the predatory angle from which the singer is shot suggests sexual availability and intimate pillow talk, even if the folds in the poster indicate that she's intimate with you and 20 million others. Or there's the French

*Untitled
(This Charming Man)*
2009
C-type print
118×156 cm



actor, Jean Marais, who Collier represents in *Untitled (This Charming Man)* (2009) on the cover of The Smiths' record 'This Charming Man' (1983). Here, Marais is seen in a still from Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (Orpheus, 1950) appearing to be in love with his own reflection, but recast as the cover star to a cult 1980s band's song about clandestine homosexual desire, where the classy, romantic cachet of a French art-house film is bartered in the economy of post-punk record labels and lonely bedsit aspiration. Marais becomes a Narcissus who doesn't mind who he shares his reflection with.

The objects that appear in Collier's photos are all products of the age of print, a world of paper circulation.

Here, of course, is where we could really wax theoretical about 'the gaze'. We could talk about your gaze at Collier's gaze, or Seliger's gaze at Sherman, or an eye or a sunset. Or all those images of eyes peering back out at us from book spreads or emerging from developing trays. Or what it means for Collier as a female art photographer to put an alpha-male fashion photographer such as Meisel and an A-list female pop icon such as Madonna under the same spotlight. But in gazing so hard into each other's eyes we might miss the invisible hands that are circulating these images. The objects that appear in Collier's photos are all products of the age of print, a world of paper circulation – the quartered folds in the Madonna poster or the worn corners of her album sleeve images tell us that. (That Collier's photos belong in their own class of print/object economy, that of desirable contemporary art works, adds a further complicated layer of fetish meaning to the images.) Her subjects don't have the weightlessness of Internet or peer-shared camera-phone digital images, or the backlit glow that keeps such photographs permanently fresh. (It's interesting to think that a decade from now there may no longer be such a thing as a foxed or faded photograph, although graphics software such as Photoshop persists in providing filters that allow us to pretend there is.) As analogue objects, they're better placed than digital images to remind us that the hands they pass through are yours and mine, valuing them as information or status symbols or whatever use you have for them. But they also pass into our hands from those who understand that money, in order to make the world go round, sometimes needs something to attach itself to.

The types of images that Collier uses mostly share the same pop-cultural emptiness, just specific enough to intrigue – someone crying, a gorgeous sunset – but also generic enough to allow any individual to invest their own emotions in them. ('That

*Open Book #1
(Crépuscules)*
2009
C-type print
112×150 cm



poor person crying – *I know how they must feel.* 'Look at that full moon over the sea – just like our holiday in Marbella two years ago!') They work the same trick as the lyrics to a well-tuned pop song, open-ended enough to allow anyone to get involved, at which point the trap is sprung: the sense that the song about new-found love or heartbreak that exactly describes your own feelings is so uncanny you really should go to iTunes and buy it. Indirectly, these works are about the mechanics of cheap emotion, the idea that if a piece of music or film or art moves you to a heightened emotional state, then that is a mark of its quality, rather than the effect of a few easy tricks.

Collier comes at this idea from a different angle in her images of pages from New Age self-help books and cassette tapes (like printed magazines and papers, audio tape is another distribution technology on its way down the road to obsolescence). In *My Goals for One Year* (2007), we see, against a black background, a booklet open at a double-page spread printed with a number of sub-headings such as 'Career or job position', 'Salary or earnings' and 'Spirituality', under each of which there is space for someone to fill in their personal targets. Similarly in *I Wish For?* (2008), under the header 'What Do You Wish For?' and a friendly drawing of a shooting star, a self-help manual tells us that: 'One of the best ways to receive psychic guidance is to organize your goals and desires and create a wish list of those things that are most important to you now.' It leaves space for you to note down 21 wishes. *Beautiful Moments (Detail)* (2007) gives us another variation – a shot of a deep blue ocean, over which is printed the legend: 'Beautiful are those moments of togetherness when two people feel a real respect for the very differences between their personalities that made each of them a unique individual.' Put these alongside the images of sunsets and moon-rises and we start to get another sense of the way something generic allows for deep emotional investment. This is the sorry end of 1960s counter-cultural idealism: the dream of individual freedom and self-realization bought out and sold off as self-help therapy and *prêt-à-porter* ideology. ('You're all individuals!' 'Yes, we're all individuals!' as Monty Python put it in their 1979 film, *The Life of Brian*.) It is a pernicious promise of happiness that can't really be achieved, and which only leads into further spirals of self-dissatisfaction since it casts happiness as the 'normal' state, and all those complex anxieties that make us interesting human beings somehow 'abnormal'. But it certainly helps keep those posters of Californian beaches, the deep blue yonder and messages of beautiful togetherness in circulation. That the end of the rainbow is tantalizingly out-of-reach is reinforced by the physical form of Collier's photographs; high-production prints, framed and pressed behind glass – these aren't self-help questionnaires you could fill in, even if you wanted to.

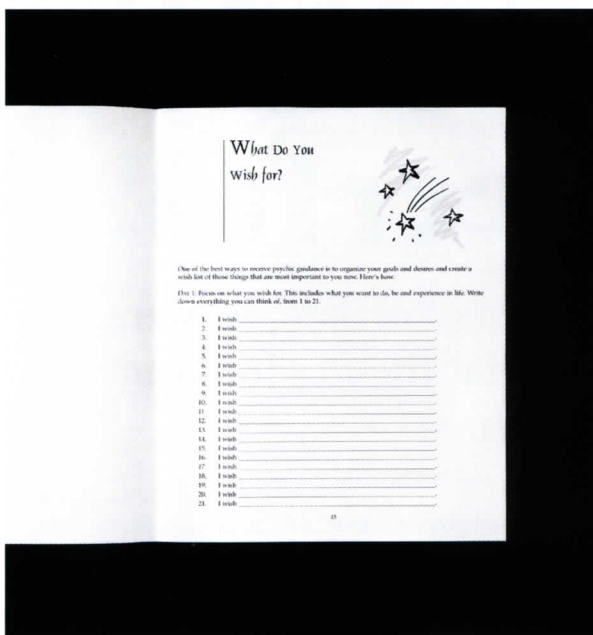
You could say Collier's photographs show us the stuff that dreams are made of; if, that is, those dreams are made of lights, make-up, film stock, developing fluids, glossy paper and printed cardboard.

Dan Fox is senior editor of *frieze*. He lives in New York, USA.



Eye (Enlargement of Color Negative)

2007
C-type print
142x150 cm



**Left:
I Wish**
2008
C-type print
127x119 cm

**Below:
Smoking 3**
2005
C-type print
103x128 cm

