

# Hard Copy / Soft Image

**“Did you get your precious photos?”**

—Roy Batty, *Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott, 1982

## **Prologue: Little Yellow Huts**

In 1965, miniature homesteading cabins with yellow rooftops bearing the neologism *Fotomat* in bright blue letters began to inhabit the vast asphalt landscapes of the new American malls, supermarkets, and shopping centers. As an outpost for the industrial complex of popular image making and a curbside depository for everyday memories, each yellow hut processed the American experience into neatly packaged envelopes that read, “Our business is good pictures.”

At the prime of their utility, Fotomats numbered over four thousand, an expansion fueled by car culture, suburbanization, and America’s booming service society. When Fotomats rapidly began to close in the final decade of the twentieth century, it was a sign that a fundamental shift in our relationship to the photographic print had occurred. As data replaced chemistry and lab processing became desktop programming, scores of derelict Fotomats, artifacts of photography’s material era, were left idle across the land. Each abandoned structure stood as a *memento mori* for the material image and the printed memory.

## **After Material: Considering the Photo Book in the Present Tense.**

The parameters of the material print and its processes have ceased to be determining factors for how the contemporary photograph operates. Physical location, material properties, and chemical procedures are no longer of immediate consequence to the medium. In the photograph’s two-decade-long transition to immateriality, visual representation has been freed from the limitations of location, distribution, and reproduction, while meaning has shifted in conjunction with the removal of the material factors that formerly controlled its reception.

The immaterial image does not reproduce, copy, or re-photograph; instead, it distributes, multiplying through vast and indeterminable channels that aggregate and circulate imagery without concern for hierarchy, authorship, or origin. In this space, there are no means to permanently tether images to fixed starting points or intentions; the image’s meaning is made as fluid as the innumerable instances of its perpetual recontextualization. Across these densely trafficked channels, the specific meaning and history of any image are hewn through a process of continual reassignment.

Two primary categories of image operate within these soft channels of distribution: the purely immaterial image, which originated as data, and the

archived image, which occurred as material and has been transferred into data. Once redistributed, both categories of image are circulated out of hierarchical and authorial contexts, their individual statuses are equalized, and their meanings are divorced from a fixed indexicality.

This transition to immateriality permanently alters the receiver's perception of the image, changing our expectation of an image's degree of malleability and accessibility. As all forms of information gathering have steadily shifted to immaterial resources such as the Internet, databases, and electronic archives, the receiver has developed an expectation that all imagery should operate without the limitations of location, distribution, and reproduction. Further, the receiver has begun to impose the language of the immaterial onto his/her material experiences, viewing the fixed and tactile world through the lens of a malleable and infinite (virtual) world. In this constant negotiation between the hard copy and the soft image, material imagery becomes increasingly foreign to our intuitive expectations of how visual content should operate.

Under these conditions, a book of photographs (hereafter a photo book) can no longer maintain its status as a visual document that indexes a fixed material origin. The photo book is therefore at risk of becoming little more than a cultural accoutrement—a mere prop in relation to its ever-circulating soft image counterpart. This shift in status is best illustrated through some unexpected avenues, such as the fantasy space of the contemporary interior design catalog, in which the careful placement of a weighty coffee table book, lean monograph, or boxy pictorial compendium is presented as fashionable and in good taste. Or consider the precisely curated boutiques that display publications flat upon tabletops, offering the book as an object of art rather than a purveyor of content. Although these examples may seem trite, it is their unabashed relish of the photo book as cultural signifier and fetish object that foreshadows the role of a format no longer responsible for visual investigation, historical record, or scholarship in its material form.

Given, then, that the photo book is no longer a self-contained, stand-alone document and record, it will have to redefine its role within contemporary terms if it is to reassert its relevance. The photo book will need to resist its status as prop and product in order to offer new terms through which to be considered alongside its soft counterparts.

It is here that Mark Wyse's *Seizure* emerges as an example of how to get beyond the discordant simultaneity of hard copy and soft image. *Seizure* operates unlike its predecessors. Its content does not represent a collection of photographic explorations; its intent is not to catalogue one photographer's tastes, nostalgias, or narratives; and its order does not function as a gallery of discrete works. Instead, *Seizure* is a transitional gesture: it builds a case for how representation can operate after materiality. As a photographic project, it acknowledges the contemporary conditions of distribution and operates concurrently with the immaterial images trafficked across the soft channels of Internet and mobile technologies. To properly engage with *Seizure*, the viewer must move beyond the language of material production, distribution, and appropriation in order to recognize how the conditions of hyper-aggregation and continual recirculation

are defining photography's post-material paradigm, and in what way these shifts in meaning are reflected within Wyse's work.

Wyse forms a photographic practice that reconciles itself with soft media without relying on a stylistic, aesthetic, or formal likeness to those technologies. Instead, Wyse's works maintain a simultaneous dialog with both the hard copy and the soft image by residing in the liminal space between the fixed position of material presence and the fluid position of immaterial movement—a space in which pictorial equivalences can be assigned to disparate images that, if left to scatter across media, might individually fall into the murky arenas of nostalgia, taste, or personal narrative.

Within this space between the fixed position of material presence and the fluid position of immaterial movement, the sequencing of *Seizure* functions as a concrete device, an organizational system for the juxtaposition and serialization of images. Aware of its soft counterparts, *Seizure* uses the folding of pages to mimic the folding of time, thus choreographing a collapse of personal, social, and formal concerns. In direct response to the plasticity of the online aggregate, *Seizure* embraces linearity and rigidity as a form of critique. By approaching layout as formal strategy, Wyse gives the most rudimentary elements of the photo book renewed meaning. For example, we find the cover as title; the first, second, and third images as preface; the blank page as pause; and the this-beside-that of opposing pages as a structural element in support of the total form. The movement between images—impressions of one image grafted onto another through the turning of pages—forms the poem, the essay, and the archive of *Seizure*.

Four meditations on *Seizure*:

*A sunburned monstera plant sags pathetically towards the lens; a landlocked giant kelp lies dormant along the shore, its float cracked open; a carefully framed section of earth delineates a geometric study in light. A stutter of natural forms is made anthropomorphic, symbolic, diagrammatic.*

*Budding trees, a crashing wave, and a swimsuit model against cobalt sky, operate like flashcards, disrupting and enhancing each other. Her pink bathing suit and heavily jeweled ears, remnants of an economy past, cause images of nature to be trumped by new desires.*

*A Cartier sign—a symbol of luxury in black metal relief on a marble slab. On the facing page, a carefully framed bed of impatiens, planted in a grid, planted into a corner. A mirroring rendered through the juxtaposition of two images—both false, both planted.*

*An image of a woman repeats: as person, as friend, as mother, and as figure on the landscape, then a sudden break in the form of a rigid mannequin—a fake that uncovers all of the flesh that precedes it.*

Although we have learned to take images of things for granted due to their abundance and their utter banality, Wyse's images refuse to go quietly, read easily, or wholly fulfill our desires. *Seizure* is just what its title claims: an unexpected rupture and refusal, an outburst, a critical gesture articulated in material form as a means of contending with the immaterial paradigm—a gentle anarchy.

*Seizure* offers a carefully composed rupture that argues for the viewer to reconsider photographic representations of places, people, objects, and ideas from a position predicated on a shared axis of popular imagery, private expression, and personal histories. Wyse's position establishes terms wherein old, new, never-before-seen, and completely exhausted images can operate along a contiguous visual strand. By establishing terms capable of responding and reacting to the immaterial aggregation of soft images, *Seizure* emancipates the representations of place, person, object, and idea from the material paradigm, thereby creating a new foundation from which to reconsider the printed image: the hard copy.

Charlie White

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