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aperture

Curriculum

A List of Favorite Anythings

by Moyra Davey and Jason Simon

Through her celebrated works in photography, video, and writing, Moyra Davey melds literary references—from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jean Genet—with personal histories. Her “mailer” project, made up of letters in the form of photographs, was exhibited at the 2012 Whitney Biennial. Her partner, Jason Simon, is a media and documentary artist. He took on the controversial 2002 shuttering of the Museum of Modern Art’s Film Stills Archive, and presented both sides of the story in a multifaceted exhibition. Among the links between Davey and Simon is an expansive curiosity about photographs as material objects, evidence, and cultural history.

Boyd McDonald

Boyd McDonald (1925–1993), editor and publisher of the zine *Straight to Hell*, made the most eloquent sport of spotting social and sexual hypocrisy in films, watching black-and-white broadcast reruns via a rabbit-ear antenna in his SRO room for research. The result was *Cruising the Movies*, originally published in 1985. The prolific artist William E. Jones has recovered and rebuilt McDonald’s story—contributing an introduction to the reprint of *Cruising* and a biography, *True Homosexual Experiences: Boyd McDonald and “Straight to Hell”* (2016)—as a waymark of lusting, watching, and the radically democratic force of smut.

Ydessa Hendeles

Ydessa Hendeles wears many hats: gallerist, collector, curator, writer, artist. *Partners* (2003–4), a monumental exhibition at the Haus der Kunst, Munich (the venue infamous for hosting Hitler’s Degenerate Art show in 1937), consisted of works precisely staged to build an alternative history of the Holocaust. Hendeles’s signature mark is showing traditional journalism and photography alongside cutting-edge contemporary art without making a distinction. *Partners*, now a book, contains Hendeles’s renowned *Teddy Bear Project* and indelible images by photojournalists Malcolm Brown and Eddie Adams in dialogue with works by On Kawara, Hanne Darboven, and Maurizio Cattelan, to name a few. It is an erudite, multiform essay from the hand of an obsessive auteur.

Deana Lawson

The very “real” black bodies in Deana Lawson’s photographs come with a strong element of theatricality. Posed in domestic settings or Edenic nature, Lawson’s framings nonetheless evoke staged, enigmatic tableaux. Take *Cowboys* (2014), a cinematic night shot: two riders emerge from an inky sky; the horses exhibit the whites of their eyes; chaps, hat, and bandana are well worn. Lawson’s statement about countering violent images of black men seen in today’s media with celebrations of black rodeo riders makes us imagine the horse opera we’re dying to see.

Billy Hough

Provincetown, Massachusetts, still feels like the artist colony it began as, thanks to a shrinking number of stalwarts, principally among them Billy Hough. His sessions at the piano, with ever-present bassist Sue Goldberg and occasional guests, typically cover renditions of beloved albums or make studies of brilliant contrasts (one recent show mashed up Tom Waits and Eminem). His musical abilities alone would serve the scene, but Billy adds monologues that make every show feel like we’ve never understood a tune until he plays it.

Xavier Dolan

Xavier Dolan’s films *I Killed My Mother* (2009) and *Mommy* (2014) both feature his star collaborator, Anne Dorval. They are heartbreaking and hilarious in equal measure. Dolan, a twenty-seven-year-old wunderkind, takes daring chances in his films. *Mommy*, the story of a mother’s relationship with her delinquent, charismatic son, Steve, is shot in 1:1 aspect ratio, a square in the middle of the screen. The frame signals the ways Steve’s world has boxed him in. Then, in moments of ecstasy, friendship, and bonding, the screen magically expands, a direct and totally unexpected use of a frame like we have never seen.

Hervé Guibert

Ghost Image (1996), Hervé Guibert’s collection of short, idiosyncratic texts on photography, is particularly memorable for its essays on “lost” photographs—instances where the film did not advance or Guibert did not have his camera on hand. Guibert (1955–1991) was a prolific writer of criticism, novels, and diaries—*The Mausoleum of Lovers: Journals 1976–1991* (2014), for example—and a brilliant photographer: our favorites are of his desk or couch, strewn with implements and evidence of writing, as though finding those same lost photographs in another state.

Janet Malcolm

The more photography rushes in to fill the gaps of an inflated art market, the more the air feels sucked out of its discourse. We consume Janet Malcolm’s magazine articles with such greed and pleasure that we wonder at the missing critical currency of her writing on “the enigma of photography.” Her essays from the 1970s, when she was a photography critic for *The New Yorker*, are full of air, and light, and jeweled insights. We return to her 1980 collection, *Diana and Nikon: Essays on the Aesthetic of Photography*, over and over, a reminder that the bond between photography and writing, more than combined powers of observation, is an essential imaginary.

Dayanita Singh and Aveck Sen

Dayanita Singh’s books contain precisely chosen and sequenced photographs and are often accompanied by writer Aveck Sen’s texts. Singh, who photographs mostly in black and white, has an incredible eye for light, texture, and framing, and an enviable ability to get in close on her human subjects. Recently, she has adopted the novel practice of exhibiting the books themselves, framed, or not, or inserted into freestanding sculptural units. Sen’s writing is not “critical,” but consists of highly imaginative texts that exist alongside Singh’s work, sometimes intersecting, sometimes not. Singh and Sen together form a hugely seductive combination.

Billy Monk

Photography’s lost practitioners regularly emerge through images recovered in flea markets, auctions, and abandoned storage. Billy Monk, a bouncer and photographer at the notorious Cape Town nightclub the Catacombs in the late 1960s, was one such discovery. In 1979, the photographer Jac de Villiers discovered Monk’s negatives and contact sheets and immediately recognized their value. Three years later, Monk was murdered on his way to the first exhibition of his photographs, adding dramatic closure to a bizarre career. We live with a handful of Monk’s astonishing images of barroom abandon: apartheid portraiture in its heyday, wasted working-class whites on benders, a decade before the liberation struggle in South Africa came knocking in force.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Nancy Crampton, Janet Malcolm, New York City, 1981; still from *Mommy*, 2014; cover of Boyd McDonald, *Cruising the Movies: A Sexual Guide to Oldies on TV*, 2015; Deana Lawson, *Cowboys*, 2014; Dayanita Singh, *File Museum*, 2012; Billy Monk, #32. *The Catacombs*, 1967

Clockwise from top left: Nancy Champton; © the artist; Mummig; © Roadside Attractions and courtesy PhotoFest; Deana Lawson; Courtesy the artist, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, and Sikkema, Jenkins & Co.; Dayanita Singh; © the artist and courtesy Frith Street Gallery; Billy Monic; Courtesy Papasa

