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Altered States

BY **RICHARD B. WOODWARD**

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<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/article-2003.jpg>

Alec Soth's subject in *Falls #26*, 2005, is a staple of American art—and one of the world's most photographed sites.

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The year 2005 may be remembered as a watershed in the history of photography, a crucial date when one generation of artists lifted off into blue sky while another was brought down to earth, left once again to ponder its slave-master relationship to technology.

When **Kodak** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/kodak/>) announced last June that it would no longer manufacture black-and-white printing papers, the decision did more than terminate 117 years of production. By severing a vital supply line long taken for granted,

the company reminded photographers of their humbling dependence on equipment and materials—and how quickly both they and the equipment and materials can go out of date. Painters endure regular critical warnings that brushing pigment on canvas is irrelevant, but at least they can work their entire lives without fear of their basic tools becoming obsolete.

“I’d been expecting it but not quite believing it would come to pass,” says photographer **Tod Papageorge** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/tod-papageorge/>), who, at 66, can’t remember a time when Kodak Polycontrast paper didn’t exist.

The gloomy tidings from Rochester were followed a few months later by news that **Agfa** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/agfa/>) was bankrupt. For artists who had regarded the German company as a buffer against the hegemony of Kodak, this announcement provoked an even deeper crisis. “I can’t tell you how many panicked e-mails I received asking me if I knew where to find Agfa fiber papers,” says **Lesley A. Martin** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/lesley-a-martin/>), executive book editor of the Aperture Foundation. Those who had relied on Ilford were able to counsel the bereaved: the world’s largest manufacturer of black-and-white papers had already gone bankrupt in 2004.

All this red ink splashed across the business pages only confirmed what analysts had predicted for more than a decade: the future of photography is no longer controlled by makers of paper, film, darkroom chemicals, and enlargers, but by Intel, Apple, Hewlett-Packard, Epson, and the information companies. Still, the prospect of giant corporations on their knees before the new rulers of the digital age was a sobering lesson.

For those who scan their images instead of making contact sheets, and who in overwhelming numbers prefer to shoot and print in color rather than in monochrome, the crumbling of the industrial order has been far less traumatic. Besides, other signs indicate that the state of photography is decidedly healthy, especially when it comes to the acceptance of the medium outside its own borders.

Photographers are orbiting closer to the magnetic core of the art world than ever before. Collectors are willing to pay higher and higher prices for prized images. At Christie’s contemporary-art sales in November, **Richard Prince** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/richard-prince/>)’s 1989 *Untitled (Cowboy)* sold for \$1.2 million, a record for a photograph at auction and one of the highest prices ever achieved by any youngish (Prince is 56) living artist.

“You can’t have a show about contemporary art anymore without having photography as a central element,” says Sandra Phillips, director of the photography department at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Art photographers are now gossiped about on television, with Cindy Sherman and Gregory Crewdson rating mentions by the snarky art

students in the HBO series *Six Feet Under*. Larry Gagolian has added Alec Soth and Sally Mann to his roster of heavyweights.

For the computer literate, the benefits of digitization have been huge. Every ambitious photographer, with or without a gallery, has a Web site. The unclogging of the editorial bottleneck, a problem that until the late '90s prevented most images from being widely disseminated, has transformed how picture magazines make assignments and museums review portfolios.

At the same time, the globalization of images afforded by the Internet seems only to have heightened the urge felt by many artists to frame work for galleries and organize it in books. The recent explosion in the number of photography titles can be seen in part as a result of—and a reaction against—the expanding digital universe. Computer scans and desktop layouts have slashed production costs, lowering the barriers to publishing. But with billions of images floating around the Web and on cell phones, there seems to be an even more pressing desire to ground them on sheets of paper.

Darius Himes (<https://www.artnews.com/t/darius-himes/>), book editor for *Photo-Eye*, a quarterly based in Santa Fe, has watched the surge in photography books and estimates that he now has to choose from among 300 for review every year—“important, interesting, or beautiful books, not coffee-table books,” he emphasizes.

Impressive boutique operations in the United States and Europe—Blindspot, Boot, D.A.P., Nazraeli, Parkett, powerHouse, Steidl, Trolley, Twelvetimes, Twin Palms, Umbrage, and a rejuvenated Aperture—as well as Osiris in Japan, are pumping out serious photography titles at a pace that matches, or exceeds, the output from M.I.T., Yale, New Mexico, California, and other university presses, and from the more established art publishers Abrams, Bulfinch, Phaidon, Prestel, Rizzoli, Taschen, and Thames & Hudson. Himes believes that editors at several of these smaller houses have become curators of sorts. “You can see their tastes and interests in the lists they develop over the years,” he says.

The history of photography, unlike that of painting and sculpture, is bound up, literally and figuratively, with books. William Henry Fox Talbot, Jacob Riis, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Larry Clark, William Eggleston, and Nan Goldin are only a few of the artists whose original prints have exercised far less influence than the reproductions in their books.

Museums and publishers in recent years have underlined this distinct aspect of the medium with a series of exhibitions and catalogues devoted to books with photographs. The publication in 2001 of *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century*, edited by New York book dealer Andrew Roth and published by Roth Horowitz, was topped in 2004 by the even more comprehensive first volume of *The*

Photobook: A History, by photographer Martin Parr and critic Gerry Badger, published by Phaidon. Last summer, New York's International Center of Photography continued the trend with the exhibition "The Open Book: A History of the Photographic Book from 1878 to the Present," produced by Hasselblad.

Daile Kaplan at Swann Galleries in New York, where records for photographic books have routinely fallen lately (the French edition of Hans Bellmer's 1936 *La Poupée*, for example, fetched \$41,400 in December), says that the Roth and Parr/Badger histories have stimulated a "crossover interest for out-of-print photographically illustrated books among photograph collectors."

Business considerations may also be behind the dramatic growth in new titles. Books are increasingly being financed by artists themselves (or their dealers) as a career investment. "A book is a calling card that's harder for people to throw away," one young photographer says. Publishing a monograph is seen as a necessary step toward exhibition in a gallery, and today's young photography students are nothing if not market savvy.

Collectors of contemporary art have shown themselves willing to pay high prices for photographs ever since the spring 2000 auction at Sotheby's New York, when Cindy Sherman's 1989 *Untitled* (#209) sold for a stunning \$269,750. Last year, Hiroshi Sugimoto's 1999 *Henry VIII* (in seven parts) went for \$744,000 at Christie's contemporary sale in November, elevating the artist into the company of Thomas Demand, Rineke Dijkstra, Robert Frank, Goldin, Andreas Gursky, Irving Penn, Prince, Sherman, Thomas Struth, and Jeff Wall, each of whom has sold a photograph at auction for more than \$150,000.

New York dealer **Lucy Mitchell-Innes** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/lucy-mitchell-innes/>), who ran the contemporary-art department at Sotheby's in the 1980s, has observed that the multiple nature of photographic prints no longer bothers collectors. "People now want to own pictures that other people own," she says. "That's a major shift, and photography is one reason why."

The record-breaking Prince photograph was not a unique print. Number one in an edition of two, the large (50 by 70 inches), grainy reproduction of a Marlboro ad was well known, having been reprinted many times. Whether or not one accepts the critical argument that the photo is a telling commentary on American advertising and the mythology of the cowboy in the American male psyche, the market has declared that a photograph made in 1989 can be as valuable as a painting by a young artist from the same period.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the image, other than its hammer price, is how out of sync, how '80s it looks compared to most 21st-century work. Almost the size of a Gursky, the Ektacolor print lacks the vivid sharpness that digital enhancement has made

commonplace. The rephotography movement, of which Prince and Sherrie Levine were exemplars, seems quaintly historic now—even a little drab. Superseded by more eye-catching trends, their images are the products of antiquated technology and a time when the question of what constitutes originality in photography was a burning theoretical issue.

Fashions in photographic practice are not yet as evanescent as elsewhere in contemporary art, but new figures and styles are surfacing—or resurfacing. The theatrical tableaux that were popular among students a few years ago are giving way to personal documentary again. It's a trend that **Peter Galassi** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/peter-galassi/>), curator of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art, identified back in 1991 with his "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort" show and one that Martin of Aperture would now like to call—with an apologetic laugh—the "New Docugraphics."

"A younger group has adopted the cool, objective approach of the New Topographics photographers from the '70s to document intimate scenarios and make sociological observations instead of purely geographic or environmental ones," Martin says. Her nominees for membership in this club, which favors medium- and large-format cameras for the crisp detail their negatives can provide, include Tim Davis, Doug DuBois, Jessica Todd Harper, Lisa Kereszi, Gillian Laub, An-my Lê, Darrin Mickey, Matthew Monteith, Nicholas Prior, Taryn Simon, and Brian Ulrich.

"I don't see as much staged photography anymore," agrees **Doug Eklund** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/doug-eklund/>), assistant curator in the department of photographs at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "William Eggleston and Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld have put their stamp on the young people whose work comes through here and that I see in galleries. It's interesting that Shore and Sternfeld are artists who were looked at seriously by Gursky—so it's come full circle."

For the generation of artists under 40 who have worked with Photoshop for most of their adult lives, notions of purity in practice are largely passé. Many now gravitate toward digitally altered work. "My students at the moment are interested in artists like **Kelli Connell** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/kelli-connell/>), who uses a computer to make a digital lesbian twin of herself," says **Rod Slemmons** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/rod-slemmons/>), a teacher at Columbia College in Chicago and director of the school's Museum of Contemporary Photography. Aperture will publish a monograph devoted to Connell this fall. Likewise, **Barry Frydlender** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/barry-frydlender/>)'s large, digitally manipulated image of a flooded street in Tel Aviv, prominently displayed in MoMA's "New Acquisitions" show last year, aroused as much comment as the more traditional, less digitized work by Carlos Garaicoa, Phillip Pisciotta, Robin Rhode, or Bertien van Manen in the latest installment of the museum's "New Photography" series, which was revived after a seven-year hiatus.

The public's interest in what photographers are up to has not yet peaked if the number of surveys of the subject is any measure. **Susan Bright** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/susan-bright/>)'s *Art Photography Now* (Aperture, 2005) follows on the heels of Charlotte Cotton's *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2004) and David Campany's *Art and Photography* (Phaidon, 2003).

Bright's sampling of 80 photographers—from Sternfeld, Gursky, and Demand to Philip-Lorca di Corcia, Katy Grannan, and Justine Kurland—captures the range of styles exhibited in galleries and museums in the United States and Europe over the past five years. But the independent British curator and critic senses that the mood is shifting again, thanks in part to technology—"I think there's anxiety about digitization," she says—and in part to the swinging pendulum of taste: "We're coming out of ten years when big color and big prints were the norm."

Bright predicts a revival of black-and-white photography, citing the work of Shannon Ebner and Markéta Othovíj, neither of whom is represented in her book. "Their work is quite poignant, not staged, and they make smallish prints," she says. "There's a desire to return to modernist esthetics, to what photography used to be and how we imagine it should be."

Traditional black-and-white still dominates the fine-art photography auction market. Of the 241 lots sold last year for a total of almost \$16 million at Sotheby's New York, department head **Denise Bethel** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/denise-bethel/>) estimates that less than 10 percent were color prints. Collectors still balk when offered digital prints of any kind.

For living artists, though, nostalgia is not a long-term option. Papageorge has never made an exhibition-quality ink-jet print, and examples produced by his graduate students at Yale have yet in his eyes to "reach the level of poetry."

But like most of his contemporaries (except Friedlander, who has stockpiled hundreds of boxes of his favorite paper), Papageorge lacks the freezer space to be a Kodak survivalist. He recently bought an Epson printer and realizes that he had better master it quickly. Film will likely be the next to vanish, if the rest of the industry follows the example of Nikon, which announced in January that it will stop production of most film cameras, and Konica Minolta, which said it would withdraw from the camera and color film business.

The choices confronting photographers in 2006 are stark. From now on, adapt or be left behind.

Richard B. Woodward (<https://www.artnews.com/t/richard-b-woodward/>) is an arts critic based in New York.