25 MARCH 2008 / PANEL DISCUSSION

Too Early Too Late

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Participants: Miranda Lichtenstein
Carter Mull, Amir Zaki
Moderator: Charlotte Cotton

The characterizations "too early" and "too late" point to the polarization of photographic camps between the "decisive moment" and the constructed tableau. "Too early" refers to observational photography, where one might say that the actual taking of the photograph happens before the idea or the intellectualized relationship with the work has been fully realized. "Too late" refers to constructed, highly premeditated photographs made in a manner that has come to be defined as the "directorial mode." While "too early" may begin to raise questions about how something so immediate and unpredictable can be understood or explained within the terms of rigorous, contemporary art practice, "too late" occupies the other extreme in which every location, actor, prop, light source, and digital retouch can be attributed to the intent of the artist. Such a distinction poses a dichotomy between the spontaneous intuition of the photographic eye and a more calculated image that provides constant reassurance about questions of authorship and stylistic signature.

To be sure, these are potentially dangerous lines to draw in the sand. This is precisely why we invited three artists whose practices skirt this supposed borderline. Instead of asking them to choose sides, we invited the panelists to join us for a discussion about their processes.

MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN: I brought very specific images from a project I've been working on for the past few years. This project represents a turn in my work towards a more

constructed and premeditated mode than I've worked with in the past. Certainly, I wouldn't say that any of my work previously would fall in the "too early" camp. But, there was a bit more of a scanning of the topography, as it were, than the work I'm about to show you. I only brought seven images, to keep it short. They are from a body of work I call *The Searchers*. Interestingly enough, I had that title in my head before I even started making the pictures.

The project is a reflection on a trend I'd been noticing for the past few years towards people seeking spiritual enlightenment and different states of transcendence through secular means. It was something I had experienced myself in trying hypnosis as a cure for my fear of flying. In this experience of hypnosis, what was interesting to me was that I was always told to try and imagine an image—a place that represented some kind of blissful or utopian state. And I started thinking about this question in terms of the potential struggle, or lack, in photography in its ability to represent an altered state. What would that look like?

So I started making a list. When I think about this idea of how I was cruising or scanning the landscape in my previous work, in this case I started cruising the Internet, and reading about isolation tanks, for one. That's what this picture called *Floater* is of. I'm sure most of you know the movie *Altered States* [Dir. Ken Russell, 1980]. I certainly had that in mind. In terms of this idea of staging, and preconceptualizing, I often do research beforehand and think about references . . .

I've continued on this path of using myself in photographs. This is *Dream Machine*. I don't know if you guys know, but Dream Machine was designed by Brion Gysin in the late '60s as a way to enter a state that's in between dream and sleep, by virtue of staring into this homemade stroboscopic device. It didn't work for me. But it became important for me to start experimenting using myself. Also I was interested in questioning the possibilities and the possible failures of what the photograph can do to represent an experience. In making a diptych, I was trying to call that into question further.

CARTER MULL: I went to college on the East Coast, and that was my first serious induction into art in an intense way. I went through a Bauhaus-type program, which is how a lot of East Coast colleges are modeled. It left me with an emphasis on process and materials as a major concern no matter what the medium—photography, painting, or sculpture.

I began seriously making photographs in 2000. And the work steadily evolved from there, using a model of looking at previous work, seeing what's latent or of interest, and pushing that into the next body of photographs. This is a photograph from 2004, titled *One Hundred Unions in the Snow*. It is a chromogenic print of about 30 by 40 inches. Leading up to this body of work, I was making photographs by basically setting up a series of sheets of Plexiglas over an image, and then aiming the camera through the Plexi. On the Plexi would be situated material and textured, tactile things. I was making photographs using a technique that was basically developed by commercial photographers, but had been replaced by digital technology. I never intentionally hid the technique, but in this photograph, the actual construction became more apparent. The white that you see throughout the frame is literally daylight reflecting off the Plexi.

Following this working method that I had picked up as a younger person, I was interested in what would happen if I used this same set of materials, but shifted the construction that's built in front of the lens from two dimensions to three dimensions. This was the first body of work that I made in Los Angeles. It is called *Shifting States*. I was interested in creating a construction that was both in front of the lens, and also happening in-camera. That was one way I was thinking about making meaning. But for me, primarily, the issue was with the kind of photograph, and the kind of print itself. In this image, the construction is set up. It is destroyed after the photograph is made. The materials are thrown away, and what is left is the photographic print. Therefore, the way the camera is focusing on the image is critically important. For example, this area of the photo

is a result of a glitzy material being out of focus. The reason that happens is that the aperture of the camera is at a certain f-stop, and the film plane of the 4 by 5 is in a certain position. As a result, the camera and the construction that is in front of it are contingent upon one another—totally dependent upon one another—for the purpose of making the image.

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One of the ideas was to use the print itself as another moment of intervention into the photographic process where meaning could be constructed. For me, the whole concern is still about constructing an image, but in a certain sense, maybe even giving it a kind of autonomy relative to the kind of material and the kind of process concerns that are specific to photography . . . However, that said, for me, photography is really the relationship between information and time, and the formation of information in time. For me, the way something is made cannot be separated from what it means. Maybe that's the burden of a Bauhaus education, to have this process-driven set of concerns. But at the same time, I would hope that other meanings in the work are implied, if not fully explicated.

AMIR ZAKI: I think the reason that the three of us were brought together on this panel is because of our process rather than the content of our work or a conceptual framework. It is about something that is too early, in a way. It is how we make things. I think that's an interesting way to structure this; I want to work through some of those ideas. Also, I'm not going to talk about content in my work either, because I don't think that's really what this panel is about.

But I will talk about affect, which is, for me, the "too late." It is how I come to make work, and then how work effects me—my own work and another person's work that I'm going to show. Before I show any slides, I want to think about the two camps, which were presented and then dismissed, which I thought was very funny. Intuition is

associated with earnestness—these are my associations—authenticity, rawness, and being unmediated. Truthful is what I think that means. On the other extreme is this idea of a directorial mode of making work, which is really premeditated, constructed, fabricated, and I think ultimately, fictional. I think that is what the cultural implication of that kind of work is.

I think most artists working in photography, not just the three of us, are working in somewhat of a hybrid of those two modes. I don't think very many people are really invested in one or the other. The other thing that I was thinking about was that there is another kind of dualistic approach that's similar to this idea of intuition versus directorial, but I think it is a little bit more apt for my work, or the way I think about making work. This is the idea of a kind of a subtractive [approach] to making work, versus an additive approach.

That idea is not my own; it is an idea I heard in my very first photography class, taught by John Divola, with whom I'm sure most of you are familiar. It is a very obvious idea, but it is also incredibly clear. It is still helpful for me when I teach, or when I talk about my own work, or when I think about my work. And it is simple. Traditionally speaking, photography is a fundamentally subtractive medium. You've got an infinite visual field, and the photographer frames that, subtracts out everything for this one sort of moment. The opposite of that would be the life of a painter, which is a fundamentally additive process. Painters start with a blank canvas and make marks until they are happy. Right?

Again, those camps don't hold up so well with most people making art today. Certainly, I work in a very hybrid fashion that is both additive and subtractive. That said, I just want to quickly show an image pulled out of context for the sake of this talk. This is an 8 by 10 inch, black-and-white photograph documenting a Chris Burden performance from 1974 called *Transfixed*. And I will paraphrase his description of the performance, which is that he was crucified to the back of this Volkswagen bug while the engine was running and it was rolled out of a garage for a

few minutes, and rolled back into a garage. As I'm sure all of you are familiar, what you are presented with in a gallery is the 8 by 10 inch photograph along with the relics, which would be the nails, and his blurb.

I'd like to forget about those parts and look at this as an image for the purpose of this talk, because I think it is a very good hybrid of these two approaches. It's a kind of directorial approach, mixed with an intuitive approach—or you also can think of it as additive and subtractive.

It's obviously a constructed event, and I think that the photographer making this image worked in straightforward, intuitive fashion. It's framed in a sensible, direct way in order to get this idea across. There's not that much else to say about it in that way. But what I think is interesting about that kind of hybrid approach is what it produces as an affect. And for me, the affect is this initial believability. I believe it—I read the text—I believe he was crucified to the back of this bug, it makes me nauseous, it makes me kind of laugh, and I'm a little uncomfortable. It produces all kinds of mixed feelings about the piece. But it's all because of this image. In the end, I start doubting the authenticity of it, and I couldn't really care less if nails were driven through Burden's hands. That's irrelevant to me. What I think is effective about this work, and lots of other documents of performance is the image. I think it has to do with this result of a hybrid process . . .

In terms of my own work I will talk a little bit about my process and not content and maybe a little bit about affect. I would say in terms of my process I combine these additive and subtractive approaches. In a lot of ways I have a very romantic and maybe traditional stance or approach to making photographs, which is that I totally enjoy happy accidents. I enjoy coming across something that I think is noteworthy. I enjoy that kind of transformation of something banal into something magical, or beautiful, or arresting, or surprising. That's why I started making photographs and I still enjoy that part of it. The other half of my process is pushing pixels around on the computer. I heavily fabricate, manipulate, and create these images in an additive fashion.

But ultimately, I guess I'm much more interested in the way that a piece such as the Chris Burden photograph I showed you works and how it initially reads as the result of a traditional, subtractive process. It reads as if I happened upon this event. That's how I want my images to read. I don't mind doubt entering my work, that back and forth between doubt and believability. I want my images to be arresting, for viewers to ask, "What is that thing?" "What happened, or "How did you find this thing?"

CHARLOTTE COTTON: In very different ways I think that you revealed that the idea of construction and preconception are both caricatures. It is a very literal version of construction. Process and the flat-footed information about how you make photographs are entirely relevant to the intellectual standpoint that your work then comes to represent. You're using construction both in terms of being a process, as well as an intellectualization of what we think photography is.

MULL: I would say that my process involves a series of intervals. I think that's very common in photography. Shoot, re-shoot, back and forth in that way. But it is a bridge that is no longer necessarily entirely contingent upon the photographs. So I can have an interval that might be made with a drawing, or might be made with a found image. There is something intellectual in that.

At the same time, the process is probably driven more by an actual relationship to the act of making. An example of that is that I take a ridiculous number of notes for my work, but when I actually get into making work in the studio, those notes do not apply. It is almost like there is a shift that happens in my thinking. Those notes become a heuristic background, like a series of thoughts, a series of things that inform the work, but cannot be directly induced into the process of making.

COTTON: Miranda, that seems to relate to how you were describing your process as one that's heavily led by

research, in terms of getting to the idea.

LICHTENSTEIN: Right, what I was about to say is that I do a lot of research. The project that I showed just now was really much more driven that way than what I'd done before, in terms of production. It was the first time I was working with a figure; I had to engage with other people and set up these shoots. It changed my process a lot. And I was thinking about that idea of intuition, because I've also shot still-lifes. All these things that happen when I'm alone in the studio don't happen when I'm with a shaman, two assistants, and lights. That dictated a lot of how things came to be. There were certainly happy accidents too, and that's something very different from intuition. There is still that kind of play, or magic. For example, in one photograph the subject put his watch down, and I just thought, "Right, that's so great." But it is not something I had preconceived.

ZAKI: I don't preconceive very much about the work until it gets going, and then it starts to make itself, in a way, if I come up with a strategy that I'm happy with. But that part of it is totally experimental. It is experimental when I'm making the pictures, and it is really experimental when I'm moving pixels around. It might seem very technical, but I happen upon a lot of how this work ends up looking. I happen upon it by screwing around, basically. It is not as if I think, "Oh, I want to do that to that image." It is probably really closely related to how painters work. I never made a painting, but I'm guessing that's what it is like.

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COTTON: Do you any of you find resonance in the idea of the series, as it was defined by editorial photography, or do you think you're using the idea of series in a much more "contemporary art", or Conceptual art, version? I feel maybe the editorial series has a greater resonance with you, Amir.

ZAKI: I have a difficult relationship with series. I think that in a lot of ways that approach—if it is not watched—is a default approach, and I think that is a problem. I think that typology is a problem. I think making typological work now has its problems. So I'm always in dialogue with it, because it is the kind of work that I feel like I appreciated, or learned from, or was influenced by. But I'm constantly trying to figure out ways to undermine it, or complicate it. Often, I work in sub-series. I'll have these series that [contain] very different-looking works that resonate off of each other. There is dialogue within these sub-series, which I feel is one way of dealing with it.

Lately, with the newest things I'm working on (I'm actually working on three projects simultaneously), are breaking away from a series even further. At the same time, the polar opposite of that, which is complete anti-content, is a problem in contemporary photography, too.

COTTON: Do you mean like the empty car parks at night, corners of sidewalks, and things like that?

ZAKI: Without naming anybody, I think that when an exhibition looks like the photographer's "best of" that is a problem. We all have an archive of pretty good pictures that we keep. If the photographer just blows those up in various sizes and pins them up—I'm not that interested. I think that's more of a problem than series, actually.

COTTON: You mean the idea that you have your body of work, and you're ever adding to it and it is like your raw material for every time that you install it. Do you think that's problematic?

ZAKI: There just seems to be less at stake when you make work like that. I don't know. I don't want to go too far into that.

LICHTENSTEIN: I agree with you, but I also think that strategy is liberating all of us now, too, in some ways. I have the

same sentiment, but I also think it has been an open door.

COTTON: In a way, you're talking about values which are new to photography, because of its resonance within contemporary art. But also, they are really age-old problematics about editing. I mean, I must say that in all the time I've worked in photography, portfolios have tended to be this mismatch of pictures that a photographer recognizes as being good pictures. You know, they stand out. You recognize them in the first edit as ones that are good, and are constructed well.

And they are probably the kind of pictures that you will take the whole of your life, if you chose to take the same picture the whole of your life. And then there are other ones, which I sometimes call "itchy-scratchy" pictures. They trouble you; you don't know whether it is the picture or if it is a cue to what will happen next. I think that has become a sign of photography as contemporary art—how much time you will spend with the pictures that don't appear as good pictures.

The fault line is the idea that if it is about an idea, having twelve doesn't make them any better. And if it is the kind of picture that, if you're a good photographer and you understand your camera, of course you're going to take when you're in front of that subject, then that's not interesting either. On the other hand, is this idea of not abusing the potential in the most interesting pictures that you take that you haven't fully intellectualized or understood.

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AUDIENCE: I have a problem with what looks today like commercial photography being passed off into the high echelons of art. I hate to make the distinction between artists and commercial photographers, but there does seem to be a collapsing of boundaries between art and very competent, technical commercial photography that is utterly staid in terms of the content. I'm just wondering if anybody wants to take that on.

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MULL: I want to interject on that note a little bit. I actually find commercial photography more interesting than most art photography. The reason is that, from my point of view, it shapes a lot of how we see—not only in terms of what our visual field is, but also in terms of the processes used to make images, and how we understand those processes and see them. At a certain point, something that's not made digitally started to look of a different time, not only in its style but also in its very production. I find that condition that commercial photography gives us to be very interesting. It shapes our field in many ways.

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AUDIENCE: I perceive commercial photography as learning language. These are people that have to be absolute masters of their craft. However, they don't always have something to say. The artist is the one who has something to say. I think the best would be someone who has the technical expertise of the commercial photographer, but also has something to say.

COTTON: Yes, absolutely. My ex-boss, who distrusted my interest in commercial photography, described it as thus: an artist makes a proposition, asks a question, and leaves things open-ended. A commercial photographer makes a statement with a full stop at the end.

In the unsuccessful attempts by commercial artists to move into the gallery arena, what you're seeing is almost like throwing back at the art world a caricature of itself. So you have these perfect visions laminated behind Plexi, everything constructed and everything attributed to the artist, but not with a question that leaves it open-ended.

AUDIENCE: I wanted to ask all the photographers on the panel, and you, Charlotte, about what I perceive to be a tentative relationship with the history of photography.

Everyone seems really eager to praise painting history. I'm wondering why that is?

MULL: I'll take a stab at that. From my point of view, photography is always affected by the conditions—technology and things that are changing in the world. Painting is an antiquated technology. There are technological innovations within painting, but they are few and far between; they are not great. But photography is very much affected by the technological world around it. And now, we're in a time of technological flux. We have been for ten years, maybe more. At a time when modernization was affecting photography, there was a lot of photographic experimentation going on.

In a certain sense, we're in a place where the medium is in flux. And what the medium can be is an open question, I think, to some degree. With digital technology, there is this new sense of plasticity. One can push pixels around, and one can do all these different things. At the same time, our relationship to images has changed because of the Internet. Somehow we went from a library that had a certain materiality to a library that had a different kind of materiality. I think these questions about plasticity are actually really a major part of the medium right now.

ZAKI: Can I follow up? That's a really good question. I don't mean to dodge photography, but I always see my relationship to it in the broader art making context, in its relationship to a history that's older than 200 years. I think about it in relation to sculpture and painting. I prioritize photography only to the degree that it's what I do.

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CHARLIE WHITE [AUDIENCE]: I'm hoping that each of you can speak a little bit about this point. Fundamentally, there seems to be a generational bubble around this conversation because of a pedagogy shift. We're all talking about students who learned process in a context of master's

studio art programs that began to allow photographers to study with them. We're looking at a group of people that came from the Pictures Generation—from 1979 forward—that started to become teachers in schools that otherwise weren't actually hiring photographers-as-artists-as-art-teachers in art programs at the master's level. So there is this major shift where process became—going to Amir's point of looking at a picture of Chris Burden who's coming out of a program that's teaching dominantly conceptualism—whatever medium, whatever means to convey the idea. And at this point, people are reaching out and grabbing cameras. They don't have to be, but they are. And they are saying, "I'm not really a photographer. I'm just using photography to make my work." Ultimately you end up having pictures like the Chris Burden documentation, which he's not taking . . .

I just think that this discussion exists within a different place for somebody who is 20 years the senior of the group. It is a very different argument about where their process came from, because they didn't learn process, as it were, in a pedagogical system, if they studied photography at all. You know, even in most of our undergraduate programs, photography was ghettoized. I know at the School of Visual Arts, it didn't exist in the art program. I know at Art Center here on the West Coast, it doesn't exist at the undergraduate art level. It is ghettoized as a practice separate from art. If you study photography, you are not going to be in certain discourses. At the graduate level, say at Yale, they still ghettoize it, but they intellectualize it. It is uncompressed. At the University of California at Los Angeles, the graduate student mentor system starts to merge; the University of Southern California merges it; where Amir is, at UC-Riverside, it is merged. It doesn't really matter any longer what the practice is, it is just an all-collective system. So maybe people can talk about process forward from their graduate studies a little bit.

ZAKI: Do you mean process like the way Carter was talking about process?

WHITE [AUDIENCE]: Maybe, somewhere between the three of you. Carter's process, on one hand, in terms of the way he's able to think through an idea as a means of making and dealing with materiality. Or Miranda in terms of thinking about the sociological as a means of getting or reaching certain places, spaces, or subjects. Perhaps you could argue and say I'm absolutely wrong, but part of this comes from being able to participate in dialogues and pedagogical systems that, historically, photography was somewhat left out of.

LICHTENSTEIN: Yes, I agree with you, absolutely, and I see that a bit in New York, where I teach undergrads at Parsons. I also teach at Cooper Union, and they are two totally different approaches, because at Parsons photography is ghettoized. And I struggle to connect the two.

MULL: In high school, I studied with a 4th-generation Abstract Expressionist painter. And my first assignment in college was to make a drawing of the experience of taking a shower, by making it in the shower. I studied painting in college, so I had a very direct relationship with process. But I think the irony is that I was also taught on some level by Pictures Generation people, by people born in the 1950s who were basically in their early 50s. But they were painters, not necessarily photographers. A lot of the process education came from people that were much older who were really concerned with the push and pull of charcoal. On the graduate level, I went to CalArts, where the pedagogy is outlined in a conceptual way. If anything, I had to disagree my way through there. At the same time, I was learning as I went. So I think that my relationship with process wasn't necessarily determined by the Pictures Generation. At the same time, because of that, the work of the Pictures Generation seemed very refreshing. Richard Prince's early photographs seemed really radical when I first saw them.

ZAKI: This might answer your question. It doesn't really

have to do with how I was educated, but I have two relationships with my process. One is a kind of closeted one that's shared with a select group of people with whom I share these super nerdy, techy, process-oriented questions. And I get incredible enjoyment out of that. But I also feel that that's really not good because there is a broad audience that I'm much more interested in. For example, I'm working on something now that's really mathematical. And I'd love to have this totally nerdy, techy conversation with a mathematician about it, or someone who's into permutations and adding. But that's not what my work is about; that's not what it is going to be about when it is out in the world.

I think that photography might deserve to be in a ghetto if we all expect everybody to get interested in the new brand of Crane paper that just came out, or something. I think that there is such a high learning curve with photography, and digital technology, and it is so foreign to most people that it is an unrealistic expectation to think that there is going to be a sophisticated dialogue with even the art world in the way that exists with painting or sculpture. There is just not an understanding of materials, or immaterial, with digital. There is just not an understanding outside of a really tiny group of people.

QUESTIONNAIRE / CHARLES TRAUB & ADAM BELL

Photography education is about teaching people to think in a visual world. Photography and its related practice are a matrix and nexus for relating to the real and imagined worlds in which we live. The essential goals of any good, creative academic environment are simply to help students learn how to look and engage with the world responsibly. In addition to the development of craft and technical skills, there is also a language and intellectual base that must complement any photographic practice. It is clear to us that the best students are those that are able to relate their practice not only to the evolving technical potentials of the medium, but also to its rich history, theory and practice.

that I need to choose between digital and analog photographic capture and output. Instead, I believe that complementary versions of photographic thinking can be played out at this interesting moment in the medium's history and that it's time for any photographer with public, discursive ambitions to shape our online context.

Imagine if the Internet had emerged in the early twentieth century. The majority of those "-ists" would have had a field day—imagine Andy Warhol and the Internet. I guess it is simply a matter of time before a generation not weaned on paper and chemicals sees the manufactured bubble of "art photography" for what it is, and begins to explore the potential of an inclusive, affordable distribution network and its inherently interesting formal qualities for presentation and distribution.

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DISCUSSION FORUM
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Subject: Not Yet
Date: 3 January 2008 14:37:52
From: AMIR ZAKI

I interpret Mr. Evans's essay to be expressing his frustration that more "serious and independent photographers" are not making more interesting work for the Internet as an alternative to gallery and museum installations. Why is this the case? Why haven't they? Why not?*

Well, one somewhat boring reason may be because it is just not time yet. These sorts of things seem to happen organically and with a sense of critical urgency—I'll even say necessity—not wishful thinking or desire. My interpretation is that, despite the imperfections within the "art world proper" (the gallery and the market), it

is nonetheless a finite forum that has some sort of system of checks and balances, problematic as they may be. There is an evolving structure in place. Artists that choose to participate within this structure, knowing its faults and potential for dysfunction, are doing so because of a shared desire to be a part of a language, a history, and a multifaceted, ongoing contemporary art dialog involving regular exhibitions, critics, journals, reviews, curators, etc. For me, as one of these participating artists, the potential for failure and rejection are as important as aspects of critical success and peer support. In short, there is something at stake.

With photography made for the Internet, there is no such community. There is no such system or power structure. Thus, there is no such potential for failure. Not yet. If no one "hits" your website, you are the only one who knows or cares. If someone does come across the site and wishes to engage through some sort of critical response, there are the forums of blogs and comments, which have little impact at this point. (I think "OMG" and "LOL" are probably the most popular responses to images one finds online.) There is very little at stake. Therefore, it's very safe. And, as Mr. Evans states, it is free. It is democratic. However, I'm not convinced that democracy, in the way I understand it, is a system that is best suited for all areas of cultural production. In fact, I "vote" against a democratic art world if I am to continue to take it seriously.

For the sake of comparison, please imagine that instead of art, we consider the field of philosophy, a relatively parallel mode of creative cultural production. There are contemporary philosophers, mostly academics, who participate within a rich history of rigorous dialog and debate in the world of ideas. Most of the time peers in academic journals and books review their work. It is scrutinized, torn apart, refuted, dismantled, challenged, praised, and expanded upon. There is a community and structure in place. And, if it is like many other fields of study or inquiry, it is

not perfect. There is probably nepotism, feuding camps, some injustice, etc. Despite these ills (like a close family with its own problems and difficult relationships) organized groups function better than nomads. Certainly, there must be some independent philosophers philosophizing online without any of these constraints, right? I'm sure some of the content is also incredibly rigorous and interesting. However, at this point, there isn't nearly as much of this serious work happening as there is nonsense and "philosophy-lite" ranting or opining.

Similarly, within the realm of contemporary art, I think there is some incredibly engaging and serious work that has a final destination on the Web. However, at this point, there are infinitely more examples of terrible and uninteresting, albeit VERY popular, imagery floating in cyberspace. The majority of Myspace.com is but one example. Countless videos of people doing "face-plants" on YouTube.com or Break.com are certainly entertaining if one is in the mood to comfortably revel in the low resolution, excruciating pain of others, but it isn't good art, no matter how many thousands of "hits" these sites get. When considering the benefit of having a potentially much larger audience online than in the gallery or museum venue, Mr. Evans states, "If an audience is what you prefer (as opposed to a physical thing like a book or a show as the testimony to your photographic talent), then the Internet is for you." With this logic, one could stand on a freeway overpass holding up a large photograph during rush hour and could have an incredibly large audience. But what does that mean? Personally, it means more to me to have 10 people intentionally spend 20 minutes each seriously engaging with my photographic installations in actual space than it does to know that 100 people happened upon my website, half of whom got there by accident when Googling their favorite guitar virtuoso who happens to share my name, and spent five seconds or less before they were on to yet another adventure.

I understand that the potential that Mr. Evans

describes for much more interesting work to exist on the Web is there. I happily welcome these expansions of the medium, both formally and conceptually. However, we have many historical examples of artists who begin by working outside of the fuzzy boundaries of what is then accepted as art. Their ultimate success is not so much in forcing (or even caring about) a dramatic alteration in the existing structure, it's in the structure's ability to slowly grow, adapt and absorb that work within its boundaries. Mr. Evans invokes Andy Warhol as a pioneer, which he certainly was. (One could easily replace Warhol with Marcel Duchamp or several others in this example.) However, the reason Warhol's radicalism took hold is because it was time for it to do so. Had he made the same work 50, 15 or even 5 years earlier, there is no guarantee that the response would have been as strong. All the wishful thinking and desire one can muster won't make a difference.

I suspect that Mr. Evans is foreshadowing in some way an inevitable evolution in contemporary artistic production and public reception. I suspect that the art world, sort of like the commercial music industry already has done with some success, will eventually incorporate more art that exists as digital information in addition to discrete objects. As with the music industry, it will happen when it absolutely has to, when all parties and the technology are ready. It will be later than its pioneering participants wish, and I bet it won't be free.

* "Why Not" was the working draft title of Mr. Evans's essay.

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Subject: The Buck Does Not Stop Here
Date: 7 January 2008 01:21:32
From: NICHOLAS GRIDER

It seems that the nervousness that underlies both Evans's original essay and Zaki's response is not