

The Incomplete Reimagining of Image Matter

by Jelena Stojković

There is a set of reproductions depicting hands in Patti Gaal-Holmes's studio: a film strip from Richard Serra's *Hand Catching Lead* (1968), a photographic rendition of a hand's imprint in ink, a still from Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1929), Auguste Rodin's *Main droite de Pierre et Jacques de Wissant* (1885-86), several rayographs, and a colour photograph of somebody's hand holding a mineral. It's a Warburgian panel of sorts, hanging in an upper corner of the studio, just above the arch-shaped window taking up most of its outer wall, to the right of her desk. For an artist who spends a lot of time experimenting with film and photography, this is not a random arrangement. It is rather a visual reflection on the act of art making, a current of thought that undeniably runs deep in her artistic work.

We can observe it in Gaal-Holmes's *into the frameless distance - city of (no) memory*, which is a carefully considered configuration of multiple acts through which images are presented to us – fragmented, superimposed, stitched together, sequenced in sketchbooks and photo-books, projected, unrolling on the wall. These acts are by no means accidental but are deliberate stagings of a zone of encounter with a body of work that decidedly develops over time and is perpetually left unfinished, in a continuous state of incompleteness. Mirroring its key focus, an effort to reconstruct her father's escape from Hungary in the late 1940s, there is no definitive end or closure to the story that *into the frameless distance - city of (no) memory* tells. Just as something conclusive starts to take shape, a new trajectory opens, a tangent, and the journey starts again. The suggestive and fragmented nature of this project, its ambiguity and incompleteness, evoke Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1962), a valuable contribution to the understanding of art as a form of production of knowledge. Eco describes open work in visual art as an 'epistemological metaphor', favouring disruption and discontinuity in analogy to the shared experience of the modern world.¹ Unbound by any singular, 'correct', way of viewing or perceiving, it encourages new ways of looking, and thereby fosters conditions for a renewal and change. Clearly, such an approach to art making is rather appropriate, not only to the unearthing of Gaal-Holmes's complex family history but also to the time we live in.

Gaal-Holmes often quotes Japanese photographers and critics associated with the short-lived magazine *Provoke*, active at the turn of the 1970s, as closely related to her own method of working with images. This parallel is most apparent in the preference for analogue, monochrome film, and how it lends itself to experimentation in the dark room as well as in post-production. In its conceptual aim to 'provoke the world of language and ideas' *Provoke* cultivated a recognisable style known as *are, bure, boke*, or 'blurry, grainy, and out of focus'.² It was achieved through a playful practice that involved photographing without looking through the viewfinder or from a moving vehicle, rephotographing, scratching the negatives and alike, in order to destabilise a static and fixed character of photojournalism's use of the photographic apparatus. Gaal-Holmes's images undergo a similar treatment, as they are developed and printed in an array of experimental techniques, organised, and

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 87.

² Takanashi Yutaka, Nakahira Takuma, Taki Kōji, and Okada Takahiko, 'Provoke Manifesto' (1968), translated by Christopher Stephens, originally published in *Provoke* 1 (November 1968): 2, in Doryung Chong (et al), *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 214.

reorganised across different formats of presentation and multiple gallery spaces.³ Such a handling of what we might term as the 'image matter' – referring to both her films and photographs – also suggests sculptural modes of working. I am reminded of a story about Constantin Brâncuși's encounter with photography: deeply unsatisfied with the highly stylised and polished manner through which others photographed his work he asked Man Ray to help him procure necessary equipment and give him a couple of lessons so that he was finally able to take adequate photographs, which were all blurred, over- or under-exposed, and stained.⁴ In Japan, this manner of work is especially relevant to *Mono-ha*, a radical group of artists primarily interested in materiality that was not unrelated to *Provoke* in the 1960s and '70s.⁵ For these artists acting upon the material (in such gestural actions as dropping, slashing, suspending, pulling or ripping apart) substitutes the more traditional ways of art making, constantly evolving through phases, or impermanent stages of an artwork that crystallise at the point of exhibiting it.⁶ What therefore becomes clear is that Gaal-Holmes does not simply make work *about* her father, and that it is not intended only as a representation but also, at least in equal measure, an objectification of her experience of searching for him. This process is channelled through an active renegotiation of the image matter, which expands from its conventional function as a historical document into a material rethinking of the past in the present.

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³ Within this conceptual and stylistic framework, Moriyama Daidō's weaving of personal narratives with broader interests in memory and city culture resonates particularly strongly in Gaal-Holmes's practice. In her reconfiguring of photographic mediation through installation and her interest in both urban and rural landscapes, she also works closely to Nakahira Takuma.

⁴ As told by Victor I. Stoichita in *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 191.

⁵ Enokura Kōji is a good example of this crossover.

⁶ Mika Yoshitake, 'What is Mono-ha?', in Reiko Tomii (section editor), *Voices of Mono-ha Artists: Contemporary Art in Japan, Circa 1970*, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* (December 2013), 205-208.