

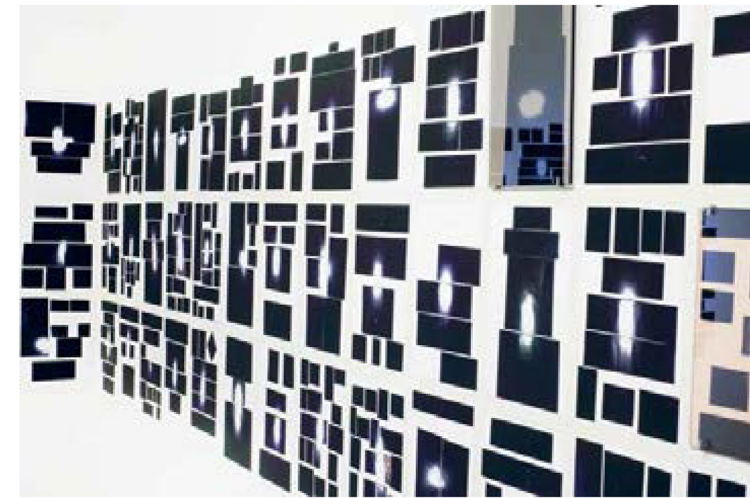
ANOUK KRUTHOF: SHIFTING REALITIES

Dutch artist Anouk Kruthof is bridging analogue and digital worlds.

By Dan Rule

Opposite
ANOUK KRUTHOF
Sweaty Sculpture
(*Denim*), 2015
flatbed print on
radiant plexiglass
112 x 100 x 50 cm

Top
ANOUK KRUTHOF
Subconscious Travelling
(detail), 2013
99 photo stickers and
colour glass
660 x 73 cm
Courtesy the artist and
MoMA, New York



Anouk Kruthof needs a moment. It's a rare intermission in our conversation, which traipses along somewhere between her New York apartment and my Melbourne office, the Dutch artist leading us off on conduits as divergent as portraiture, sculpture, spatiality and amateur bondage photographs sourced from a photographic archive. But for the minute, at least, she's lost in thought.

"I'm never quite sure of myself in life anymore," she offers, finally, drawing back on a cigarette before falling back into silence. "Do I live in a screen reality or in a physical one?" Another moment passes. "Sometimes I don't even know it, because the screen is such a big part of your existence. The normality of it is quite remarkable."

Orthodoxy is not a quality that troubles Kruthof's various approaches and attitudes to the photographic image. Based in New York, the Dutch artist positions herself at the intersection of an analogue legacy and a digital world. Her images, sculptures and installations at once adhere and upend photographic process, traditions and tropes. The 34-year-old, who was born in the small city of Dordrecht, perched on the Netherlands' southwestern flank, speaks of the flux besetting her generation of artists, of living betwixt and between technological and cultural epochs.

"It's very much part of my generation," she says, taking another drag of her cigarette. "I have been through the transition with photography, learning and developing and having that total analogue education with colour printing and everything, towards a time when almost all the darkrooms are closing at all the art academies."

"I have one foot in that world and another foot in the newer world...and I feel that this comes through in a lot of my works."

It's a fair proposition. As much as Kruthof's output – which has seen her garner several high-profile awards (including an Infinity Award at the International Centre for Photography in New York), exhibit throughout Europe and the US, and release several artist books through various publishers – has embraced the iPhone and the screen as a means and a conceptual nub for image-making, she has also looked to expand the physical and spatial parameters of the photographic image. Her *Subconscious Travelling* series, which shows as part of MoMA's prestigious *New Photography* exhibition (this year titled *Ocean of Images*), for example, sees her photograph empty negative sleeves from a discarded travel photo album, her iPhone flash lighting up only the formal arrangement of plastic sheaths on each page. It is both embracing and resistant of the photographic, pointing to the skeleton of the archive in the place of the archived images themselves.

"I found an old album and on each of the cardboard sheets were all these old negative sleeves for all these different dimensions of film, which were cut in all these bizarre ways and mounted on the pages diagonally, and they were all empty," she recalls. "There were only some numbers and the names of countries, so you could see that that was like an empty, anonymous travel archive."

While for many, it would prove a worthless find, for Kruthof – who will be showing the work at MoMA alongside the likes of UK artist Mishka Henner, German artist Natalie Czech, American David Horvitz, Japanese photographer Lieko Shiga and several others – it was rich terrain. "I found it really interesting and also really beautiful, because the way the negative sleeves were composed on the pages was already quite strange," she says. "As someone who learnt analogue photography, you would never cut the sleeves in such a way because it would let in dust, so it was quite unusual. There was this absence of this person who had travelled through all these countries, which were often identified. So there was a real tension between what this had been used for and what it was now – just these black and white shapes. So I re-photographed the pages with my iPhone in order to re-travel those absent trips."

Kruthof's installation will comprise printed photo-stickers adhered directly to the wall, in addition to intermittent coloured glass frames, which work to "highlight certain elements and pages". "It's also about this certain communication between the analogue time and the modern way we make photographs now, with our phones," she says, "which is a basic commodity for us all now."

Her work has long engaged with social and cultural tropes, exploring just how they might interact with the photographic. A recent series *Sweaty Sculptures* (2013–2015), which have shown in Brussels and Copenhagen, saw her hold a "sweat workshop" in the gallery, taking participants through a vigorous workout before photographing sweat emerging through their clothing.

"Sweat is an interesting thing for me," she smiles. "I'm always a bit excited about sweaty armpits for example, because sweat is almost like a universal bodily scar of discomfort or stress. Like, when you go to a job interview, you become sweaty but you never want to show it – you always try and hide it. I find it really interesting that we all have it as human beings, but none of us want it."



"THE EXHIBITION SPACE AND THE BOOK SPACE ARE PARALLEL FOR ME. SOMETIMES THE EXHIBITION IS JUST THE WORK, AND OTHER TIMES THE BOOK IS THE WORK."

ANOUK KRUITHOF
The Bungalow
Courtesy the artist and
MoMA, New York

She affixed the resulting images – close crops of armpits and the arch of the back – to large polystyrene blocks (the kind typically used as installation materials), before “suffocating” them in cellophane and adding various hyper-coloured plexiglass apertures, creating a situation in which the photographs themselves are “uncomfortable” and “unable to breath”, essentially mimicking the experience of being nervously sweaty.

“By doing all that, you also break photography,” says Kruthof. “You’re working with a photograph, which is very fixed, but when you add all those materials the image begins to change and move, depending on how the viewer moves around it, ducks down or looks up. You break the fixed rules of the frame and the photo print.

“I kind of see the same thing with a book. You have to open or close it, maybe unfold something, put it back on the shelf,” she continues. “You activate the viewer, and you can also do that with installations like this. You don’t decide, absolutely, on how someone perceives or deals with the work.”

Books, and the Dutch tradition of artist book making, have been a central strand of Kruthof’s practice, having published nine titles since *The Black Hole*, her debut book with the now defunct Rotterdam publishing house Episode in 2006. Her 2013 book *Pixel Stress* (RVB Books, Paris), meanwhile, saw her create pixelated monochromes by blowing up images sourced by searching the word “stress” on Google to the maximum size in Photoshop (3200 per cent).

“One thing I love about the books is that all the work and ideas stay there in this kind of limited format – you have this little structure to work within. It’s very pleasant to have these limitations and I tend to just think in the language of books, you know? The exhibition space and the book space are parallel for me. Sometimes the exhibition is just the work, and other times the book is the work.”



While a recent show of collaged and sculptural works, *#EVIDENCE*, riffed off the famous 1977 photo book *Evidence*, by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, one of Kruithof's books that, quite inextricably, operates as a work unto itself is her 2014 tome *The Bungalow* (Onomatopoe, Eindhoven). Working with the personal archive of infamous London-based collector of vernacular photographs, Brad Feuerhelm, she creates a densely psychological book rippling with visceral photographic content spanning sadomasochism, family snaps, administrative and bureaucratic images, along with Kruithof's interventions.

"I think we share some overlapping fascination in the kind of imagery we're interested in, but also not," she says of Feuerhelm, whom she met after attending one of his lectures tracing the parameters of his collection. "When I was going through his archive in London, there was a lot that I couldn't bear to see because of the cruelty... There was a lot of material that I didn't want to work with because you couldn't do so in a free way because it was so politically and historically loaded."



Opposite
ANOUK KRUIHOF
Neutral (confident)
graphite, pipe-isolation
and flatbed print on latex
105 x 46 x 80 cm

Top
Installation view
ANOUK KRUIHOF
AHEAD, 2014
FOUR A.M., New York

Left
ANOUK KRUIHOF
The Bungalow
Courtesy the artist and
MoMA, New York

Perhaps some of the most intriguing images are those Kruithof describes as "fictional bondage photographs", in which the artist has cut out the tied and bound subjects of the photographs, leaving the spectre of oddly contorted bodies. "I was looking at the women, but also at the environment where they are photographed and sometimes it was really nicely sculptural – like, the couch or a piece of furniture or the composition," she explains. "I just wanted to remove them. I guess it's a little political gesture, to cut these women out of their captivity and their present situation, even though it's fiction in itself."

"I find the images with the people cut out of them far more sexy and tense than the photos are normally... We look at so many images these days that we're not really excited quickly anymore. There's an overload of sexy images of women out there. Something that shows someone else's imagination is hopefully more stimulating."

It says a lot about the criticality of Kruithof's practice. Rethinking the role and the bearings of the photograph is central. We chat about a new series, *A Head*, which is still in development. Taking the ubiquity of the selfie and, by association, the portrait as its starting point, the project sees Kruithof invite subjects to face a coloured backdrop of their choice, only for her to take their portrait from behind their back. All we see is a gridded field of heads, hair and shoulders, organised by background and colour. It is a selfie inversion, a portrait hack.

"It's about anonymity and privacy," she says, explaining that the idea came together when she uploaded some of the early photographs and realised that tagging and face recognition technologies no longer worked.

"But it's still a portrait," she urges. "It says something about someone and it has qualities in the way you interpret it and read it that make it a portrait. We look at the neck and the hair and we still make judgements and have prejudices."

Ocean of Images: New Photography shows until March 20, 2016, at MoMA, New York.

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