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Arthur Ou, *Phil Chang reading 5.632: The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.*

PICTURES IN AN INKJET ERA

A conversation between Phil Chang and Arthur Ou.

Arthur Ou: We've known each other for a long time. Among the countless things we've talked about, I'm trying to remember when (and why) we started talking about photography.

Phil Chang: It was 1999 when we first started talking about it. You'd already finished your undergraduate studies in photography. At around this time, I began taking evening courses in photography to learn about the darkroom. And I remember talking to you about discovering Andreas Gursky and you scoffed and said I should look at the New Topographics.

AO Did I? I guess I always did prefer the New Topographics over the Struffskies.

PC I think this is a fair preference.

AO In photography terms, 1999 is an eon ago, and the medium is in many ways unlike what it was around that time. When you and I started to explore photographically twenty years ago, the photograph was still an analog entity, whereas the default understanding of a photograph now is that it's a coded thing, very much elastic and multifarious. With these kind of fundamental shifts in mind, have your reasons for wanting to do photography remained the same?

PC They haven't, fortunately. In 1999 I was really excited about something that I took for granted: how a photograph (at least, a light-sensitive one) could optically represent the world in the way that we visually perceive it. I'd studied sociology and history and when I discovered photography, its documentary impulse and genre interested me: it was a very legible and easy transition from textually analysing social issues to trying to depict them in images. In the late 1990s, Los Angeles became a subject that I was very interested in. I began photographing sites in a documentary way using colour film and a medium-format camera. This interest in documentary and Los Angeles led me to the California Institute of the Arts graduate school, and this completely upturned my initial interests in photography and offered up an entirely new perspective of the medium: how, despite its widespread ubiquity in our culture, photography still remains a complex theoretical subject. Since 1999, I've had the opportunity to rethink my initial interest in documentary photography.

I'm very interested in the elastic and multifarious qualities that you mention. They help explain a dialectic that I believe exists between photographs as instrumental versus artistic images: the former include a widespread flexibility based on utility and genre category that typically involves a sensible relationship between referent and image; the latter include a more distinct flexibility that concerns the status of the photograph as an object when it circulates in the context of art. I'm fascinated when a shift from one mode to another can allow for something as culturally available as a photograph to function with a new flexibility that allows it to be many things at once: an aesthetic object, an artifact, a site for philosophical investigation, an item of décor and a commodity.

AO Like you, I was initially drawn to the documentary aspects of photography. I think for me an early turning point that gave glimpse to other possibilities beyond the documentative was the 1996 Robert Frank retrospective at the Whitney. I was especially drawn to the work he made in Mabou in the 70's. In these strange and dark images he seemed determined to depart from the work that he was so well-known for to use photography in a way that I later understood to be self-reflective, as if to examine the very reasons why he was making these images. In other words, this work was conscious of the notion that to make a photograph is to give presence to a particular kind of phenomenon. On a side note, it's interesting that this work hasn't really been contextualized with the conceptual work being produced around the same time, because there seems to be some potential dialogue between them. I don't mean to use phenomenon in a Husserlian kind of way, but I think it's a term that can describe the very unique conditions of photo-making that require a self and the world. This encounter with the Mabou work probably planted the seed in the later interest in the philosophical potentials of the medium. So, to maybe continue on this thread with your work, the interest in the conditions of making photographs was there in the early shift in your practice and has continued in your recent projects.

PC Studying with Allan Sekula was instrumental in this. Sekula's concept of 'the traffic in photographs' was a pivotal idea that allowed me to think through the political and cultural problems crucial to documentary. So, to say that my reasons for making photographs haven't remained the same is also to say that my understanding of photography's relationship to politics has been revised. Or more that

photography's relationship to political subject matter has been revised. This can be described as wanting to be critical of the liberal impulse associated with much of documentary, which typically calls for an affective response to political issues rather than action or reform.

AO It's true: in so much of Sekula's work he was able to, in a sense, assume a documentary position, while consciously and very critically addressing the problems inherent in this categorical approach.

PC Which explains why he's rightly credited with reinventing documentary.

AO Can you talk more about the idea of 'traffic in photography' (TIP)? It's a term that seems even more prescient now.

PC I should say that though some of my work doesn't resemble documentary, the genre itself is an important starting point for the directions I take in it and how I approach teaching photography. I think TIP is applicable here. It describes the physical and discursive networks through which photos are produced, circulated and consumed. But more importantly, TIP describes what Sekula claims is the 'constant oscillation between the antinomies of bourgeois thought that structures such circulation, especially between science and art, between instrumental images and aesthetic ones, and realism and formalism'.¹

I believe that photographs are incredibly effective in reflecting the world as images. However, I believe that the way photographs are produced, the way they circulate, and the way we consume them all constitute a more effective reflection of the world than images ever could.

AO Maybe the binary between realism and formalism is a fitting context within which to talk about your *Replacement Ink* work, because to my mind the work addresses realism in a radically different way, very much against the art-historical definition of the idea. The work raises some pressing questions regarding photography's role in 'trafficking' the real.

PC I'm glad you perceive that. I'm interested in how imaging technologies are indicative of the function of disavowal in our culture. By that I mean that condition of saying 'I know, but...' – of knowing the truth but convincing yourself that the false option is also acceptable. The way in which imaging technologies do this is through the slippage between media that we enact in referring to something as one thing when it is in fact entirely different. The inkjet print that resembles a photograph is one such example. These works attempt to reflect this act of disavowal

by deliberately misusing inkjet materials as an exaggerated way to bring attention to something as prevalent as inkjet prints. It's my belief that at times we have to transgress certain media in order to speak clearly about their conditions. *The Replacement Ink* works try to engage in how this slippage of designation and medium can be noticed in the creative professions, where an inkjet print can exist in many forms: as a rendering in an architecture firm, as a mock-up in a graphic-design studio, as a poster at a commercial printer, as a MS Word document in an administrative office, and as a photograph for the photographer. These are made by manually applying third-party inkjet printer ink to many of the dominant inkjet papers on the market, papers produced by Epson, Canson, Museo and Hannah Muhle. And the titles are intentionally redundant to the work they describe.

AO The decision to use 'third-party' replacement inks seem important.

PC For me, it was a way to create an antagonism between various manufacturers and ensure that the title of the works indicates this (e.g. by listing the paper manufacturer and brand name). Using third-party ink was a way to highlight the various hierarchies of inkjet products and how their marketing adopts tropes of connoisseurship and excellence. I was also interested in this work fitting into how photography involves a series of many relationships, where the social activity around photography seems to be most reflective of how the medium is functioning today.

AO It seems that the flexibility in the inkjet process, the way that the same material or processes can be used in different applications, is analogous to the camera, in that the capture apparatus itself is in some ways 'mute' until it's deployed by a user.

PC I agree. And this describes the function of instrumentality that's so applicable to photography and image production. What's interesting to me with inkjet media and technology is how identical materials are designated as something different depending on profession and 'creative' or instrumental use.

AO Maybe there's more to be said about this notion of instrumentality. I'm curious (not specifically in relation to your work) about the idea that this flexible attribute can be tweaked and manipulated only within art. It's interesting that photography's instrumentality can be made null once it's designed as art. Or, seen another way, the instrumentality of a photograph is made more apparent once it becomes art.

PC That's precisely because photography has

a double-standard imposed on it, so that it then has the added incentive to completely upend, reduce or make its instrumentality more apparent. This issue of instrumentality has interested me for a long time and has helped me establish why I think my photographic work should only function in the context of art. It's only in art that an object can have a multivalence, that it can be a discursive object, an artifact, an item of decor and a commodity all at once. I think when you introduce photography into these conditions it becomes very interesting, precisely because of photography's built-in instrumentality. How do you conceive of instrumentality and Allan's work in your own practice and research?

AO Instrumentality in itself isn't something I'm grappling with, at least not in my recent projects. In my teaching I talk about it quite a bit, but in my work it's precisely photography's instrumentality that allows for an interchangeability of approaches. I can make landscapes, studio still-lives, abstract works, seascapes and other kind of existing and categorical genres because they already exist and therefore become 'ready-made' categories for me to tackle, whether critically, aesthetically, philosophically, or all of the above.



Arthur Ou, *Michele Abeles reading 5.634*: *This is connected with the fact that no part of our experience is at the same time a priori. Whatever we see could be other than it is. Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is. There is no a priori order of things.*

PC That's an interesting point. Your work can be very fluid and conscious of photographic genre, especially your last exhibition of artists' portraits with each individual reading Wittgenstein.

AO In the portraits I was interested in the potential philosophical space that can open up between what is depicted and what is intended — depicted meaning that there was an indexical record of what took place (photographers reading specific propositions from the *Tractatus*), while what is depicted stops short of the internal theoretical engagement by the subject with the text, because that is something that defies depiction. So indexicality here is only possible for what was external, yet is not possible for depicting interiority.

PC I believe so, especially considering that you used film and gelatin silver paper to produce the work, which allows for the argument of indexicality to exist. I think this is important, if not crucial, because it's with the indexical that intentionality is then problematised and it's the indexical that explains why photography is still an important and challenging theoretical object, as I mentioned earlier.

AO Right now I'm reading some writings about the philosophy of mathematics, which talks about numbers being subjects with no objects. I think of photographs like this.

PC That's interesting because that brings up that semiotic distinction with photographs: that what they're of might be completely different from what they're about.

AO Maybe this is another way of saying that photographs are inherently theoretical objects.

PC True, and that this inherent condition then either attracts an enormous population of users who rely on photography's instrumental function or a smaller population of users who might be interested in a medium that's always undergone changes due to technological and market forces while continually challenging notions of intentionality, authorship and originality. Walter Benn Michaels wrote in *Photographs and Fossils* that outside of art history, the issue and debate around indexicality (that is, between indexiphiles and indexiphobes) is a cheap one.²

AO Except for when photographs are touted as evidence?

PC Right, and their evidentiary use relies on an instrumental impulse.

AO It seems that from a design and marketing standpoint, the shift is towards the opposite end of instrumentality, that instead of a supposed range of applications there is but one that can be

interchangeable? I was introduced to this idea from a visit to the MIT Media Lab a few years ago where they are developing an apparatus that is capable of capturing the entirety of an experienced moment.

PC Do you mean some apparatus that's so multi-functional that it goes beyond the still and video features of a DSLR, like an Epson all-in-one printer/fax/photocopier?

AO From what I understand, the idea, which still seems radical to me, is that in one capture the entirety of a moment is photographically mapped so that one could later ostensibly choose any number of ways to represent it. Maybe what they are after is the penultimate photographic flexibility and elasticity. To bring these notions of interchangeability back to your work, your *Replacement Ink* series speaks to how the designated use can be stretched and elasticized, that by purposefully misusing the material, another possible understanding of it can emerge?

PC Yes, I agree. I am purposefully misusing the materials during the making of the work. However, I like to call them 'works on paper', and I list the media as 'archival pigment prints'. This is a conceit on my part. Benn Michael's writings were another factor that informed my misuse of the inkjet materials. He argues that in many ways a photograph isn't a representation, but instead a trace or a causally inflected sign. This was very important for me. It encouraged me to rethink the idea of what a picture is today in an inkjet era.

AO When I talk about inkjet technology to students, I propose that it should be considered an analog process. Inkjet printing requires a printhead moving on an axis in real space shooting out pigment onto physical material. If coded images are going to be turned into prints, a spatial transformation is required. Why coded images are turned into prints is a question of instrumentality as well, maybe especially in art.

PC How do you see the role of indexicality playing into this inkjet versus analogue argument?

AO I think it's an interesting ontological question because we can only exist in dimensional space. Even though we would like to believe that most things are or can be digitized, the only way we can interact with this information is when it is converted back to sound waves or physical surfaces that reflect light.

PC It reminds me of how with smart phones or tablets, we still have to rely on manual dexterity to navigate, to swipe, to pinch.

AO Right. So perhaps indexicality is not

applicable in the digital realm because it points to a spatial and physical correlation. I wonder if WBM would agree?

PC It would be interesting to see what he'd say. From a technical standpoint, digital images and capture devices aren't indexical. And from a personal and artistic standpoint, that's why I use the term 'indexicalish' for digital images that rely on a notion of indexicality.

We've mentioned photography's function in a few ways – through instrumentality, through art, and through theory. How have you navigated or confronted photography's theoretical function?

AO I think it was when I decided not to use photography as a tool for narrative that I became interested in its philosophical or theoretical potential.

PC So it was when did you decided not to follow that once dominant model of staged, narrative tableau?

AO That was in grad school, when the narrative approach was the central focus for many of my peers.

PC Which also explains why in 1999 you told me to look at New Topographics. You were looking out for me!

AO It was at that point that I started to scratch my way towards other possibilities.

PC Yes, I remember, since I was so new to photography and art at this time, being very informed by this decision of yours, as well as seeing your classmates take on a similar challenge and approach (e.g. Shannon Ebner, Mark Wyse, Walead Beshty and others).

AO You talked about the shift away from the documentary impulse earlier. Have you reconsidered this notion in your newest work made in Bosnia? Can you talk about this new series?

PC I appreciate this question because it comes on the heels of what I've been thinking about contemporary photography and potential responses to it. One of them includes a return to making 'straight' photographs again.

AO Can you elaborate on the notion of 'straight', since the term now carries art-historical weight.

PC I've always been interested in the problems inherent in photography. Some of these include widespread cultural presumptions about the medium, the fact that a static image emerges out of interrupting lived reality, and the frequency with which the photographic image is confused with its subject matter. By 'straight' I mean ostensibly transparent, or a photographic image that's indexical(ish), or a

photographic image that doesn't trade in the subjectivity of 'process' and 'experimentation' and instead attempts to describe something in the world. I'm still interested in instances when the photographic image and its subject are confused. This has led me to research subjects whose status as originals or replicas are precarious, which as subjects in photographs assert something interesting for me: they call into question the function and notion of something so fundamental to photography: depiction.

AO In this work, you've repeatedly depicted the same subject, as if to reinforce its subjecthood by showing it again and again, from different vantage points.

PC Yes, in the project on Stari Most, or The Old Bridge, which is situated in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, I've photographed it from various locations. Each location was determined by historical factors. My research and fieldwork revealed that units from the Croatian Council of Defence (HVO) shelled or used heavy artillery from these locations in order to destroy the bridge in 1993. Stari Most was reconstructed to specifications relating to the sixteenth-century building methods that were initially used to construct it in 1566. The United Nations rebuilt the bridge in 2004. So my interest in returning to straight depiction also involves an interest in returning to subject matter, however overt or oblique, that's informed by politics and history. In the case of Stari Most, these politics and historical conditions concern extreme nationalism and its impact, which first manifested itself as a war from 1992–95 in Bosnia and then became sublimated to cultural heritage sites where architecture and monuments become the site, as it were, of conflict and competition.

AO The historical aspects of this structure are fascinating. The approach that you took to depict it photographically brings up an interesting aspect of photography that may be more invisible in the inkjet work: that of the subjectivity of the viewer, which can ostensibly only emerge through 'straight' depictions. I don't mean this tautologically, but I find the fact that you had to place yourself in the various locations where the mortar cannons were positioned – the placement of your body in these physical vantage points – brings up very different questions about photography, at least compared to the inkjet work: namely, questions about place.

PC I'm happy you perceive this aspect of my physically being in these places in order to make the photographs of Stari Most. For me, they are indeed

questions about place, questions that I have no license to, since I'm not from this city nor a Bosnian citizen. Since photography has another historical problem – that of capturing images of subjects or places that have no connection to the photographer or viewer – I wanted to approach Stari Most in a historical way. The bridge is photographed every day by professionals and amateurs alike. All the images are stunning precisely because its recreation is an amazing feat. Given this wealth of images of the bridge, I chose to defer to historical conditions, such as where the HVO had positioned themselves to fire upon the bridge. These positions then determined where and how I photographed Stari Most and this explains the repetition in the photos that I made. On one hand, then, you have historical conditions determining how I made the photographs. On the other hand, Stari Most poses a very compelling problem for photographic representations of it: because it is a replica, its depiction is precarious. Its status as something truthful, evidentiary or authentic is, from the onset, faulty. And this interested me, because of all the things or occurrences in the world that could thwart photography's enterprise of depiction, it's this bridge, whose contested status and existence has been indelibly informed by extreme nationalism, postwar attempts at peace-building, and the insistence of a replica as a stand-in for post-war reconstruction.

AO The engagement with place in this work is making me wonder where the place is in the inkjet work.

PC I think if there's any 'place' in the inkjet work it's the 'space' of what a picture could be today in an inkjet era.

AO I've never been to Bosnia, but have been to places like Berlin and Dresden, where historical replicas abound, rebuilt for similar reasons.

PC What interests me about Bosnia is that genocide happened there at the end of the twentieth century. This was at a time when the world thought that Fascism had concluded at the end of WW2. And Berlin and Dresden's replicas have a place in this, as it relates to WW2. Perhaps as Americans, we have a distinct separation from the construction of replicas as commemoration, since replicas in the US function more for entertainment and escape – for example Las Vegas, or the abundance of faux European plaza shopping malls in Los Angeles.

AO I think there are different cultural understanding of authenticity. For instance, a large percentage of the Forbidden City in Beijing is rebuilt

since much of it was destroyed and pillaged. But the way it was done was not through authentic processes and materials. It seemed enough that things “looked” the same, but not so much “made” the same. As an artist I place a lot of care in how things are made, but I find that the idea of remaking something that “looks” rather than “made” in the same way to be conceptually interesting.

PC Yes, I agree. We’re both ethnically Chinese, and have a relationship to the culture’s insistence on replicas or counterfeit goods. What’s interesting about the Chinese approach is that appearances count more than being, or, ontologically speaking, the essence of a thing. And that’s what I found compelling about the United Nation’s decision to rebuild Stari Most in the same manner, using the same material (limestone) that were used in the sixteenth century. So remaking

something to look a way that obscures how it was made has something interestingly to do with nationality and cultural factors.

This conversation reminds me of how the expanded field of art leads one to observe the Chinese impulse to focus on looks rather than labour, or how something was made. In the same way, I’m certain the United Nations weren’t aiming for a conceptual claim on the appearance and re-making of Stari Most. And this takes us back to that subject of instrumentality once again.

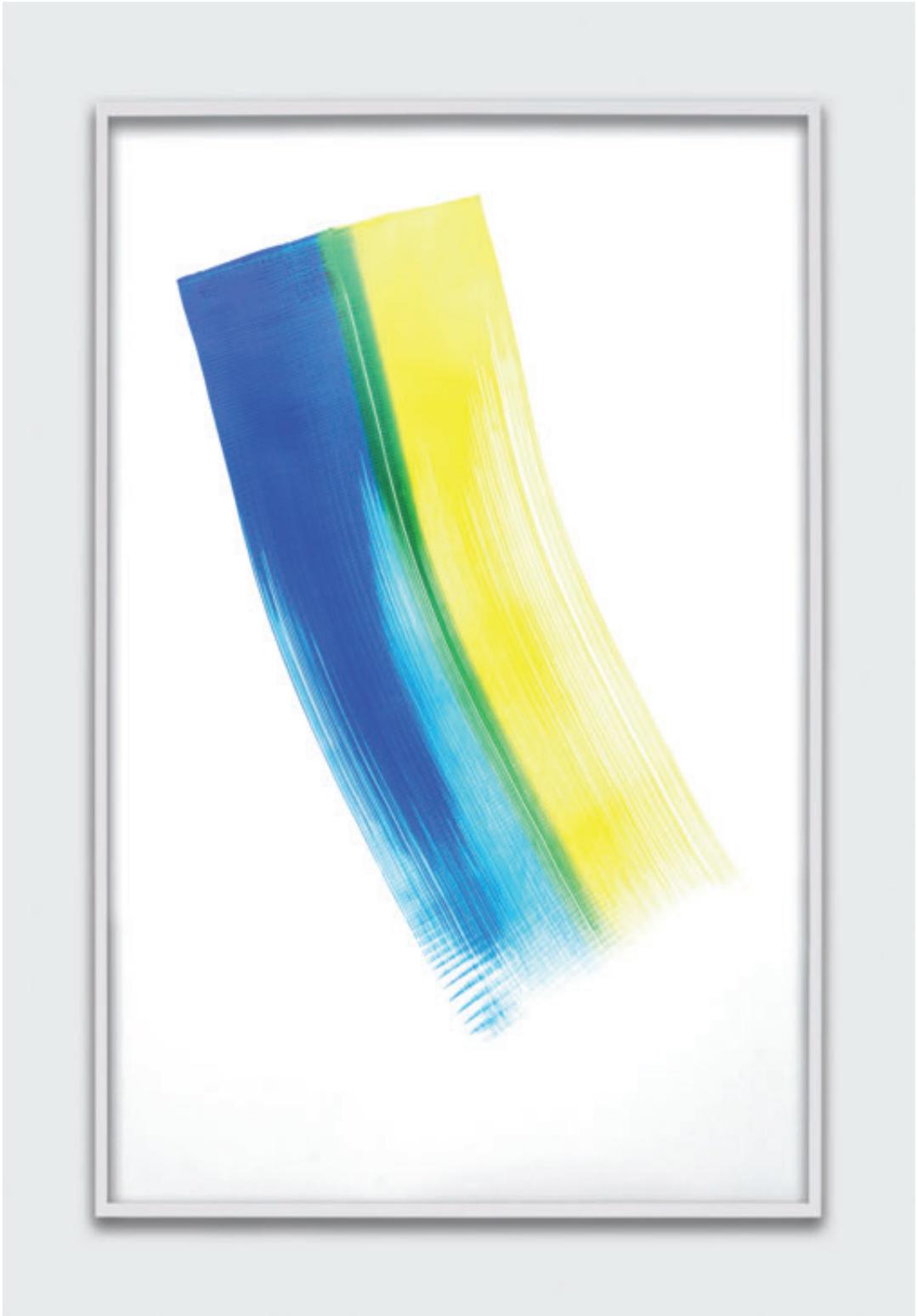
¹ This quote appeared in the journal *Grey Room* in an issue devoted to Sekula’s writing and artwork: *Grey Room* 55, Spring 2014, pp. 6–15, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

² This appeared in Walter Benn Michaels, *Photographs and Fossils, Photography Theory (The Art Seminar)*, Routledge, 2006, pp. 444.

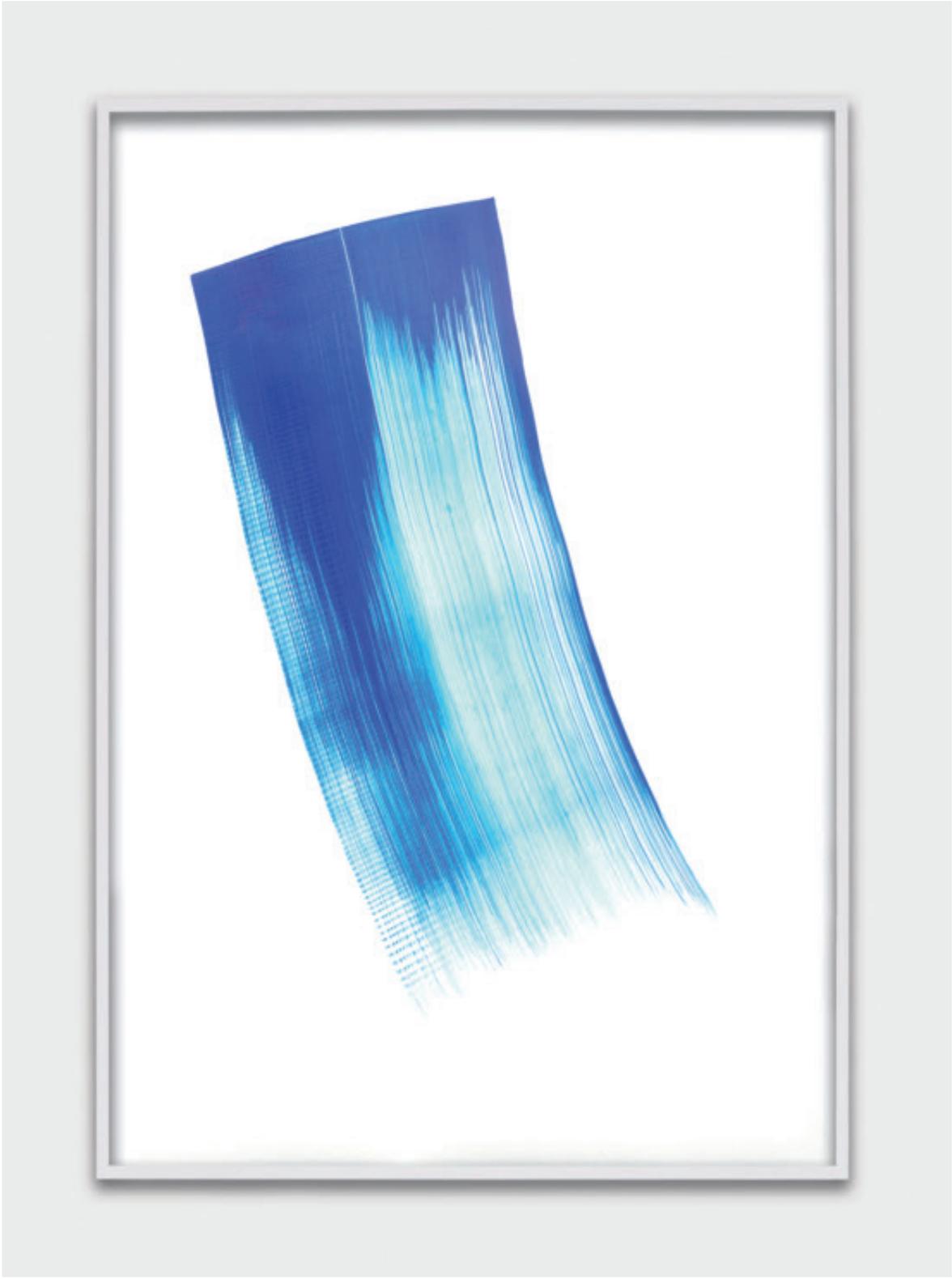
Arthur Ou works in photography, painting, sculpture, and installation. His work is featured in the new book, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (University of Chicago Press, June 2015), by Walter Benn Michaels, and *Photography is Magic*, (Aperture, September 2015) by Charlotte Cotton. He is an assistant professor of photography at Parsons School of Design.

Phil Chang received his MFA from The California Institute of the Arts and his BA from the University of California, Irvine. Solo exhibitions include Praz-Delavallade (2015), The California Museum of Photography at UCRARTSblock (2015), M+B (2014), LAXART (2012), and Pepin Moore (2012). Chang’s publications include *Four Over One*, an artist’s book published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with Textfield, Inc. He is currently visiting faculty in the Department of Art at UCLA.

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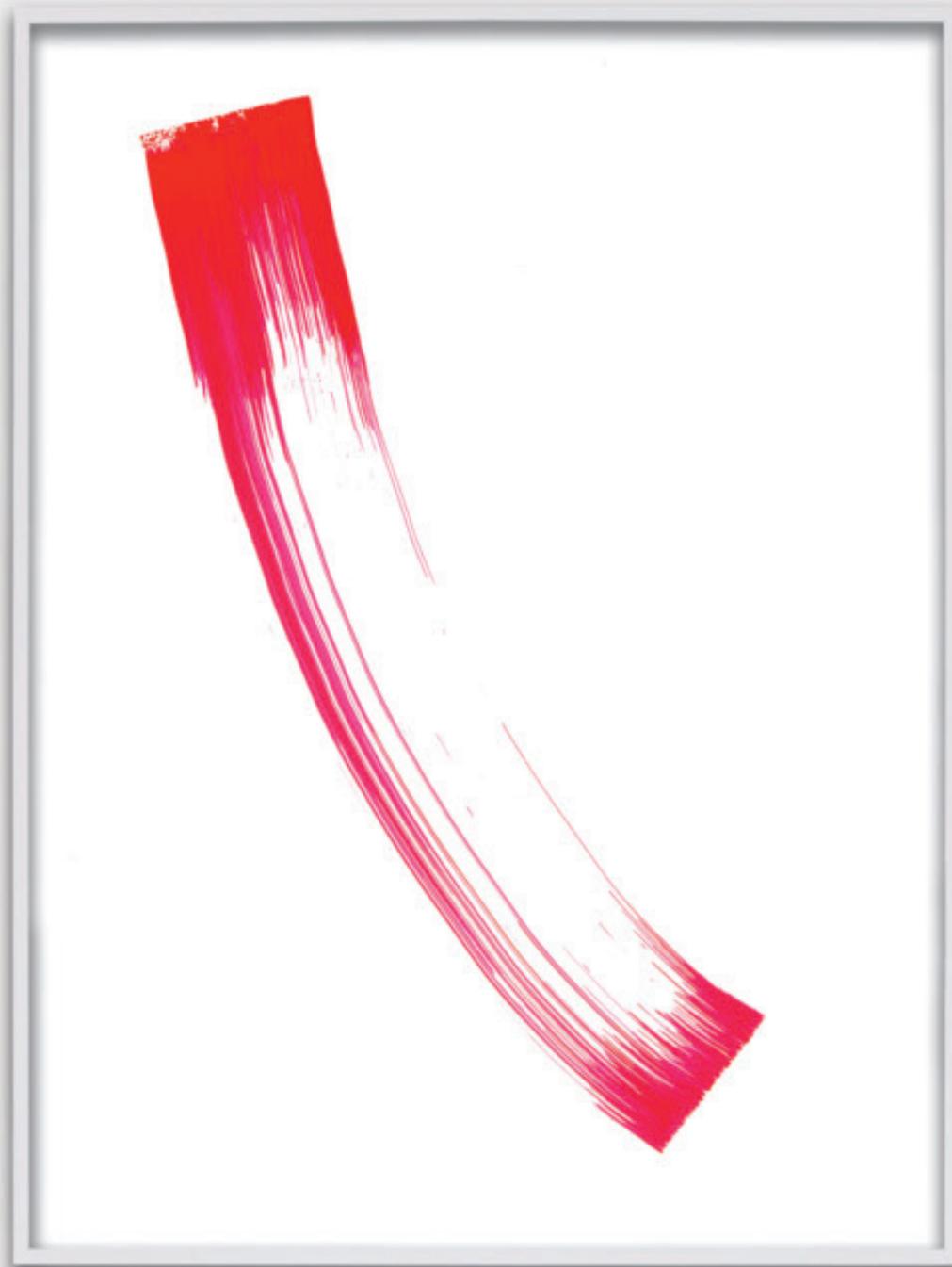


WORKS ON PAPER













STARI MOST, MOSTAR, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA









