Still Revolution:
Suspended in Time

Barbara Astman

Walead Beshty

Mat Collishaw

Stan Douglas

Idris Khan

Trevor Paglen

Martha Rosler

Mikhael Subotzky

It is the advent of the photograph...
which divides the history of the world.
— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Photography engendered awe and trepidation in 1839 when the daguerreotype, an image produced on a chemically treated silver plate, astonished the public with its veracity and power to arrest time. Before long, an obsession to possess photographic images that could be held in the palm of one's hand swept through society. Since then, each significant innovation in photography's evolution has radically altered the creation and consumption of images, irrevocably changing the history of visual representation.

Today, the proliferation of photographic technologies is laden with infinite possibilities for image production, reflecting our rapidly changing world and burgeoning global culture. Meanwhile, historical precedents in the medium continue to extend substantial influence. *Still Revolution: Suspended in Time* looks back to the revolutionary foundations of photography to explore the current innovations that continue to transform the medium. The exhibition presents eight Canadian and international artists whose photographs mirror a complex history marked by pervasive

change. From documentary to abstraction, choreographed fact to constructed fiction, the works in this exhibition implicate photography's catalytic role in social and political change. Suspending transitory moments in time, the evolving manifestations of photographic imagery overwhelmingly influence the way that we see the world today.

With the development of photographic technologies in the late 19th century came the power to isolate the mechanics of movement. Eadweard Muybridge's groundbreaking studies of animal and human movement from the 1880s demonstrate photography's ability to apprehend an instant in time and anticipate the invention of the moving image. British artist Idris Khan uses digital technology to mimic and then reverse the static character of still images. In *Rising Series... After Eadweard Muybridge "Human and Animal Locomotion"* (2005), Khan re-photographed and digitally overlaid five of Muybridge's sequential studies. By creating an image of simultaneity, Khan essentially "unfroze" the single image and distilled the illusion of movement in a new way. As a playful assault on the characteristics of analogue photography, Khan has appropriated and digitally reconfigured a number of iconic images and theoretical writings that are central to photographic history.
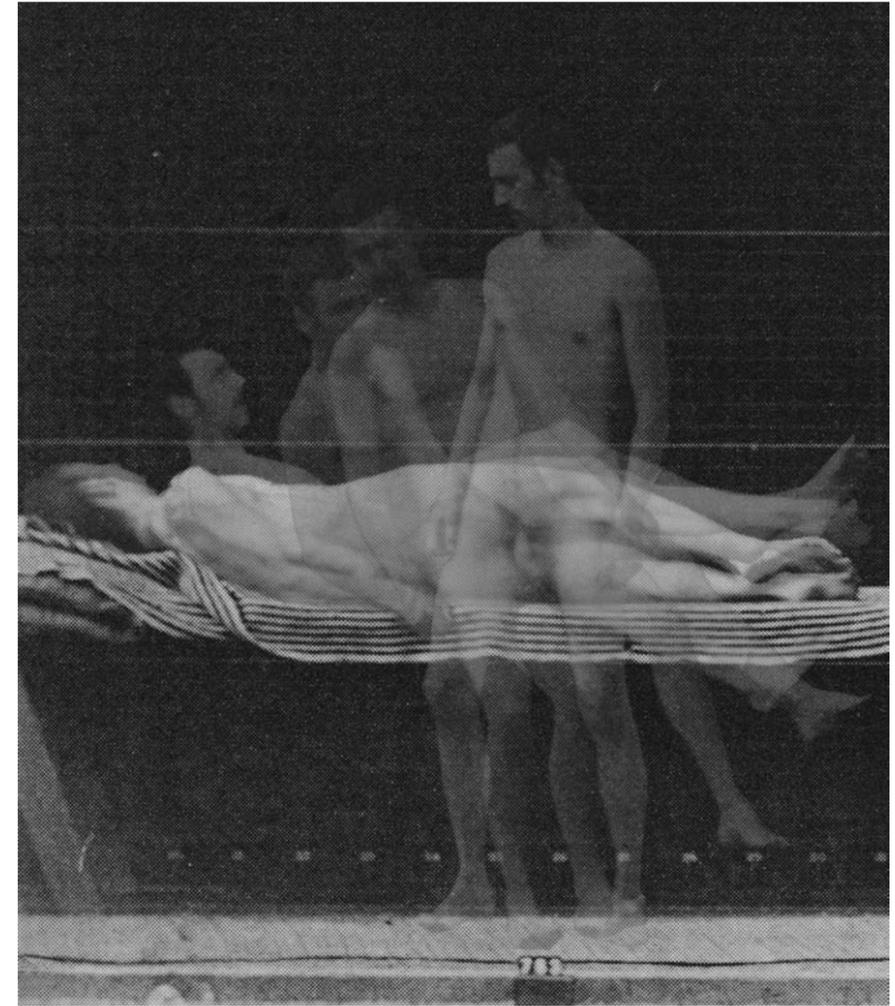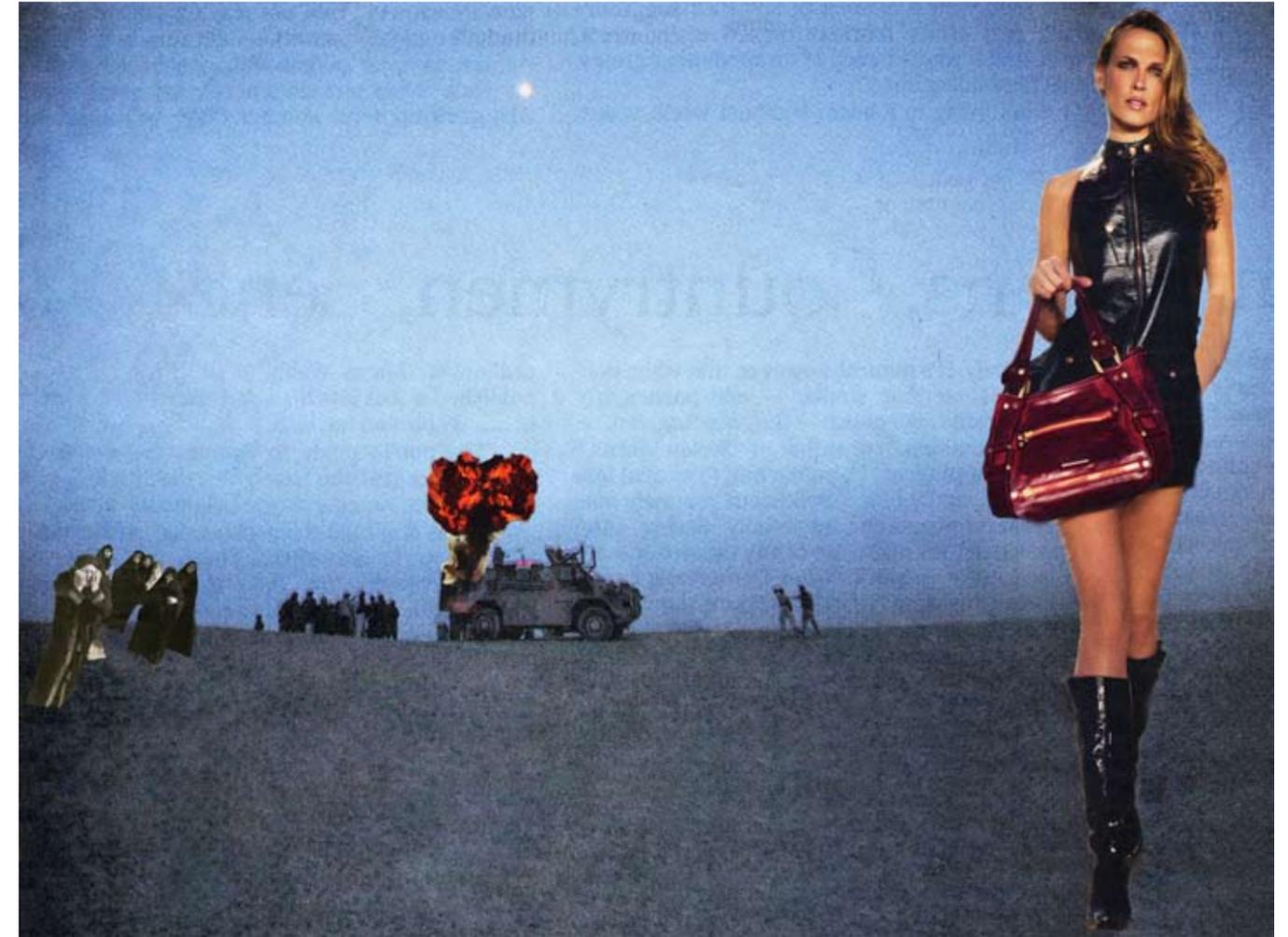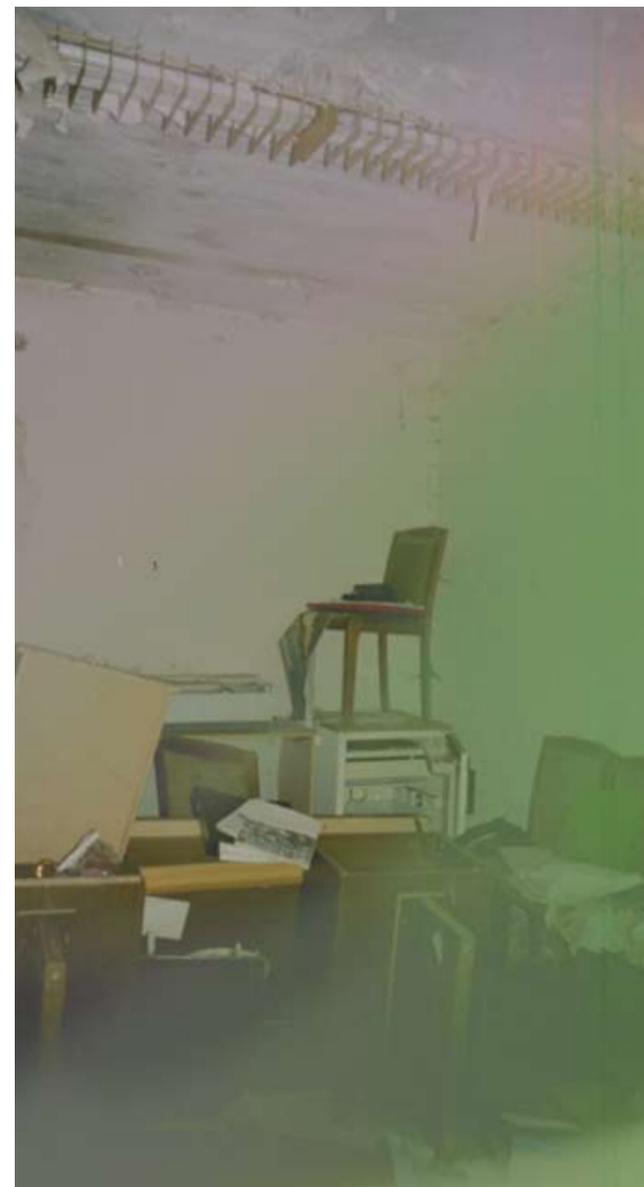
Every...Nicholas Nixon's Brown Sisters (2004) compresses the 30 years over which Nixon has taken an annual picture of his wife and her four sisters. Superimposing every image from this series, Khan emphasizes the elements of time and memory embedded in photographs and the enormous role the photograph can play in the documentation of social change evident in our personal histories. Extending his practice to include musical scores and a variety of written texts, *every...page of the Holy Quran* (2004), a work suggested by Khan's Muslim father, depicts Islam's book of guidance as a singular mass formed by the compression of pages. *Struggling to Hear... After Ludwig van Beethoven Sonatas* (2005) references the composer's frustration with his loss of hearing. In all of Khan's works, the content is transformed nearly beyond legibility, with the end result revealing provocative images that share affinities with painting and drawing. He avoids the realism associated with the use of photo editing software and instead exploits the metaphysical properties of the technology to create abstract representations of sound, time, movement and doctrine – all compressed into one.

Walead Beshty, a British artist and writer currently based in Los Angeles, is similarly interested in exploring the material aspects of photography and in exposing the process of his practice, which includes both documentary and abstract methodologies. His images are often accompanied by contextual material in the form of objects, ephemera and archival photos that expose the mechanics of their origins. For Beshty, representation is never neutral or fixed but always subject to shift and flux, and is defined by a complex, interconnected web of social and political circumstance. A photograph, an artwork, an image, does not exist in a de-contextualized vacuum.

Between 2001 and 2006, Beshty made several visits to the abandoned Iraqi Diplomatic Mission in former East Berlin, a site stripped of its identity within the former nation after the fall of the Berlin Wall that exists as a relic of history. During one such trip, his film was accidentally damaged by airport security x-rays. Beshty realized that the compromised film represented the circumstances of international borders, echoing the ruptured political and social realities of the photos' subject matter. The images he then took of the mission's derelict interior full of aging office debris reveal enigmatic patterns and colours, resulting from the film's prior exposure. As hybrids of chance and circumstance, these works literally and metaphorically expose the tension between the realities of the physical world and the properties of its photographic representation. While Beshty's actions – his intentions, his travels and the decisions he makes – are all complicit in the formulation of his images, the final results

are beyond his full determination. Images and their aesthetic characteristics are shaped by complex histories, evolving photographic technologies, and social and cultural circumstances and conditions.

Histories associated with sociopolitical events also inform the strategies of Canadian artist Stan Douglas. His recent work references an essay by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze entitled *Humour, Irony and the Law,* which was inspired by Franz Kafka's book *The Trial*. Deleuze examines the arbitrary nature of laws and regulations that often determine the fates of individuals and the outcomes of history. Douglas reconstructed forgotten incidents of social confrontation between local Vancouver police and members of the public at various times throughout the last century. These events make the abstract and non-visible tenets of authority disconcertingly real.

Abbott and Cordova, 7 August 1971 (2008) depicts one such incident, commonly referred to as the Gastown Riot, in which the police violently intervened in a public protest against undercover police tactics and in favour of the legalization of marijuana. The composition was realized using cinematic staging and digital compositing techniques to assemble 50 different images taken with the camera in the same position. Striving for historical accuracy, Douglas undertook extensive research, collecting archival photographs and conducting interviews with witnesses and participants to recreate the scene in painstaking detail. Using complex production methods similar to those of the film industry, the details of local businesses, commercial signage and period clothing were carefully replicated to represent the past. The combined use of theatrical and digital processes enabled a heightened form of realism. A focus on individuals in the crowd reveals the reactions on their faces. *Abbott and Cordova* was commissioned as a photographic mural for the Woodword's building, a redevelopment in Vancouver's Gastown, where the scene was set. Within the context of urban transformation, Douglas resurrects the controversy of a political event that many would prefer not to remember.

American artist, author and experimental geographer Trevor Paglen is also concerned with the elusive mechanisms of authority. However, the subjects of his pictures are often concealed from public view and are invisible to the naked eye. Paglen photographs places and things that do not officially exist: secret American military installations in Afghanistan, a covert military research facility in the Nevada desert, the flight paths of the CIA's clandestine fleet of jets and the trajectories of American government surveillance satellites.

MIKHAEL SUBOTZKY • *CELL 508*, 2005.

BARBARA ASTMAN • *DANCING WITH CHE 17, 22, 23, 14, 2002.*

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Using high-powered telescopes to magnify his subjects and a technique similar to astrophotography which Paglen terms "limit-telephotography," a secret world is revealed in photographic vistas of distant landscapes that radiate with heat and shimmer like a mirage. Sites not intended to be seen, hidden through obscure location or sheer distance and masked to conceal their operations, are photographed across many miles of terrain and restricted zones. As with Idris Khan, Paglen's work recalls Eadweard Muybridge, who, before creating his studies of movement, was one of the great landscape photographers of the American West. Another was Timothy O'Sullivan, whose pioneering photographs of the Civil War are some of the first and best examples of early fieldwork. During the late 1860s and early 1870s, these frontier photographers were occasionally hired by the US government to produce photographic surveys. Ironically, as Paglen points out, they have been replaced by today's military reconnaissance spacecraft. Now using technology unimaginable in the 19th century (such as customized astronomy software, a computer-controlled motorized tripod, and a guided-exposure camera system), Paglen photographically records top-secret US surveillance satellites as they orbit the earth. Redolent with seductive beauty, his images fluctuate between representation and abstraction as they illuminate the movement and visual traces of a shadowy, elusive world.

Mikhael Subotzky, a Magnum photographer based in Johannesburg, also explores a mostly hidden reality that he exposes to public scrutiny. The history of documentary photography, and the precedents it sets as a corollary for social justice, has a strong presence in Subotzky's work. *Die Vier Hoeke ("The Four Corners")* (2004) is a brutally frank documentary project on life in South Africa's notorious Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison, where Nelson Mandela spent several years of incarceration during the Apartheid era. Subotzky's 360˚ panoramic photographs of prison life, digitally stitched together from 18 individual frames, expand upon the traditions of documentary. The visually powerful effect of the panorama, while harkening back to its origins in the 1840s, heightens the impact of the narrative to a palpably tangible, near-cinematic experience. *Cell 508* (2005) depicts a space housing 54 men that was designed to accommodate 18. It underscores the horrific living conditions of a severely overcrowded prison system, where rehabilitation is almost non-existent.

Subotzky's recent series *Beaufort West* (2006-2008) is a comprehensive study of a South African town located in the desert halfway between Johannesburg and Cape Town, noteworthy for the prison that is curiously positioned in the middle of a traffic roundabout at its centre. Geographically isolated, in many ways Beaufort West has not broken away from its political and cultural past. The legacy of Apartheid is clearly visible through the racial segregation, severe poverty, rampant unemployment and criminal activity in the town. Subotzky focuses on the sociopolitical conditions of a culture that revolves around a facility where people are held captive. Isolated from the revolutionary movement that ended Apartheid in South Africa, Beaufort West is literally and metaphorically suspended between time and history.

During the late 1960s, American artist Martha Rosler became well-known for her work reflecting feminist and anti-war sentiments. Building upon the photo-collage traditions of her predecessors, such as Alexander Rodchenko, Hannah Hoch and Richard Hamilton, Rosler's work appropriates and critically comments on the vocabulary of mainstream consumerism as found in advertising, home décor and fashion magazines and the news media. Channeling the power embodied in the juxtapositions of incongruent images, Rosler conflates time, space and circumstance, often to the point of absurdity. In her series of highly politicized photomontages, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-1972), she provocatively reacted to the Vietnam War. In recognition of the similarities between Vietnam and the current war in Iraq, in 2004 Rosler reprised the series for the 21st century. While the details of place and political motivation may have changed, the devastation of lives and destruction is no different now. What has changed in the decades between these two American wars is the advance of globalization, largely facilitated by telecommunications technologies including photography. Images from the media, advertising or any source are now easily and instantly transmitted around the globe, directly into our homes through television and the internet. Rosler's reprised photo-collage series emphasizes this circumstance: a military tank advances down a road accompanied by a dozen smartly dressed men in suits as the landscape behind them explodes into flames. In her original modest-scale series, Rosler's photomontages were published by an alternative press or distributed as photocopies to a politically active community. Today, developments in digital technologies enable the artist to make works at an enhanced scale for a broader audience at gallery and museum exhibitions. Her new works accordingly push the medium beyond the handmade into the highly polished realm of technology associated with modern warfare and the slick veneer commensurate with the gloss and artificiality of her sources.

Photographic representation has steadily pervaded the fabric of society to the extent that it influences the construction of identity, both personal and collective. With the popularization of the Polaroid camera in the 1950s, for the first time in history anyone could take a photograph and instantly see the results. American-born Toronto artist Barbara Astman began using a Polaroid camera in the late 1970s. This technology facilitated her desire to quickly create narratives of sequential images. Using her body as both object and subject she produced self-portraits exploring issues relating to identity and representation. Twenty years later while in Cuba, the ubiquity of iconic images of the revolutionary leader Che Guevara – on everything from clothing to coffee mugs, jewellery, key chains, banners and stickers – prompted Astman to explore the powerful role photography plays in the creation and commercialization of a cultural icon. The relationship between Cuba's socialist revolution, the accessibility of Che's image to the masses, and the technologies that create such widespread accessibility all work together in an attempt to sustain the ideals of the revolution.

For the series *Dancing with Che* (2002), Astman returned to the Polaroid camera, which she had rarely used since the 1980s, as the source of production for a body of large-scale photographs documenting herself dancing in a t-shirt bearing a well-known image of the revolutionary Che. Since then, the demise of the Polaroid camera and its film has transformed what was for many artists an intermediary product of the working process into the authentic artifact of the work's conception. Recalling Muybridge's sequential experiments, Astman's full series of 30 Polaroids displayed in linear sequence echoes across more than a century of technological innovation and evolution of the medium.

The barrage of images that surrounds us on 24-hour television and internet news sources feeds the insatiable global desire for spectacle. British artist Mat Collishaw's immersive multi-media installation *Deliverance* (2008) poses moral questions about the use of images depicting conflict and human suffering. Within the darkened space of the gallery, luminescent images of men, women and children, blood-streaked and disheveled, flare like paparazzi flash bulbs from three noisily revolving projectors suspended from the ceiling. Fading in and out across phosphorescent paint-covered walls, the life-size images are staged to resemble disaster scenes depicted in the media – in particular the 2004 massacre in Belsan, Russia – to create a nightmarish scene of tragedy. At the end of the Belsan school siege that lasted three days, wounded survivors emerged to walk straight towards news photographers waiting at the scene. Minutes later their grief-stricken pictures were transmitted to a worldwide audience and were consumed with revulsion. By surrounding the viewer in an environment that is as disturbing as it is seductive, Collishaw implicates his audience in the allure of tragedy, and makes explicit the role that images, especially those of innate beauty, can play in this dynamic.

Collishaw also looks back to the roots of the medium and alongside the installation presents a grouping of daguerreotypes depicting the same figures in small scale, complete with red velvet-lined cases. He juxtaposes the representational capabilities of traditional and ultra-modern photographic technologies – direct positive images on silvered copper plates in contrast with gobo image projections using computer-operated light fixtures. The daguerreotypes inevitably elicit sentiment and a perverse intimacy while the installation dazzles through sheer spectacular effect. Through this pairing, Collishaw's work emphasizes photography's complicity in the commoditization of events of global significance and exemplifies the massive change in past and present forms of reproduction.

The astonishment percipitated by the daguerreotype in the mid-19th century has given way to the overwhelming ubiquity of photographic imagery today. Deeply instilled in our collective consciousness, photography has emerged as the preeminent visual vocabulary of our times. As a rapidly changing technology, it has developed alongside the significant social, political and cultural events concurrent with the rise of the age of technology. The continually expanding sphere of digital technology enables the creation of the hyper-real – images that extend perception beyond the field of ordinary vision. The traditional properties of photography are clearly embedded within this domain. Photographic images have the capacity to reveal hidden meanings and invisible truths, regardless of the technology used to create them. Photography is still a revolutionary means of reproduction and simultaneously reflects back upon its own radical history. As such, the medium has not yet reached a point of mechanical stasis, although the optical principles of lens and light remain unchanged. The technology, the role and function of the medium still revolve around the wonder that has captivated us from the beginning: the ability to capture and reproduce images, suspended in time, that reflect the ever-changing world around us.

→ David Liss and Bonnie Rubenstein, exhibition curators