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Damage Done

Materializing the Photographic Image
Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Toronto
May 5–June 11, 2005

Photographer and curator Vid Ingelevics is becoming known for his smart and poetic exhibitions. His installations often form wonderful intertexts, implicitly exploring the complex relationship between photography, its institutions of collection and dissemination, and the production and retention of knowledge. On its surface, Ingelevics's latest curatorial project, *Damage Done: Materializing the Photographic Image,* seemed uncharacteristically monothematic. Presented at Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, the exhibition brought together work by emerging and established artists and featured found objects and archival material, beautifully portraying "damage" as a strategy that artists use to highlight the materiality of the photograph.

Damage Done was consistent with the installation style and ethics of the relatively new Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art (born out of *Prefix Photo* magazine), characterized by a seductive elegance and minimal didactic information. Typically, beyond basic labelling, any textual explanation and analysis of an exhibition is saved for publication and sale in *Prefix Photo*, where it is printed alongside reproductions of exhibited artwork. This is certainly not an unusual style of interpretive apparatus for a small contemporary gallery – attempting to "let the art speak first."

Without didactic material, Ingelevics's curatorial position seemed most embodied by two wonderfully anxious gestures at the entrance and exit of the exhibition. At the gallery entrance, a display window encased a pile of corrupt computer hard drives collected by the curator. At the other end of the exhibition was the classic installation by Max Dean, *as yet untitled* (1992–95). With this complex robotic work, viewers face the choice of allowing a stack of found family photographs to be continuously shredded or of saving them from destruction by selecting images to archive. This moral bracketing of the exhibition points to Ingelevics's participation in a collective angst over the potential loss of material information as we develop further into a digital society.

Ingelvics's curatorial essay, published in the accompanying *Prefix Photo* (issue 11), is essential to opening *Damage Done* up to its greater complexity. With characteristic wide-ranging but rigorous reference, Ingelevics builds the story behind his exhibition with a history of the oscillating dematerialization and rematerialization of photography. His research takes us through everything from Benjamin's theory on art and reproducibility to modernist and postmodern debates regarding photographic production, artistic legacy, authenticity, and marketplace, to photography's virtual status in an apparently "post-photographic" era and the many ways that capitalist structures are supporting and countering this paradigm shift. Discussing both vernacular photography and photography as art, Ingelevics traces our waning attention to the material object and attempts to rectify what he calls a "casual disregard of the distinction between photographs and images."

This distinction is highlighted in *Damage Done* as an ongoing conundrum rather than a clear difference. Seen in relation to each other, many of the works in the exhibition, without the aid of Ingelevics's essay, turn damage into aesthetic images with the texture of nostalgia. Fiona McLaughlin's single-channel video *Untitled* (2003), for example, shows close-cropped views of 35 mm slides on a light table in the process of being beautifully obliterated by a chemical liquid that is poured on their surface. A recent Ontario College of Art and Design graduate, McLaughlin used de-accessioned slides from the college library, mainly images of Byzantine mosaics, which are turned into abstract colour fields and, eventually, negated completely as bleach washes them away. Jennifer Givogue's prints, *Vinegar Negatives* (2003), were created from mysteriously decomposing documentation negatives from a collection at the Royal Ontario Museum. Exhibiting the damaged negatives themselves next to Givogue's beautiful prints, in this context, detracts attention from the actual loss of information and instead reifies such a loss into a touristic image of ruins.

Jennifer Givogue
Vinegar Negatives, 1993
photo: Toni Hafkenscheid

Pointing more directly to the notion of materiality through the image of artistic legacy, Ingelevics wisely includes documentation of the *performance* of damage. A gallery plinth showcases cut-up negatives and a jar of ashes. In one of the few didactic gestures in the exhibition, signage explains that these are remnants of negatives by the American artist Brett Weston, who intentionally destroyed them on his eightieth birthday. Weston was making a clear statement about the material origins of his art, which for him lay in his prints and not the negatives. For those lucky enough to catch it, *Damage Done* also included a one-night screening of Robert Frank's first video, *Home Improvements* (1985). The work is an emotional diary focused mainly on Frank's personal life, with occasional but provocative juxtapositions against his life as an artist. The scene highlighted in the context of *Damage Done* shows Frank drilling through a stack of prints that seem to be from his iconic book *The Americans*.

The most interesting moment in the exhibition is provided by Patrick Altman's *Venise revisitée* (1993) series, in which he uses nineteenth-century travel photography from Italy. Presented in diptychs, one print of the pair shows a scene that has some obstructed information due to damage to the print. Next to the damaged print is a clean print of the exact area of information that has been damaged, as though – reading as we do, from left to right – lost detail had been resuscitated. I assumed that the artist had somehow recovered the damaged information until Ingelevics's essay set the record straight. Altman, who is the chief documentation photographer for the Musée du Québec, is himself the culprit responsible for the ruin of these prints. In an oddly fetishistic process, Altman first documents the area he intends to damage, then proceeds to act out the damage, then displays the damaged print next to documentation of the saved detail – he becomes both conservator and destroyer of history. Altman's ambiguous work, with the aid of Ingelevics's discussion, is exemplary of the anxious complexity in the seemingly obvious distinction between photograph and image, bringing up issues of origin, authenticity, and intentionality.

Highlighting the conundrum even further is that *Damage Done* itself, as a whole, exists within a complex institutional system of image production – material objects and their interpretation, reproduction, and dissemination. The exhibition existed primarily as a body of representations until one read Ingelevics's text and the works finally materialized through discourse. Ingelevics's textual imagery created a more visceral response to the work of highlighting material origins. Typically contradicting this materiality, *Prefix Photo*, the magazine, chose to elegantly reproduce most of the work in the exhibition, and indexed the reproductions as artist "portfolios." This machinery, which creates the photograph's existence as both representation and object, is certainly something that Ingelevics discusses in his essay, but never specifically in relation to the operations of his own exhibition. Albeit less self-reflexive than the usual Ingelevics attention to the play of institutions on the production of meaning, *Damage Done* beautifully performed the complex of concerns over the loss of attention to photographs as material culture.

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