TODAY, AS WE increasingly see and share images online, are our interactions with photographs as objects becoming less frequent, less intense? According to Steve Hoffenberg, director of Consumer Imaging Research at Lyra Research in Newton, Massachusetts, we’re now taking more digital than film-based images and printing out far fewer of them. The estimated 3 billion images that are uploaded to Facebook every month suggest, Hoffenberg argues, that our historical relationship with photography is changing. Only 15 percent of the digital images shot with cameras get printed—the same kinds of pictures (of vacations, kids and holiday gatherings) that were printed all along in the analog world. But now the majority of photographs are made with cell- or smart-phone cameras, and they’re of subjects most of us wouldn’t consider making prints of—everyday events, informal interactions, things interesting, cool or curious—but that are useful for informational purposes and posting on social networking sites.

Does the materiality of photographs still matter to us? To explore that question, I invited four people who engage photography in various ways to participate in a roundtable discussion. Haidy Geismar is a visual anthropologist and an editor of the blog Material World (www.materialworldblog.com). The photographer Susan Meiselas devised an eight-year traveling exhibition (originating at the Menil Collection, Houston, in 1997) and publication on Kurdistan, which led to the website akaKURDISTAN.com, an archive of collective memory. Carol Squiers, a curator at New York’s International Center of Photography, organizes exhibitions that often explore the cultural impact of photographic images in their many material forms. Oliver Wasow is an artist who uses digital imaging to create hyperreal landscapes. Our discussion took place at Art in America’s offices, on Nov. 23, 2010.

HAS FACEBOOK KILLED THE PHOTO?
Five experts debate whether a relentless bombardment of images in the virtual realm has rendered the photographic print obsolete.

BY MARVIN HEIFERMAN

MARVIN HEIFERMAN When we think of photographs today, do we think of them as images or as things?

CAROL SQUIERS They’re both images and things, depending on why they are being made. It’s not necessarily a loss that all the pictures uploaded to Facebook aren’t being printed. I don’t want to look at all of them, or have them use up chemicals and pollute the environment.

OLIVER WASOW Taken collectively, images on the Internet are an index of shared experience and may speak more eloquently than isolated, edited-out individual prints. I have two small kids and I’m mesmerized by the little digital frame in our bathroom that rotates about 1,000 family photo-
graphs. I gave one to my mother for her birthday a few years ago. When I visited her the next year, it was still in its box and on a shelf. I e-mail her pictures all the time, and she says, “That’s nice,” then asks for a print. **HAIDY GEISMAR** I read recently that every time you do a Google search, it’s the equivalent of boiling a kettle of water, in terms of energy use. A massive electrical/software/hardware infrastructure underpins the uploading of Facebook photos. So I’m wary of discussions about digital imaging that negate complex materialities and our engagement with “things.” Obviously there is a transformation going on—in terms of access, usability, visual literacy and interpretation. **SQUIERS** In the art curatorial world I live in, materiality is about a thing that you hold in your hand: what kind of paper a photograph is on, the kind of film it was taken with. **GEISMAR** And yet many of the images you’ll work with on a day-to-day basis are going to be on a computer screen. **WASOW** Soon, I think, we’ll see the development of digital or electronic ink. Paper itself could become electronic so that an image might have a physical surface and presence that can change wirelessly and continuously. An image won’t be one, but a thousand pictures. **SQUIERS** It’s difficult to see into the future. But if we wanted to show a thousand pictures at ICP right now, we would show a thousand digital pictures on a screen. **GEISMAR** Still, do we continue to create hierarchies of value in which a vintage print is the thing with materiality and worth, while this other digital “stuff” is somehow not real? **WASOW** I wonder if the distinctions one can make between material and digital images helps to explain the growing fetishization of old or alternative processes and a certain nostalgia for fine art prints as commodities. I make work that looks great on the computer, but less so in printed form. I wonder if the art world doesn’t gravitate or cling to the print in a nostalgic, romantic way. I know my students don’t want to hear about the print going away. They want to shoot high-resolution images with great cameras and then make prints of them. **SQUIERS** The whole notion of “the photographic” has always been vexed by this question of its physicality.

**SUSAN MEISELAS**

*I’m living in the bridge between the two options—unwilling to give up either [conventional print or screen image], and struggling with the boundaries of both.*

Left, mural with Polaroid portrait taken as part of a community project with Cape Verdians in Cova de Moura, outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal, 2005. © Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos.

Opposite, one of Wasow’s Facebook wall photos with friends’ comments.

HEIFERMAN Many of the students I work with have become so enraptured with making images that they fail to think critically about the form their work might take. Some seem conditioned to make prints whose destiny is to be conventionally matted and/or framed. For others, the image they see on the screen is one that they sense can live multiple lives in various formats, and no single option is necessarily better than another.

SUSAN MEISELAS I’m definitely living in the bridge between those two options—unwilling to give up either and struggling with the boundaries of both. In 2004, when I was working with kids in a poor immigrant community outside of Lisbon, I was struck by the facility they already had with their cell phones. What surprised me even more was their interest in the Polaroid camera I was working with. It was as mesmerizing for them to see an image come up as it was for me, when I was young, working in a darkroom. And they wanted to have the resulting physical object so much. For me, the act of giving away a unique photograph and never having it again became a significant choice. One doesn’t know if it’s of value to others in the way that it is to oneself. Not as a commodity, though I’m sure that there’s that aspect to it. For those kids, their cell phone images weren’t as real as the Polaroids. The issue wasn’t about accessibility; it was about the reverse, a one-of-a-kind experience. And they wanted that.

WASOW Our traditional relationship to images as objects is rooted in the idea of memory, but that’s changing. At some point, I know I started thinking of analog images as being records of something having been there, while digital imaging is more about being in the present.

SQUIERS Digital images still preserve the past, but in a different form.

WASOW Today so many people are transmitting, recontextualizing and changing images.

GEISMAR That’s been the nature of photography from the very beginning.

WASOW But photography doesn’t have a specific time or place now.

SQUIERS Having worked in magazine publishing at American Photo for so long, I got used to seeing images in different states and ways—as photographic prints, as chrome, as pictures on a computer screen.

MEISELAS For me, too, images have always moved across boundaries and spaces. But when an image moves from a print onto a page, into a public space or across the Internet, that image, experientially, engages viewers differently.

HEIFERMAN With digital cameras, cell phones and smartphones loaded up with user-friendly software, photographs have been released from their materiality and finality. The goal of any one image may not be to sum something up, but to trigger others in response.

WASOW I walk down the street, see something, take a picture, send it to my Facebook page and start a dialogue about that, instantly. I did that on my way over here.

SQUIERS What did you take the picture of?

WASOW A sign in a window for a sale on shorts. I’m having an ongoing dialogue with some people on Facebook about shorts. I post at least one picture a day on Facebook, usually a found, vernacular photograph. These images then generate a lot of interesting and often funny conversations. Photography in the digital age has become much more active, as images dematerialize, mutate and float around.

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GEISMAR That’s one of the biggest differences, actually. Photography has become a medium of sociability.

WASOW Susan, can I ask you about your Kurdistan project and how that worked on the Web?

MEISELAS That project, from around 1997-98, grew out of a traveling exhibition of prints and my desire to keep adding new images to a project generated by the community. The concept for what we called akaKURDISTAN was to create a safe zone in cyberspace where a virtual exchange of images and information could be had, and to figure out how the resulting database might continue and grow without my mediation. Because so few people had access to computers, they brought in photographs from home to be scanned and uploaded. I loved that—all the rips and tears, and what images as objects could express. The frail condition of many of them made their public display problematic, but the digital version of the project made that content accessible.

I also realized, in working with digital imaging, that I could combine and collage imagery in new ways in my own work. I started making 12-foot-long rolls of images, something I could have never imagined doing five years earlier. I no longer had to worry whether an image should be an 11-by-14 or a 16-by-20 print. I could, if I wanted, print images on mesh. Digital imaging, as it turned out, opened up a new landscape of material possibilities.

GEISMAR In his book *After Photography*, Fred Ritchin says that despite its vast potential, most digital work is quite reactionary, aspiring to older forms of photography.

WASOW I try not to get too caught up in the utopianism of new technology, but I am looking forward to the day when I can jettison prints entirely.

SQUIERS You can do that now, can’t you? If your product in the world is a digital photograph presented digitally, then that’s what your art is. Your art is no longer a print.

WASOW Ideally it’s not. But there are market forces, audience forces. And there’s my own desire.

SQUIERS While some of us may have already decided the era of analog photography has passed, I’m with William Faulkner: the past isn’t dead, it isn’t even past.

WASOW The past is very much alive, digitally speaking. Millions of older
images are being uploaded every day and can be indexed or grouped using search engines to uncover typologies we didn’t know existed.

SQUIERS I’m working on a show about 9/11 now, and when I used Google to do research, it was unsatisfying. The images are too little; there’s no decent caption information. I typed in Guantánamo and came up with a pathetic bunch of images. People think the digital world is a magical place where great things happen all by themselves.

WASOW Think of it this way: you’ll find more images than you would have 25 years ago, and there’s the potential to find photographs taken by people in Guantánamo.

HEIFERMAN I look at a fair number of websites that present or promote photography—Humble Arts, I Heart Photographs, Tiny Vices and others—and while I think it’s great that they’re continually scouting for and promoting new work, the way it is represented on screen inevitably emphasizes subject matter over object.

WASOW The first time I saw Salvador Dalí’s The Persistence of Memory, I thought, “That’s it? That little thing?”

For most people, the Mona Lisa is a photograph. And yet, scale has become an issue central to contemporary photographic work precisely because it offers up something you can’t get on the screen. I like Gursky in a book or on a screen, but then there’s Gursky as a kind of cinematic experience.

HEIFERMAN You could argue that it’s the aggressive materiality that makes work like his, or Jeff Wall’s lightboxes and Wolfgang Tillmans’s installations, so compelling.

SQUIERS In 2009, I organized what we called “The Year of Fashion” at ICP. Because the reproduction quality in some high-end fashion magazines is seldom phenomenal, Vince Aletti and I decided to cut fashion spreads straight out of magazines for one contemporary show. Then we put the tear sheets in the show “Weird Beauty” six rows high on the walls. The inventiveness and imagination in the material we found was mind-boggling, and for many visitors it was a revelation. It was photography, it was in a museum, but it wasn’t a precious kind of art experience.

HEIFERMAN Joerg Colberg, who features contemporary photographic
work on his website, Conscientious [jmcolberg.com/weblog], has said that while the Internet is a great place to disseminate work, it may not be the best venue to see it. Does that, I wonder, help to explain why we’re seeing a boom in the publication of photographic books?

**MEISELAS** I still think of images relationally, and of the space they create in terms of what a book does, as opposed to what a wall does.

**HEIFERMAN** It’s interesting to watch the retail and auction prices rise for photo books, as imagery goes digital and new display platforms, like iPads, gain popularity. Now smaller publishers are producing more titles but in much more limited runs, and charging more for them.

**MEISELAS** I appreciate the points that have been made about accessibility. We can look at an iPad and say its spectacular, backlit images couldn’t look more beautiful. But is that the same thing as turning the pages of a photographic book that I, for one, still want on my shelf?

**WASOW** Haidy, how do questions about materiality play out in less developed parts of the world?

**GEISMAR** The place where I have the most experience is Vanuatu, a small country spread out over 83 islands a thousand miles off the coast of Australia. There’s one major city with about 30,000 residents, but in many of the rural villages there’s no electricity. Even in town, few people have online access at home; you have to go to an Internet café. While most people don’t have cameras, there’s still a fascination with, and a desire for, photographs.

My own work often involves bringing historical images that were made of Vanuatu back to Vanuatu. We take for granted the fact that people desire to own photos of their ancestors. For us, if we don’t have family photos it’s probably because of some loss or a forced migration. But historically, the people who went to Vanuatu and took photos then carried them away to be studied or deposited in museum collections elsewhere. A classic stereotype about Australian aboriginal cultures is that once somebody dies you remove all representations of that person; you don’t speak their name, and you destroy all photographs of them. While that proscription is still powerful, with increased access to cell phones and Bluetooth technology,
for image sharing, people’s perceptions about, and control over, images is changing. The people I work with don’t get hung up on the difference between print and digital.

SQUIERS People will make prints if that’s the thing they need to end up with. Which reminds me of an experience I had, a while back, with an Edward Weston print that was for sale at Sotheby’s. I’m not a fan of Weston’s work; actually, some of it bores me. But when I went to the presale exhibition and saw a gorgeous print of a nautilus shell, I had a realization about what Weston was driving at, something I never understood before because I had never seen a print of this depth and quality.

WASOW Weston’s intention, from the beginning, was to make a print rather than just an image. The question for artists working now is whether the print is the best way to get their work out and into the world.

SQUIERS It depends on the artist. Weston photographed a shell he had positioned and lit in a certain way. The expression was going to be this print. A contemporary artist like Marco Breuer goes into the darkroom and makes prints to test how far he can push the photographic paper before it implodes.

WASOW He’s working consciously and in opposition to digital.

SQUIERS Ending up with a singular object is what is important to him, and what links him to Weston in my mind. A couple of years after I saw that spectacular Weston print, a gallery in Chelsea exhibited a number of prints of that same image, but ones that were made at different points in time. None came near to the print I saw, which wound up selling for over a million dollars at auction! If I had had an extra million dollars, I would have bought it, because it was the most beautiful photographic print I’ve ever seen.

HEIFERMAN When I asked Steve Hoffenberg who was still committed to making photographic prints, his answer was surprising: it’s the digital natives, and particularly couples in their 20s who have kids and believe that the online repositories they’re posting images to won’t exist 30 years from now.

GEISMAR I’m thinking about archiving everything I’ve got on Facebook. I do have the images in my iPhone. But I might delete them or my phone might get lost. I keep waiting for some company to market the archiving solution.

HEIFERMAN Many of the people who post photographs on Facebook without keeping copies of them may learn, down the road, that they can’t make good prints from the downsized versions of the images on their Facebook pages.

WASOW If you want pictures to last, or don’t want them out there for lots of people to see, don’t put them on Facebook.

SQUIERS But when you’re young, you don’t know what that means.

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