

REVIEWS

Sarah Bay Gachot on

Anouk Kruithof, *AUTOMAGIC*

What do photographs do in the unused digital archive? Inert in their imaginary folders, filed away like tributaries feeding an ever-filling hard drive, they are just megabytes, gigabytes, terabytes in virtual space, living in the digital equivalent of sleep—or even of coma—dreaming secret zero-and-one reveries incomprehensible to human minds.

The artist Anouk Kruithof has uncompromisingly refused this kind of digital amnesia. **She's an artist and photographer with inimitable organizational systems that turn photographs into wall works, sculptures, stickers, online exhibitions, performance, and, especially, the printed page of the artist's book.** In 2011 she began work on her book *AUTOMAGIC*, mining her archive of digital images taken since 2003 with a variety of point-and-shoot cameras and camera phones: pictures Kruithof had taken without a specific series or project in mind, of stuff and people she found interesting. Once edited, this collection amounted to a few thousand images.

Picture, if you can, these thousands of images being filtered through the mind and eyes of someone with the sense of organization of a tropical parrot in the wild throwing a party, and you can imagine what *AUTOMAGIC* became. It's a photobook in nine volumes plus an interview, tucked into a clear plexiglass box. Each volume is bound as a book of its own—raw, coverless, and printed on various paper stocks—making *AUTOMAGIC* as much a sculptural object as a “book” of books. The volumes are edged and faced with energetic and unnatural colors, colors as giddy and pleasing as the plastic-container aisle in a 99-cent store. Pulled out of their plexi box, each of the nine volumes bears one of the letters of the title: A-U-T-O-M-A-G-I-C. Each is designed around an “action” or “image treatment,” as Kruithof explains in the interview, images recontextualized according to loose themes, or by color, collage, or by being rephotographed, as if to remind us that a photograph is not direct memory, but something new—like a dream, where our unconscious mind conjugates and formulates past experience, layering things, and making associations.

Book “A” (blue) is filled with images of water, above and below the surface, floating within other images of water. Book “U” is composed mostly of portraits of people, but the images have been printed on paper, overprinted, layered, and photographed in piles with both image and blank sides facing up. Book “T” has page after page of pictures of nature photographs as displayed on a computer screen. Pixel noise, low-opacity

overlays in Photoshop, and the reflection of a camera-phone flash bring a kind of violence to these images. These visual cues suggest how “far from the actual experience of being in nature” a photograph necessarily is, according to Kruithof, and how disappointing the viewing experience can be after the fact: she had to add something to these images, replace the remembered natural magnificence with surreality. Color plays a role in nearly every project by Kruithof. She says in the interview, “I filter life through color. I hope my maneuvers while making the photos are reflected in my broad and vibrant color palette. I want it brimming with strong mental qualities, often with indeterminate hues. I tend to manipulate, filter, and order with color in ways that might seem more painterly. It's inherent in me to juggle with color's distinctive soul.” In a previous project, *Enclosed Content Chatting Away in the Colour Invisibility* (2009–ongoing), constructed from a collection of about 3,500 books stacked on their sides, the colored edges of the pages create a pixilated abstract landscape of the colors of the rainbow. *Enclosed Content* has been installed eleven times and its color organization has been slightly different in every iteration—color always guides its form. With *AUTOMAGIC*, Kruithof's obsession with color ties the physical book-object to her more ephemeral digital archive. The colors of the volumes reference the color-coding of file folders available on computer operating systems, like a backward skeuomorph in which the analog now mimics the digital.

Kruithof also represents ephemeral digital systems as analog in her 2014 book *The Bungalow* (Onomatopoe, 2015), her paean to experiencing digital and physical images in person. One chapter, titled “Screen-Reality,” which is divided into two sections at the beginning and end of the book, is composed entirely of grayscale photographs on pale blue paper, juxtaposed and layered in Photoshop, as indicated by selection boxes and crop marks that remind the reader of how Kruithof experienced these images: on the computer screen. The chapter “Command Shift 3; New Photography” depicts another digital-viewing image mode, with screenshots of multiple JPEG scans open in Photoshop; this chapter is printed on glossy paper in full color. To work on *The Bungalow*, Kruithof isolated herself for an extended period of time with hundreds of photographs—vernacular images amassed by the London-based collector, writer, and

curator Brad Feuerhelm. The book is a record of how she experienced those pictures and how she thought they should be processed and presented in book form.

On September 10, 2016, contributors to the *AUTOMAGIC* Kickstarter campaign (full disclosure: I was one of them) received the following notice: “BAD NEWS :(:(*AUTOMAGIC* is stuck on a stranded HANJIN vessel, one of the largest shipping companies in the world which got declared bankrupt. . . .” This anxious message explained that the one thousand copies of her fresh-off-the-press book were floating on a container ship off the coast of Valencia, Spain, just days before she intended to debut it at the New York Art Book Fair. Nineteen other Hanjin Shipping Co. cargo ships were also drifting aimlessly, or anchored miles from ports, around the world, rejected for fear that the faltering shipper would default on port fees. By the time Kruithof sent this notice, Hanjin was on its way to federal bankruptcy court in New Jersey to resolve the issue and get all of the thousands upon thousands of containers on these twenty ships ashore—containers that carried *AUTOMAGIC* but also tables, chairs, appliances, auto parts, paper products, toothbrushes, throw pillows, and even the artist Rebecca Moss (who was, at the time, on an artist residency on a Hanjin ship called *Geneva*).

AUTOMAGIC would eventually make it to shore; Hanjin would eventually be dissolved, dismantled, and declared bankrupt. Delayed arrival aside, this strange twist of shipping fate seems curiously appropriate for the *AUTOMAGIC* project, which brings physicality to images that were once zeros and ones coded into a computer hard

drive. It's a handmade book, with careful binding, dyed edges, and a glued plastic box; now its sea journey is also part of the story—made real by the threat of Hanjin's momentary pause and insolvency. The ocean of visual information that Kruithof is indebted to—a world seen through the eyes and archived with the camera—needs a container in which she can play, to experiment with ideas and analog materials, and to present what results back to the world. **This is why the book form is so important to Kruithof—it tames the archive but places no limits on its fluidity.** And fluidity runs through so much of Kruithof's output, in both form or subject, as in the watery book “A” of *AUTOMAGIC*; the more recent sculptures of abstracted photos printed on latex and vinyl, works she calls *Neutrals* (2016) and *Concealed Matter(s)* (2016–17); and the changing nature of *Enclosed Content*.

Kruithof hones in on things on the verge of inhabiting their next shape. With *AUTOMAGIC*, she sets an archive of images free from the hard drive and transforms it into a book that takes on sculptural qualities—a book object. The real task of processing this segmented and controlled explosion of images is on the viewer, one letter volume at a time, a feast of the printed page in a synergy of elements: image and object, archive and curation, worldly things and the imagination.

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Anouk Kruithof
AUTOMAGIC

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Anouk Kruithof
Enclosed Content Chatting Away in the Colour Invisibility (installation)

Approx. 3,500 multicolored books, video loop, photograph
Various locations, 2009–ongoing