

PART 2

LB: In this second part, I would like to talk more about the way each of the iterations of this project proposes the archive anew. I mean that I see a difference between the passive archive and the archive articulated. In this second sense the archive's character takes on the shape of its use; in this case the logic of “Michelle duBois.” We have already talked about nods to Christopher Williams and Cindy Sherman—besides art photo, can you talk about some of the strategies that came into activating the material?

ZC: This idea of “archive articulated” is something that really excites me, although I have been primarily thinking it through as “activating the archive.” It’s a question of how to go from a passive experience to an active one, reflecting the nature of archive as in an actively transforming state, in terms of both looking at/experiencing and thinking about the project itself and the act of looking at it.

The project ends up highlighting the instability that is, in fact, the more realistic character of any archive. The archive is not of a stable time (then); rather, its history accumulates each time its contents are remembered, spoken about, considered, thought about, discussed, and so on. The archive then becomes the container of its own dynamically shifting history, and the just-past begins to infect the just-now and the just-future. . . . I’m rambling a bit, but what is so exciting to see is how this has actually played out in the various forms of the project over the last few years, the last of which is what this interview is finally being written for, the fourth in a series of books that Aperture is publishing about the duBois project, each an immediate rewriting of the last.

The description of the book iterations goes as follows:

The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois is a print-on-demand limited-edition artist book. It is the first in a four-volume set by the artist Zoe Crosher. These artist books are part of Aperture Ideas: Writers and Artists on Photography, a series devoted to the finest critical and creative minds exploring key concepts in photography, including new technologies of production and dissemination.

Identical in structure, each volume offers an alternate perspective on the archive of Michelle duBois, an enigmatic collection of images bequeathed to the artist by the subject and compiler. In each subsequent volume, Crosher configures a new set of identities and meanings for this ephemeral archive of photographic detritus through a selection of unique sets of images and reinterpretations of photos seen in previous volumes, as well as new texts.

What I lay out below are the iterations of duBois in the Aperture books, a project within the project that has a great deal of parity to the whole. Metaphorically the project has functioned for me roughly like the 1968 Charles and Ray Eames film *Powers of Ten*, something I am realizing now was hugely influential on me when I was younger. In the film, the camera starts off showing a single square foot of a picnic a couple are having in a park in Chicago. As the camera pulls out, the world is explicated through exponentially expanding space. Each level opens up outward, until you are out into the farthest depths of the known universe. Once we are at the limits of the universe, the camera reverses directions and progressively collapses all the way back to the picnic, and then into the microscopic world of cells to atoms, and so on. The overall concept of pulling out/away from the normative viewpoint (here that of the transparent personal snapshot) is crucial in

critically considering photography, and I do this, like the Eameses, through a multivariable strategy of concentric expansion.

The intention with each passing iteration is to pull the viewer away from the “normal” photographic viewpoint, to have her reconsider the act of looking at a singular image and start understanding that image, in all its variability. On the surface, the basic duBois story is “an assemblage of a variety of touristic and posed images that play in the space between fantasy and documentary, originally drawn from an obsessively assembled collection of self-portraits by the series protagonist, Michelle duBois, one her many aliases.” Or, as recent wall text describes, “all-American girl from Oklahoma and occasional escort, duBois photographed herself in a variety of guises in and around the US and Pacific Rim from the late 1960s to the 1980s.”

But how this narrative actually unfolds is what I manipulate and shape. How each version gets read, how much further away from the above narrative I can get, is the stuff of the work, and in turn becomes the shape of the archive.

Every book has an identical structure, the maximum number of pages (250) allowed by Blurb, with content divided into two main sections and an introduction and main body text in each. Initially I wanted the same author to pen the four introductions, but due to various human realities, this did not happen. Still, the structure remained otherwise intact across the four versions, each pulling the viewer further out from the simple act of looking, in varying ways. What print-on-demand seemed to offer to the project was liberation from standard publishing turnaround times, and I wanted to exploit this freedom from time constraints, literally reworking the “same” book four times over a short span of time.

I loved the idea of being able to immediately self-historicize, to re-remember and ultimately rewrite the story of Michelle duBois every few months, breaking down the authorial voice a book of archival material inevitably presents.

The first book, *The Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois (aka Kathy)*, is the most straightforward, introducing duBois as a character and concentrating on the way in which *she* views the fantasy version of herself. The volume is full of images where she is playing to recognized tropes as well as inhabiting various personae she has created for and of herself. The cheesecake shots, the studio shots, the straightforward smiling shots—all the idealized ways in which she viewed herself—find a home here. I call the first section of this book “Autoportraits.” In this group of images duBois is always in control of the planning, the executing, and, most importantly, the *keeping* of the analog detritus produced.

The second section of the first book, “Companions,” is based on the question of *who* is taking the picture, and proposing that it doesn’t really matter; they are all in service to duBois and her autoportraits. This section includes duBois with pets and with what I term her “half husbands,” various men who are literally cut out of the frames. There are also Polaroid images in which the men with her have been blacked out with a permanent marker, as well as images that imply the presence of someone else—betrayed by clues like the photographer’s shadow or a plate of food across from duBois—who, although not in the picture, is nonetheless essential, since he is wielding the camera. This insistence on an absent presence speaks to larger questions of who duBois is and how she moves through the world. The important point in this first book is that the images are treated very straightforwardly. The emphasis is on not how the images are made but what they are *of*,

a more traditional way of seeing the image without thinking about the physical construct of the actual analog photograph.

The second book, *The Unraveling of Michelle duBois (aka Alice Johnson)*, brings this question of physicality to a head. Its two sections, “Self-Reflexive” and “The Errant Hair,” both emphasize the physicality of the archive. In “Self-Reflexive” we see the fronts of albums, the backs of images, the language and branding of the analog, the types of film used, the idea of the photographic “Eye” / “I,” and the same image used in multiple ways/contexts. Here I also include the art-historical references to Cindy Sherman and Christopher Williams.

“The Errant Hair” is a catalog of all the images that were taken with a particular camera, in which what looks like a pubic hair appears in the same place, in the upper left-hand corner of the image, over and over again. The emphasis of this collection is on an *awareness of the apparatus of the fantasy*—in this case the errant hair stuck in the camera. The insistence on formalizing the analog in various ways forces the viewer to take a step back from simply looking at the image, to begin to understand that the images are manifest in a physical form and that this physical form breaks the seductive assumption of transparency. The first pull away in the power of ten, it shows that there is a construct that holds the fantasy, and this awareness of a constructed reality/documentary is key to the unraveling of the entirety of the fantasy.

The third book, *The Unveiling of Michelle duBois (aka Cricket)*, positions duBois in a larger sociopolitical context by bringing in location, specifically her obsession with Asia and the Pacific Rim in the 1970s and '80s. I call the two sections of this book “The Asianesque” and “Collecting,” and both speak to a self-awareness in relation to various collections, whether of fantasy places, of alternate selves, or, in this book, of Japanese

dolls, hundreds of them, photographed by duBois in perfect amateur black and white on her bed. DuBois is shown dressed up as various male fighting figures, from Japanese samurai to Genghis Khan, alongside documentation of her evident tiger fantasies. This volume offers the first hint of actual physical location and biography, and also brings in chronology for the first time, with fragments from “The Last Four Days and Nights in Tokyo,” a shoot that ranged from August 18 to August 21 of 1986 (the last dates I include in the overall archive) and combines bizarrely banal tourist shots during the daytime with a series of brutal stripteases at night, in what is clearly a Japanese love hotel.

Here the documentary assumption of place collides with the imaginary of fantasy place, in the context of an American expansionism, moving beyond the edge of the West Coast to places like Guam and Okinawa, with all the trappings of a colonial endeavor. This book complicates the fantasy by inserting it against a backdrop of tense geopolitical ambiguities at a very particular historical moment in this region. Structurally, it asserts the problematics of “collecting.”

Finally, *The Disappearance of Michelle duBois (aka Mitchi)*, the fourth and last book in this series (although a fifth book, *The Disbanding of Michelle duBois, aka Michelle duBois*, will be published, although it is uncertain when and in what form), is one that I find most exciting, although that could be because I am knee-deep in it right now! It takes as its premise the demise of the fantasy, and subsequent liberation, of both duBois and the photographic analog, as Catherine Wagley describes: “This, in the end, is the artist’s fantasy: that over-exposing, fading, blurring or breaking up an image can be a liberated and liberating act. In Crosher’s presentation, it’s as if duBois’ image has consumed itself and left her, not captive to what the world projects on her or to a fixed self she must uphold, but freely undefined.” An insistence on overexposure, literally and

metaphorically, not rarefication, pushes “her image to the point of disappearance, which makes her disappearance feel more like an escape.”

The images fall into the sections “Almost the Same” and “Obfuscated,” both of which conceptually obscure a straight take on the image. In the first section, on some spreads nearly indistinguishable pictures are shown side by side; others display bracketed images from a single shoot. In the second, images are blurred, obscuring their subject in shadow, progressively accumulating dust to totally white out the image, or fading out the same image over multiple steps. In every case, the modes of photographic production serve to undermine its “photographicness.” It is this sort of liberation—from the medium, from the historical read, from identity politics, from one’s own history, from photography, from the static image—that drives this final iteration.