Light and Time: A Conversation with Divya Rao Heffley

By Jen Saffron

Since 2013, the Hillman Photography Initiative at the Carnegie Museum of Art (CMOA) in Pittsburgh has been experimenting with new ways of engaging artists photographically and showcasing new work to both arts audiences and communities. Light, movement, vision, time, perception, activism—how can these photographic principles inspire new ways of thinking about art, art audiences, and what museums can do and be? The photograph is inherently a journey through space and time. Where are images headed now, and what can we expect from public encounters of images in museums, as opposed to our personal phones and small screens? How might a museum respond to this rapidly changing medium, when a museum is, by its very nature, a slow-moving institution that collects past-based objects? Divya Rao Heffley, senior program manager for the Initiative, answered some of these questions in an interview with me on February 23, 2017, at the CMAO.

JS: So your role is, let’s say, in the middle. You have one ear to the ground about cutting-edge innovation in photography, and on the other hand, you are an employee of an inherently slow-moving institution, a museum. What kinds of tensions does that produce between trying to create an initiative that is so forward-thinking and future-driven, and what museums actually do, how they function?

DH: Well, the benchmarking and talking to people we felt were pushing the boundaries of photography—that happened because the Initiative was positioned to push the boundaries of not only what photography could do, but what a museum could do and how a museum could operate. Traditionally, it takes two or three years for an exhibition to go from concept to full manifestation in a gallery. We tried to compress that timeframe, to ask, “If we only had six months, or a year, what could we do? How could we be more responsive and relevant to a quickly moving medium?” We had to be able to respond to rapidly changing photography issues much more quickly, and to do that, we created a structure where we could figure out the most exciting development in photography, and then showcase that development. We established a group of rotating advisors, most of them from outside the museum, whom we call “agents,” and created a new structure for the museum’s planning and programming.

We knew we wanted the Initiative to push the museum to generate ideas from outside voices—in other words, flipping the stereotypical museum model where the museum is the solo authority or voice. We’re able to flip that because we have the freedom to build our own structure: a two-year cycle, where one year of planning is then followed by a year of programming. The planning is built with a handful of creative thinkers—mostly agents in the field who are not affiliated with the Carnegie Museum, alongside one internal agent, who is one of the curators from the museum. The agents in the field are practicing, thinking, writing, and researching.

JS: Is your role, then, to “win hearts and minds”—not just within the museum, but also with the museum’s audiences and what they might expect from a photography exhibition or program?
DRH: I think the Initiative’s charge is absolutely to show that the museum is and can be relevant to a twenty-first-century society that is moving very quickly. We need to be able to adapt to the speed of moving information and moving ideas, to show that this museum is a relevant place to have exciting conversations, and to more clearly show the role of the artist and artists’ voices in those conversations. Artists practicing today are in the middle of those exciting conversations, asking, “What’s relevant to my practice, now? How is the work I make relevant to the things I am thinking, feeling, researching, doing?” This museum is filled with collection objects made by people who are influenced by their immediate context. So, yes, we want the Initiative to address more quickly changing ideas and influences, and to more actively showcase artists’ voices to museum audiences.

JS: Let’s talk about social context in relation to this museum, which is so interesting. First, CMOA was founded by an early industrialist, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. Second, it’s one block from Carnegie Mellon University, where GigaPan camera technology emerged, the development of which inherently transformed a fundamental principle of photography: the photograph’s flatness. Third, the museum houses one of the largest collections by any single photographer, Charles “Teenie” Harris, who is African American and from the Hill District of Pittsburgh—a neighborhood in transition from urban renewal and racism. This museum, in addition to these contextual elements, has been hiring curators like Dan Leers, the curator of photography, who is collecting African photography, and Eric Crosby, curator of modern and contemporary art, who wants to break down barriers between the museum and diverse populations. Chief Curator Catherine Evans wants to make the museum more relevant to communities outside the museum, and the education department is working on a playground project in nearby Braddock, a distressed former steel town. The Initiative invites artists working in a more grassroots, activist manner, too. So, it seems like the museum is moving away from the iconic museum as a behemoth building, filled with Eurocentric object collections, toward more in-depth community work and addressing contemporary issues. What kinds of public-facing visual representation can we expect from these kinds of contextual changes at the museum?

DRH: The Carnegie Museum of Art has a more than one-hundred-year history, which we inherited, and it’s our choice what we do with that. When I started six years ago, I stepped into a conversation about how the museum could become more transparent and responsive about these efforts to make the collection more representational,
create more inclusive exhibitions, and reach out to communities with both outreach and in-reach with multidimensional conversations.

The DNA of the Initiative is about going to outside voices, with a more quickly moving planning and exhibition process, which forces us to think and do things differently as a museum. As part of that, in our planning process, we essentially set our agents free. We ask them to consider the most exciting question in photography, and how might we manifest that in programming. For our current cycle of programming, our external collaborators are Laura Wexler, professor of American studies and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at Yale University; Steffani Jemison, a visual artist whose work explores themes of blackness; and Liz Deschenes, a contemporary visual artist whose practice is informed by photography. These three women, as well as Leers, were tasked with conversations to determine the framework for this current cycle of artists. As it turned out, this cycle is all about social context.

The framework for this social context is inspired by the deeply seated connection that photography has with light and time. The initial conversations with the agents quickly went macroscopic to embrace the social context: “Who gets access to light? Who gets access to clean air and clean energy?” We’re launching four artist-led projects this year: Light and Environmental Sustainability; Light and Perception, about digital bias and how people, places, and things are represented in the digital realm; Light and Movement, or migration; and Light and Social Justice. So, social context is in line with the idea of the Initiative, which is to be responsive and relevant, because this is what people are talking about, this is what the museum needs to talk about, and what better medium to use as a lens than photography? The very intention of the Initiative and the fact that these socially motivated projects were chosen and supported does show, like you said, that the museum is being much more forthright and transparent about operating in a social context.

JS: What can we expect from the artists in this current round of the Initiative, and how do they and their work intersect with the museum’s commitment to social context?

DRH: Over the course of 2017, we’re launching four artist-led projects that activate photography’s measurement of light and time to investigate contemporary social issues. All of the artists selected are exploring this question of “What is photography, now?” When the agents were thinking about whom to invite for the projects, they were thinking photographically as well as about photography, and that dualism is a critical one. So, when you’re talking about thinking photographically, that conjures a continuum of artistic practice between the printed image and the moving image. At what point with a multimedia artist’s work—say the sculpture and photography and video work of an artist like Alisha B. Wormsley, who is in this round of artists—at what point do you ask, “Is this photography or isn’t it?” and to me, that’s not even the most interesting question. The more interesting question is “How is this informed by photography? What parts of her practice are inspired by photography? What parts are something else, entirely, but change what we think of as photography?”

For the Light and Perception project, we invited DIS, an artist collective, to produce a creative brief—a fifty-page document that provided creative direction for the project, and that explores how digital technologies have transformed photography. The project asks, “How are people, places, and things represented in virtual environments? Who makes those decisions, how does that change things?” DIS and Scatter, another artist studio, built a virtual environment that’s essentially a digital time capsule from the future. In this virtual reality (VR) experience, visitors walk into a cave, and the light is flickering, and it harkens back to the cave paintings of Lascaux, some of the first paintings humans ever made. This virtual reality scene is animated by the flickering of the fire—perhaps the first form of animation? Then the cave starts to dissolve, and we’re transported forward in time to the 2020s, into a digital dystopia with social unrest and economic destabilization, but there is a veneer of a utopia, where work is unnecessary and leisure time is plentiful. Yet, leisure time is controlled by corporations, who also own the water supply. In this virtual reality experience, light from the distant past collides with light from the future to illuminate our present moment.

Virtual Reality is photographic in the most technological way possible. Methods of 3-D capture, photogrammetry, 3-D modeling, and volumetric filmmaking are photography, but it’s not photography with a capital “P”—you didn’t see this in a frame on a wall fifty years ago. It’s so different, yet it is still photography.

In the Light and Environmental Sustainability project with Andrea Polli, the agents knew about her Particle Falls exhibit (at the Benedum Center, Pittsburgh, in 2014) and they immediately said, “That is photographic.” Visualizing data is what photography does—there’s a more transparent layer of what happens between “This is the data as it’s read out” and “This is the way the artist chooses to portray it,” but that happens in photography, too—it has happened from its beginnings. With Polli, the agents were interested in asking, “How is the visualization of environmental data photographic?”

Inspired by the Initiative, Polli applied for the Rachel Carson Bridge commission for Light Up Night, a major annual event here in Pittsburgh that included, in 2016, a celebration of Pittsburgh’s Bicentennial. Her winning commission, Energy Flow (2016–17), is a project independent of the Initiative, is a large-scale light artwork and wind-power nanogrid installed on the Rachel Carson Bridge. The light installation visualizes climate and weather data in brightly colored shimmering lights running up and down the vertical architecture of the yellow bridge. The materials include custom-created wind turbines, LED strips, and advanced computing. It is beautiful. There is an interesting connection between deeply researched data that one doesn’t necessarily have to fully understand to get the piece—the bridge is not a barometer. You’re not going to look out and say, “Oh, the bridge is doing this, today, I think I will bundle up.” You experience the piece, you are encouraged to know more, you invest yourself and make change. It’s a process. And, it’s part of the artist’s job—Polli’s job—to create that experience to pull people into caring about the issues of our environment.

For our project at the museum, Polli’s concept of “Hack the Grid” empowers people through citizen science to use the photographically inspired tools at their disposal to gather data and make change. Hack the Grid is the title of Polli’s upcoming artist’s book, co-published by the Carnegie Museum of Art, along with a January 2017 series of
public workshops by the museum about data, art, and environmental sensing. The connection to photography is really through that data visualization, and the ways in which this artist—who doesn’t identify herself as a photographer—is still working photographically in a way that asks interesting questions. How might this artwork make us think about the choices a photographer makes, or an artist makes, between image capture, gathering the visual data, and then representing it. What are the critical differences?

For the Light and Movement project, Bradford Young speaks to the museum’s context and also to Pittsburgh. When we shared with him the idea of the project, we asked, “How are light, movement, vision, and time interconnected over history, and specifically located in the topography of Pittsburgh?” He took this concept and built an amazing project inspired by Harris and playwright August Wilson. He’s known their work throughout his life growing up in Kentucky and Chicago, and his photographic work has been inspired by Harris. Young explores Pittsburgh’s Hill District as a critical destination for the Great Migration, the movement of millions of Southern African Americans in the twentieth century to cities in the North and West. He examines where African American people are in Pittsburgh and why we find them in the Hill District.

Young’s Light and Movement piece will be a three-channel video in CMOA’s Scaife Galleries, incorporating Young’s own footage of Pittsburgh’s Hill District, translations of Harris’s photographs as matrices of metadata, videography of Pittsburgh’s tunnels, and a custom music score by jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran.

JS: Tunnels here, for example, speak to aspects of coal mining, covered bridges, and our hills in Appalachia—all part of Pittsburgh’s history and culture.

DRH: Yes, Young is exploring the connections between movement, vision, and time in the Pittsburgh landscape. He proposes that we think about the tunnels not only as literal passageways into the city of Pittsburgh, but as metaphors for the journey of the Great Migration to Pittsburgh, and explores the journey through space and time that brought people here and located them here. In response, he is using video, working with a composer to score music with lyrics, and he’s thinking about Harris’s images not only as analog but as digital. This multi-channel video about the community of the Hill District will ask viewers to consider what is the continuum of artistic practice between photography and the moving image.
Light and Social Justice is led by artist Alisha Wormsley and launches this fall. This project looks at the connection between light and social justice. For Alisha, the people in the community of Homewood, a neighborhood of Pittsburgh, are the light. She’s chosen three Homewood spaces and will activate those spaces through installations, events, and programs. In one of those spaces, she’s invited artist Robert Hodge to implement his project The Beauty Box (2013), which he’s done in Houston, where he takes a vacant lot in a community and retrofits it to look like a moment in time in that community’s past. That space then becomes the site for artists’ talks, performances, and community programming to think about that moment in the community’s past. The artist is there, facilitating conversations about the past, present, and future of the neighborhood.

Wormsley will encourage visitors to think about the current moment in Homewood through programming she’s curating with nine women who are currently working creatively there, to share their art and practice with residents. So, it could be a community choir, a reading, or a meditation workshop. We’ll then invite the community to other events Wormsley is developing, including a procession and a public opening and closing between mid-September and mid-October.

Community residents will also be invited to think about the future of Homewood through a sound installation created by artist Ricardo Robinson, who will gather ambient sounds, words, music, and conversations, and mix them into a futuristic soundscape. People will be invited to experience this and consider Homewood’s future and their role in building that future.

The goal is to build a dialogue with and within Homewood that Wormsley will facilitate and document. She will create a video piece documenting the installations and events, so the output might be more traditionally photographic, but the process is more about thinking photographically. By creating artist installations that speak to the past of Homewood and address the present and future of Homewood, she’s creating this conversation about place across time that photography does very well—for example, through documentary photography or even treasured family snapshots from the past. But Wormsley is creating a lived experience—it is installation, it is performance, and it is a platform for residents to have this conversation about where Homewood came from, where we are now, and where we’re going in the future.

JS: Do you feel that the Initiative helps the museum think about more diverse artists? Given that your role is rather unique, do you feel that just by being here, you are opening up new conversations, curatorial and otherwise, that are helpful to progressing the museum’s goals, which are to be more inclusive of artists of color?

DRH: I think that the Initiative has allowed us to show our heightened focus on being more representational and inclusive. We’re interested in having conversations with diverse audiences and providing a platform for artists of many backgrounds and self-identities. I think it’s critical for the museum to be more forthright about these efforts. We are trying to be more transparent about this focus, and the Initiative has been, in my mind, a success in opening the door to that conversation and showing that the museum is invested in these issues.

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