

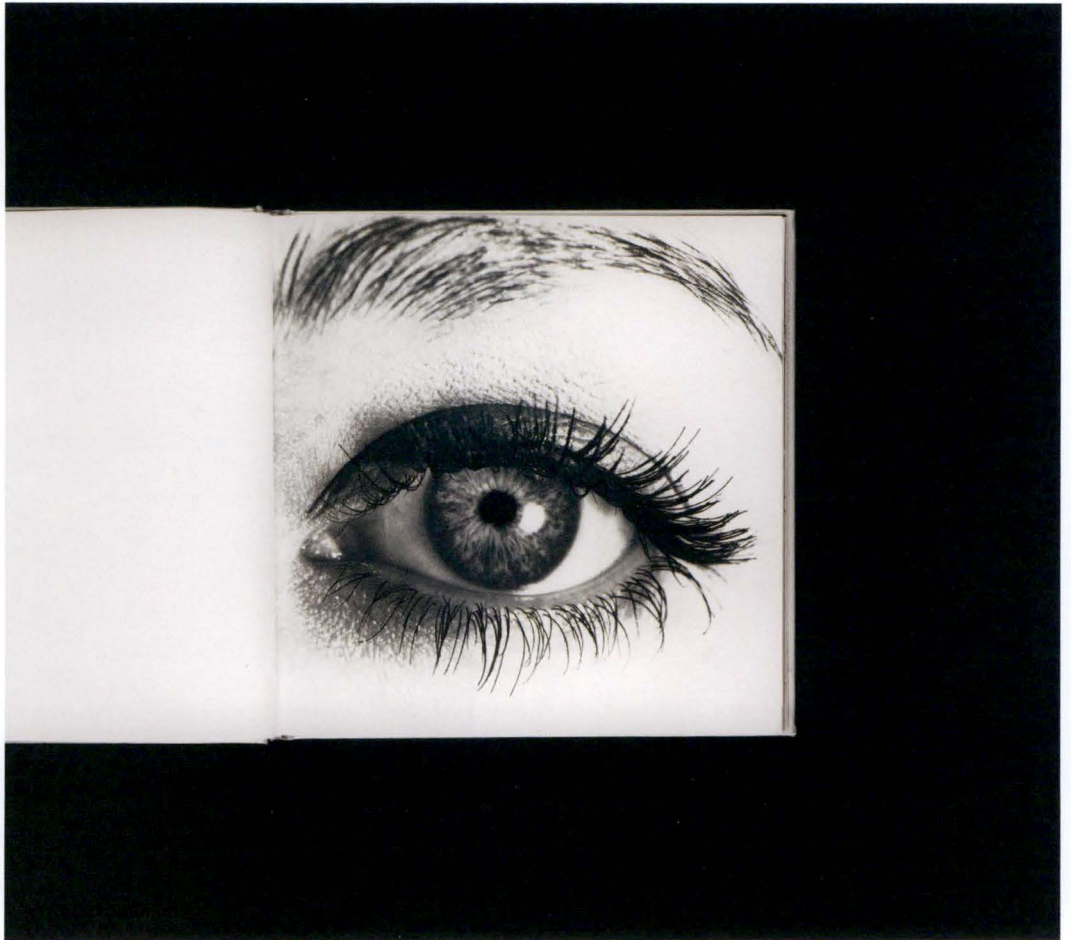
The Forensic Eye

Tom McDonough

Our eye is first drawn to *her* eye, which seems to stare back at us: her pupil constricted, a bright light reflected in her iris, eyelids emphasized with mascara, eyebrow shaped. We recognize this as a sort of studio photograph, but thanks to some deep evolutionary impulse of empathetic identification, we are nevertheless immediately drawn to her gaze, seeking any sign of mutual recognition. It is only secondarily that we can step back and see this photograph as a photograph—or rather see the artist's gesture to be one of re-photographing this image from a book. It is no more than an open page that she has arranged for our viewing in a careful composition, with the eye perfectly centered in her own square-format image. The blank, white facing page of the book occupies the left-hand quarter of the photograph, while an enveloping black background curls around the right. This is an old, practically obsolete technique, made not with the flatbed digital scanner but with the copy stand, which holds the camera perpendicularly above the item being photographed.

That oscillation between identifiatory pathos and cool appropriation is perhaps the characteristic manoeuvre of Anne Collier, whose photographs have for well over a decade questioned how such images—most notably of women—manipulate and mobilize their viewers. She has called her analysis of such material “forensic,” suggesting at once her studied objectivity and an undertone of menace. The photograph at the center of *Eye* (*Paper Gradations*) came from a book on printing techniques, a self-reflexive gesture common in her work; she has frequently drawn upon sources such as photography magazines, camera advertisements, popular photobooks and the like. She would, in fact, make several images from pages of this particular volume, including *Eye* (*Hot Foil Stamping*) and *Eye* (*Enlargement of Color Negative*). All have an identical format, and close inspection reveals that, in each case, the photograph is identical: same model, same shot, the variations due only to the variety of printing techniques named in Collier's subtitles. Her typological concern thus becomes clear when the series is seen in its entirety. So does its derivation from conceptual precedent and its reference back to that “allegorical impulse” active in the Pictures Generation artists, who pioneered re-photography as a tool to demystify the indexical authenticity of the image, to deny its immediacy in the name of the endless deferral of signification, and to critique a range of cultural mythologies stabilized in photographic spectacle.

Collier, however, looks to photographs—most often drawn from the final triumphant decades of analogue technology in the 1970s and '80s—to explore the paradoxes peculiar to her own role as a “woman with a camera,” to recall the name of one of her best-known series. She is above all else an archivist of femininity under and behind the gaze of the photographic apparatus, and it is no coincidence that she would later reprise the theme of the *Eye* series with images depicting a photograph of her own eye, perfectly centered in the frame, resting in a darkroom developing tray. In *Eye* (*Paper Gradations*) we already find a similar play with the technical conventions of the photographic medium, coupled uneasily with the emotive and aesthetic draw of its theme. Appropriated from the most banal of sources, it nevertheless strangely moves us. The reversibility of subject and object, the mobilization and denial of our affective sympathies, and the contradictions—at once historical, social, and psychic—attendant on her own position are held here in the highest tension.



Anne Collier
Eye (Paper Gradations), 2008
C-print, 53.34 x 61 cm