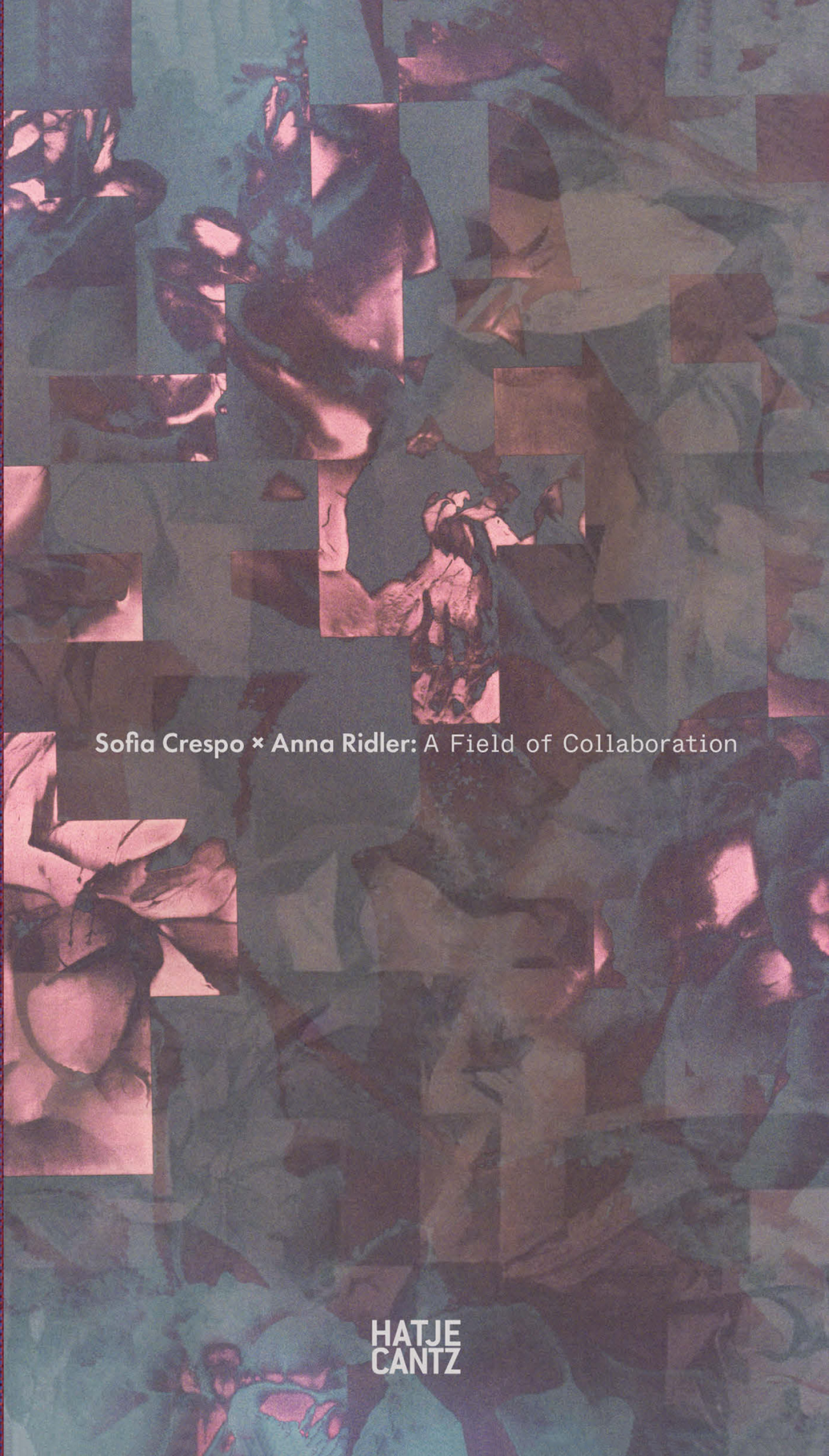


Sofia Crespo × Anna Ridler: A Field of Collaboration

HATJE CANTZ

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Foreword

Since 2022, Arab Bank Switzerland has been building a collection of artworks engaging with blockchain technology and digital culture. Through its growing collection, its event and exhibition activities, and the annual awarding of its art prizes, the bank seeks to contribute meaningfully to the evolving discourse on art in the digital age.

The Arab Bank Switzerland Artist of the Year Award is a jury-nominated distinction that recognizes an artist's overall practice and forms the basis for a year-long commitment, including the development of a newly commissioned work. The award focuses on artists who engage with digital technologies thematically and/or as part of their practice, particularly those whose work contributes to bridging the historical divide between digital and traditional contemporary art.

The selection of Anna Ridler and Sofia Crespo as the inaugural recipients reflects the jury's recognition of a collaborative practice that operates at the intersection of image-making, data, and living systems. Working across photography, machine learning, and processes of collection and classification, their five works open a space between natural and computational forms of knowledge, offering new perspectives on how images are produced, organized, and understood today.

This publication has been developed in the context of the award and accompanies the artists' year-long engagement with Arab Bank Switzerland. It brings together four newly commissioned texts that discuss the artists' practice from different perspectives, an interview with the artists, and an overview of their collaborative work. *Sofia Crespo × Anna Ridler: A Field of Collaboration* reflects the depth and relevance of Ridler and Crespo's practice within the evolving field of contemporary art.

Through initiatives such as the Artist of the Year Award, Arab Bank Switzerland reaffirms its commitment to supporting artists who engage critically and creatively with the conditions of the digital present, and to fostering dialogue across disciplines, institutions, and audiences.

Rani Jabban
Deputy CEO, Arab Bank Switzerland

Introduction
Charlotte Kent

> *Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present... Profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which cannot be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. In the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial.*
>
> Paul Valéry, *The Conquest of Ubiquity,* 1928

Anna Ridler and Sofia Crespo, who have produced five major works over the last few years, help us move through the shift described so eloquently by Valéry. By integrating machine learning with the tactile traditions of botanical study and historical photography, by layering the various socialities and disciplinary expectations of art and technology, they show us why practice matters... How process forms and informs what we see. Their works may depict flora, but more so, they broaden into a field of possibility.

The beautiful—confused and ill-defined since Plato, but distinguished by Immanuel Kant from notions of pretty or sublime—faded as the predominant aesthetic over the course of the twentieth century. A realpolitik altered expectations of art. Other values appeared: novelty, brut, abject. The sublime provided the awe-inspiring terror of the era, apparent in the radical developments across society: from novel practices and politics to dizzying macro- and microcosmic explorations.[1] The digital sublime furthers that by describing the way

1 I'd be remiss not to mention the important work done by Sianne Ngai on the cute, zany, interesting, or Jane Bennett on enchantment, among others; see Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics.* Princeton University Press, 2001; Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting.* Harvard University Press, 2015.

modern technologies are mythologized and emotionally charged; this creates an aesthetic experience of power that takes the traditional Kantian sublime but mediates it through code and screens.[2]

Certainly, Ridler and Crespo's work offers the opportunity to explore the digital sublime, a topic managed deftly by Catherine Troiano in her essay on the history and role of photography across the artists' five collaborations to date. Troiano brings the snapshot from its hunting origin through photography and into the language of machine learning. In so doing, she complicates the digital sublime's "fetishism of technology" by addressing how the artists also blur the edges of recognition, forcing viewers to question what they see. Every act of observation is shaped by the conditions that make it possible: the artist's choice of framing and lighting; the parameters or biases coded into computational technologies; and, the default modes viewers bring to images perceived as photographs.

A Practice Makes a World

Photography cannot be disassociated from its social practices. The ontological stability of photography remains a common attitude, but more than two decades ago this was destabilized by scholars like Peter Osborne. He declared it was an expanding field (rather than expanded, in a nod to Rosalind Krauss on sculpture three decades prior): "The idea of a founding unity of the photographic... is essentially imaginary or mythical: in this case, in its reductive identification of a cultural form with a technology."[3] As we'll see, social practices also can't be disassociated from materials like art, technology, evident in developments within photography. I'll digress briefly on the Polaroid SX-70 to situate how materials and practices inform this sociality.

The Polaroid SX-70 was presented by Edwin Land at the April 1972 company meeting with the simple pronouncement: "Photography will never be the same after today." Indeed. Previous instant cameras, like the popular Model 250 from 1967, required eight pages of instructions, and the 1965 Swinger camera provided a clear warning: "if you don't follow the instructions you're headed

2 See: Mosco, Vincent (2004). *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. On technological sublime, see Marx, Leo (1964). *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford University Press. For a history of the aesthetic of the sublime as related to industrialization and technologization see, Nye, David. E. (1996). *American Technological Sublime*. The MIT Press.

3 Osborne, Peter. 2013. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. Verso Books. p. 123.

for plenty of picture taking trouble."[4] The ad for the SX-70 summarized its use in nine clear sentences next to four images. No more brushing of a chemical solution over the image. Now, push the button and presto, an image![5]

The SX-70 did have an impact. Land's simple push button technology and instant image contributed to the culture that values having a camera phone for constant snapshots.[6] Not only did general audiences want to take pictures immediately of everyone and everything in their lives, but even famed photographers like Ansel Adams and Walker Evans enjoyed using it. Land's 1974 booklet of instant photographs declared the import his camera would have: "a new kind of relationship between people in groups is brought into being by SX-70 when the members of a group are photographing and being photographed and sharing the photographs."[7] Requiring a commercial good to construct the social implicitly privatizes a public encounter.

In contrast to the reproducibility of the photograph generally, the Polaroid reintroduced a single, unique image. In so doing, it reclaimed the auratic here-and-now-ness of the original, so that it became something special. From being an inadequate medium for art, it has become rarified and so finds renewed appreciation today. That's not a change in the material but the social, precisely to Osborne's point.

This focus on the Polaroid SX-70 offers an analogy, perhaps even a fable, for relations to our emergent technologies. It's not just that the past informs the future, but that we can learn from it to question the messaging we receive about today's latest and greatest. The use of this particular photo technology in their work is just one example of the artists' diligent attention to how a medium matters materially, socially, culturally, ecologically, and temporally.

Their respective streams of research flow into a joint practice that is brackish and cumulative, yet that also clarifies the conceptual distinctions in seemingly similar work. Both artists are interested

4 McCracken, Harry. 2011. "Polaroid's SX-70: The Art and Science of the Nearly Impossible." News. *Technologizer by Harry McCracken*, June 8, 2011. https://technologizer.com/2011/06/08/polaroid/.

5 The push button technique is now a major feature; Amazon patented their one-click shopping cart, which expired in 2017, and trademarked their "1-Click" term to safeguard the value of this technique partly popularized by the Polaroid SX-70. The single click for photo brought to life the science fiction fantasy where a push of the button provides all the necessities of life.

6 The camera was demonstrated and publicized in 1972 but only available at the end of the year, and entered the national market in 1973, but in this moment photography becomes pervasive.

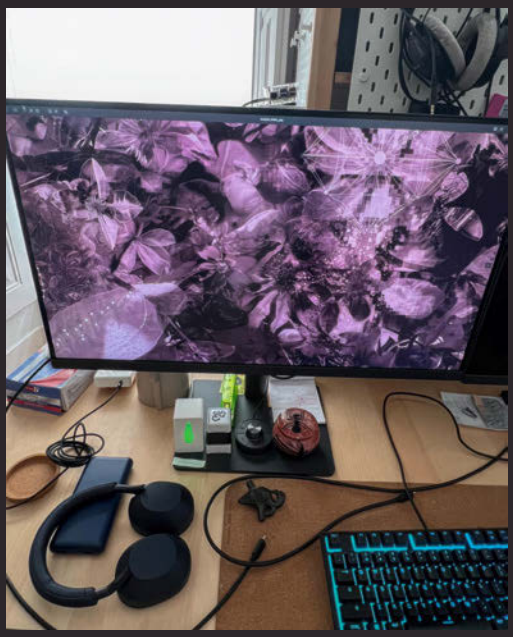
7 Bonanos, Christopher. 2012. *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*. Princeton Architectural Press. p. 105.

in how the "ordinary" becomes something else through machine vision—but they weight that transformation differently. Ridler reveals the hidden complexity inside the everyday world; the ordinary is elevated by granular specificity. For Crespo, the ordinary is not simply being examined; it is being deformed into the extraordinary. That's why Ridler can feel archival and intimate, while Crespo feels speculative and expansive—even when they are working with similar visual materials and overlapping technologies.

Their practices look related because both use GANs, biological imagery, repetition, and variation across outputs. But the direction of change is different. Over time, Ridler allows a sense of drift and decay, where images hover between stability and breakdown, while Crespo permits morphing or branching transitions that provide a broadening ecosystem. Ridler's practice is defined by careful construction and authorship of datasets; she is interested in how datasets carry bias, value systems, and hidden decisions. The art is not just the final image, but the slow, repetitive, archival labor of producing the work itself. Crespo pursues machine learning as a process for new imaginaries; the emphasis leans toward the aesthetic and conceptual futures offered by such systems. So where Ridler foregrounds how data comes to be, Crespo suggests what data might become. This collaboration unites Ridler's reflexive critique and Crespo's speculative posthumanism. Past and future converge in the present.

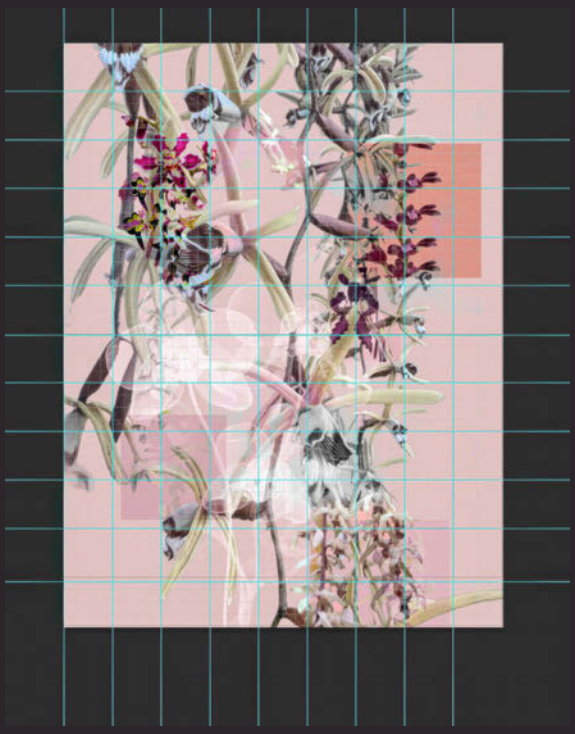
Observing the kinds of processes used in their joint making, however, reveals their distinct voices. Throughout the chapters dedicated to each artwork, we chose to include images from their process, as well as parts of their datasets and detail shots, as a way of illuminating the thoughtful effort and conscientious design in their joint work. Before returning to other ideas in their work, the next few pages situate us within the material matter of their works making.

Process



Collaging

Ridler and Crespo use the word “collaging” as a shorthand for a variety of different digital processes including compositing, layering, masking, selective erasure, and reshaping forms to construct different images.



Because the artists only work digitally when collaging, layering elements in Photoshop recalls and even parallels how historical photography depended on layers of materials and processes. It brings to the forefront the different visual qualities of the various steps they adopt in making work, whether the grain of an analog photograph, the pixellation of a digital file, the grid of a software, or color alterations, texture modulations, image rotations, and more.





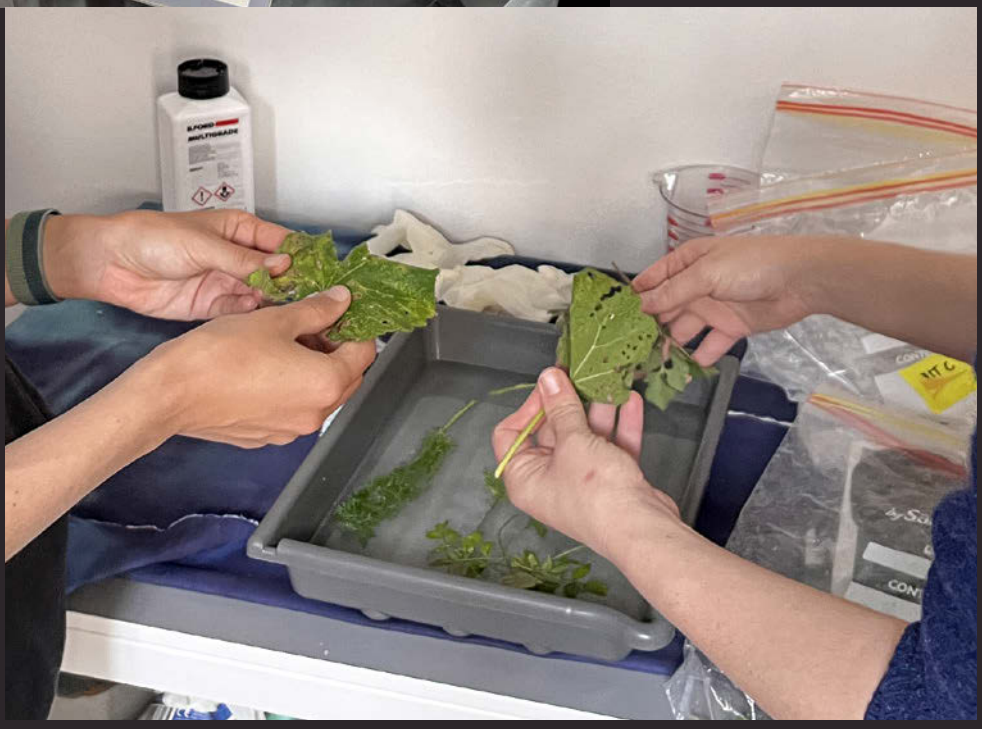
Analog Photography

The artists have primary practices deeply engaged with historical photographic processes. That knowledge imbues their joint work where they engage how materials impact the making of an image, which includes light quality, but also situates the role of rain and humidity, paper, chemical substances, etc.



Synthetic to Analog Photography

Putting a synthetic image into their analog production loop adds chance and loss in a way that can't be controlled. It also resists notions of infinite perfect images that many claim or imagine AI promises.



Developing

Particularly in *Various and Casual Occursions,* the plant becomes the developing agent (with other non-toxic chemicals like saltwater). The environment is part of the process. Plants are not merely the subject evident of their work but also part of the medium, reflecting the close relationship between form and content for the artists.



Cyanotype

Cyanotypes have an established relation to natural history and scientific innovation, because Anna Atkins used this process for botanical specimens in the early nineteenth century. Frequently associated with blue prints, cyanotype coloring can be altered through toning, as seen here. The precision required of making cyanotypes encounters the inordinate data of a hi-res digital image, so that the artists disrupt both. Transforming the digital image dissolves detail so something very different appears.