

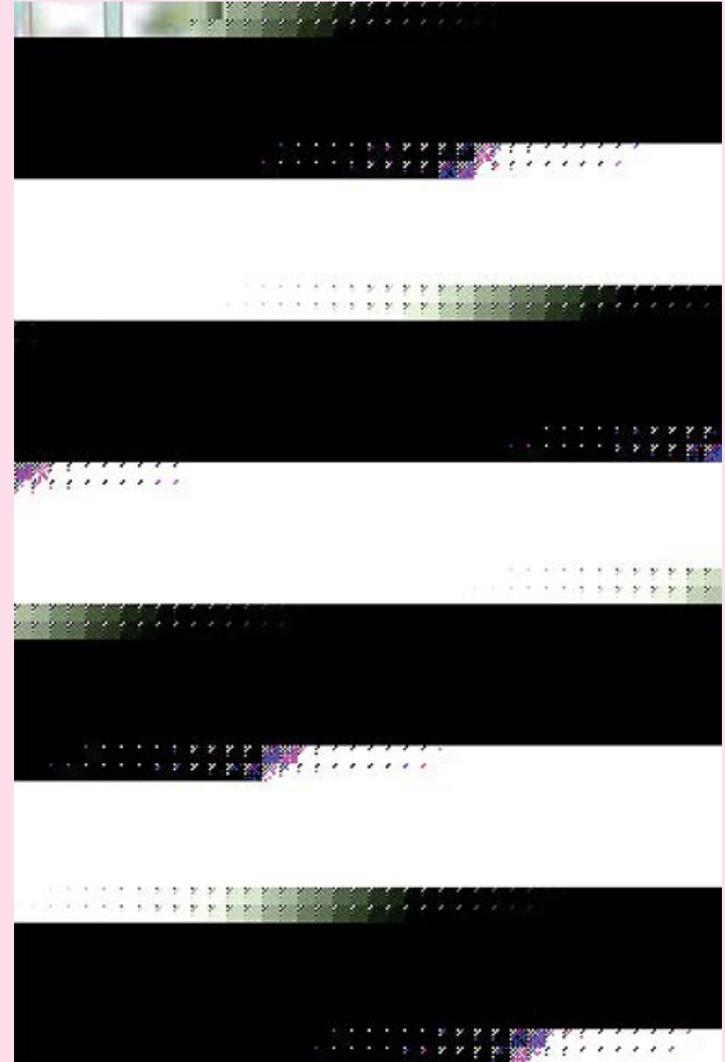
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Anthology

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For Christopher Meerdo, it is compelling to consider the magnitude at which photographs are amassed and destroyed every day, which places contemporary vernacular photography into both a compulsive and entropic framework. The individual digital file from a memory card has replaced the now anachronistic physical negative, and with it, has expanded photography's ability to reproduce and discard into a seemingly limitless capacity. It is with this same ease and efficiency of creating an image that it can be lost, deleted, or destroyed. Even the storage devices we entrust our data to deteriorate or become obsolete almost as rapidly as new technologies are invented to displace them. While digital photography can create and replace without having to produce any physical material, every image that is deleted from a memory card leaves behind a slight trace of its existence.

In *Anthology*, Meerdo culls these traces of leftover data. Using image data recovery programs, he excavates erased photographs from used memory cards he purchases from eBay and Craigslist. The resurrected images are then saved and stored, subsequently creating an archive of eradicated files that, to date, has amassed in numbers into the thousands. This, in effect, creates an archive of digital refuse that surveys the broader collective authorship of photography and reveals shared motifs, which in the case of *Anthology*, consists of innumerable vacations. In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, the act of photographing at a tourist site is described: "We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception." The characters, amused by those who participate, remark, "They are taking pictures of taking pictures." Many of Meerdo's images are sourced from older memory cards with timestamps dating back to the 90s. These early cards, once hailed for their technological advances, hold information at a fraction of the capacity as those that are newly manufactured, thereby already deeming them obsolete. Resurrecting images that communicate to the technology they

are tied to – in addition to the instance of the captured moment – makes the recovery process feel to Meerdo like "hacking into an earlier moment in photography."

The life of a memory card – photographing, deleting, transferring, re-photographing – can generate incomplete data that leaves peripheral artifacts and disrupts the ability to retrieve complete images. These gaps in photographic data are reconstructed as pixel approximations. Many of the recovered files become fragmented amalgamations of composition and hue, creating a visual hybrid of a photograph as a representational image and a photograph as data. In every instance, we are denied the chance to fully trespass on the former, private lives of these images and the individuals who authored them. The varying degrees of obfuscation of the original image allow us to consider photography's inherently voyeuristic qualities. Only scraps of information are available: in many photographs, two or more fields are spliced into a single frame, losing their initial sense of time and place and becoming instead a visually disrupted timeline of intermittent experiences. Images are abruptly halted by a wash of grey, black, and even chroma key green. Others still are left completely void of recognizable objects or scenes. The glitch is visualized; recovered pixels fall short of representation, leaving instead aggregations of lines, patterns, and blocks of color. The photographs in *Anthology* take on a kind of past life regression, and we are left to act as psychics to read and interpret the past lives of these images.

Memory cards, not unlike our own memories, aim to encode, store, and retrieve information. Our data's storage devices have aspired to become placeholders for memory which propose to eclipse it altogether. Through a larger paradigm of image-equivalents, we have the ability to edit or even visually manufacture our own histories. The images in *Anthology*

serve as a reminder of our own faulty memories that are vulnerable to time and can be altered by similar means. Meerdo further disrupts the idea of permanence in an image while simultaneously reinforcing it by printing the files exactly as they appear through the recovery process. By staying true to both content and scale, we still question the nature of the technology as author. Here, photography's relationship to indexicality is deconstructed by the inaccessibility of the literal photographic content of the images and of the removal of the hand in the work, both of which are inherent to the data recovery process. Photography has been historically bound to a tradition of constant modifications and technological improvements. It is with Meerdo's works that we can question the edges of these developments as they push against notions of photography's complicated history of representation. The images in *Anthology* may as well have never been anything but binary code before their second chance at life.



Emily Kay Henson

Emily Kay Henson is an independent arts writer and Collections Research Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.

Christopher Meerdo
/ born 1981

is a Chicago based artist who grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and spent time in post-soviet Lithuania as a teenager. He has survived three near-death experiences including drowning and crashing in an airplane. Meerdo is a recipient of an MFA in Photography from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His work has been shown in numerous locations including Reykjavik, Nottingham, Seattle, Toronto, New York, and Chicago with recent exhibitions at Gallery 400, The Hyde Park Art Center, Roxaboxen and Roots & Culture in Chicago. Meerdo was recently an artist in residence at the SIM Residency in Reykjavik, Iceland and currently teaches photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.

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