

# Something About IMAGE



## Beyond the grid

Art-tech company **VSCO**  
unlocking the creative restraints  
of online photography

Words by Janine Leah Bartels

Instagram has long confined the composition of images to its trademark crop. By contrast, the Visual Supply Company, better known as VSCO, has always thought outside the box.

“VSCO is a place where people can take creative risks and more freely express themselves,” says its co-founder Greg Lutze. “Our goal for VSCO is to honour art and artists, to be a place where someone can express themselves creatively without the pressure that social media often brings.” And indeed, on his photo-editing tool and image-sharing app there is no space for comments or ‘likes’.

The former creative director launched VSCO Cam with photographer Joel Flory in 2011. “It started as a ‘by creatives, for creatives’ company,” says Flory. Featuring desirable photo filters that mimic the effects of shooting analogue, with comments replaced with the camera’s aperture and shutter speed, the app

immediately proved popular with both aspiring and established photographers.

Photographer Greg Kahn, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, is an enthusiast: “The layout on VSCO is really sophisticated and clean, especially on a desktop, and the emphasis with VSCO is on the image, not on comments.” It is, in short, about admiring the image without the distraction of the popularity contest. In response, Instagram has been playing catch-up. The filters that originally drew users to the VSCO app are most likely responsible for Instagram’s own filter add-ons and upgrades over the last year. A new update now welcomes traditional portrait and landscape images as opposed to the limiting symmetrical block.

Nevertheless, Instagram have done little to promote original content. Users continue to regurgitate old content that maps out their mood or capitalises on habitual hashtags like #TBT (Throwback

### NATALIE McCOMAS

McComas’ project *In This Skin* celebrates subjects who have birthmarks. The Australian artist uncovers their stories as she intimately exposes their markings and inspires them to feel comfortable in their own skin. [natmccomas.vSCO.co](http://natmccomas.vSCO.co)

### YUMNA AL-ARASHI

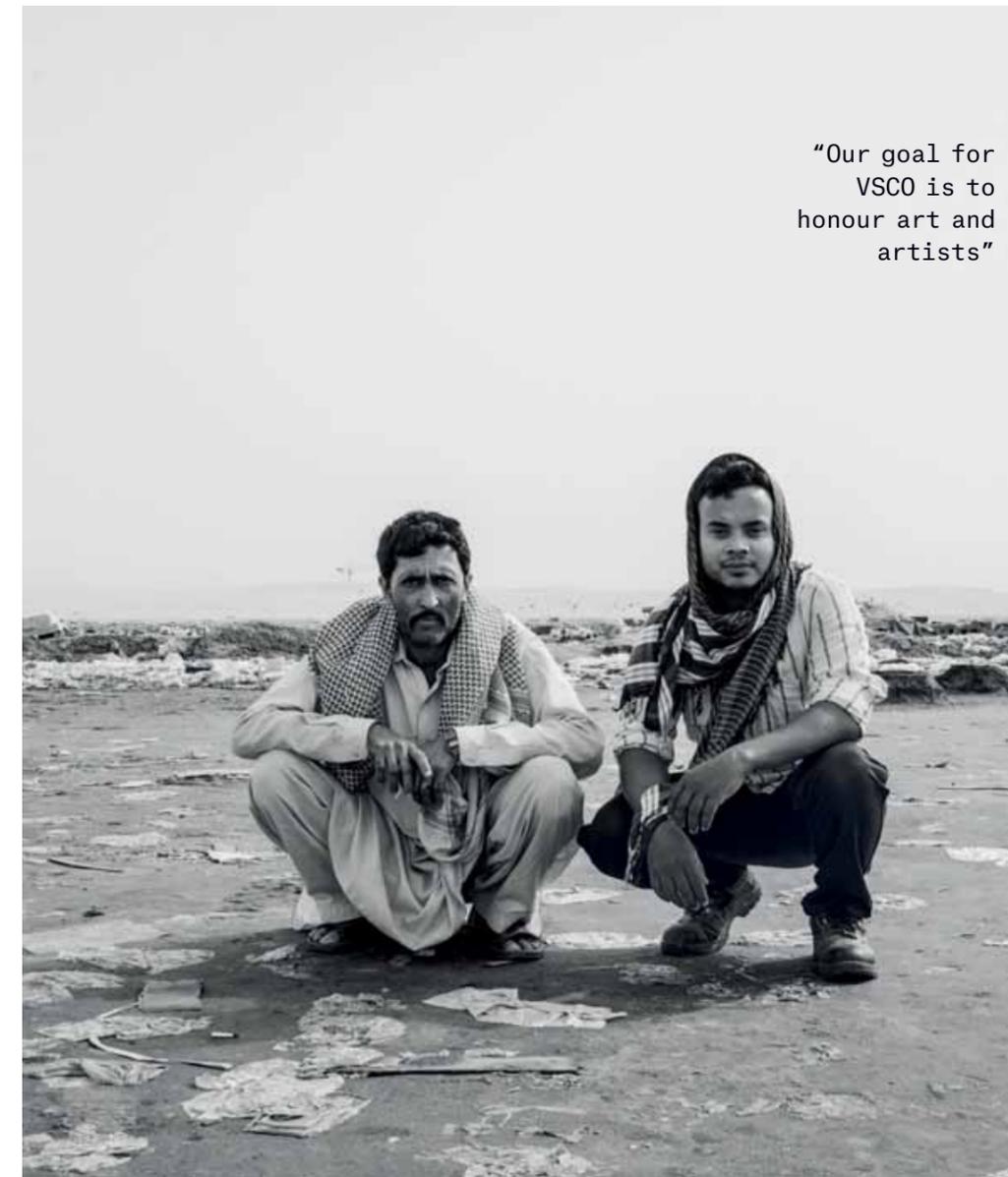
Al-Arashi highlights the prominent socio-economic divide between migrant workers and residents of the United Arab Emirates, creating awareness and promoting social justice. [yumna.vSCO.co](http://yumna.vSCO.co)

Thursday) and #FBF (Flashback Friday). Fine artist and creative director Jonathan Schofield, who worked as Stella McCartney’s worldwide visual director for six years and shot her lingerie campaigns, believes that this may stem from the creative industry as a whole.

“Our culture is too referential,” he says. “Image makers, art directors and designers are referencing the past too heavily. If you look at people’s Instagrams – and I know I do it – it’s, ‘Look, a picture of Jane Birkin’ or an amazing Helmut Newton shot. It’s a tantalising and intoxicating thing to dive into the past and use it for your image making. Who’s not referencing? This is the Pinterest Generation.” And that is exactly what Instagram has become: a moodboard for inspiration, a time capsule.

No wonder there is an increasing appetite for applications like VSCO, which promote new original content,

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enabling the work of new artists and photographers to be noticed in an online world that has, visually, reached its saturation point. VSCO doesn’t only provide them with a public platform; in 2014, the company launched the VSCO Artist Initiative, a \$1m scholarship fund that supports artistic projects.

Greg Kahn is a recent addition to the initiative. “Simply put, it allows me to create this body of work,” says Kahn, who, in 2011, won a Pulitzer Prize nomination for his series *It’s Not A House, It’s A Home*, which captured the foreclosure crisis in Florida. The Artist Initiative team is helping to organise flights to Cuba and accommodation for Kahn’s latest project, which documents the youth movement in Cuba. When he reaches the halfway point in his project, VSCO will provide an ‘update’ to his Artist Initiative profile.

Meanwhile, photographer Yumna Al-Arashi has been working with the



GREG KAHN

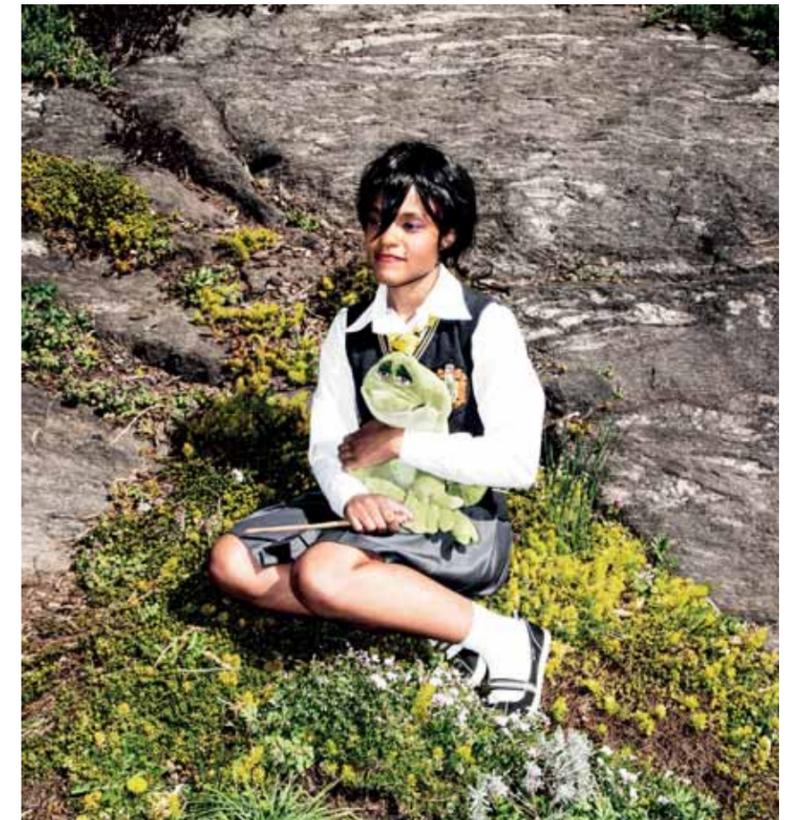
The latest project of Pulitzer Prize nominee Kahn will capture the cultural identity of Cuba's youth. He hopes to communicate their emotions throughout the period of national change. [gregkahn.vSCO.co](http://gregkahn.vSCO.co)

ANTON RODRIGUEZ

London-based photographer Rodriguez hopes to get to know his neighbours. Living in the city's Barbican Estate, home to 4,000 residents, he is exploring the lives of the individuals inhabiting the intriguing cultural hub. [antonrodriguez.vSCO.co](http://antonrodriguez.vSCO.co)

AMY LOMBARD

A photographer who lives and works in Brooklyn, Lombard documents subcultural 'Meetups' where individuals gather under the context of a common interest. She vibrantly portrays these passions to the rest of society. [amylombard.vSCO.co](http://amylombard.vSCO.co)



"It's less about feeding egos, more about beautiful art"

Artist Initiative team for over six months. "They've created such an incredible environment where I've felt comfortable sharing my struggles, my emotions and my passions," says Al-Arashi, who began her project over three years ago. She has been documenting workers in the United Arab Emirates, photographing the men in labour camps the same way she would photograph a model for a fashion editorial. Al-Arashi's background in politics and journalism has also led to her posting written work to her visual diary, publishing her intimate interactions in her VSCO Journal.

Artists working in a variety of media are eligible – from writers to sculptors, animators to musicians – although they still must document their process photographically on their VSCO Grid. Now supporting upwards of 20 artists, the Artist Initiative has a rolling application process, with new artists introduced to the roster every few months. "We receive applications every day and they all get read," promises Sarah Goerzen, the initiative's producer.

So how does this free app, which carries no advertising, provide enough revenue for VSCO to give money away? According to Goerzen, the company's

revenue comes from products such as VSCO Film, and also Artifact Uprising, a company acquired by VSCO in January this year, which allows its users to transform their images into photo books, prints and gifts.

VSCO Film for Abode Lightroom allows creatives to edit images and video footage on their desktop. "I've been a user of VSCO profiles in Adobe Lightroom for some time," says Kahn, "and now, whether I make an image on my camera or phone, I can have a consistent look across all platforms. It has really streamlined the process."

It is tools like this that have led fashion companies such as Burberry and Levi's to collaborate with VSCO users to produce compelling images, rather than advertisements and further product placement. "We are interested in building a place where people all over the world come to create and discover original content," says Flory. "VSCO will be known as a place of creation, discovery and connection, equipping and inspiring people everywhere."

People flock to the main VSCO Grid, where curators are responsible for sifting through the stream of images that are uploaded – visualise high-quality images

of sweeping hills, rolling waves and laughing children from all around the globe. "I appreciate the network of artists that VSCO curates, and I find constant inspiration within the Journals and Grids," says Al-Arashi. "It's less about feeding an ego, and more about curating beautiful art to inspire one another."

In July, VSCO announced the release of VSCO Collections, a feature that enables users to digitally curate their own grid (separate from their own original work). This is the first time artists have been able to interact directly with each other, filling the void of 'liking' someone's image. Reposting an artist's image becomes more than a simple nod of acknowledgment; sharing it becomes a statement. And if artists can inspire each other to create, the future of image-making may be salvaged.

"Right now, we are in an exciting age for creativity," explains Lutze. "Technology has opened up a lot of doors. But ultimately, a person's vision and perspective is what's most important – not the tools, not the self-promotion, not the number next to the heart icon. Too many artists get caught up in being 'online famous.' Just make something you believe in first."

All images courtesy of the artists and VSCO Artist Initiative™ [vSCO.co/initiative](http://vSCO.co/initiative)