

## Photographic Views

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Mexico City, March 2002.

4.2 added April 2003.

### 1.1

“I used to live on Herschel Street”.

### 2.1

Just like every other genesis, the early history of photography is a shadowy marsh haunted by creation myths and hard-to-discern historical facts alike.

In the orthodox view of canonical art history, two names stand out as the arch-fathers of photography: those of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833; credited with having made “the world’s first permanent photograph” through “chemically recording images in the camera obscura” in 1826) and Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851; credited with the “invention of photography” proper, and the “Daguerrotype” more specifically in 1839). However grandiose these truly historic accomplishments may be – and there is no doubt that they indeed furnished the founding stones of photography, even though they were not yet “photography” in and of themselves – both their names have all too often eclipsed the equally, if not more impressive achievements of that of their compatriot Hippolyte Bayard (1801-1881), as well as that of the British scholar and scientist William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), whose invention of the negative/positive printing process, a feat well beyond the undertakings of both Niépce and Daguerre, would actually prove to be *the* defining moment in the founding of the art of photography pure and proper.

### 3.1

*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (originally, and much more revealingly, titled *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936) is easily the most influential essay on the philosophy of art to have appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, and up to this date it remains the work German philosopher Walter Benjamin is most remembered by. In later, revised editions of that seminal essay, it was also accompanied by Benjamin’s “casual” musings on the art of photography, succinctly titled *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* or *Little History of Photography...*

As if to further the initial point of the 1930’s essay that precisely *in* and *through* the technique of photography (and not cinematography), art had finally found a way to rid itself from the bourgeois burden of what Benjamin called the artwork’s “aura” – the ideology of “uniqueness”, “authenticity” and god-like creative genius that had pervaded western art practice since its early beginnings in the Renaissance and had done so much to subjugate the production of art works to the mercantile, possessive whims of capitalist patronage and its innate tendency towards commodification and fetishization. Photography as an art of mechanical reproduction was about liberation and emancipation, about massification and endless (re)distribution & (re)territorialization.

As if to further the initial point of the 1930’s essay that precisely *in* and *through* the technique of photography (and not cinematography), art had finally found *the* way to open itself up to the revolution of endless mechanical reproduction – and the equally revolutionary deconstruction of the stringent, autocratic logic of ownership.

Whereas Daguerre and Niépce were still very much caught within the conventional, traditionalist semantics of “auratic” uniqueness and authenticity – theirs were much more

“paintings with light” than “writings with light” in that they, formally, technically as well as theoretically, were still firmly rooted in the productivist logic of the *painterly* mode – and ultimately remained the creators of unique, singular images not only superficially resembling the works and practices of a Delacroix or a Courbet, William Henry Fox Talbot, through his invention of the negative/positive printing process, effectively opened up the floodgates of history by literally destroying the uniqueness of the printed/painted/written image – one negative could be endlessly reproduced, in an unlimited series of printing processes, resulting in a potentially relentless proliferation of images – as well as the singularity of the creative/imaging process and the authenticity of the artistic act. The work of art truly entered the age of its mechanical reproduction through the arching gates of “Mr. Fox Talbot’s Process”.

### 1.2

“I remember lying on the beach one day last summer, reading a chapter from Joan Fontcuberta’s *El beso de Judas – Fotografía y verdad* (I take that subtitle, “Photography and Truth”, to be an allusive pun on Jacques Derrida’s widely-discussed *Peinture et vérité*, or “Painting and Truth”) called *La escritura de las apariencias*. I’m not really a big fan of Fontcuberta’s work as a photographer, which seems rather secondary and plainly illustrative to his work as a theoretician and/or critic (which is where, to my mind at least, his real strength lies).

The opening lines of the chapter read something like this: “Why do we call photography ‘photography’? Because William Henry Fox Talbot did not know Greek.” Or maybe he didn’t know enough Greek – Fontcuberta isn’t really sure himself, as the actual suggestion of Fox Talbot’s supposed ignorance was originally made by still another theoretician by the name of Vilém Flusser (1920-1991).

Such was the nature of my first encounter with the name of William Henry Fox Talbot, an enigmatic, nineteenth-century Victorian maverick genius who turned out to be the *real* father of photography.”

### 2.2

Legend has it that William Henry Fox Talbot, born on 11 February 1800 at Melbury, Dorset, as the only child of William Davenport Talbot of Lacock Abbey and Elisabeth Theresa, daughter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Ilchester, actually took to inventing the process of photography, or “photogenic drawing”, as he himself liked to call it, out of frustration of him being “the only one in the group unable to sketch the scenery of Italy’s Lake Como”, where he spent his holidays in October 1833 in the company of his sisters and his new wife. Instead of painstakingly trying to draw from nature using the common artist’s tool that was the camera obscura, William Henry Fox Talbot there and then started to dream about “how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper.” Thus the concept of photography was born.

### 2.3

John Herschel was born the son of William Herschel, the astronomer who discovered Uranus, and Mary Pitt, daughter of a wealthy merchant, on 7 March 1792. A child prodigy that would later revolutionize such widely diverging fields of scientific enquiry as astronomy, mathematical analysis, algebra and trigonometrical series, optics and chemistry, Herschel would prove instrumental in furthering the case of photography along the Talbot line of the negative/positive printing process; indeed, it was probably a chance meeting with John Herschel in Munich in 1824 that influenced Talbot’s turn towards research into light and optical phenomena, which would eventually lead to the latter’s lifelong engagement to the art

of “writing with light” – a term first used in Sir John Herschel’s presentation of a paper to the Royal Society on 14 March 1839 called “Note on the art of Photography, or the Application of the Chemical Rays of Light to the Purpose of Pictorial Representation”.

(On 31 January 1835, Talbot’s own “Some Account on the Art of Photogenic Drawing” was read to the same Royal Society.)

Although Herschel’s interest in photography was largely theoretical and almost casual by nature, he suggested to replace both “heliograph” and “photogenic drawing” with the more gracious “photograph” and soon after also coined the “negative/positive” double term.

### 3.2

The crux of the work is a rather straightforward, plain-faced celebration of the torrent of riches that was unleashed upon the practice of producing images, and thus also the practice of making art, by William Henry Fox Talbot’s invention of the negative/positive printing process: one single “originary” image, meaning one single negative, can be reproduced in(de)initely and interminably, making use of the whole gamut of different printing processes that have come to see the light of day since William Henry Fox Talbot first laid eyes on the oriel windows at Lacock Abbey.

The single, “negative” image in this instance being a close-up, fragmentary portrait of the white, windowless wall that cuts right through the exhibition room at Galeria de Arte Mexicano: an object in itself for sure (the peculiar lighting literally highlights its dramatic sculptural qualities, reminding us of both Bruce Nauman’s obtrusive corridors and Gordon Matta Clark’s elliptical “cuttings”, but also, more directly, of the “classicist” minimal aesthetic), throwing back its lunar light on its own images, it enables us to contemplate the portraits made of that same supporting structure. We are looking at both *the* wall, *one* rather generic image of the wall, and *nine* different photographic views from a wall, taken in 2002 by Iñaki Bonillas based on Mr. Fox Talbot’s process – and thus become fully engaged in a spiraling, tautological dialogue between object and representation, between primacy and mediation, between what is the work, what the work is about and how the work actually works.

### 3.3

In considering tautology and the tautological, we arrive at the heart and soul of Iñaki Bonillas’ artistic practice, which most emphatically revolves around the concept of autoreferentiality as is engendered in his project of “photographing photography” (photographing “bad photographers” being another exemplary work), or, more generally, photographing, recording and mastering *light*. Through his choice of a white support wall – with white being the theoretical point of convergence of the whole color spectrum, i.e. pure, intensified, “accelerated” light – the artist reaches a plastic absolute already hinted at in his *Photographic Works* from 1998. With nothing to see but the absence of every and any image, nine photographic views from a white wall must by definition imply a radically “meta-visual” reflection on the – Talbotian, not Daguerrian – nature of photography per se, and not so much on the images it habitually delivers. Ignoring the consideration whether there is anything to look at here at all, we are really looking at nine printing processes become “visible”, or at least “material”; nine different shades of white that are the result of photographic technology, not imaging. (Of course the use of nine different printing processes in reality confronts us with nine different images, which in this case pretty much seem like nine views of nothingness; whether the source of those images is one and the same – one negative, a certain segment of a white wall – gradually becomes irrelevant in the viewing process.)

This is pretty much as “it-is-what-it-is” as it can possibly get. Or, to use an even more jaded formula: the medium truly has become the message.

Apart from the obvious Kosuthian reference of “art after philosophy” – in which Kosuth shows himself to be an avid reader and acolyte of the mighty Ad Reinhardt, most famously known for his all-black (and some all-white) paintings and his polemical “art is art-as-art is nothing but art and everything else is everything else” statement – there is another motif at play in the exhaustive deployment of the tautological so typical of Iñaki Bonillas’ meta-photography, which is rather more Borgesian in nature. Once again this Borgesian project first came apparent in the *Photographic Works* series from 1998, which consisted of 7 pictures of a blue computer screen, scaled 1:1 in that one picture showing the standard measurements 5”x7” in reality also measured 5”x7”. The McLuhanite statement that “the medium is or should be the message” thus acquired a realist quality both symbolically charged and ... well, literally *real*: one is reminded of the Borgesian allegory of the 1:1 map of the world that in the end, in its attempt to acquire a reality of representation hitherto undreamt of, smothers and eclipses the very same world it aims to map. These are the tautological, circular trappings of the realist enterprise that are inscribed in the genetic code of the project of photography as a whole: the sign-become-signifier will always be chasing the signified until it ultimately becomes that represented reality itself – until the primary object is no more to be seen, and the secondary, mediated representation of the object is the only hyper/reality we are left with.

#### 4.1

A TRANSLATION FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER – Lawrence Weiner.

#### 4.2.

“*Der Nebel, der über den Anfängen der Photographie liegt, ist nicht ganz so dicht wie jener, der über den Beginn des Buchdrucks sich lagert*”: thus spake Walter Benjamin in the defining opening lines of his *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* or *Little History of Photography*. An all the more telling analogy in the very context of this critical reflection on the work of Iñaki Bonillas, in that his expanding body of work, besides the genealogical plunge into the depths of photo-history currently under discussion, now also includes an insightful excursion into (or archaeological excavation of) the world of book-making and book-printing.

Along with – but, as an artistic enterprise in its own right, unrelated to – the single originating (originary) photograph of a white wall resulting in a limited array of scaling blanknesses (i.e. overall “whiteness”), a *White Book* was made by Iñaki Bonillas and Roger Willems. Numbering a hefty eight-hundred ninety-six flimsy pages of sheer nothingness, both format and paper quality were modeled after the generic phonebooks of the artist’s native Mexico City; with not a single page of even the faintest trace of print (“meaning”) in it to mimic the archetypal conditions of pure, irreducible “bookness”, the original dummy was then handed on to a number of artists and photographers who were each invited to portray the *White Book* as they liked or saw fit; these photographs, eight in total, were then inserted back into the book: some of them showed the book head-on as a massive, monolithic chunk of white gravity; others tried to convey something of the book’s real-life tactile dimensions; yet another captured the book flapping its wings, bird-like, in mid-flight, right in front of a white wall. And of course in most of these instances the white book, as its paper-made corollary, actually resembled the white wall, too. [Two photographs in particular reduced the book to the sheen surface of such high-modernist aesthetic statements as a Malevitch, Mangold, Marden or Martin canvas.] The final ROMA-published *White Book*, then, contained eight-hundred eighty-eight blanks and eight pages of photographs depicting the original (“dummy”) version itself, folding back onto itself in a most Deleuzian fashion: *tautologie totale*, the photo project/process has become a printing process/project and vice versa.

Ideally, of course, yet another custom-made reconsideration of the *White Book* should now also include these three-hundred eighty-odd words of meta-discourse.

#### 2.4

Ahh – the windows, always them windows, them windows that keep returning and reappearing...

Keeping in line with the orthodox view of canonical art history, we find that “the world’s first permanent photograph” was actually Joseph Nicéphore Niépce’s “View from his window at Gras”, an 8 hour-exposure heliograph taken in 1826.

The very first “photogenic drawings” (or “photographs”, as Sir John Herschel would later rename them) William Henry Fox Talbot ever made were of the three oriel windows of his home in Lacock Abbey in the summer of 1835.

“Just as one begins to waken, perhaps emerging from a dream, the eyes struggle to open and a tentatively defined world starts to take shape. Light separates into lines and forms even as memories start to be imposed. This moment of the genesis of sight is wonderfully represented here. An opening onto the world materializes – a window – but a fantastic window it is, inverting our experience and passing dark mystery instead of bright light. It is natural magic. ... Nature literally drew the subject on the paper, and wherever light was present a deposit of purple-colored silver occurred. After a lengthy exposure – certainly many minutes and perhaps even exceeding an hour – the sheet of paper was withdrawn from the camera, and the image of the window was as visible as it would ever be.”

The painting has on innumerable occasions been called a “window on the world”. (And no one has done more to successfully complicate this notion of the pictorial than Belgian surrealist René Magritte.)

Twenty different “photogenic drawings”, no negatives, were made of some seven or eight windows in all, using heliographic paper (“linea azul mediano”) and a median three-minute exposure. “Daguerrotypes” in a way, as each of the blueprints is just as unique – strictly “positive” – as any painting “from nature” ever made: using the techniques pioneered by the French triumvirate of Niépce, Daguerre and Bayard, who are not so much the *inventors* as the *precursors* of the art of photography as we know and still practice it today, they are the perfect historical complement to any homage to the unique historic achievement of William Henry Fox Talbot, who truly is the founder of the art of photography as Iñaki Bonillas knows and practices it today.

#### 1.3

“We were visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, some two months ago. There was an exhibition of a rather unknown (he didn’t figure in my copy of the *Encyclopedia of Photography*, published by the International Center for Photography) Englishman called Benjamin Brecknell Turner, another half-forgotten mid-century pioneer of the art of photography.

The frontispiece of the book from which his “Photographic Views From Nature (taken in 1852, 1853, and 1854)” were culled said that these “pictures” had been printed on paper by making use of ‘Mr. Fox Talbot’s Process’.”