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**TRACTATUS**

by RODRIGO GONZALO ENCINAR

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY  
November 2011

Approval:

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Committee Chair

Date

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Committee Advisor

Date

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Gregory Halpern  
Committee Advisor

Date

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# **TRACTATUS**

by RODRIGO GONZALO ENCINAR

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## ABSTRACT

*Tractatus* is an act of criticism concerned with the current matters of economy, war and home. The work visually investigates through a range of interdisciplinary projects issues related to the nature of the photographic medium and the functioning of the capitalist system. *Tractatus* uses systematic methodologies embedded in Conceptualism that focus on a more complex, more politicized and more critical understanding of photographs, interrogating the documentary use of the camera.

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## LIST OF EXHIBITED WORKS

*Histograms*, 2011, projection on screen, dimensions variable

*Civilian Iraq Casualties 2003-2011*, 2011

*Oil Price Fluctuation 2003-2011*, 2011

*Banks*, 2011, Lambda prints; each 8 x 10 in.

*Always with you*, 2011

*The world's local bank*, 2011

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dimensions variable

## INTRODUCTION

*Tractatus* is structured around the progression from a documentary to a conceptual photographic practice, analyzing the functionality of the photographic medium and investigating the recognition of signs and their construction of meaning in our visual culture. This analysis also addresses aspects of contemporary society, in particular politics and economics. Starting from the photographic image as a mode of information, I frame my work within a semiotic approach to different systems of representation using images, analyzing how aesthetic and technological codes contribute within the fluidity of signification. The use of written language—both traditional and computer language—acts at the same time as a vehicle and object of study.

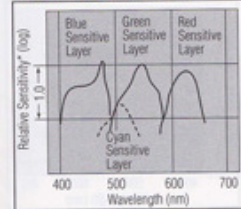
Technology has been a key element in the history of photography, affecting and shaping how we know it today. It is obvious that with the eruption of digital imaging since the 1990s, a very deep continuous transformation is taking place, not only with regard to technical aspects or the development of software for the manipulation of existing images and the creation of virtual ones, but also in the ways images are distributed and circulated. New digital technology plays a major role in our understanding and consumption of photographs and images.

These developments are exciting and affect all photographic production. They also indicate a post-photographic era; thus both the technology and the uses of photography find themselves again on the verge of a new beginning. In this scenario “data” seems to be a more appropriate term when trying to define what photography is today in a digital world. The photographic image is now primarily displayed on screens, circulated on the Internet, more ubiquitous than ever.



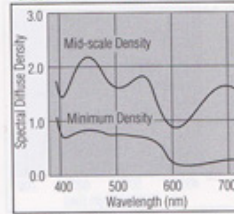
**FUJICOLOR PORTRAIT FILM NPS 160 PROFESSIONAL [NPS]**  
 ISO 160/23°, Daylight Type

• SPECTRAL SENSITIVITY CURVES



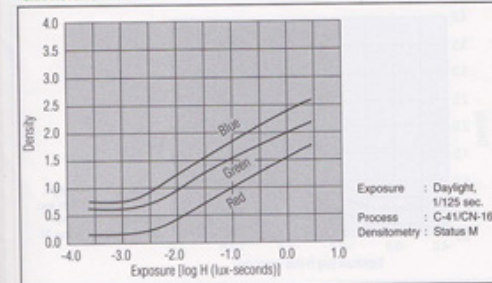
Process : C-41/CN-16  
 Densitometry : Status M  
 Density : 1.0 above minimum density  
 \*Sensitivity equals the reciprocal of the exposure (Lux-sec) required to produce a specified density

• SPECTRAL DYE DENSITY CURVES



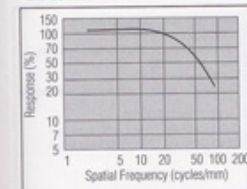
Typical densities for a mid-scale neutral subject and for minimum density.

• CHARACTERISTIC CURVES



Exposure : Daylight,  
 1/125 sec.  
 Process : C-41/CN-16  
 Densitometry : Status M

• MTF CURVE



Exposure: Daylight  
 Process : C-41/CN-16

• DIFFUSE RMS GRANULARITY

VALUE: 4  
 Micro-densitometer Measurement Aperture:  
 48µm in diameter  
 Magnification: 12x  
 Sample Density: 1.0 above minimum density

• RESOLVING POWER

Chart Contrast 1.6:1 - 63 lines/mm  
 Chart Contrast 100:1 - 125 lines/mm

Figure 1. Fuji specifications booklet

## THE NATURE OF IMAGES

“Photography is at the same time a science and an art, and both aspects are inseparably linked”<sup>1</sup>

Beaumont Newhall

Although unknown to me at that moment, the conception of my thesis work started during fall 2009. Cleaning up my darkroom at RIT I came across a booklet of different film specifications for the brand Fuji (fig. 1). Especially noteworthy were the graphics and curves of this professional data guide. I could not avoid thinking about what the traditional photographic companies are doing right now. In fact, being in Rochester, New York, made me think about Kodak, the company that first made photography available to the general public. There must have been a miscalculation. How could the foundational company of photographic technology decline so quickly?

Joan Fontcuberta classifies photographic practice according to the intentionality of the author: those who use the medium in order “to learn about the world”—documentary—“and those who feel they must first learn about photography itself” —expressive. “It is not about giving preference to one or the other, or presenting these two lines as antagonistic, because they are complementary and they enrich each other.”<sup>2</sup> Both the conceptual as well as the documentary aspects of photography, albeit from a critical and hybrid perspective, are the objects of analysis in *Tractatus*.

Photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa—despite their different approaches in the documentation of an event, both advocated for showing a relevant moment that captured the action at *the right time*. The documentary photo essay, regardless of more intimate or personal

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont Newhall, introduction to *Photography, 1839-1937* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Fontcuberta, “Joan Fontcuberta Speaks with Cristina Zelic,” in *Conversations with Contemporary Photographers*, ed. Nan Richardson (New York: Umbrage, 2005), 22.

manifestations like Robert Frank's or Roy DeCarava's, has taught us that its alternative search for photographic objectivity is to be considered nothing less than another kind of construction. On the contrary, if we consider, for instance, the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their students at the Dusseldorf Academy during the 70's, the idea of objective documentation was based not on capturing the right time but on an aesthetic of dispassionate analysis. At the same time we have seen how artists investigated the before and after of a certain fact—although staged, Roger Fenton's war photographs could only show the aftermath of battle due to technical limitations. In contemporary documentary photography, the before and after—now as an aesthetic and conceptual choice—seem to be equally or more important than the idea of the “decisive moment.” For Cartier-Bresson and the German School photographers, the visual experience focused on content and less on a critical approach to the photographic processes and its established materials - lenses, negative, prints (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Thomas Ruff, *P. Lappat*, 1987

These photographic practices currently seem insufficient and exhausted when considering the transformation of the medium as a documentary form on a conceptual level. Where the concept of the decisive moment is irrelevant, and showing the before and after are merely comparison tools far from a postmodern artistic analysis of a specific contemporary reality, there is no choice but to pose a reflexive conceptual approach.

During a portfolio review in June 2009 I realized that I wanted to change my way of approaching photography. In the previous five years the Dusseldorf School, had primarily informed my image-making. The changes that review triggered focused on a profound, radical shift in my creative process. I realized conceptualization could enable me to investigate the reasons behind specific phenomena. I thus expanded my understanding of how photography functions, which is rather circumscribed by its history, around which we have constructed certain meaning through symbolism. In discussing *the detail* as one of the five elements that define a photograph, curator John Szarkowski proposed reading pictures as symbols,<sup>3</sup> which anticipated the semiotic approach to understand images in our visual culture.

I realized that my exclusive approach to objective documentary photography was leading to a dead end, where analytical comparison of the photographed subjects appeared to be the main goal. Going out with the camera in order to photograph was becoming a superficial and incidental task, and reinforcing the idea of photographic record underlined the assumption that the mere reflection of reality revealed anything about it.<sup>4</sup> Also, postmodern theory and practices—which have had a

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<sup>3</sup> John Szarkowski, "Introduction to The Photographer's Eye," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoting Bertolt Brecht, in "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 2 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 526.

central impact on photography—destabilized links between representation and reality.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural and contextual aspects both in time and space determine the interpretation of meaning. For *Banks* in particular, I started to build from semiotics, the study of photography as a language; and the hybrid advertising approach using typography, colors, shapes and the subsequent recognition mechanisms of the message that is generated. However, all this—the photograph as document, semiotics and its application to the photographic medium, the use of images in advertising, and a social content—seemed to be an amalgam of positions difficult to reconcile. Previously in my work taking pictures supposed the beginning of a photographic process where printing represented the final stage. I began to find new meanings through repetition, combination, and deconstruction, where taking the picture represents only the starting point around which the construction of meaning revolves. At the same time I am aware that the *Histograms* require active participation and interpretation skills, since their accessibility is not based on issues related to iconographic recognition but rather on content analysis.

*Tractatus* assumes a critical stance regarding the capitalist system where economy, war, and home are the fundamental ideas. This critique aims to contest the hegemony of the capitalist system,<sup>6</sup> but I neither pretend to be an activist nor is the work intended to be only political art. As an act of criticism this work cannot be interpreted within the frame of critical realism as we see in Allan Sekula's search for justice through didacticism. It departs from it in two ways: there is no didactical intentionality and there is a clear intention to reflect the photographic medium from a position that departs from realism and underscores to some extent the virtual disembodiment of the photograph.

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<sup>5</sup> Liz Wells, "Part Four. Photography and the Postmodern" in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 149.

<sup>6</sup> T.J. Demos, "Recognizing the Unrecognized: The Photographs of Ahlam Shibli," in *Photography Between Poetry and Politics*, ed. Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2008), 136.

It is in my process and method where I see similarities with Sekula. As Jan Baetens and Hilde van Gelder write, “[C]ritical realism, as we understand it, is a practice, a research method rather than an artistic style. It is a way of seeking to understand the social reality by critically ‘making notes’ of it. [...] What the method does, is [...] analytically and critically reflect on the reality it aspires to fathom.”<sup>7</sup> The content in *Tractatus* is very much informed by sociological aspects and there is a humanist tradition behind it. The work of Sekula, Hans Haacke, and Alfredo Jaar interested me—leaving aside the ethical motivations they may have—because it critically represents social concerns in the art space, which has traditionally marginalized this kind of content.<sup>8</sup> Used to a way of working developed around traditional photographic genres of portrait or landscape in which analyzing the nature of the medium did not have a specific weight, my main concern before *Tractatus* was being able to reveal a reality through the window of photography. Before this thesis I conceived of photographic practice as a more or less transparent process of revealing a given reality, where the photographer acted as an external witness.

However, by introducing a deeper reflection on the processes of creation, understanding, and distribution of images, the subjective reflection of objective reality ceased to be relevant. I could not overlook the fact that today, thanks to the mass distribution of images, our consumption of them in the news, as e-mail attachments or in blogs has changed our understanding of them. During 2010 the length of videos uploaded to YouTube would be equivalent to watch TV continuously for 1000 years. This made me rethink distribution, access, relevance, and meaning of images in our culture. Obviously no one will be able to see all this visual amalgam in the course of a lifetime. The archive

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<sup>7</sup> Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens, “A Note on Critical Realism Today,” in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, ed. Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2008), 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “Allan Sekula: Photography between Discourse and Document,” in Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995), 190.

invariably grows and flows almost spontaneously, oblivious to the action of a single individual. The relevance that this may have escapes individual perception; analyzing the processes seems a more interesting and necessary conceptual task.



## THE DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION OF THE DIGITAL

“Don’t start from the good old things but from the bad new ones.”<sup>9</sup>

Adam Broomberg and Olivier Chanarin quoting Bertolt Brecht

What is an image? For an image-maker concerned with the photographic medium this question is more relevant than ever. Let’s start by defining a photographic image, taking into consideration historical and conceptual analysis. For Szarkowski, a photograph is defined by five visual characteristics: the detail, the thing itself, time, the frame, and vantage point.<sup>10</sup> I would place digital manipulation (excluding 3D) into the same category. Unless Szarkowski was ascribing himself exclusively to straight photography, this could have been included from the very beginning as analog manipulation. At the same time this helps understand that what we see in a photograph is constructed and therefore coded.<sup>11</sup>

Fontcuberta approaches photography as a system of communication, analyzing the elements that contribute to how images are read in visual culture (see fig. 3), underlining aspects such as trace, truth, context, image-text relationships, or the image as a vehicle of information.<sup>12</sup> A photographic image relates to the idea of optical lenses and light sensitive material, either chemical or digital, being exposed to light, which in turn appears as a reflective act, as a physical, tangible trace—and implies the notion of truth. For historian James Elkins, “Mistrust of the mechanism of representation has a long and intricate history, and it was an endless preoccupation in the twentieth century.”<sup>13</sup> The work

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Broomberg and Olivier Chanarin, “What’s Next, the Future of Photography”, FOAM, accessed August 21, 2011, <http://www.foam.org/whatsnext#19049>.

<sup>10</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966.

<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 88.

<sup>12</sup> Fontcuberta, 20.

<sup>13</sup> James Elkins, “Renouncing Representation,” in *Marco Breuer: Tremors, Ephemera* (New York: Roth Horowitz, 2000), 8.



Figure 3. Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, *Centaurus neandertalensis*, 1989

of artists like Marco Breuer, who relinquish optical representation, “represents an acutely radical moment in this history.”<sup>14</sup> That simple mechanical and technologically driven act of taking a picture gets complicated with digital technology and when we start to analyze the implications of images and reproducibility in western culture, as Benjamin acknowledged.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in Ruff’s portraits we identify the image only on its surface, which means that even though the photograph works as a reflection of reality, the beholder is denied the identificatory impulse we expect from photography.<sup>16</sup>

To interpret signifies understanding meaning. In *Tractatus*, the debate between recreating and reflecting takes the form of an analytical exploration of representation. The reflective aspect of photography is relegated to the background. The very indexical notion of photography appears no longer essential and in some cases irrelevant. Due to the complexity of our visual culture it is not enough anymore to just transcribe since according to semiotic studies, W.J.T. Mitchell argues there is nothing natural in the formation of mental images and meaning. In order to create and expand the complexity of meaning we need words and concepts. On the other hand, as Mitchell points out, “Language and imagery have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison houses which lock the understanding away from the world,” and further, “Images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation.”<sup>17</sup> Images seem to be easy to understand but the more we look at them the less we do.

It is through the recognition of what the depicted object is that the image acquires relevance and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>15</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of the Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books, 1955.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 149.

<sup>17</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “What Is an Image,” in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 503.

meaning. Conceptualism and abstraction can lead to a position where only educated viewers are able to understand the idea behind it, thus creating exclusivity and reinforcing the experience of art as an elitist endeavor. Benjamin used this argument to stress a kind of artistic production that should be understood by everyone. Here is where his critique of the Bauhaus's "new objectivity" photographers' claim of making the world artistic rather than making art mundane fits <sup>18</sup>. However, the Dusseldorf School photographers approached "new objectivity" from a critical position that implied social questioning, where I frame my work in relation to Conceptualism as opposed to formalism. Currently we witness artistic forms that dismiss the idea of borders by hybridization of disciplines. In turn, globalization produces the perception that physical boundaries have acquired a different meaning. Both physically and on an artistic level, borders perceptually appear as unnecessary limitations in a technological world.

From the beginning my research included images in different forms: graphics, photographs and text, together with writings that underline the political potential of art. Although in *Tractatus* the aesthetic component has been relegated to the background it can still provide an entry point for connection with the viewer. This brings me to the politicization of aesthetics versus the aestheticization of politics.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard brings art making to the same level as industry and science when he talks about a holistic approach, the act of participating in and shaping art making while thinking and writing about it. He describes the aesthetic rules of the beautiful, related to individual genius and craftsmanship, but at the same time he is questioning and inviting artists to

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<sup>18</sup> Liz Wells, "On and Beyond the White Walls. Photography as Art" in *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997), 218.

<sup>19</sup> Demos, 132.

break the rules and invent new ones.<sup>20</sup> With this in mind, can I become critical and socially engaged through a visual form that departs from realism? Herein lies the challenge of engaging a necessarily complex understanding of photography in relation to “aesthetics and documentation.”<sup>21</sup> The absence of a specific aesthetic style in my work also relates to this concern. This work is mainly the desire to critically understand and represent the world within the means of photography in a broad understanding of it, which is sustained by research and framed as an artistic project.

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>21</sup> Demos, 127.

## REALIZATION OF THE WORK

When photographic practices aim at raising a critical debate on the internal workings of the artistic system itself or on broader social problems, is the photograph then able to distinguish itself from a merely “political” statement or pamphlet? What distinguishes art from the political, if not the poetic, metaphorical component that inhabits it?<sup>22</sup>

Helen Westgeest

### The Histograms

In *Tractatus*, where the Internet has been used as the vehicle, authorship through appropriation and collaboration is sublimated. For *Histograms*, Sergio González, a computer programmer, developed a software program that could translate the graphics into brightness values. All our meetings took place online, through videoconferences and e-mails, except one that we held in Toronto, Canada. I researched the bank slogans online as well as the typography used in each of the corporate identities. Also, the texts that accompany the window snapshots were extracted and appropriated from *The Economist* feeds in my Facebook profile.

The change in the creative process entailed having to divest myself of the time-space bonds that defined past projects. The theoretical approach, which had previously been an important step, turned out to be a fundamental aspect without which I could not even begin to work. Research fully entered the creative process. At first this represented a creative paralysis. The way the project would be shaped diametrically contrasted with previous approaches. The interaction with the audience response and their experience of the artwork became a starting point for shaping the project.

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<sup>22</sup> Helen Westgeest, introduction to *Photography Between Poetry and Politics*, xi.

The *referent*, where much of the truth and authenticity in photography rests, relates to *Civilian Iraq Casualties 2003-2011* and *Oil Price Fluctuation 2003-2011* (figs. 4 and 5) since they are the most abstract in form and conceptually they leave the classical notion of photography farthest behind. Especially in the process of creating these images, do I surrender photography's relation to the real? *Civilian Iraq Casualties* and *Oil Price Fluctuation* metaphorically take advantage of the formal and symbolic coincidence between histograms and stock charts. Here the referent, or graphic, is a signifier that already implies a previous knowledge from the viewer in order to recognize anything on the final image. There is no interaction with light sensitive material in the creative process, thus the word "photography" is inaccurate to define them. Nevertheless, they are born from a critical inquiry of how the photographic medium is increasingly becoming data and information bits and less a reflection of a given reality.

The graphics, however, are immaterial; they exist only on the screen as source images. It is in this act of interpretation where they become referents. Furthermore they are shared cultural codes acting as language and I use them and translate them into an abstract image, interpreted from the information contained in the graphic, that challenges the viewer's ability to decode. As we see in Joachim Schmid's work *Statics* (fig. 6), "the information is physically there but [it is] unintelligible for us; it has been encoded in such way that we are no longer able to decipher it".<sup>23</sup> However, there *is* something we can decipher: for instance, color patterns. The information contained in the images I have created is possible to decipher since the graphic image is handled as a photographic histogram. If we can read a histogram we can start to read the information in the final image.

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<sup>23</sup> Joan Fontcuberta, "The Predator of Images," in *Joachim Schmid Photoworks 1982-2007* (Brighton: Photoworks, 2007), 154.



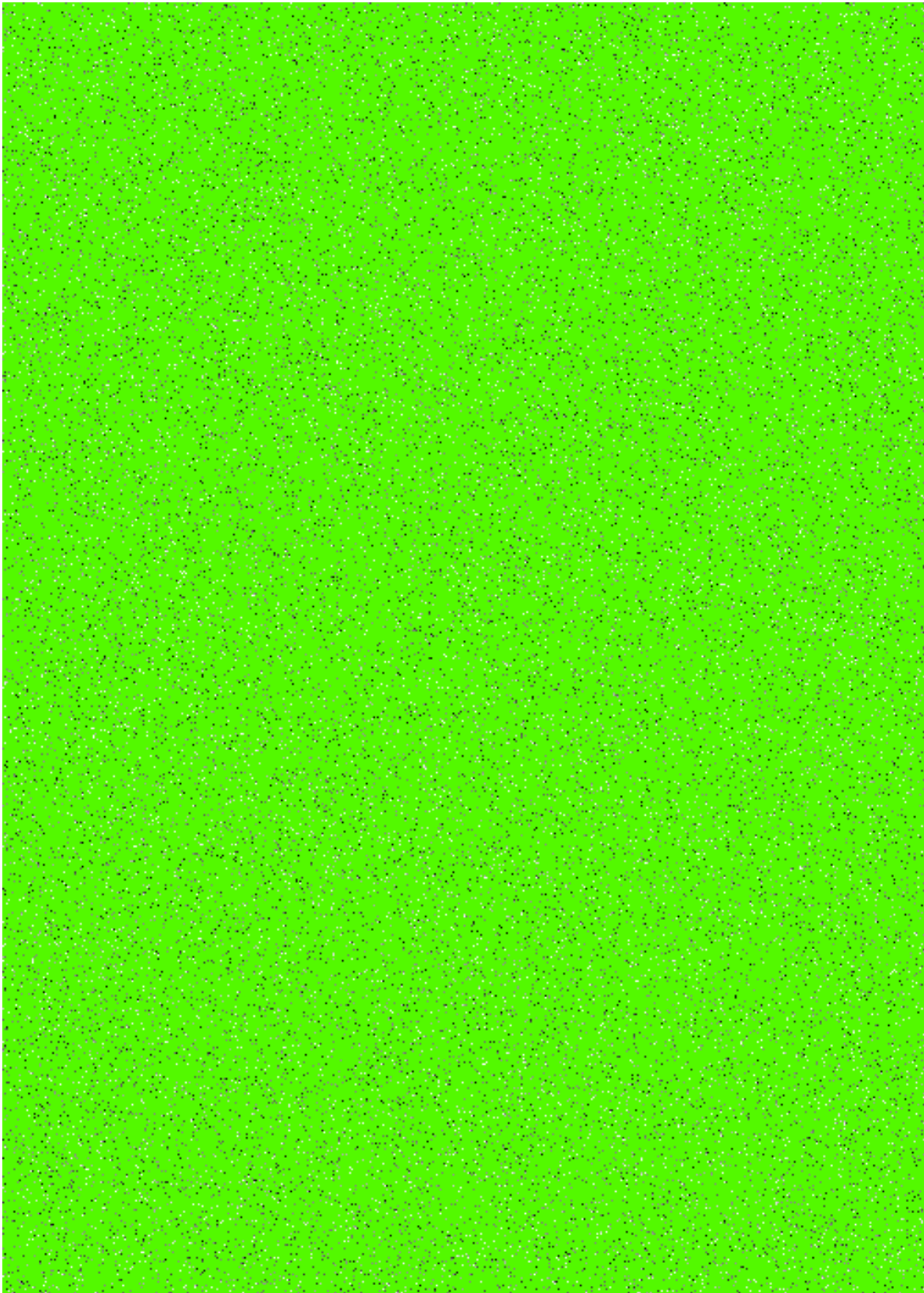


Figure 4. *Oil Price Fluctuation 2003-2011, 2011*



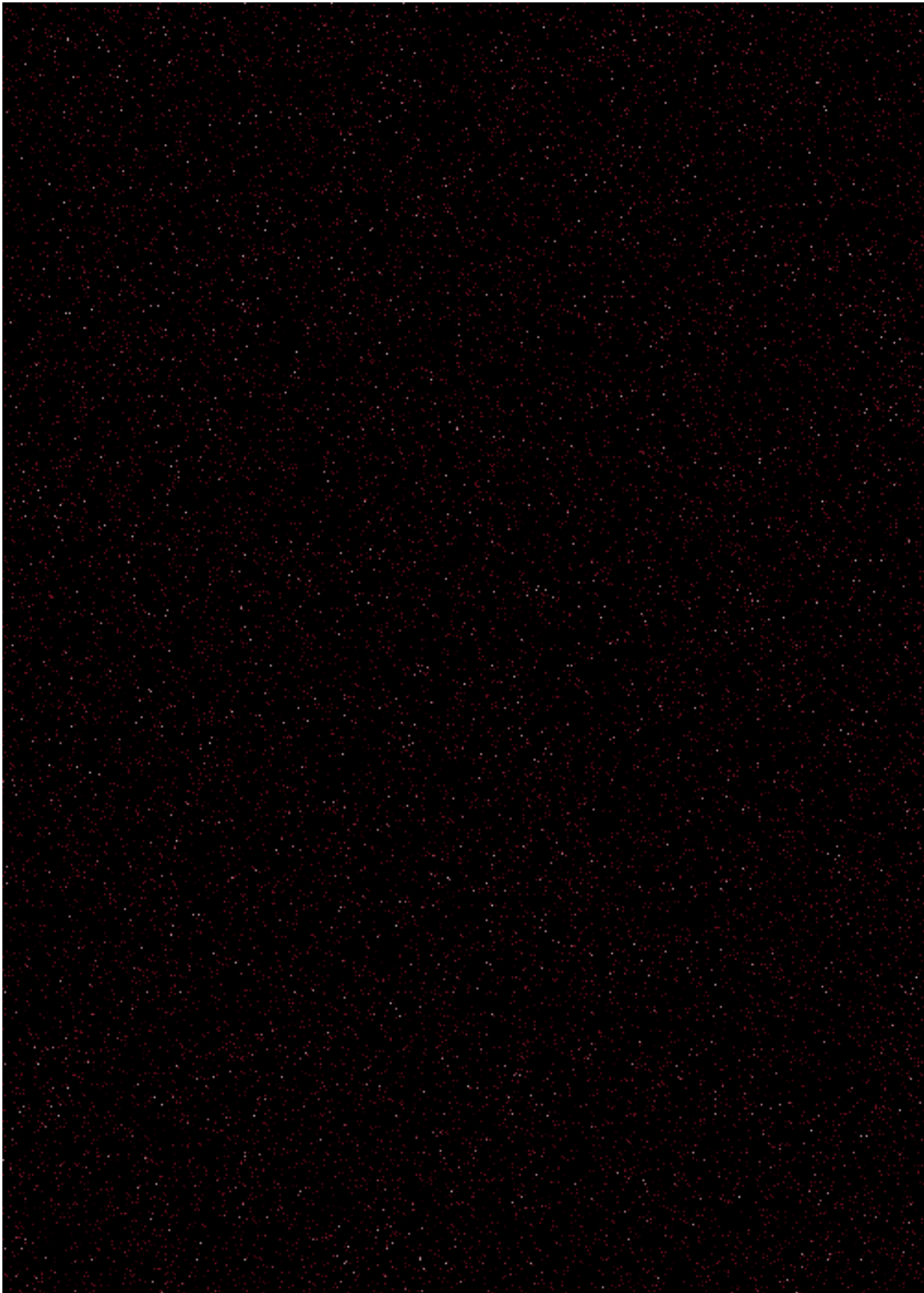


Figure 5. *Civilian Iraq Casualties 2003-2011*, 2011



Figure 6. Joachim Schmid, *Statics* (women's fashion catalogue), 1999

*Civilian Iraq Casualties* and *Oil Price Fluctuation* could be initially presented as a set of information maps benefiting from the similarity to stock market charts and other graphic charts with digital photographic histograms. Through a reverse translation method, a computer language translates one image into another, thus deconstructing the creative photographic process, consciously negating the skills of a photographer. The abstract images that I create would be senseless without the relevance of the graphic image. I aim to be socially engaged when choosing stock exchange graphic charts that have a direct impact on society at large as well as on an individual level, subscribing to Benjamin's demand of reflecting and thinking about my position in the process of production.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the kind of environmental, social, and ethical impact on our society of our dependency on oil is present in these two images.

One of the most challenging and exciting aspects of this thesis work has been how to present it inside the gallery space. Thinking about the installation was necessary given its heterogeneous nature, which would have made an inadequate traditional display. The choice of presenting two images created from graphics as projections responds to the dematerialization of the photograph and its convergence with other media.<sup>25</sup> They are presented opposite each other on facing walls in order to engage in a direct dialogue about the relationship between war and oil (fig. 7). It is remarkable that in the era of digital images and instant communication, official images of war have almost disappeared from the media. When they do appear they are strongly mediated and have little to do with death. Images of war are not about death anymore but about showing technological developments in imaging. As photographers Adam Broomberg and Olivier Chanarin point out: "the technologies of war and representation have been strictly

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<sup>24</sup> Argued in his conclusion of "The Author's Producer," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 2 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 779.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Lister, "Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging," in Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 257.

linked morally and technologically.”<sup>26</sup> In this sense war is presented to us in the form of military technological developments to provide visual rationales for domination. It is this way of representing war and surveillance that has influenced the way in which I approach the subject.

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<sup>26</sup> Broomberg and Chanarin, “What’s Next, the Future of Photography.”



Figure 7. *Tractatus* installation view showing *Civilian Iraq Casualties* at left, and *Oil Price Fluctuation* at right, 2011

In statistics, a histogram is a graphical representation, showing a visual impression of the distribution of data. A photographic histogram is the graphical representation where all of the brightness levels contained in the image are found, from the darkest to the brightest (fig. 8). These values are arrayed in a Cartesian coordinate system. On the X-axis we have brightness levels from left (0 = absolute black) to right (255 = absolute white). The Y-axis (the height of points on the graph) shows how many pixels of the image are found at any particular brightness level. The histogram is derived from the information that the photosensitive sensor in the camera/scanner collects.

The challenge was to turn the normal workflow around and be able to create an image from a graphic-histogram. After a deep analysis, it became clear that the only way to convert a histogram image into tone values reproduced in pixels was to develop the reverse process that occurs when the light-sensitive sensor allocates a certain tonality value to each of the pixels (fig. 9). It was also clear that the latent image in my imagination could not be anything but abstract. The reason for this rests on the certainty that reconstructing the tone values from the information contained in the histogram cannot rebuild a recognizable image since the information that relates to the position that every pixel occupies on the final image is not given in the histogram. Its function is to provide tonality information of the pixels, not position. To achieve the reverse process I developed together with Sergio González a JavaScript application that allowed the interpretation of stock exchange graphics and others as if they were photographic histograms. Once the image was settled this way, the computer language assigns gray values in the same way a histogram represents values from 0 to 255 from left to right and scatters the resulting pixels randomly on a predetermined canvas (figs. 10 and 11). The concept of chance plays an important part. Also, the number of pixels of each gray value is determined by a proportional calculation with respect to the final canvas size for which I chose a standard screen size, 1280x1024 pixels, instead of the photographic paper or film standards.

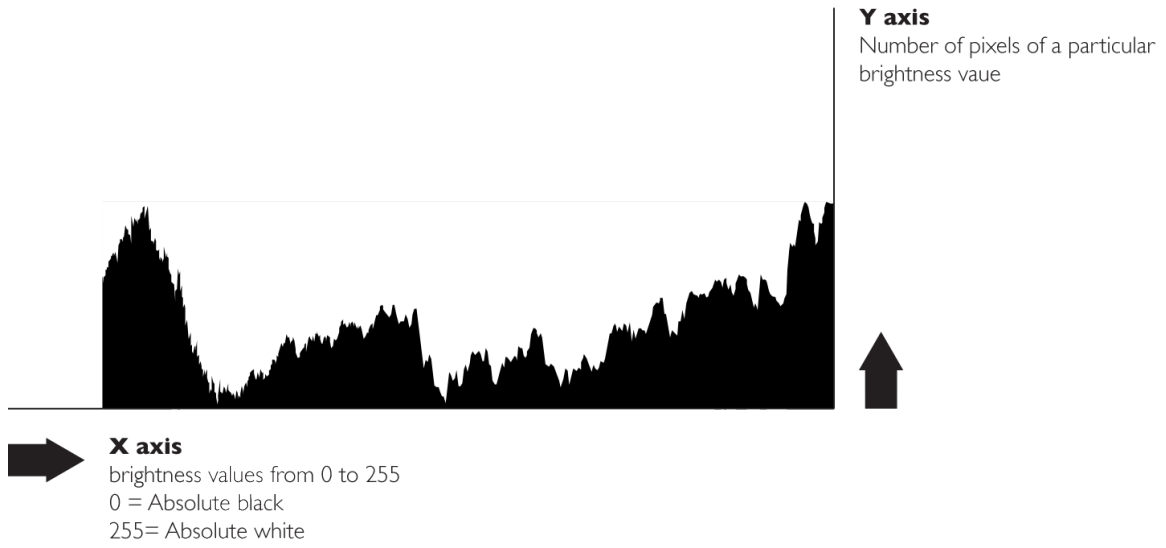


Figure 8. Histogram

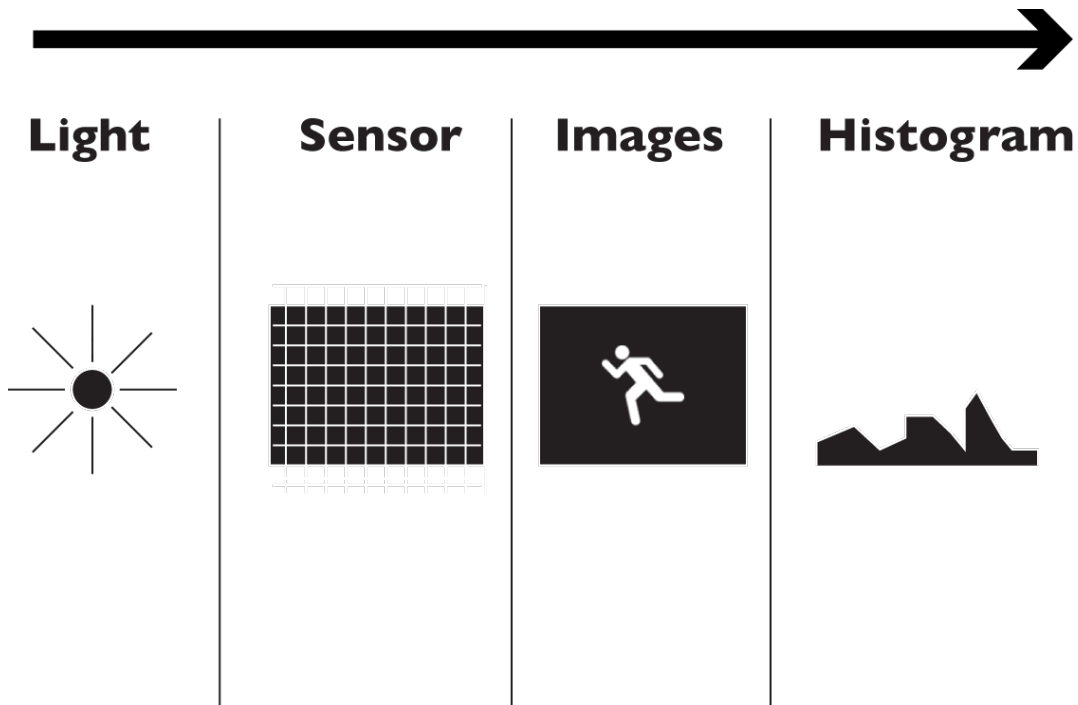


Figure 9. Image to histogram workflow

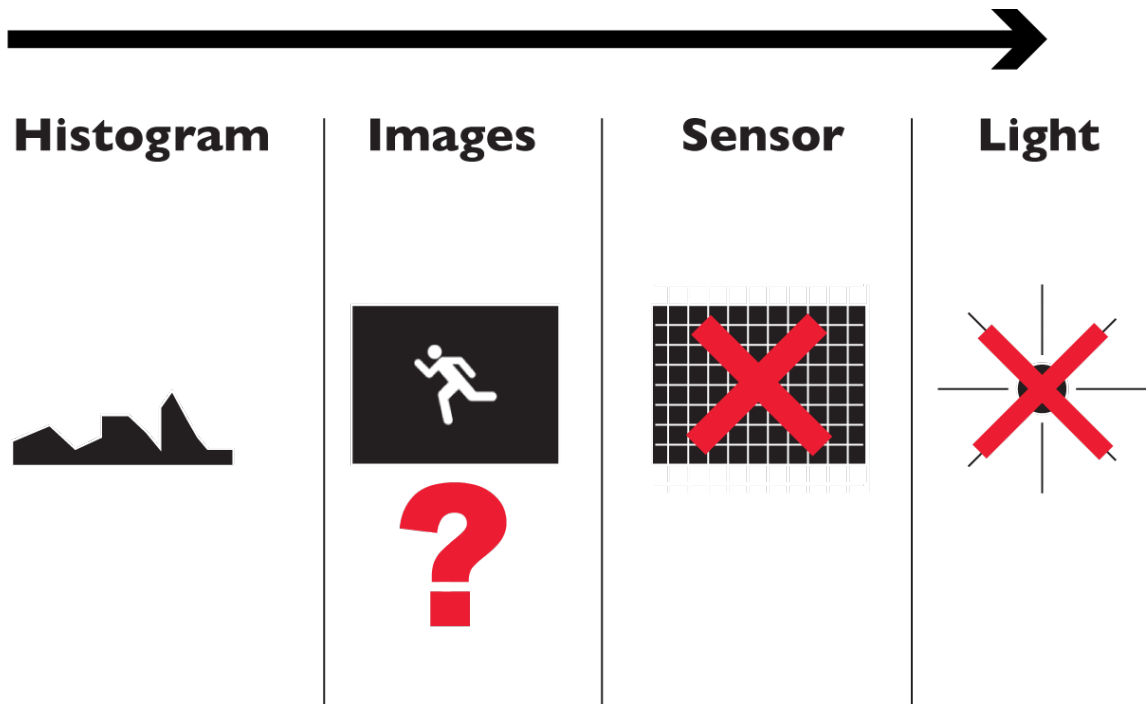


Figure 10. Histogram to image workflow



Figure 11. JavaScript translation workflow



Technology influences the way in which we create and interact both with others and with a specific medium. In *Civilian Iraq Casualties* and *Oil Price Fluctuation*, although the final image can be reproduced, the process of translation implies uniqueness and authenticity in Benjamin's words, in the sense that the distribution of the pixels on the canvas is unique. After the graphics have been interpreted into brightness values the JavaScript randomly spreads the pixels on the canvas, generating a unique image since the position that any of them occupies in the final image is not settled *a priori*. The pixels would be spread in a different position each time the process is repeated, thus revealing a unique image from the same source.

Both the creative process and the technological production of generating the image make it unique; thus the images preserve their aura. Why bring back the idea of aura into a postmodern discourse? I use the term "aura" in the sense of Benjamin's approach to aura as uniqueness, a concept that is still venerated in the art market. Even within the reproducibility of the photographic medium, artists tend to restrict the productions of their work. There are always a restricted number of copies of a certain art piece, underlining the idea of aura inside a capitalist system. I am very conscious that the objects we produce as artists for the art market are still auratic, so for the installation of this piece I decided to project rather than print the images and therefore transform them into tangible reproduced objects, to invert the dialogue about mechanical reproduction versus the original. If images are transformed into digital data, what does it mean to continue the printing process? This reflects back to a vision of photography as an object. If the museum began collecting digital files rather than physical objects generated from them, perhaps we could then speak of a new concept in the uniqueness of the artwork.

The analysis of the real, based on software that enables image creation and manipulation together

with the immaterial nature of the photographic image, change the approach to the creative process by the very transformation of the medium. For Mitchell, new conventions related to concepts where theories, algorithms, and data are relevant replace old visual ones linked to perception in what he calls “the process of performance.”<sup>27</sup> The transformation of a graphic through mathematical logarithms in *Civilian Iraq Casualties* and *Oil Price Fluctuation* (fig. 12) addresses this process. Moreover, developments in technology shape our understanding of the visual, informing how we learn to see. It is therefore my intention to create work that is less about provoking feeling “than it is about provoking thought”.<sup>28</sup>

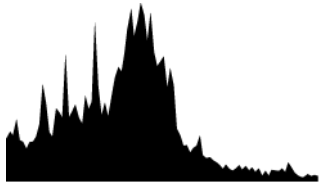
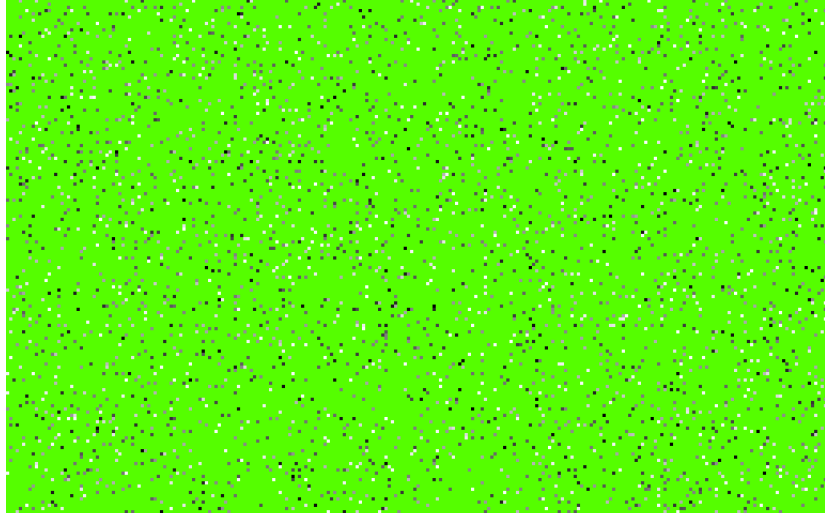
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<sup>27</sup> W.J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992), 77.

<sup>28</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism.” in Wells, *The Photography Reader*, 160.



Oil Histogram  
Price fluctuation 2003-2011



War Histogram  
Civilian Casualties Iraq War 2003-2011

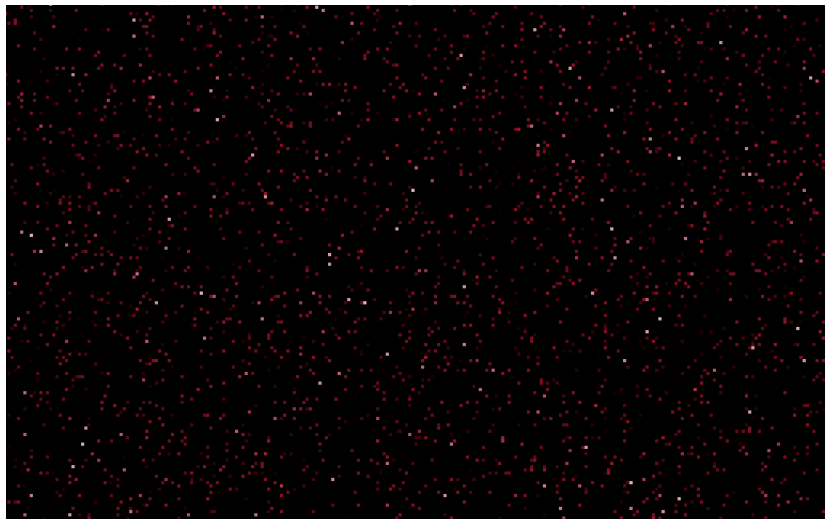


Figure 12. *Oil Price Fluctuation 2003-2011*, 2011 (detail), and *Civilian Iraq Casualties 2003-2011*, 2011 (detail), and graphic source charts

## Banks

Capitalism, colonialism, economics, and visual marketing in advertising were concepts I investigated initially in relation to identity and memory. I traveled to Indonesia, a former Dutch colony that today belongs to The Group of Twenty (G-20) and has experienced huge economic development in recent years. The images of banks that I made there were informed by readings of Michel Foucault and Masao Miyoshi and artist such as Fiona Tan, in which they speak about the Western economic condition. The idea of the colony informed by its legacy and continuation through economic power, its relation to western economic growth throughout history, and the recent economic events that question the foundations and unethical practices of an economic system where never-ending growth and expectations are sold as facts, are the concepts behind *Banks*. History, its relation to economy, and how contemporary economic practices affect ordinary people are the bases of these images.

The early history of the photographic medium, colonialism, and trade are closely related. From its introduction in 1839 the daguerreotype spread rapidly around the globe. In a matter of months photography began to circulate to major cities along the trade routes of Europe.<sup>29</sup> The photographs of German daguerreotypist Adolf Schaefer in Indonesia in 1845 and Felice Beato in India and China during the 1850s are a good example of this expansion and in turn speak about the relationship between war, colonialism, and photographic record. The implications and heritage of the colonial period are still clearly to be found and colonialism is even more active now in the form of

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<sup>29</sup> David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (New York: Berg, 2009), 149.

transnational corporatism.<sup>30</sup>

Although conceived as straight photographs, some of the bank images have been digitally constructed afterwards. In the end I am aware of how photography doesn't just reflect what we see and perceive from reality; photographs reflect a personal set of choices and as digital manipulation gains weight we can start talking about photorealistic images versus photographs. I describe the banks as polysemous, ambiguous images.<sup>31</sup> The vantage point and frame selected negates immediate identification for the viewer who has two options: either stay on the surface of the print just paying attention to details, or start to decipher it from the elements depicted which at first do not lead to any revealing conclusion. In the gallery space I construct a meta-linguistic narrative appropriating the advertising slogans of the banks whose offices I photographed (fig. 13). Here the verbal is articulated as a political reference and constitutes a visual part of the work. The slogans are printed on white paper, which is exactly the same size as the photographs, and the appropriated typeface is printed in light gray. Presenting them in this way aims to function as a new layer of understanding and serve as the anchor point. Hence without the erased cultural markers of initials and letters in the photographs or the added slogan images, they would always be too indeterminate to function critically.<sup>32</sup> Also, the deliberate lack of information in the photographs references the work of Thomas Demand, where the viewer is confronted with an extreme lack of visual information and a photograph that stubbornly refuses to satisfy the expectation of knowledge and objective information.<sup>33</sup>

What we see is some sort of perimeter, delimitation in an urban space that implies a barrier. We

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<sup>30</sup> Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism To Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State" in *Documenta X*, ed. Catherine David and Jean-François Chevrier (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 1997), 183.

<sup>31</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 42.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Laxton, "What Photographs Don't Know," in *Photography Between Poetry and Politics*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



Figure 13. *Leading the way in Asia, Africa and the Middle East or Here for good*, 2011, and *The world's local bank*, 2011

are looking from the outside into an apparently quiet, even idyllic environment where nature is controlled and the *panopticum* of surveillance designates or signifies a place we should be aware of (fig. 14). The symbolic image, again in Barthes's terms, shows how the structures of power and its relation to economy in images made in a former colony, connotes how modern economic practices—the new transnational companies—continue colonialism.



Figure 14. *Always with you*, 2011



View from my window

What changes with the digital transformation? Perhaps the most obvious consequence is the distribution of images. Images circulate converted into sequences of ones and zeros through e-mails and storage devices. Photography has been transformed into something intangible. With the Internet images circulate and are consumed in a way that guarantees immediacy.

Over the course of six months, almost on a daily basis I took snapshots from inside my apartment of the view through my window. Pictures change their meaning when they are shared through the Internet and the social network. The meaning of these images juxtaposed with texts that at first have nothing to do with them is altered from its lineal scope to acquire a broader meaning at once ambiguous and complex. It dismantles the concept of a linear narrative apparent in the recognition of seasonal changes and transforms it into a schizophrenic one, where relationships between text and image appear in a tree-like structure (figs. 15 and 16). The spatial limits of the concept of home move away from physical demarcations in a globalized world where individuals' mobility is increasing, turning the notion of home into intangibles such as cultural markers, like the use of a specific language or routines. Barthes, when explaining an advertising image of Italian pasta, examines the understanding of it based on various aspects or mixed messages that come together, constructing an almost *indisputable* meaning. That meaning is constructed by a number of messages: the caption, the text written in a particular language and the photograph itself. All work together to constitute a first sign, which is implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture,<sup>34</sup> present among the individuals that share those specific habits, to be understood.

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<sup>34</sup> Barthes, *Image*, 37.

Due to the *mise en scène* on the web, images acquire new contextual meanings. Now, if the elements joined together do not correspond with some culturally constructed meaning—which occurs in the interpretation of vernacular photography more than any other classification of images—but the formation of the signs is left open, interpretation is not indisputable but arbitrary, independent of a particular culture but dependent on the operation of a process. To dissociate even more from a search for meaning determined by the use of shared cultural markers, the linguistic message is obtained from an arbitrary process, which is the publication of comments and news from *The Economist* on my profile on the social network Facebook. The message without a code—or an arbitrary one that in this case relates to the working mechanisms of distribution of both information and images—is what is left.

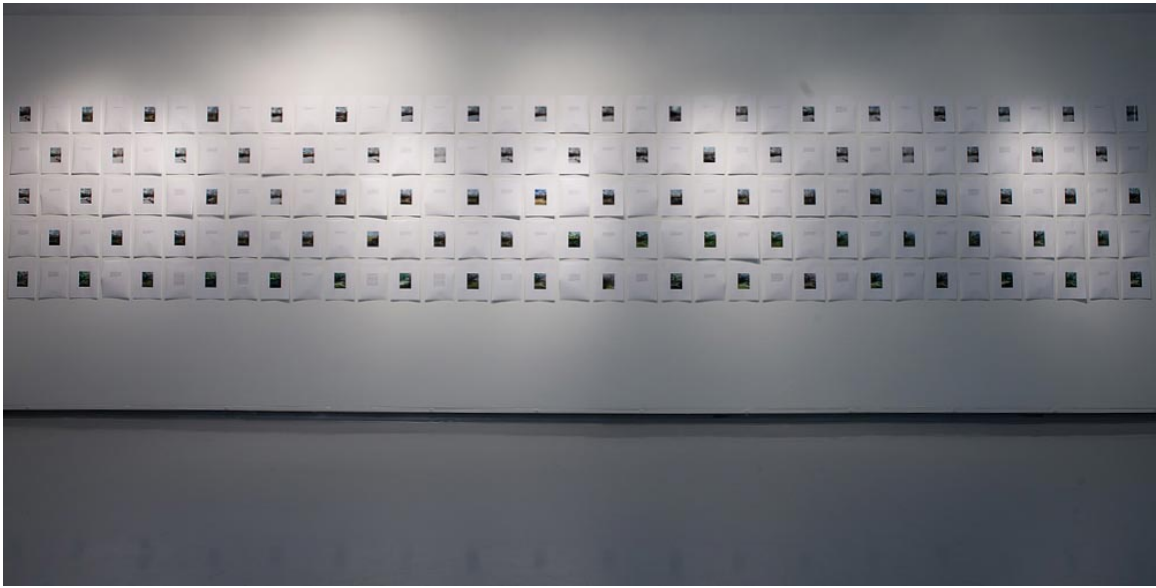


Figure 15. *Tractatus* installation display, *View from my window*, 2011



Figure 16. *Tractatus* installation display, *View from my window* (detail), 2011

## CONCLUSION

The art space is a place to produce freely and can be a place of action and reflection. It is my intention to be critical.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless there is a distance between the work and the world as well as a distance between the work and myself. Although there is always a personal aspect in anything that we do, my work does not address biographical issues nor have the Freudian self as subject. Rather it aims to reflect contemporary social issues taking the form of an analytical exploration of representation.

In many different fields where photographs are used, the skills of the photographer have become an obsolete asset. What is valued is not anymore how the image has been technically produced but how we use it and interpret it. The exploration that I began with *Tractatus* focused on the interpretation of images. It responds in its form to exploring the ways in which the interpretation of images in our visual culture shifts and changes.

The boundaries between art, technology, and life are shrinking; in fact they have almost disappeared. I conceive artistic practice as a space to explore and create freely and at the same time as a practice that can trigger individual thought. In this sense the viewer has to be more than a couple of borrowed eyes. It is in the art space where, due to metaphor and representation, the audience can engage in a critical dialogue with contemporaneity. How far this engagement is presented as a commodity and how far I as an artist am aware of the relationship between art and entertainment is also to be considered. In this sense the display of *Civilian Iraq Casualties* and *Oil Price Fluctuation* engage with the notion of entertainment in which we experience war.

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Author's Producer," in *Selected Writings*, 779.

Economy, war, and home within the autocratic appropriation of the capitalist system have become global concerns in the beginning of this century. The world appears more complex, interrelated, and multilayered. The understanding of social issues is therefore more complex and demands a deeper analysis. Visually this necessarily translates into a multifaceted and hybrid process. The completion of my thesis has taken my working method to a path of profound transformation, both in my way of approaching the projects and my understanding of the photographic medium. This does not mean a rejection of what I already knew; the moments of frustration had to do precisely with the conscious need to change and the difficulty of abandoning creative and automated processes. It is always traumatic in some way to get rid of something, leave behind what is known, where one is at ease and comfortable and venture into unknown paths. Nevertheless I consider this as an indispensable task to constantly evolve and develop.

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