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Joan Fontcuberta: post-photography and the spectral image of saturation

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ABSTRACT

The age of post-photography can be understood as the age of the inorganic image: a composite of littered information – collected, ordered, layered, buried, stored and discarded. Joan Fontcuberta is one of the leading contemporary artists to conceptualize and advance the notion of post-photography from its prior articulation concerning the digital to its current iteration as a marriage between image, technology and the Internet. By focusing on two diverse works by Fontcuberta as curator and artist – *From Here On* (2011) and *Googlegrams* (2005) – this article breaks down post-photography as a discourse, investigating its effects on how we understand the contemporary image drowned out by accumulation and how it speaks to the politics of saturation, surveillance and data in our state of constant exposure.

KEYWORDS

Post-photography;
saturation; surveillance;
accumulation; Internet

The age of post-photography can be understood as the age of the inorganic image: a composite of littered information – collected, ordered, layered, buried, stored and discarded. Joan Fontcuberta is one of the leading contemporary artists to conceptualize and advance the notion of post-photography from its prior articulation concerning the digital to its current iteration as a marriage between image, technology and the Internet.¹ Through focusing on two diverse works by Fontcuberta as curator and artist – *From Here On* (2011) and *Googlegrams* (2005) – this article breaks down post-photography as a discourse, investigating its effects on how we understand the contemporary image drowned out by accumulation and how it speaks to the politics of saturation, surveillance and data in our state of constant exposure.

The pairing of these two particular works is not arbitrary: in their differences of form and content (*From Here On* is an exhibition, *Googlegrams* a singular body of work) the pair help dig out a necessary space that seems to me a crucial beginning for the development of post-photography to be understood not as an after-photography, or as a continuation of postmodernist thought, but as a fluid discourse that addresses the stakes of the altered, yet continued, production of visibility after the panopticon has lost its allure – where we have fully entered into what Bernard E. Harcourt has termed the expository society.²

Prior to Fontcuberta's conceptual revamping, the notion of post-photography was mostly accredited to William J. Mitchell's *The Reconfigured Eye* (1992), which considered

digital manipulation a technical advancement of the photographic image, ultimately anchoring it to the photographic process and paradigm. This is likewise echoed by Alan Trachtenberg when he says,

In the old photography, the camera is an instrument of memory; in the new photography, the camera itself serves as an electronic repository of memory from which a past, a simulacrum of any past, can be called up and programmatically shaped. (qtd. in Lehan et al. 12)

This is to say that while the outcome – the manipulated image – was increasingly easier for a wide variety of people to create, post-photography was still previously regarded as a mere extension of the photographic medium. And, because post-photography was yoked to the history of photography, the question of the truth of the image was again being brought to the table for discussion.³

In the spring of 2011, Joan Fontcuberta drew up a manifesto for the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* giving post-photography a new, more radical position, claiming that post-photography has necessarily abandoned the confines of the photographic paradigm and its ties with truth, memory and representation. He writes, “Soltando amarras de sus valores fundacionales, abandonando unos mandatos históricos de verdad y de memoria, la fotografía ha terminado cediendo el testigo: postfotografía es lo que queda de la fotografía” (“Por un manifiesto posfotográfico”). For Fontcuberta, post-photography does not mark a new technique in the digital age but rethinks the image in its totality. He draws on new media – in both his theory and practice – as a way of investigating what constitutes the post-photographic image in a time of the Internet and social media, where accumulation proliferates.

Post-photography lurks as an afterimage, the residue and excess of image or, in Fontcuberta’s terms, the “lo que queda de la fotografía”, exhausting the threshold of exposure that differentiates between light and shadow. Properly speaking, post-photography is not reducible to one definition or beholden to any one medium. What one may refer to as a post-photographic practice another may refer to as glitch art, or new media, or even video art. Post-photography, as understood throughout this article, lies in the conceptuality of its discourse as a critical marker that, to borrow from Michel Foucault, has a “strategic function, in order to dismantle what the discourse has done” (166). This is to say that post-photography is not in opposition to older analog or digital forms. On the contrary, it engages with them, attacks them, appropriates them, collects them; the post-photographic practice, in its essence, offers us paths for questioning ways in which the visible, in relation to the image, can or should be of fundamental value moving forward.

I propose that post-photography not only radically transforms the image (which would be in keeping with Fontcuberta’s theory) but exposes the fragility of the line between visibility and saturation,⁴ putting the image at risk of losing a sense of accountability.⁵ The age of post-photography is one in which the accountability of an image is no longer based on its validity (i.e., the truth of the image, its subversive core at the level of expression of the real), and the image has even, I would argue, lost its gumption in the quest for verisimilitude. Authenticity, as well as its appearance, is now more firmly rooted in data and information than in aesthetic and visual reliability. Fontcuberta has alluded to the accountability of image saturation via the sense and purpose – “el sentido que le demos” – of the image as an extra-moral component: “La objetividad es un mito, por tanto no podemos sino mentir, entendiendo la mentira en un sentido extramoral,

porque la fotografía puede ser verosímil pero no verdadera” (Espejo). I would agree inso-much as we understand extra-morality not as a fundamental grounding of ethical or moral responsibility, but as a fundamental question of use (control societies, market forces) and image exposure (surveillance, visibility, saturation).

Provided that the image is still something that can be accounted for, what is at stake in this new reckoning is the image’s very survival, its visible existence as such (as we may say that there is no existent image that has no visibility). Without visibility, there can be no archive, no account, no survival of an image. As Fontcuberta reminds us, the digital photograph (and in this, we may include the post-photographic image by extension) is “an image without place and without origin: deterritorialized, it has no place because it is everywhere” (*Pandora’s Camera* 10). In his 1927 essay, “Photography”, Siegfried Kracauer anticipated this saturation as a process that was already underway: “There has never been a time that has known so much about itself, if knowing about oneself means having a picture of things that is similar to them in a photographic way” (39). This saturation, or what he refers to as the “blizzard of photographs”, moves away from an indexical value because it washes out a more consciously derived image, that of memory, (Kracauer 39). “Yet the flood of photos sweeps away memory’s dam”, he says, “just as consciousness finds itself facing the fully uncovered mechanics of industrialized society, so too, thanks to photographic technology, it faces the reflection of the reality which has slipped away from it” (43). 1927 already saw the effects of political, economic and mass consciousness at the hands of a burgeoning proliferation and circulation of images, deadening our relation to nature as our world picture was changing gears from memory to photograph. What we might now call the exhaustion of the image details the threat – or realization – of a self-imposed absorption: a saturating mechanism of elimination in the name of accumulation where a contagious disregard for accountability is perpetuated.⁶

The over-abundance of social media networks and the pervasive use of smartphones have helped constitute a society of control that, encouraged and supported by the massive production (and composite stature) of images, generates a framework of constant and infinite surveillance of its members. In this way, of course, it is not just the individual member who is being monitored: those perpetually observed and haunted by surveillance’s reach are driven to engage in measures of counter- and self-surveillance that become saturated (over-exposed), and they are themselves subjected to a loss of visibility due to the expansive and ubiquitous nature of the underlying phenomenon. The saturation of images, pushed through post-photography, grapples with the tension between control and exposure, veiled as choice.⁷

I ask: What would it mean for there to be no possible accountability of an image, for an image not to offer itself in its visibility, for the image to refuse itself as such? Another way to ask this would be: Is visibility necessary for the existence of an image? Or, What is an image? If we may agree, at least tentatively, that images are ordered and retain an inherent structure that provokes visualization, the jump from asking “What is an image?” to “What is a post-photographic image?” does not move along the lines of a structural concern, but rather it is an informational concern; it is information that separates the image-as-photograph from its sutured counterpart of the post-photographic image. As we settle into the contemporary world of images, the camera has become antiquated in the face of computer technologies. Photographs, far and wide, have moved from the realm of imprinting chemical compositions (silver gelatin, chromogenic printing) onto a surface (glass,

paper) to retrieving binary code translated into color and tone, in effect, visual information on a screen. Our notion of ourselves in the world has seemingly solidified into virtual space. Fontcuberta addresses this informational concern within particular parameters; however, I would like to suggest that the basis for questioning the continued importance of an image rests on the perceived condition that for an image to be held accountable, visibility must maintain its presence. In this regard, what makes Fontcuberta's work so appealing to me is his desire to reject this condition as predetermined, or necessary.

Not in singularity: *From Here On* as a post-photographic manifesto

In 2011, the same year as his manifesto's debut in *La Vanguardia*, Fontcuberta conceived and curated the project *From Here On. A partir de ahora: La postfotografía en la era de internet y la telefonía móvil*, alongside Clément Chéroux, Joachim Schmid, Erik Kessels and Martin Paar. Comprising four curators and the works of 38 different artists, *From Here On* investigates the consequences of this collaboration of visualizing technologies under the umbrella of post-photography.⁸

In the exhibition catalog, Vicenç Altaió, then the director of the Santa Mònica Arts Center in Barcelona, states, "[W]e are pleased to present a manifesto, an exhibition and a book that reflect not so much an aesthetic trend as a radical about-face in the world of the visual image and communication: *From Here On*" (Fontcuberta et al. 7). Altaió's reading of *From Here On* as a manifesto points to the necessity of understanding the project in its entirety – that is, as a work of art that adheres to the very philosophy of post-photography the curators aim to portray.

Those whose work is exhibited are as much curators and taxonomists as they are artists, oftentimes pulling images off the web and presenting them in an ordered system of cataloging. The curators, in turn, become artists through re-cataloging and exhibiting the works as a collection, building up yet another use for the so-called final products.⁹ Because the curators and exhibitors are consistently alternating roles, *From Here On* is a work within a work *ad infinitum*. And perhaps this is what elevates the show beyond its particular pieces to a theoretical discourse: the show must, in the way that Altaió has shown us, be thought of as a manifesto instead of as an aggregate of the individual works and artists. Maintaining a possible accountability of the image in *From Here On* rests on its achieved groundwork of examining the paradox of actively showing, staging or providing visibility for, not the image, but the saturation of the image. *From Here On* does not gesture toward a desire for canon reintegration that adopts the hegemonic model of preciousness commonly associated with orthodoxy. *From Here On*, and post-photography in general, emerges from, but also moves well beyond, a genealogy of postmodernism.¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard held the belief that postmodernism not only followed modernism but was in fact a kind of precursor for it, and the same may be true for the post-photographic discourse.¹¹ Many of the artists working in post-photography, starting with Fontcuberta himself, are heavily engaged with art historical practices, postmodernism notwithstanding, and we could even make the case that Fontcuberta's earlier works are indeed quite rooted in a postmodernist framing.

Postmodernism, while no longer fundamentally part of the innovation and industrial age that modernism surrounded itself in, is still beholden to innovation and

commodification in a way that post-photography is not.¹² Fredric Jameson notes that in postmodernism,

it becomes minimally obvious that the newer artists no longer “quote” the materials, the fragments and motifs, of a mass or popular culture, as Flaubert began to do; they somehow incorporate them to the point where many of our older critical and evaluative categories (founded precisely on the radical differentiation of modernist and mass culture) no longer seem functional. (64)

In similar fashion, postmodernist theory no longer seems functional precisely because the apparatus has so drastically shifted. Photography, for example, no longer needs to quote, or represent, because it is not of fundamental use to its own contemporary practice (that of post-photography). This is not to say that post-photography does not quote – it is thoroughly involved in appropriation and found-footage techniques – but the reasons for this appropriation involve a new set of parameters having much to do with the dissipating needs of the camera itself, on the one hand, and the human as the proprietor of image-making on the other hand.

The link joining these juxtaposing needs – of proprietor and apparatus – resides in global surveillance projects, not, or not only, by big-brother closed-circuit television cameras and militarized police–state protocol, but by the likes of Google Maps and Google Earth. This new model of global surveillance is seemingly self-diagnosed as a trait of collective betterment (e.g., apparel and accessories that monitor our footsteps and track our every breath; and to this we can even employ Google’s original slogan: “Don’t be evil”¹³). While many parts of the world are yet to be photographed by Google, and Google’s endeavor to accomplish this mission is one of near impossibility, it may very well be the last necessitated use for the camera. That is, the last time a camera serves a purpose of withholding, in that for every picture taken, there is always a withholding of what is not photographed that simultaneously occurs. To put a twist in the plot, regarding this level of saturation, or what happens to the accountability of the image after a total world picture has been achieved, Kaja Silverman reminds us of an essay written by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1859, only 20 years after photography’s birth. Silverman writes, “Oliver Wendell Holmes not only characterizes the world as a picture, whose essence inheres in its photographic representability, but suggests that once this essence has been extracted, the world itself can be thrown away”, later quoting Wendell Holmes himself:

Form is henceforth divorced from matter In fact matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please. (Silverman 9–10)

A large part of post-photography is about negotiating a visual space in which the image and its mechanical infrastructures (the apparatus, the camera) are at the brink of exhaustion, but as we can see, this is not a new trait: it is deeply embedded into the fabric of photography, folded many times over to question its changing stature within a changing society.¹⁴ The post-photographic discourse, registered through art practice, does not move away from the commodity totality of contemporary life, but through it, invests itself as a techno-political and techno-aesthetic undertaking of accountability. The investment is one of total exposure, an acknowledgment of saturation – or a pushing for or toward saturation – that demands reason: perhaps this is the contemporary critique of

neoliberalism, while, at the same time, there is little attempt to quell the fervor of commodity culture.

What post-photography does so well, and what *From Here On* exemplifies, is to confront the relationship between detail and excess so present in this commodity culture. Appropriation shifts into an acknowledgment of omission and discarded goods. Post-photography sheds a never-ending supply of excess information; exposes landfills of techno-trash and e-waste, glitches, bugs and errors; and questions the survival of an image expatriated from the familiarity of memory. The act of retrieving – collecting, ordering, rendering – would seem to bury the singular “moment in time” of any original photograph, without which there is only the tracing of an impossibility of accountability under the assumed hysteria of collective surveillance and active vigilance. On the one hand, the age of post-photography addresses the role of technological accessibility (Google Earth, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, smartphones) that provides fodder for a culture of surveillance and encourages behavior based on a paranoid vigilance that can only provide diminishing returns; on the other hand, technological accessibility has become mainstream, egalitarian and self-censoring.

The accumulation of images is not an example of numerical bounty but of a saturation that dismantles visibility, washing out what can be seen, observed or monitored. Erik Kessels, one of the co-curators of *From Here On*, presented his installation – *24 HRS in Photos* (2011) – at the Foam Museum in Amsterdam which involved printing out every photograph to go public online over a 24-hour period (Figure 1). The result turned onlookers into instant participants by forcing them to walk across a sea of scattered images. Giving literal weight to saturation carries the consequence that however many individual images the participant is able to pick up and observe – an act of deliberate pause – the image will eventually be reburied in a new location, re-contextualized and unlikely to



Figure 1. *24 HRS in Photos* at FOAM in 2011. © Erik Kessels.

be uncovered by a future participant wandering the mausoleum of images – making the likelihood of an accountable archive exceedingly low. Kessels forces a convergence of location while interrupting the practice of instantaneity in its tracks: information becomes a heap, a mound, a wasteland.¹⁵

Kessels's *24 HRS in Photos* acts as connective tissue between abundance and waste: even the gesture of his installation – a landfill made of printed images – purposely holds little regard for preservation or conservation methods. *24 HRS in Photos* materializes the unsustainability of the Internet as an archive bearer, accentuating the fallout of our digital waste/production. Yes, cloud storage and warehouses filled with off-site hard drives save the metadata of everything that is produced, and social networking etiquette favors methods of indexicality (for example, the use of hashtags) over verbose written language, but these methods are also fleeting, both in practice and in theory. Kessels pairs the weight of saturation (a landfill of excessive information) with the production of its own undoing. Shown is a radical retreat from archival practice and a systematic determination to enter a visual terrain with little indexical value. Old methods of codification that were fundamental for retrieval purposes and symbolic of photographic witnessing – and therefore preserved in historical and cultural memory as truth markers, either in what the image showed or what the image stood for (its subversive core) – are being replaced by archives of instantaneity. These fleeting archives do not need to be thought of as a nostalgic longing. They are, simply, a new way to account for the images that mark a time when infinite surveillance and infinite geo-tracking potentially jeopardize visible longevity. Let it suffice for now to say that part of the concern here stems from bit/data erosion and the inhospitable tagging systems that are trend-based, always primed for extinction.

The 38 artists and 4 curators that make up *From Here On* actively engage with Internet, mobile phone and new media approaches as a means of creating – and dismantling – the images on display. These approaches are, as noted previously, what constitute the backbone of post-photography, immersed in the understanding and exposure of surveillance culture (everything from information ownership, data-mining, geo-mapping and net neutrality laws to so-called end user marketing strategies are included in this).¹⁶ Artists Jon Rafman and Aram Bartholl use images pulled from Google Maps, and Hermann Zschiegner takes Sherrie Levine's most notable appropriation project *After Walker Evans: 1–22* (1981) one step further. Where Sherrie Levine photographed Walker Evans's photographs of the Burroughs family directly from an exhibition catalogue and presented them as her own, Zschiegner renders a Google search to account for both Levine's and Evans's Allie Mae Burroughs portrait. The resulting *+Walker Evans +Sherrie Levine* (2008) pins photographs of photographs (Levine) with copies of copies, working specifically within a context of pixel degradation that occurs as a consequence. Without noticing Zschiegner's titles, the viewer is unable to decipher which photograph belongs to whom. All in all there are 26 versions of Allie Mae Burroughs, each a different shade of black and white or sepia, varying in pixel clarity and image size.¹⁷ Corinne Vionnet, another *From Here On* artist, collects as many tourist photographs of iconic sites as possible and overlays them one by one in a single frame, creating a vaguely distinguishable but wholly abstracted image (Figure 2). Vionnet's post-photographic images connect with those of Rafman and Bartholl (Figure 3) in their expressions of geo-mapping and in gleaning highly locative imagery as means for radical deterritorialization.

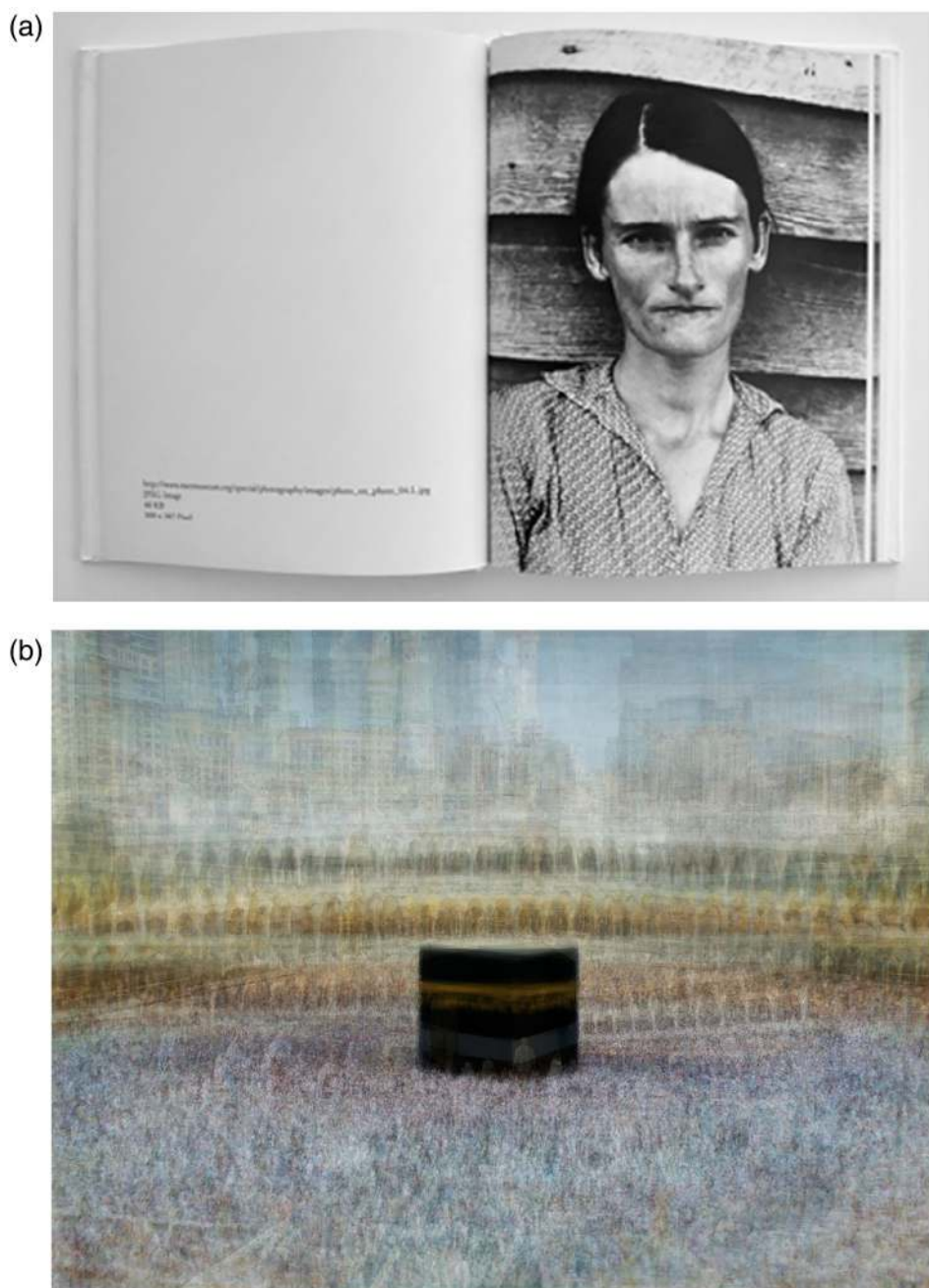


Figure 2. (a) +Walker Evans +Sherrie Levine. 2008. © Hermann Zschiegner. (b) Makka, 2008. Series *Photo Opportunities*. © Corinne Vionnet, courtesy of Danziger gallery.

In the second issue of *Screendump*, an ongoing Tumblr project published in yearly journal issues devoted to photography in the virtual age, Karin Krijgsman writes, “The amount of images that we create and share via the internet is expressed in figures, but these numbers have long surpassed the point at which a concrete figure simply



Figure 3. *Map, Taipei.* 2007. © Aram Bartholl.

becomes a vague abstraction" (17). Of interest here is Krijgsman's concession that while numerical value is bound up with accumulation, it cannot sustain it, which is to say that the abstraction of accumulation necessarily goes beyond any kind of numerical ordering or point value and shifts into a tautology of accountability. This move is irrevocably tied to information and dissemination as much as it is to appropriation and collection habits. There is no image without visibility, but this visibility has become abstracted, so ubiquitous that the very singularity offered by an image, the historically charged fraction of a second, has given way to an archive without place.¹⁸ Deterritorialized, even in the midst of constant big data and geo-mapping protocols.

Lev Manovich writes that the "old dichotomies *content – form* and *content – medium* can be rewritten as *content – interface*" (66; emphasis in original). Information is of course not only that which establishes an image but what proliferates beyond the frame, disseminating and enacting awareness. Because post-photography, under the umbrella of new media, ultimately favors interface, or operations, over medium specification (it is, in a sense, a tool that draws attention to accessibility, use and methodologies of practice), image and information are tethered to form as unstable parties (Manovich 120–21).¹⁹

Both photographic and digital images rely on informational data (patterns, logic, heat sources, light sensitivity) to initially capture a visual frame and create an image. Digital photography renders this information electronically, breaking down light, color and photons through the use of optical sensors, a process already far removed from analog's chemical processes fixated on the preservation of this same information. Unlike digital or analog photography, however, post-photography does not necessitate the use of a camera in order to generate an image, becoming, instead, an amassed product of

pre-existing information including that which seeks to rupture the image's position as a sovereign visual entity. And, conversely, post-photography is exactly the modern iteration of what Paul Virilio has named the vision machine, and what, later, Harun Farocki would call operational images: images generated by and for the machine. That is, what is not needed is not the camera, but the human eye.²⁰ Though there is no visual frame to capture and no dependence on an optical device – or, flipped, there is only dependence on an optical device, and zero dependence on the subjectivity of the human set to reveal the subversive core – the post-photographic image builds on the electronic techniques of digital imaging and other new media, retaining a sense of formal visual structure even when exceeding the limits of visibility. Information binds itself to the concepts of accumulation, saturation and (un)accountability as potent resources to point out systemic and conceptual contradictions that societies of control cannot evade.

Googlegrams: saturation and the protocological system

Information is what allows for protocol fluidity. Alex Galloway's work on computer protocols investigates the impossibility of maneuvering outside of them, writing: "The limits of a protocological system and the limits of *possibility* within that system are synonymous. To follow protocol means that everything possible within that protocol is already at one's fingertips. Not to follow means no possibility" (53; emphasis in original). Galloway presents protocol as part and parcel of control societies – it is non-confining but sets the systemic parameters of control. There is nothing that is outside protocol; nothing is visible, consistent or even imaginable outside protocolary constraints. This seems to be a totalizing effect, one in which boundaries are hidden, even purportedly abandoned, as there is no way out of its own internal structure. I am, however, not convinced that saturation is a totalizing mechanism in the same way that Galloway presents the notion of computer protocols to be. Indeed, Galloway's protocolary systems tie into what Deleuze called societies of control (see Deleuze 169–82). Where totalizing systems work to repel boundaries by swallowing up any conceivable outside to their frames, saturation carries an infrapolitical reading: it is an overflow that extends beyond totalization.²¹ Saturation does not disregard totalizing borders, but the very idea of containment increasingly becomes a moot articulation of the present. When speaking on the subject of algorithmic information sets, which post-photographic images are now tied to, the broadened spaces of protocolary confinement, necessarily articulated through control, are now giving way to the overflow of the expository society. We can see this in the case of Erik Kessels's *24 HRS in Photos*. Constraint is at the foundation of the installation: boundaries are set up (all photographs are printed, but only those which emerge in a 24-hour period) so as to offer up visibility – and materiality – all while employing a gesture that resists visibility via compulsion and accumulation. The landfill as an open-ended site for simultaneous collection and degradation.

We could argue that Fontcuberta's *Googlegrams* marks the line between a totalizing protocological system and the saturation of expository society through a post-photographic discourse. *Googlegrams* still keeps within protocolary confinement by building up an index of related images for the purpose of composing an inorganic image (literally, creating a mosaic) where visibility neither falls outside a determined possibility nor can it be completely lost. It rests troublingly on the threshold between confinement and

saturation as it also promotes our own compulsive need for accumulative production that rejects containment. Fontcuberta writes:

[W]hat we have ... is a palimpsest effect of overlapping texts whose hierarchy is solely dependent on the observer's distance: a hyperopic vision privileges the composite whole, while a myopic view privileges the little component units that make up the coarse graphic texture. The overlapping of the two, the lack of fine detail, indicates a first level of noise. ("Archive Noise")

By positioning the hyperopic within reach of the myopic, Fontcuberta confronts the protocolary constraints that are embedded within a system of archiving events via raw data.

The architecture of *Googlegrams* involves combining algorithmic searches within Google that cull thousands of images from specific keywords previously entered into the engine platform (Fontcuberta uses Google, but this same mechanism could be used with any online search engine). Each Googlegram consists of around 10,000 images. In one photomosaic, *Googlegram: Abu Ghraib*, Fontcuberta inputs names of those involved in the scandal (officials, soldiers, contractors, personnel), as a means of generating a large-scale photograph replicating the sinister viral image of an Arab prisoner, naked, leashed and collared at the neck, held onto by Private Lynndie England of the U.S. Army (Figure 4). The keywords that control the flow of source material (images of all personnel involved) create various indexing patterns for Google to present. Fontcuberta then transfers these images onto a photo-imaging freeware specifically designed for collating images into small tiles, aiding in the production of photomosaics.²² This process of algorithmic collation is repeated for all Googlegrams, the only difference being which key



Figure 4. *Googlegram: Abu Ghraib*. 2005. © Joan Fontcuberta.

words are inserted. *Googlegram: UFO* draws its myopic parameters around those who claim sightings; *Googlegram: The Last Supper* around top chefs; *Googlegram: Eros* around sexual services and other fetishized words; *Googlegram: Auschwitz* around words such as *history, destiny, memory, the past, violence, horror, barbarity, testimony*; and so on and so forth.²³

These smaller photographic tiles, structured and arranged by color and data patterns, create the myopic, detailed view of each *Googlegram*, whereas the meta-image, or the hyperopic view, is seen only when acknowledging the entirety of the mosaic, standing as a signifier for each detail. Like the work of Erik Kessels, Corinne Vionnet, Jon Rafman and the others associated with *From Here On*, *Googlegrams* outsources its original nexus to online platforms and algorithms, shifting constantly between levels of detail and excess and between what is revealed and what is hidden or even disregarded. Negotiated in *Googlegrams* is our choice – the viewer's – in what we wish to pay attention to, that is, where we wish to place our attention and where we wish to ignore the remainder (Figure 5 (a,b)). Depending on where one stands, the viewer is obligated to decide between the myopic and hyperopic as a course of action. Of course, this decision is completely, and demandingly, reversible; it is not one or the other, but it is one or the other at any given time or place depending on one's position in relation to the image. And yet, the surface of the image remains a constant. Dimensionality and depth are not acquired by way of a neurological trick effect that an autostereogram would produce (such as the iconic Magic Eye illusions). The constancy of the surface lies in its stubbornness in remaining a two-dimensional figure.

Googlegrams steadily remains in tension with its own self-image through a proposed representation of a depth that its surface will never allow for, except in the name of informational data. If depth is *Googlegrams'* patina of surface, information is something akin to the spectrality of surface, floating just under, and right above, the image. Joan Fontcuberta reduces each detail-image to create a resemblance – distinct from representation, as it were – to the pixel, both in size and in format. This visual trick rapidly reduces the form of the image down to an anonymous piece of data, to a shareholder, not yet in visibility. Or even: the image can only come forth as a visible entity in a state of collaboration, i.e., hand-in-hand with other pixels per inch. This dance among interchangeability, apropos of perception, depth-of-field and pixel, is important because it establishes the complex underpinnings of information (pixel, noise, grain, color, depth – components of the image) and information's intrinsic relation with choice and testimony;²⁴ through this, it establishes saturation as accumulation and saturation as a refusal to look or to reveal, caught on the line between control and exposure.

Information reveals the elements of materiality while also being tasked with historicity. Truth, particularly within the history of photography, has always been a problematic notion. Information, however, has been contextualized as the saving grace of truth, or its remainder-in-absence. Geoffrey Batchen writes that Joan Fontcuberta's project *Orogenesis*²⁵ – a similar photo-based project involving computer software that highlights the instability and precarious relation between algorithms, truth and origin – is sublime and therefore un-representable, elaborating that

[Jean-François] Lyotard argues, any effort to represent the sublime must end in failure, must be a failure. Perhaps this is what Fontcuberta's hackneyed computer-generated landscapes are all about – the impossibility of fulfilling their own visual rhetoric, of bridging the gap between desire and experience. (10)

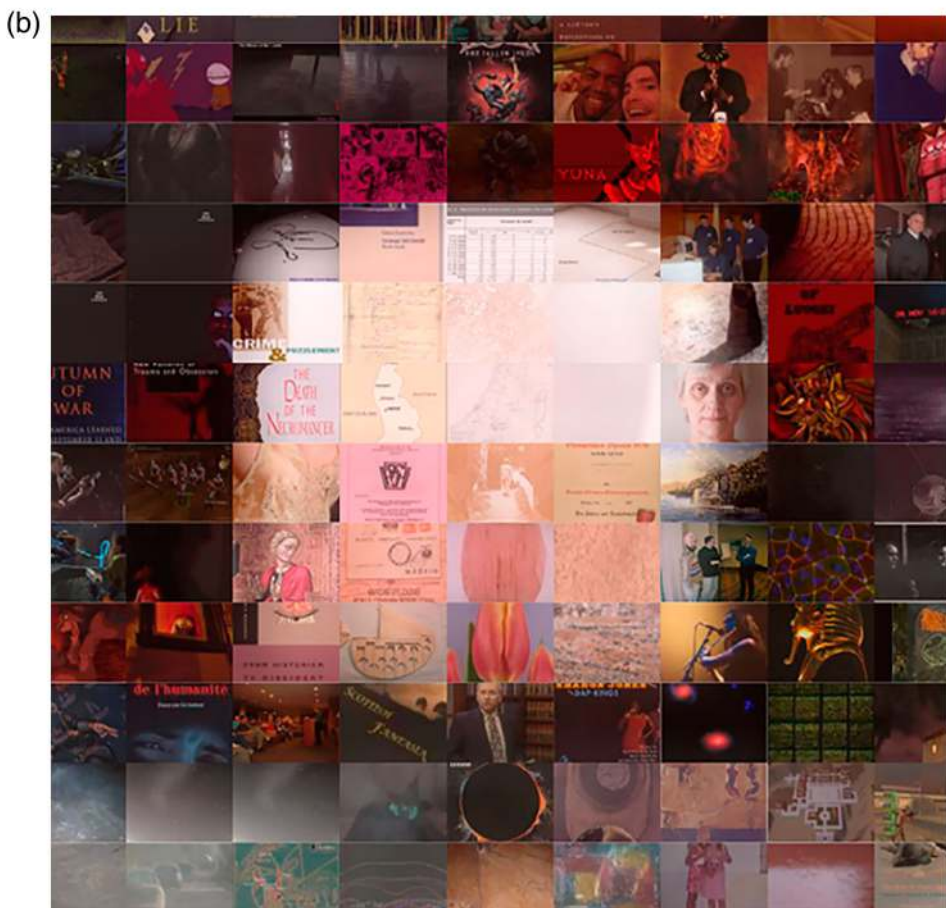


Figure 5. (a) *Googlegram: Auschwitz*. 2005. © Joan Fontcuberta. (b) *Googlegram: Auschwitz (detail)*. 2005. © Joan Fontcuberta.

I would also insert *Googlegrams*, with a few pointed caveats, into Batchen's claims. The impetus to create a certain type of failure in Fontcuberta's works speaks to the informatics of post-photography, where representation – even involving notions of purposefully distorted simulacra – does not arrest what is being activated in works such as *Googlegrams*, *Orogenesis* or other newer registers of coded photographs.²⁶ Representation weighs in as only the most basic of readings of *Googlegrams*. I argue that with *Googlegrams*, the event's representation – torture by the U.S. military at Abu Ghraib, catastrophic oil spills, conspiracy theories of unidentified flying objects, seduction and exhibition – is resisted with varying ramifications both for the image-as-such and for the archival question. As Patricia Keller has argued, *Googlegrams* disrupts the neat codification and representation of history that archives traditionally offer. She writes:

Rather than conceiving of the archive as a site or a body of knowledge that makes visible a fixed relationship between photograph, document, and history, here we have an example of the opposite. These image-archives are instead based on the very temporality of the document, its tenuous connection to not only the past but also the present, a kind of floating signifier. Since these images not only depend on but also are determined by a database of information that is in constant flux ... each Google-based photograph becomes, however problematically, not a container of static knowledge but now a living, fluid testament to the ways in which images are themselves dynamic systems of the ever-changing flow of information. (134–35)

In acknowledging a need to understand *Googlegrams* through a different conception of the archive, Keller calls for seeing images as information over documentation. With this assertion is the implicit understanding that information is never static and is always on the move. To a great extent, the archive, a work in constant progress, is also in motion. But this motion stems from a desire for augmentation: to make the archive larger, and ultimately, more complete. What comes with imagining the image from its post-photographic discourse is not a desire for augmentation or completion, but for an accountability that is always *in potentia* of saturation. No archive can ever be complete. As Jacques Derrida notes, the archive "shelters itself" in that, with what is gathered, the archive withholds and forgets (2). Derrida notes how this privileging grants political power to the house of the archive when he writes, "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory" (4, note 1). To be confronted with saturation potentiality is to confront the loss of what Derrida calls the archtonic power, citing "with such a status, the documents ... inhabit this uncommon place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*" (3; emphasis in original).

Post-photography does not abolish the archive, but it does insist on removing the archive from the institutional, representational or documentary orders as a means to account for, in some way, the loss of artifacts that stem from the constant overflow that looms in contemporary new media practices. Documentation, even in its visual form, lends a grounding force to traditional archival techniques. Information, alternatively, has the potential to simultaneously ground documentation (i.e., in the form of context and narrative) and unmoor it. Okwui Enwezor reminds us that the archive has always confronted itself with the promise of accumulation, noting, however, that this promise of accumulation is tied to the reproducible – if we expand reproduction to stand in for what is showable, distributable, available. He writes, "[T]he infinitely reproducible, duplicatable image, whether a still picture or a moving image, derived from a negative or digital camera, becomes, in the realm of its mechanical reproduction or digital distribution or

multiple projection, a truly archival image" (12). So, on one end of the archival spectrum is the historically infinite field of reproduction as "excess of the seen" (Enwezor 12), which seemingly would correspond to a spatial, or positional, dimension alongside its temporal ability to be consistently refreshed, and on the other end of the archival spectrum is the constant confrontation between containment and power and enacting the volatility of informational instability. Failure, degradation, erosion: all are inevitable consequences of infinite reproducibility, but with regards to information, the infrastructure of the archive and the contents of the archive are not necessarily in the same physical space. We must ask whether positionality – in the sense of a having-been-there – is essential for archival practices or whether the non-positionality of image saturation and digital information is largely what is at stake for Patricia Keller's reading of *Googlegrams* and the question here of the "new" archive. This is certainly at issue with *Orogenesis*, whose landscapes are entirely fabricated, composed of photographs of body parts fed into the Terragen software and rendered in code specifically meant for topographical output (*Landscape*). In this way, *Orogenesis*, though unable to remain truthful in its representation, is always brought back to Enwezor's "excess of the seen" as an exuberance of the visual.

Googlegrams calls on us to invest our vision simultaneously in the detail of each of the 10,000 images framed in its hyper-real hyperopic rendition. In part due to this chaotic blurring of numbers, ultimately a futile and restrictive development, the hyperopic image functions something like a headline: that excess of information that saturates and washes out the detail in the name of keeping a sense of visibility within the parameters of (an) image.

The bounty of images that post-photography addresses as the saturation and excess of image, concerns itself – as previously stated – with acknowledging the structured accumulation of information over aesthetic value. We could call for renaming post-photography so as to help untether it from the systemic allure of the always "new", but the term itself is of little importance: where it is an afterimage – the excess of image, or even what has remained – it is not an after-photography, it does not come as a consequence of leaving photography behind but as a question to be posed for how to see an image beyond the visual.

Notes

1. Others scholars to contemporize the notion of post-photography are Ritchin (*After Photography; Bending the Frame*), who positions the term in relation to citizen journalism, and Shore (*Post-Photography*), whose emphasis resonates with the full-scale saturation of image-making that Fontcuberta pushes. I focus on advancing post-photography through Fontcuberta because it is most explicitly and substantially defined and thus allows for a more fluid critique.
2. The expository age, against the control and disciplinary societies of the past, is a new reckoning that cannot be thought of in terms of confinement, but rather as choice and freedom in a society of constant exposure. Harcourt argues that while surveillance is intrinsically tied to the panopticon and control societies, it is left behind in the expository world. It is my belief that surveillance is precisely what allows the expository society to take shape, that surveillance is the linking trope between post-photographic discourse, saturation, control societies and now the expository age. However, it is in large part through the rampant use of surveillance in contemporary times, self-surveillance notwithstanding, that choice and freedom remain contested terminologies in the expository age: can there be choice without confinement, or does the expository society merely widen control tactics, masked as infinite choice?

3. Digital photography advanced this discussion from the parameters of staging and re-enactments (for example, Hippolyte Bayard's famous *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* or the numerous theories around Robert Capa's *Death of a Militiaman*) to more nuanced concerns involving degrees of manipulation via modes of "re-touching". Techniques previously done in wet dark-rooms gave way to editing software where the technical skills needed were drastically altered. As a consequence, questions were raised in the name of authenticity, truth and bearing witness. The bibliography on truth and memory in relation to photography is immense and justifiably so. I only touch tangentially on this history because one of the most profound markers of post-photography is its separation from these paradigms. In the same way that digital photography emerges from analog photography and the phenomenon of the camera obscura, post-photography is indebted to its lineage. However, post-photography necessarily must forge a new line of questioning because of its direct link with virtual platforms. The contentious genealogy of truth-bearing that photography offers is already so imprinted in the post-photographic era that remaining within these terms would only limit a critical and theoretical furthering of post-photography. For information on truth, memory and witnessing, particularly in the Spanish context, see Ziff's documentary *The Mexican Suitcase*. Refer also to Young's catalog of The International Center of Photography exhibition, *The Mexican Suitcase*. Also, see Naharro-Calderón; Carroll and Fernández; Sontag; Sánchez-Biosca. On photography and the document in relation to Spain and the Spanish Civil War, see Mendelson; Aguirre and Castellote Piñuela.
4. Saturation in photography usually refers to the intensity of color, which if overdone can lead to a loss of detail. I follow this logic and combine it with the notion of saturation as an everyday concept meaning an over-abundance or a spilling-over of something. Both forms of saturation have an effect of a washing-out, a loss of visibility and accountability.
5. I use accountability in this article as an elusive term that takes heed of responsibility and transparency without succumbing to a moralist position. As a term, it references the ability to take account of itself as well as its reason for being, while also holding on and resisting its connection to numbers and figures of abundance.
6. We may think of the exhaustion of the image to be in line with the precise point of saturation, the breaking point between – to go back to Kracauer – the blizzard of images and memory's dam, where image both accumulates and is swept away. As a blizzard quickly covers anew any footprints left in the snow, so too does the blizzard of images wash away the trace of what was previously imprinted on its surface. What would an exhaustion of anything imply? A letting go, a blinding, a certain complacency. The exhaustion of the image must hit the point of saturation and then break open, letting saturation take over.
7. Within the contexts of control and exposure societies, where control is marked by a loosening of boundaries – though still necessarily adhering to them – choice is a feigned offering. Choice is offered up in such a manner that the individual is placated enough, placated into exposure complacency, becoming a kind of prize for agreeing to just keep on moving forward, whether this be gifted as access to a new gaming application on a smartphone, or the ability to upload images to sites like Flickr or Instagram. Post-photography makes use of this feigned choice by exposing its parameters and showcasing the compulsion that lurks behind not just the act of choosing, but the act of foregoing the freedom not to choose.
8. Between 2011 and 2014, the exhibition was shown in Arles, Antwerp and Barcelona. I will not go into detail about every exhibited artist and curator, but rather will mention a select few who I believe to exemplify the conceptual strengths of the show. While all four curators are indispensable for the process and execution of *From Here On*, I focus on Fontcuberta, who was responsible for putting the team together, and those curators who also show considerable affinity for these concepts in their own work as artists. A complete list of artists consists of Hans Aarsman, Laia Abril, Laurence Aëgerter, Roy Arden, Aram Bartholl, Nancy Bean, Viktoria Binschtok, Marco Bohr, Ewoudt Boonstra, Kurt Caviezel, Toni Churnside and The Get Out Clause, David Crawford, Martin Crawl, Leo Gabin, Constant Dullaart, Jon Haddock, Gilbert Hage, Monica Haller, Mishka Henner, Roc Herms, James Howard, Thomas Mailaender, Mocksim, Jenny Odell, Josh Poehlein, Willem Popelier, Jon Rafman, Doug Rickard, Adrian

Sauer, Andreas Schmidt, Frank Schallmaier, Pavel Maria Smejkal, Claudia Sola, Shion Sono, Jens Sundheim, Penelope Umbrico, Corinne Vionnet and Hermann Zschiegner.

9. In the exhibition catalog, Joan Fontcuberta makes it explicit that post-photography rests on the idea that no product is finalized, emancipating it from photography. If a photograph has traditionally been regarded as a (decisive) moment in time, Fontcuberta claims that post-photography is salient and dependent on the articulation of choice. He writes, "What comes closest to the decisive moment depends now not on the eye but on the patience of the sifting and the intelligence of the search strategy" (133). This may be one indication as to why the exhibition was given the name *From Here On*. Because no product is finalized, there is always a possible futurity that is implicated, though this futurity is not without consequences of degradation, erosion or any other loss to visibility.
10. Marien reminds us of Douglas Crimp's article, "Appropriating Appropriation", noting that it was "written for the 1982 catalog accompanying the show called *Image Scavengers*" and that Crimp "observed that postmodern photography was being diluted by the artists who first fashioned it, such as Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, while simultaneously being subsumed into the art institutions as just another category of art" (470). An important distinction to make between postmodernism – and postmodern photography – and post-photography is that post-photography does not implicate itself as a way of being or a totalizing cultural turn in the same manner as does postmodernism. Rather, post-photography grapples with ways of registering vision through of a variety of art practices and media in a time of constant surveillance and image proliferation. This is to say that the investment comes from a point of assimilation, rather than from a point of departure.
11. For more information on the various framings of postmodernism and its relationship to and with modernism, see Jameson, who refers specifically to Jean-François Lyotard's position, as follows:

Lyotard thus proposes that his own vital commitment to the new and the emergent, to a contemporary or postcontemporary cultural production now widely characterized as 'postmodern,' be grasped as part and parcel of a reaffirmation of the authentic older high modernisms very much in Adorno's spirit. The ingenious twist, or swerve, in his own proposal involves the proposition that something called Postmodernism does not *follow* high modernism proper ... but rather very precisely *precedes* and prepares it. (59–60; emphasis in original)

For information that specifically deals with postmodernism in photography, see Marien as well as Crimp.

12. To this, I would also add that the appropriative use of images and information in post-photography carries a different weight, stemming from its assimilative position (mentioned in Note 11), more attuned to a sense of gleaning, or gathering, than to the act of scavenging as alluded to by the aforementioned postmodern art show, *Image Scavengers*.
13. See Google's code of conduct.
14. Walter Benjamin, of course, writes about the technological-political consequences of photography and its role as a commodity. See "The Work of Art", "Little History", "On the Concept of History". For other readings on Benjamin and the media, see Kang; Hansen.
15. *24 HRS in Photos*, not unlike *From Here On*, reveals the amorphous nature of time, and its relation – as both a tethering and an interruption – to space in post-photographic discourse. By producing a mound of photographs based on a temporal premise, Kessels attempts to show this convergence quite literally, yet it also seems to me an attempt at giving location to what cannot be brought together: the images in *24 HRS in Photos* carry the inevitable position of losing ground, or of being reburied time and time again. I am indebted here to my anonymous reviewers who asked whether there is a connection between this time-space convergence and the name of *From Here On*, making use of the word "here" as a spatial reference, instead of the colloquial "from now on" as a temporal reference. It seems to me that while there is a continuous looping of time and space that is often present in post-photographic discourse, contingency and mishap often take over, articulating more the force of a

contretemps at play rather than a neat pairing. If we follow Derrida's logic that *contretemps* is never without a name, we can perhaps posit that *From Here On*, in its name, is performing the very logic of spatial and temporal interruption and letting.

16. End user is a term used to describe the general public who actually use the web product after it has been fully developed. For instance, the person clicking on any legally binding "I agree" button to access contents from a platform such as iTunes or Facebook. An exhibition by the same name opened in London in January 2015, which brought together seven artists who tackled this very issue. Among them were Jon Rafman and Aram Bartholl, also part of *From Here On*. For more information on the exhibit, see Packard.
17. I would like to hint at the connection here between reproducibility, erosion and even failure, with what I have previously noted as the exhaustion of the image. Zschiegner's +Walker Evans +Sherrie Levine is a good example of this. The project is unrelenting in that it forces exhaustion to its breaking point: saturation. We might say that the bit/data erosion present in many of Zschiegner's renditions of Walker Evans's or Sherrie Levine's photographs is exhaustion resuscitated.
18. In a similar line of thought, Steinberg has referred to the "an-archival" as that which "establishes itself between the archive and what escapes it", as well as something that is "anomic and atopic" (15; 18).
19. Manovich discusses operations as a fundamental difference between new and old media. While I take issue with his sharp divisions of old media – which he refers to as "photography, film and video" – I think it is important to draw attention to the networking effect of new media, and particularly, here, post-photography, as being inherently inclusive of operations, interfaces and protocols over a dominant trope of medium specificity. To this effect, Manovich writes, "We can connect [operations] to other more familiar terms such as 'procedure,' 'practice,' and 'method.' At the same time, it would be a mistake to reduce the concept of an operation to a 'tool' or 'medium'."
20. See Virilio; also Farocki's *Eye/Machine I-III*.
21. In totalizing systems, boundaries are repelled and obscured. Totalizing systems are made to seem infinite and this seems to be in accordance with Deleuze's conceptualization of control societies. While there is a certain freedom granted to the subjects, methods of control are still activated, lurking in the background. The expository society, for me, acts as a semi-permeable system: one in which methods of control are anachronistic in the face of compulsion, yet one that cannot quite rinse itself fully of protocolary constraints. An important difference between control and expository systems might lie in the direction of control tactics: as a parameter that closes in, or as a compulsion, always seeping outward. I am using infrapolitics here to account for one of the ways the term is being developed by Alberto Moreiras, when he writes: "Infrapolitics would be below politics, or beyond politics, it would have consequences for politics, but it would be a bit, perhaps, like a double of politics, like politics's shadow." To this, I claim that saturation carries an infrapolitical reading because it is always in the midst of seeping out of itself. This is the overflow that still carries the traces of its own accountability. It is compulsion that cannot evade the burden of protocol and constraint. Saturation works outward yet cannot give up its historicity; saturation moves beyond the visible – a washing-out, a spillage, an abundance, an exuberance – but only in so far as it takes into consideration the imprint that remains its specter.
22. Freeware is any kind of software that is available for free online.
23. Image description pulled from artist's website.
24. I use choice and testimony here for their multiple implications. Algorithms set up limitations, or parameters. When Fontcuberta inputs key terms into search engines, algorithms are already working in conjunction with other information previously collected. This is why if you search the same thing on different computers, you will be shown slightly different information, directed to slightly different websites or shown slightly different images. With this in mind, testimony is wound up in these initial parameters. Testimony comes to us here in the form of a double address: in the form of a calling out, which we might understand through Fontcuberta's process of recontextualization (giving new meaning and thus new life to the image),

and in the form of witnessing, now caught up in what the viewer chooses to focus on. The question then becomes whether Fontcuberta forces an abandon of testimony or of choice, or whether the algorithmic parameters have already produced all possible decisions.

25. *Orogenesis* is a project based in computer-generated software which allows Fontcuberta to photographically render false landscapes. Fontcuberta feeds into the software, as data, images by painters as varied as Cezanne and Dalí. To the extent that *Orogenesis* gestures toward the falsified scientific data (much in the style of the cabinet of curiosities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) of his older photographic works such as *Fauna secreta*, I admire Batchen's reading of the sublime, with nods to postmodernism via Lyotard. But, if seen alongside *Googlegrams* as a crossing point into total submersion of the Internet age, *Orogenesis*, must, I believe, be excluded from the postmodernist aesthetic.
26. Coded here refers to computer languages, "coding" having to do with computer-generated binary systems meant for perceiving vision, image reconstruction, etc.

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