

Steven Humblet

“We shall be your favorite disappearing act!”¹

“Basically, we want to be the piano, he said, not human beings but the piano, all our lives we want to be the piano and not a human being, flee from the human beings we are in order to completely become the piano, an effort which must fail, although we don’t want to believe it, he said. The ideal piano player (he never *said pianist*) is the one who wants to be the piano, and I say to myself every day when I wake up, I want to be the Steinway, not the person playing the Steinway, I want to be the Steinway itself. Sometimes we get close to this ideal, he said, very close, at which point we think we’ve already gone crazy, think we’re on the highroad to madness, which we fear like nothing else. All his life Glenn had wanted to be the Steinway itself, he hated the notion of being between Bach and his Steinway as a mere musical middleman and of one day being ground to bits between Bach and Steinway and it requires the greatest effort on my part to escape this dread, he said. My ideal would be, I would be the Steinway, I wouldn’t need Glenn Gould, he said, I could, by being the Steinway, make Glenn Gould totally superfluous.”²

Thomas Bernhard, *The Loser*

“Pour la première fois, une image du monde extérieur se forme automatiquement sans intervention créatrice de l’homme selon un déterminisme rigoureux (...). Tous les arts sont fondés sur la présence de l’homme; dans la seule photographie, nous jouissons de son absence.”³

André Bazin, *Ontologie de l’image photographique*

The Joy of Absence

Both quotes seem to describe a similar desire, even if they suggest different ways to fulfill it. According to the quote from Thomas Bernhard, the aspiration to eradicate the human middleman and finally coincide with the instrument one plays, can only be fulfilled through hard labor. It requires effort and even then one can never really experience it: one can only come close to the edge of this precious moment of self-effacement. In addition, the price one has to pay for this desire is enormous: madness awaits the one who is on this journey to self-loss. However, in contrast to the laborious, even maddening, work described by Bernhard, there exists, at least according to the quote of André Bazin, also an effortless way to achieve the same result. In the simple act of photography, Bazin suggests, self-effacement is automatic and unavoidable. Whereas Bernhard seems to suggest that this event of self-loss still falls within human reach, Bazin suggest we can only experience it by outsourcing our imagination to a pure technical operating mechanism.

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Car l’illusion ne s’oppose pas à la réalité*, Descartes & Cie., Paris, 1998, n.p.

² Thomas Bernhard, *The Loser*, Faber & Faber, New York, 2013:

³ André Bazin, “Ontologie de l’image photographique”, in: *Qu’est ce que le cinéma?*, Paris, 1958:

For Bazin this effect of self-loss is so important that he equates it with the essence of photography: for him it is the defining quality that sets it apart from every other art form that preceded it. Moreover, he further qualifies that feeling of loss as something joyful, for which Bazin uses the very specific French verb *jouir*. It is important to note that this verb has a strong sexual connotation as it translates not only as ‘to enjoy’ but also as ‘to reach orgasm, to come’. Using this specific verb, Bazin seems to link this moment of temporary absence with the French term of ‘la petite mort’ (the little death) used to describe the momentarily loss of self that follows a moment of (carnal) ecstasy⁴. The difference is here that ‘la petite mort’ is experienced by the body, whereas the joyful absence created by the photographic system seems to be more directed at the mind of the operator (photography: a mind-fuck?). Regardless, the type of joy Bazin describes here, is a radical one: it is one in which we, as conscious beings, are absent while a mechanism takes over.

For the research group *Thinking Tools* at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, thinking about photography through the prism of Bazin’s joyful absence seemed a promising starting point. It allowed us to look at photography in a more general way, not as a mere historical succession of forms, practices and genres, but as a specific cultural force that defines itself in (radical) contrast to other established art forms. As such, it led us to take an interest in those photographic practices that in some way or other are fully assuming the consequences of this particular kind of absence Bazin described here. How do these photographers, but also philosophers and media theorists writing about photography, articulate the (apparently joyful) disappearance of the human hand in the fabrication of the image? Do they really experience it as joyful? And can we also distinguish other artistic practices that seemingly have nothing to do with photography but where a similar questioning of the role of the artist is at stake?

Before delving into the question of the ‘jouissance’ that according to Bazin would accompany the absence of the human hand in photography, however, we wanted first to have a clearer understanding of the precise moment when the photographer experiences his absence. In his quote Bazin himself already hints at the exact moment when that happens: it is the moment when the photographer pushes the button that activates the photographic mechanism. The shutter is released, the light streams inside the dark body of the camera and sets the chemical layer ablaze. An image is formed while the photographer did nothing more than applying a small amount of pressure on a button located somewhere on the body of the camera. During this exact, but crucial, moment when the light etches itself on the light sensitive layer, the photographer is absent. It is a moment when the photographer is (literally) blindsided: during that (short) time of the exposure

⁴ This theme of absence as a manifestation of death will haunt the whole chapter that André Bazin devotes to photography. It returns in different guises throughout the text, but for our purpose it is not necessary to dwell more on the different forms that this theme takes in the further development of his critical analysis of photography.

the viewfinder turns black, forcefully blinding the human operator to the scene the apparatus is capturing.

It is this peculiar condition, whereby the 'initiator' is excluded from the exact moment the image is being 'made', that makes photography such an unfathomable and revolutionary act (and so ungraspable for the established art forms). For this simple condition is rife with consequences. The most important of them is that it seemingly turns the photographer into the recipient of an image, not into the creator of it. Ultimately, (s)he receives the image as a gift, which (s)he then can either accept or reject. The photographer might have initiated the process – taken up a viewpoint, framed the part of the world (s)he wants to capture, decided about the depth of field, maybe even added some artificial light to enlighten the scene, and finally chosen the precise moment to press the button – but from the moment the button is pressed a mechanism that works according to its own logic, its own parameters, takes over. And it's only after its passage through the dark body of the camera (and its further development, be it through chemical means in the analog area or through the activated algorithms in contemporary computational photography) that the photographer is first confronted with 'his' or 'her' image.

From this moment on, two reactions to this exclusion of the photographer are possible. One negative in which photographers negate their (unwanted) absence and will do everything in their power to take back control of the image (mainly through post-production), another one positive where they are curious about what the camera has added to their intentions and start up a dialogue with the camera image. It is clear that from the perspective of the research group, we're more interested in the second class of photographers. In each instance, however, every choice starts with an image that is already there: a ready-made. It then becomes to the photographers to decide which image could be called theirs. This at least suggests that the most important part of the photographic act, the part where one truly acts as a photographer, might not lie in all the preparations done beforehand or in the manipulations afterwards during post-production but in the selection process after the photographic mechanism has done its work. One becomes a photographer through culling, by choosing between the mass of ready-made images the camera has produced. It is through the accumulation and articulation of these selection criteria that a photographic identity (a photographic sensibility) takes form. But this photographic identity is not purely of his (or her) own making, it is always based on a negotiation with the photographic mechanism. Once the camera is understood as a collaborator, a new understanding of photography becomes possible: one in which the photographer can no longer claim to be the sole author of the image but shares co-authorship with a technological force.

The Apparatus

To better understand the principles behind the inner workings of the photographic system, the research group turned to the writings of Vilém Flusser, and more specific to his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. We first started with a reading group to discuss the book and from that exercise planned a symposium⁵ and publication⁶ on some of the notions that Flusser developed in his book. For the purpose of this essay, I would like to focus now on the most important lessons we took from the third chapter on *The Apparatus* in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* and how they influenced our further development.

After an initial etymological analysis of the term ‘apparatus’, Flusser proceeds in this chapter with trying to circumscribe its ontological status. He does that by distinguishing it from other terms as ‘tools’ and ‘machines’. Differentiating between the work done by people who use ‘tools’ or ‘machines’, and the very specific work ‘photographers’ do when they use an ‘apparatus’, Flusser concludes that a photographer belongs to a rather startling heterogenous group of professional ‘workers’. He writes: “Photographers, it is true, do not work but they do something: They create, process and store symbols. There have always been people who have done such things: writers, painters, composers, book-keepers, managers.”⁷

The list that Flusser puts here together seems a hotchpotch of different occupations that have seemingly little in common. Certainly, one wouldn’t expect artists and writers to be grouped together with book-keepers or managers. Yet, what links all these professions, Flusser contends, is that they produce cultural objects that serve as a carrier of information and as such do not find their end in themselves, but are mere means to an end (a book is meant to be read, a play or a musical score is meant to be performed, the book-keepers ledger is meant to control the financial solvability of a company, etc.). At the same time there is also quite an important distinction to be made here. Yes, all these professions ‘create, process and store symbols’, but in each instance the symbols they use are different: a writer works with language, a composer with sounds and a book-keeper with numbers. All work with established codes, but while a writer and a composer are free (or even supposed) to reinvent these codes and to produce something startling new, that is not

⁵ In 2016, the research group organized together with the Fotomuseum Antwerp the one-day symposium *Camera Traps* on Vilém Flusser’s texts on photography and his influence on visual artists in general. The invited speakers were: Inge Henneman, Marc Geerards, Rein Deslé & Joachim Naudts, Geert Goiris in conversation with Steven Humblet, Andrew Lugg, Simon Menner in conversation with Thomas Crombez, Brad Feuerheim and David Claerbout in conversation with Martin Germann.

⁶ In 2016 the research group was also guest-editor of the photo-magazine EXTRA #20: *Het Apparaat*, in collaboration with Rein Deslé and Joachim Naudts of the Fotomuseum Antwerp. The magazine comprised texts by Kenneth Goldsmith, Inge Henneman, Maarten Dings, Thomas Crombez, Brad Feuerhelm, David Claerbout, Nick Geboers, Hiryczuk/Van Oevelen and Ingrid Leonard.

⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006, p. 25.

exactly the case of the book-keeper: (s)he is expected to follow the strict procedures and protocols that are in place. In that sense the addition of the numbers-based work of book-keepers and managers in this part of the chapter already seems to point out to something that will be revealed at the end of the chapter and that then will be put forward as the most defining aspect of the (photographic) apparatus. So, in the picking order of occupations that work with apparatuses the photographer would be closer to the book-keeper than to the previously mentioned artists. But, before we come to that, Flusser has still more to say about the specific kind of work that goes along with collaborating with 'apparatuses'. He writes: "The camera is programmed to produce photographs, and every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera. The number of such possibilities is large, but it is nevertheless finite: It is the sum of all those photographs that can be taken by a camera. It is true that one can, in theory, take a photograph over and over again in the same or a very similar way, but this is not important for the process of taking photographs. Such images are 'redundant': They carry no new information and are superfluous. (...) Photographers endeavour to exhaust the photographic program by realizing all their possibilities. But this program is rich and there is no way of getting an overview of it. Thus, photographers attempt to find the possibilities not yet discovered within it: They handle the camera, turn it this way and that, look into it and through it. If they look through the camera out into the world, this is not because the world interests them but because they are pursuing new possibilities of producing information and evaluating the photographic program. Their interest is concentrated on the camera; for them, the world is purely a pretext for the realization of camera possibilities. (...) The camera is not a tool but a plaything, and a photographer is not a worker but a player: not *Homo faber* but *Homo ludens*. Yet photographers do not play with their plaything but against it. They creep into the camera in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within. Unlike manual workers surrounded by their tools and industrial workers standing at their machines, photographers are inside their apparatus and bound up with it. This is a new kind of function in which human beings are neither the constant nor the variable but in which human beings and apparatus merge into a unity. It is therefore appropriate to call photographers functionaries."⁸

In this paragraph Flusser introduces several concepts that helped the research group to better understand the complex dynamic between a photographer and a camera. Take for instance the concept of 'program'. What turns the camera into an apparatus is that it is programmed to function in a certain way. As an apparatus, it follows a series of strict rules and procedures. And more than anything else, Flusser contends, it is this set of rules that really attracts the interest of the photographer. It is their task to exhaust all possibilities embedded in the program. In stating

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 26-27.

that the photographer is more preoccupied with evaluating (or unveiling) the program of the camera than in any possible subject matter, Flusser turns the photographer into a functionary of the photographic program. But, he insists, the photographer is a cheerful functionary, skirting the boundaries of what is conceivable, rejecting what already has been produced, delving ever deeper into the program, turning over every stone to find new, yet unseen and unused possibilities: (s)he plays with and against the apparatus. Stressing the desire to exhaust the photographic program allows Flusser to distinguish between two kinds of images: ‘redundant’ ones (i.e., images that just repeat what already has been done) and ‘informative images’ (i.e., images that reveal new, enticing ways of using the photographic apparatus). The consequence is that these ‘informative images’ (the only images that matter in the eyes of Flusser) will always be a kind of meta-photography, which means images that articulate novel ideas about photography - about what it is, what it can do, what it is still capable of. In this sense, Flusser supported our starting position that the research group should no longer study photographs in relationship to its established historical practices or genres, but in relationship to how artists and photographer push forward the (unfortunately unattainable) depletion of the photographic program. As a research group we took up this invitation to focus on these areas where photography as an established practice is being tested, where new paths are being developed, where the program of the camera is turned inside out to surprise and startle us.

In the following paragraphs, Flusser adds some precisions about the programmatic nature of the photographic apparatus. According to him, we need to understand that the apparatus functions as a ‘black box’. His succinct definition of what a ‘black box’ amounts to, reads like this: “(...) they know how to feed the camera (they know the input of the box), and likewise they know how to get it to spit out photographs (they know the output of the box). Therefore the camera does what the photographer wants it to do, even though the photographer does not know what is going on inside the camera. This is precisely what is characteristic of the functioning of apparatuses: The functionary controls the apparatus thanks to the control of its exterior (the input and output) and is controlled by it thanks to the impenetrability of its interior. To put it another way: Functionaries control a game over which they have no competence.”⁹

In this quote from Flusser we can maybe glean something that comes close to answering that question about the *joyful* absence as expressed by Bazin. Here there is also question of a certain kind of absence, the result of the impenetrability of the black box, which turns the photographer into somebody who is attracted to something (s)he cannot ever gain access to. (S)he can only control the input and the output but what happens in between, what turns that specific input into that

⁹ Ibidem, pp. 27-28.

specific output, remains shrouded in mystery. Unwittingly, Flusser might have presented here a way to better understand the joyful aspect of Bazin's deadly absence. We could consider this playful quest to exhaust the photographic program and the rewards that go with it as the specific joy that photography brings to its practitioners: a joy that wells up out of the friction between the impenetrability of an automatic functioning apparatus and the vibrant life of an almost limitless program that goes along with it. Could it be that we want to disappear in the 'black box', not to understand it or to control it, but to be surprised by it? Could it be we are drawn to the 'black box' apparatus as a means to escape from ourselves, to open us up to other possible imaginations of the world?

But what kind of operations can be linked to the 'black box'? According to Flusser, if we want to understand the 'black box' of the photographic apparatus, we don't need to look at the hardware (the camera as an object defined by metal, glass and plastic) but rather at the software that makes it possible to operate. It is the 'program' that runs the camera that turns it into a 'black box'. A program requires a programmer. Flusser himself remains quite elusive in defining this programmer: he states that it is the photographic industry that programs the photographic apparatus but that this industry is in turn programmed by the industrial complex of which it is a part and this industrial complex is in its turn programmed by the larger social-economical system in which it operates, etc. There is only a cascade of programs, it seems, without an identifiable final programmer. Only near the end of the chapter Flusser presents us with a clue of how we have to understand the program of any apparatus. There he defines apparatuses as 'black boxes that stimulate thinking in the sense of a combinatory game using number-like symbols'¹⁰ (here we meet again the figure of the book-keeper as a functionary of a numbers-game). The photographic apparatus takes up a specific place in the generalization of the apparatus in that Flusser sees it as the historically first example of a new class of (scientific) apparatuses that made 'thinking expressed in numbers'¹¹ materially possible.

Inside the black box

Whereas Flusser remains quite abstract in defining the numerical operations that go in the black box of the photographic apparatus, the research group was wondering if there isn't a more concrete way of approaching this question. Looking for an answer, we turned to the French art historian Michel Frizot who has written extensively on photography¹². From the start Frizot defines the

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 32.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 31.

¹² The following description of Michel Frizot's analysis of the photographic system is based on notes I took while following his course on the French interwar magazine *VU* given in the autumn of 2007 at the École du Louvre, Paris.

photographic apparatus as a combination of two systems: one optical, one chemical. The optical system (the lens) is the system that bundles the light and organizes how it will enter the dark body of the camera. It is a complex system where shutter, aperture, focal length and exposure time are intricately bound up with each other. This system also operates through the manipulation of numbers. On the lens the operator can find several numbers detailing the focal length, the maximum opening of the aperture and the matching depth of field. When thinking back about Flusser's definition of the apparatus as a 'combinatory game of number-like symbols', one could assume that he refers to the manipulation of these numbers as a first step to exhaust the photographic program¹³. But, as we will see, there is another numerical operation happening inside the 'black-box'.

While the optical system is easily identifiable by the protruding lens, this is not the case with the chemical system which is hidden deep inside the dark body of the camera. The chemical system is composed of the light sensitive layer (emulsion or sensor) that reacts to the incoming light once the shutter is released. Whereas optical tools were already used in painting from the 16th century onwards, the real breakthrough that made photography possible was the use of materials that would change under the influence of light and more specific the discovery of chemicals that made it possible to fix these changes into an immutable image. It seems therefore that understanding this light sensitive layer might give us a better understanding of the reason why photography was deemed so revolutionary that it escaped any comparison with already existing art forms. This is exactly what Frizot sets out to do. Comparing the photographic act with that of a painter, he starts with drawing our attention to the outspoken material nature of that chemical layer. Instead of the empty canvas of the painter which can receive all kinds of input, the chemical layer (whether it is put on glass, paper, celluloid, metal, or even other kinds of carriers) reacts exactly to one kind of input: light. Based on its specific chemical composition, the light sensitive layer quite literally decides the kinds of transformations that can happen. Frizot then addresses in more detail the different features of the light sensitive layer. He distinguishes five characteristics:

¹³ An intriguing example of exhausting the optical system could be found in the work of the conceptual photographer Gottfried Jäger, and more specifically in his *Lochblendenstrukturen* (Pinhole Structures). These images are created by exchanging the lens of a regular large-format camera with two separate pinhole apertures each containing fifty small holes. These tiny holes could take on different forms: from points to circles and lines. By playing with the possible combinations between these two lenses, turning them left or right, or adjusting the space between them, the photographer could then produce ever-shifting intricate light patterns of lines, dots, circles, and semicircles. In order to make sure that this playfulness would not end in random images Jäger devised a strict protocol that defined the possible interactions between the photographic apparatus and the apertures. For this protocol, he listed several parameters of the photographic apparatus he was engaging with, so he could rigorously and systematically chart each possible combination. Gottfried Jäger was invited by the research group as a speaker during an event in the context of an exhibition by the American photographer James Welling in 2017 at the SMAK Museum Gent. Other speakers during this event were the Belgian photographer Dominique Somers, the German artist Claudia Angelmaier and the German collector Markus Kramer. See: <https://smak.be/nl/agenda/a-thinking-tools-session-in-s-m-a-k>.

a) The light that enters the camera arrives everywhere at the same time. In contrast to a painter for instance who builds up a painting brush stroke by brush stroke, the photographic image is completely formed in one singular moment.

b) However, the effect of that incoming light on the light sensitive material is not everywhere the same: it differs in function of the higher or lower intensity of the light it encounters. The light accumulates: parts where the intensity is high turn darker, where the intensity is lower the parts remain lighter.

c) The whole process of exposure is time limited. This exposure time can be extremely short or very long, but it always has a start and an end point. And once the end point is reached, the image will no longer change. This is again very different than a painting which is 'never' finished: even after the painter has 'finished' the painting, (s)he can always return to it and change something.

d) The light sensitive layer is essentially a-chromatic: it doesn't register color, it only records differences in light intensities. If we want to make color photographs, we have to chemically manipulate the system to register these colors. In photography, color is always based on a technical manipulation of input or output, which is the same as stating that in photography the colors are never 'real', they are always laboratory made.

e) Finally, the end result of this entire process is a mathematical figure: a matrix. One of the properties of a matrix is that one can unleash all kinds of mathematical operations (such as division or multiplication) on a matrix without disturbing the interrelationship between the data. This explains for instance why a photographic enlargement contains the exact same information as the (often much) smaller negative from which it is derived.

In our critical dialogue with Flusser's definition of the photographic apparatus as 'thinking expressed in numbers', the fifth characteristic of Frizot's analysis of the light sensitive layer seems particularly apt. More than in the manipulation of the visible numbers on the lens, the numerical aspect of photography (the 'thinking expressed in numbers') seems to happen here, on the chemical layer that is deeply buried in the darkness of the camera. It is precisely because the operations there remain hidden from view (and from tampering with during that (short) moment of exposure), that the apparatus can be rightly said to have an 'impenetrable interior'. It is there that the operator of the apparatus is losing control over the process, where (s)he is operating blindly. Flusser's abstract system of impenetrable rules and procedures turns out to be grounded in very specific substance after all. Furthermore, Frizot's analysis of the photographic apparatus as the conjunction of an optical and a chemical system also allows for a better understanding of what specific rules are at play within it. In each case the photographer has to work with the fixed, unalterable and universal laws that govern our cosmos (the laws of optics and the laws of chemical

reactions). In that sense, one can consider, as Frizot indeed does, each photographic act to be a scientific experiment.

Off Camera: a visual essay on the photographic

As a research group, we found this tension between an abstract system described by Flusser and the concrete manifestation of it in a material substance, quite interesting. While Flusser made us aware of the several programs that circulate in and around the production, distribution, presentation and reception of photographs, the thinking of Frizot always brought us to investigate the moments or places where these programs would materialize in concrete objects or gestures. The intense dialogue between these two positions was an important organizing principle behind the 2021 publication *Off Camera*¹⁴ (published in collaboration with Roma Publications). Presenting the works of 42 photographers and artists¹⁵ the book gave an overview of the wide field of inquiry that the research group wanted to cover. As a general term of that field, we opted for the term *the photographic*.

This term can be understood in two different, but interlocked, ways. First, one could read it as an accumulation of historical and contemporary criteria used to distinguish photography from all earlier manmade art objects. *The photographic* then, is nothing more than the collection of all markers of differentiation used to distinguish between the technical image and every other form of image making that came before. However, it is important to note that within our understanding of the larger concept of *the photographic* each attempt to define photography in regards to the other visual arts, has always been provisional, never conclusive. Our use of the term of *the photographic* should therefore not be considered as an attempt to finally define photography (to identify its eidós, as Roland Barthes once tried to do). On the contrary, for us *the photographic* is the name of what remains unresolved in the practice of photography. Understood this way *the photographic* remains an open question.

The second way to understand the concept is to read it as a term that encapsulates the way artists would respond to those fluctuating definitions and manifestations of photography - and in doing so would radically expand the possibilities of what we consider to be photography. Here *the photographic* functions somewhat similar as *the cinematic*, a term which outlines how some typical

¹⁴ Steven Humblet (ed.), *Off Camera*, Roma Publications, Amsterdam, 2021. ISBN 9789492811882.

¹⁵ The book contained works by (amongst others): Robert Rauschenberg, Jochen Lempert, Ann Veronica Janssens, Edmund Kuppel, Jan Dibbets, Aglaia Konrad, Thomas Ruff, Peter Downsbrough, Dirk Braeckman, Barbara Kasten, Walead Beshty, Noémie Goudal, Seth Price, Barbara Probst, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Clare Strand, Penelope Umbrico, Bernard Voita, Alison Rossiter, Matthew Brandt, Asta Gröting, Sine Van Menxel, Chirs McCaw, Timm Rautert, Spiros Hadjidjanos, Akram Zaatari, Dominique Teufen, Wade Guyton, etc. A separate section contained conversations with Johanna Zylinska, Markus Kramer and Marc De Blicck.

formal and technical aspects of the moving image influenced the creation of still images. *The photographic* would then point to an expanded definition of photography: a definition that includes art practices where a distinct idea or working method linked to the process of photography is at work, without this necessarily resulting in objects we would easily recognize as photographs.

Off Camera was conceived as offering a meeting point between both conceptualizations of *the photographic*. The first approach becomes visible in the titles given to the four sections that makes up the visual essay. These titles – The Photographic Fossil, Chemical Matter, Optical Confusion and Performing the Image¹⁶ – point towards four conceptualizations of *the photographic*: the photograph as an indexical trace, photography as a (mainly) chemical operation, photography as a lens-based medium presenting us with a framed (and thus fragmented) view of the world and photography as a semi-autonomous process. Although these chapters seem organized according to a temporal scheme with the oldest definitions first and the most recent last, the visual essay should by no means be read as a straightforward story where new replaces old. Instead, the topics are specifically selected to show that former, some would even say traditional, ways of conceiving photography, are still pertinent today. *The photographic* comprises a complex, layered field of artistic positions and possibilities, where past definitions of photography never really lose their relevance.

The second approach becomes visible within each of these chapters. It manifests itself in the combination of positions in the field of photography with those in the field of visual arts. This juxtaposition makes clear how photography as a technological and chemical/optical image producing system, has opened up novel and original approaches for the creation of art works. In doing so, *Off Camera* hoped to show how the visual arts have become more and more photographic, not in the rather superficial sense that artists started to include photographic images in their works or started to work from photographs, but in a more profound sense that they started to use photographic procedures in the creation of their work. As such, the book does not only want to surpass the simple dichotomy between art and photography but also likes to undo any supposed hierarchy between them. In short: *Off Camera* is less about the kind of images or objects produced, and more about a specific attitude. As such, the book understands *the photographic* to encompass a group of historical and contemporary artists that operate like a photographer, without them necessarily producing something that even remotely looks like a photograph.

¹⁶ It is clear that the structure of the book in these four chapters was greatly influenced by the distinction Michel Frizot made between the optical and chemical system of the photographic apparatus.

Performing the Image

Two examples of artistic practices that are part of the book could illustrate this notion of *the photographic*. Both examples are taken from *Off Camera*, more specific from the fourth chapter *Performing the Image*. This chapter focuses on several artistic practices in which the artwork is produced by a more or less automated system that adds its own ‘intelligence’, its own ‘choices’ to that of the initiators of the process. From triggering a command in a computer program or stimulating material feedback from printers or chemical substances to using a standard shipping company or the postal system, the selected works were chosen because they reminded us of our indebtedness to forces beyond our control. By at least in part subjugating their practice to an external agency, these artists show a new (and heightened) kind of generosity towards the visible and invisible forces that shape our world.

A first example is taken from the *Fed Ex Works* by Walead Beshty. In his practice, Beshty often engages with the systems of distribution and circulation of objects, images, and people¹⁷. This is also the case for the *Fed Ex Works*¹⁸. They are simply created by shipping copper cubes or glass containers to the exhibition space through regular Fed Ex channels instead of delivering them through specialized art handlers. During this process, the people that handle these objects, leave visible traces on these objects. In the case of the copper cubes, for instance, the hands of all the people that manipulate the cube leave clearly visible traces on the object, thus imprinting it with the physical labor that went into the shipment process. In the case of the glass containers, the rough handling of the object during its transportation manifests itself in the cracked glass. On one level, these works could be understood as an attempt to bring to the fore the often invisible and anonymous labor that goes on in these systems of circulation. On another level, however, one could also consider these works as a perfect illustration of what we’ve called *the photographic*, and this in three distinct ways. First, by manifesting the ‘accidents’ of their passing through the Fed Ex system, these cubes and containers are marked by the physical traces of their own transportation. Just like a light sensitive layer has been touched by light and presents us with the result of that physical contact, these works similarly show the viewer the traces of the several treatments it underwent while in transit. Second, they are photographic in the sense that they are co-produced by an apparatus, an ‘automatic’ operating system which the artist does not fully control. Just like the photographic apparatus, Fed Ex operates as a ‘black box’, as a system controlled by strict rules and

¹⁷ Walead Beshty does not only tackle this aspect of distribution in his works, but also in his practice as curator. See for instance the exhibition and accompanying catalogue: Walead Beshty (ed.), *Picture Industry. A Provisional History of the Technical Image (1844-2018)*, JRP Ringier, Zürich, 2018.

¹⁸ More information on the procedures behind Walead Beshty’s *Fed Ex Works* can be found here: <https://www.actionstakenunderthefictitiousnamewaleadbeshtystudiosinc.com/fedex-works-2007>.

procedures of which Beshty has no clue, forcing the artist into a collaboration with powers outside of his purview. He knows the input and the output, but what happens in between remains a mystery. Third, just like photographs, they are only capable of presenting that world of hidden labor, because of their specific materiality. The cracks in the glass, the scratches and the greasy finger traces on the copper, all are the result of the particular material characteristics of the objects themselves – of the fragility of glass and the touch-sensitivity of copper.¹⁹

The second example is a work from the *Discrete Channel with Noise*-series²⁰ of Clare Strand.²¹ To create this work Strand chose ten photographs from a collection of 36 that were collected for a previous work.²² Using an existing model of transferring images via telegraph, each photograph is divided into a grid, with every square being given a value from 1 to 10. 1 is white, 2 has a tinge of grey, 3 is greyer, 4 darker and so on until 10, which is black. The result was a gridded image consisting of forty-eight squares across and sixty-one down, each about 5 square millimeters. The creation of the final ten works would take place during a three-month residency at the Centre Photographique d'Ile-de-France. During that period her husband would regularly call her up and enumerate the numbers representing the different shades of grey. Strand then painted these coded greys on the largest drawing paper she could find, gridded to the same ratio as the source images. The result were large black-and-white paintings consisting of blocks of monochrome tones, presenting a blow-up version of the original photograph. Although the process reads like a clean-cut and transparent transfer of pure information, the translation was not without its faults. Not that there were solely mistakes in receiving the codes, but 'mistakes' also happened in the application of the paint on the drawing paper. Strand is not a trained painter, which leads to messy, imperfect images, tainted by hairs and dust, and where paint sometimes bleeds into another square, etc. What becomes visible here is the tension between a system that is supposed to be purely mechanical and the accidental errors that appear when that system is executed by a human body.

For *Thinking Tools* this work was a reason to invite Clare Strand for a three-month residency at the Academy in Antwerp in 2021. During that period Strand undertook a new work that is

¹⁹ We understood these works to be hybrid objects, not only in the sense that they are co-produced with forces outside of Walead Beshty's control, but also in the sense that they cross different art practices. Conceptually linked with the idea of photography, they also remain outspokenly sculptural. Being in-between these artistic practices, they would inspire us to initiate a two-year research project (*The Unruly Apparatus*, 2019-2020) in which we brought students and alumni of the photography and sculpture department together to collectively try to figure out where photography and sculpture could meet and how they could influence each other. The result of this project was shown in an exhibition in De Lange Zaal at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp where the work of the participating researchers was combined with that of artists as Wade Guyton, Bernard Voïta, Seth Price, Spiros Hadjidjanos, Thomas Ruff and Walead Beshty. See: <https://ap-arts.be/en/event/unruly-apparatus>.

²⁰ For a detailed description of this work, see: <http://www.clarestrand.co.uk/works/?id=391>.

²¹ See also "Playing a Photograph" in this issue of *Flusser Studies* (<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/773269239/c934f6a17a/privacy>).

loosely based on the previous *Discrete Channel with Noise*-series. She applied the same principle: starting from an existing photograph, she draws a grid on it and numbers each square with a value between 1 and 10, based on the grey-ness of the square in question. But instead of using these numbers as a starting point for a painting, she invited three musicians to create a musical score on the basis of these numbers. For Strand the work remained indebted to Flusser, more specifically to his ideas about music. She remarks that in the last chapter of *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser describes his vision of chamber music as the paradigmatic model for ‘dialogic communication in general, and for telematic communication in particular’. Even more outspoken than in the *Discrete Channel with Noise*-works, the telematic character of this work is realized by outsourcing the end result to playful, human bodies. She invited each chamber musician to individually interpret the number code, creating their own idiosyncratic notational system in which they defined the duration, pitch and gestural force of the notated sound for each number. As a result, the final performance remains unfixed. Based on which musicians would perform the piece, each performance would result in a different output. But in each case the end result is a performance where sender and receiver, according to Strand, engage in a ‘telematic dialogue’ guided by a set of (continuously changing) musical rules. In other words: each performance is based on an alteration of coding and de-coding. Strand makes this process also visible to the public by dressing the musicians in white hazmat-suits and projecting the coded image on their bodies during the musical performance.²³ Their bodies thus become literally inscribed by the code they’re performing. Precisely because the whole process is based on a numbers-game, one could still understand the performance as a ‘photographical act’, as an expression of ‘thinking expressed in numbers’. At the same time, in this work we notice a similar tension between the rigidity of a strict procedure and the bodily execution of it as in the previous *Discrete Channel with Noise*-works. In each instance abstract rules are broken by a human operator that functions according to biological processes. Both systems, so it seems, operate on a totally different level and are as such incompatible.

The Joy of Absence (bis)

Therefore: a tentative conclusion. What does reveal itself when we’re put between brackets? Who or what appears when we disappear? A possible answer might be that the joy of absence arises from the fact that we are, for a short amount of time, lifted out of our human-all-too-human condition and can glimpse a world that is sufficient in itself and has no use for us. What happens

²³ The work was performed for the first time during the Articulate-festival at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp on October 27th, 2022. The performers were Jenna Vergeynst (harp), Alex Smith (thunder sheet) and Paco Rosa Huertas (flute).

in this inevitable moment of self-effacement, is not a simple surrender to the numerical and mathematical thought processes of the technological apparatus, but the birth of an incipient insight that we are indebted to forces that we do not control, that we are foreign to this world (which we all too confidently declare to be 'our' world). As such, photography might be considered a humbling apparatus: permitting us to disappear so that the world in all its confusing and impenetrable Otherness can (re)appear. Or, as Jean Baudrillard wrote: "La photographie, c'est notre exorcisme. La société primitive avait ses masques, la société bourgeoise ses miroirs, nous avons nos images. Nous croyons forcer le monde par la technique. Mais par la technique, c'est le monde qui s'impose à nous, et l'effet de surprise de ce renversement est considerable. (...) Il ne s'agit pas de produire. Tout est dans l'art de disparaître. Seul ce qui advient sur le mode de la disparition est véritablement autre. Encore faut-il que cette disparition laisse des traces, qu'elle soit le lieu d'apparition de l'Autre, du monde, de l'objet. C'est d'ailleurs la seule façon pour l'Autre d'exister: sur la base de votre propre disparition. "We shall be your favorite disappearing act!"²⁴

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité*, Descartes & Cie., Paris, 1998, n.p.