

Transmedium

00/00/13. An unlucky number for media purism, no doubt. But on many a date in several countries, venues, exhibitions, and publication copyrights, 2013 was a banner year for an art practice seeking to inhabit and negotiate—to transact—the difference between media in an expanded audiovisual field. So consider this essay, among other things, a scant and glancing preview rather than review (if you don't know the book yet) of conceptual writer Craig Dworkin's important 2013 study, *No Medium* (MIT Press), where current digital experiments, both in image and sound, impinge on his longer history of medium effacement. Whether it's John Cage orchestrating silence or Robert Rauschenberg erasing a Willem de Kooning painting or Aram Saroyan binding a ream of blank paper, certain works do seem to have no real medium left, just matter (or time) for consideration.

But Dworkin is too curious for his own rubric. His sense of conceptual irony takes him farther afield from such stringencies of negation into medium-thick work not so much lacking all formal determinants as evincing self-transformed ones, including the computer-driven “blurring” (or algorithmic averaging) of both painting and film. On exhibit in *No Medium*, among many such recent experiments (though without illustration besides what his deft prose can provide), is an installation I saw first, the year before, at the Tate Modern—though only a small segment of its running time, for reasons obvious in a moment. This work by American digital provocateur Cory Arcangel (*Colors*, fig. 1) takes an entire month to screen a Hollywood DVD: to “screen out” its images, that is, in favor of their digital constituents, line by laser-read line of chromatic data traced by computerized “slit scan.” The film is thus unraveled full screen (as a distended vertical curtain of striated coloration) over a full-length and real-time soundtrack, many times rerun—a track with which the work's optical tracings can never catch up. Here is a case of slow motion so drastic that there is no visual action left, just optical activity hovering between narrative (still audible) and its artificially extruded retinal substrate.

The commercial film in question, though no longer in view: Dennis Hopper's 1988 police procedural *Colors*, the title originally suggestive of the L.A.-based plot's racial crises for the dubious men in blue. Arcangel's software proceduralism, with its analytic reduction from

DVD to dilatory pixel scan, builds to a lurking grammatical pun like the famous Hitchcock promo tagline “*The Birds Is Coming.*” The tacit question: You want to see *Colors*? Here they are. No cinematic medium left, just its split-second analysis in transfer to an underlying stratum of coded generation. Transmedial as it is, probing the space between narrative imagery electronically transcribed and its gradient digital inscriptions, this work plumbs beneath anything advocated by formalism’s “baring the device.” For here there is no sparing of the artifact at all, no informed reconstitution of its structured nature. There is only the technological comedy of loss.

Digitime Present

Art like this, in what I have taken to calling Conceptualism 2.0, even when not quite letting go of the appropriated medium it works over, won’t at the same time—and however distended that time—let new digital processes go without seeing. Such is the social contract of such “cross-over” practice. There is no danger of taming the current spate of such work by naming its common denominators with a term like transmedial. Each piece redefines its kind. But it does so by bringing to light certain invisible technological affordances and their tacit relation to our pluralized and ever more pervasive category of “the media”—a relation merely tacit, in these works, because it is often at first obscure, occulted. Technical obliqueness and mystery are the new norm in these installation projects, their display awaiting “behind-the-scenes” discourse and disclosure by extensive wall-plaque or catalogue explication. In such cases we don’t really know what we are seeing until we are told how it is shown to us, which often means how it embeds and tampers with the manifestation of another (itself perhaps already electronic) medium.

The social context is clear. By stratospheric overload, we are bombarded lately by as much mediation as radiation. Ozone depletion and digital repletion. The rain of image and text is a steady stream, two-way but irreversible. We Net-book our tickets and our faces, load our data up, down, and everywhere in between, find ourselves linked—or say enchained—and unwittingly data-mined. Visual art’s way of intercepting this flux and reflux of data transmit and its shackling fascinations—when art practice isn’t just swept along by it in reproduced thumbnail samples or Vimeo clips—is increasingly to suspend itself long enough between a received medium and its unexpected transformation to delimit and somehow cross the gap. But the gap is in this sense conceptual, not physical: often the potential chasm, or bridge, between plastic

or electronic form and some new impalpable field (or platform) of dis-embodied and composite binarity.

The *trans* in such cases can be unduly volatile: active, transactive, contrastive, dialectical, and often undoing. “Transmedial” emerges as category by sheer distinction—to set it off from other “impure” modes in the modern history of art. “Mixed media” art puts one material next to or above (nonhierarchically) another. In 2013 at the Hirshhorn in D.C.: “Over, Under, Next,” a comprehensive exhibit on just that: superimposition, underlay, and adjacency in hybrid forms, from Cubist photo-collage forward. In another terminology, “intermedial art,” like interdisciplinary scholarship, applies one method in view of another. What, instead, I am calling “transmedial” art more actively *pictures the difference*: negotiates it, traverses it. The *trans* functions much like the prefix in the etymology of metaphor as *trans-fer*: putting something across by crossing between registers, trans-figuring the described entity—and often disfiguring it in the process.

“Remediation” is of course the going term, but its emphasis is technological more than (or before) aesthetic. Think of cinema transferred to and thus remediated by VHS tape—or then again remastered for DVD issue. One medium disappears only to be “re-upped,” its former content finding a new transmissive mode. In contrast, transmediation preserves in some sense the medial energies it supplements or supplants. Operating neither in “no medium” nor in an immediately familiarized new one, it hovers between, recalibrates, analyzes. The conceptualism of the transmedial object begins in such analysis rather than in an absolute negation. Even when—as with *Colors* redux—the new scrutiny ultimately murders to dissect. The result is regularly a matter of discrepant scale: a scale spatial or temporal or both, caught out in the forced transit between material (or immaterial) manifestations. Scale and its own particularly digital irony—often a subtle probing of image in its ratio between data input and optical output, electronic fundament and visual upshot. Rhetorical irony: saying one thing and meaning another. Retinal irony: showing one thing so as to make seen another. Such transmedial irony is often a thing (an objectified thing) of scalar transit in itself, from micro to macro or back again, whether in graphic extent or duration.

Testing Patterns

Or when not a matter of scale, sometimes a matter of equivocated surface and faux depth. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2013. James Turrell—a retrospective running concurrently with his Guggenheim

show. In one particularly telling work, we come upon this implicit hybridizing equation: minimalist sculptural gesture plus video = electronic light sculpture. In cognitive effect: a transmedial mirage. It happens this way, as one has to discover by reading, unpacking its mystery by the patient discursive revelation of its explicated procedure in catalogue copy. A TV monitor is hidden “off frame” behind a gallery wall that has been defaced by a cutout, to be approached at the end of a narrow corridor where two flanking incandescent canister spots throw their beams needlessly against the side walls—as if merely to distinguish that kind of routine gallery “lighting” from the pulsing glow ahead and between them. The glimmering hole—which, until stared at up close, looks like a beaming surface of transmission—resembles nothing so much as an embedded monitor in standard museum installation. Whereas the vertical rivulets of a slit-scan color tracing in *Colors* recall, for Dworkin, the “no medium” of mere “test patterns” from predigital TV, in the so-called Magnetron works of Turrell the less defined image appears more like the aimless ocular static of a channel lost to content from beyond the broadcast band, where retinal noise can never recoup itself as signal. Yet wrong so far. This is not a TV image at all, but merely the image of a TV, derived at one remove from an invisible one: hallucinated as effect to its own absent cause.

Described to this point, in other words, is only the first feint in a developing irony, since the apparent video interface must gradually come to be seen (one guesses at this, on gradual approach, almost before one recognizes it) as just a sawed-out aperture shaped like the rounded-off rectangle of a once-standard TV screen. Depth reads at first as plane, 3D as 2D manifestation. Certainly the initially supposed “medium” is no medium at all, just the hollowed frame for another not unlike it. For the actual TV—sequestered beyond our sight, its images never seen directly—instead throws the variant abstract hues of its silent playback on a second white wall behind the negative duplicate of itself. It is as if the cathode ray image has returned across the evolution of moving-image technology from electronic broadcast to cinematic projection, but its beam radiating now, by indirection—by sheer reflection rather than direct transmit—only with the indistinct glimmer of oscillating color tones. Providing a useless flicker as if dialed up from the optic limbo beyond commercial TV’s active station roster, it appears as a default to pure medium without message. McLuhanesque in another sense too: the “cool” rather than “hot” medium of TV, cooler than ever imagined, requiring anything but passive viewing in order to grasp (to warm to) the mystery of its displacement.

Pixelation / Googlegrammar

Earlier in 2013, and back in New York, at the Met rather than the Guggenheim, a show from their photography archive: “After Photoshop: Manipulated Photography in the Digital Age.” The standout was in fact a work of manipulated digitization, a “Googlegram,” by Spanish conceptual photographer Joan Fontcuberta. One large-format image viewed from the middle distance comes to you, comes to assemblage, courtesy of ten thousand separately indiscernible web-searched thumbnails. If “hyperrealism” (or sometimes “photorealism”) names a mode of painting approximating the crisp mechanical exactitude of photography, Fontcuberta’s work is something of the opposite: appropriated historical masterworks of both painting and photography shown to dissipate into the mere pastiche of everyday “Google Images.” His are pictures that look at first like out-of-focus paintings or photographs blown out of scale and surrendering resolution, until on closer view they are themselves revealed as digital collage. The optical substrate surfaces on examination as another and coherent medial underlay. Call it hyporealism.

In any case, it is certainly transmedial—and related as such, if indirectly, to perhaps the most famous of “hyperrealist” painters, Chuck Close, whose technique undergirds his simulated gargantuan portraits—and undermines them at the same time—with a handmade pixel-like gridwork based on photomechanical projection in the studio. And not least in an involuted variant of this mode I happened to catch later in 2013 at the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne), selected for exhibit along with other works from an earlier show of contemporary art called “An Incomplete World.” Nothing there was more incomplete than the 2007 graphic work of Close’s *Self-Portrait (anamorphic)*, which had no immanence as human image until warped into reflected compression. It is as if Close had begun with one of his enlarged snapshots—as gridded up by overhead projection into his pseudo-bitmap analysis—and then “reverse-engineered” its manifestation in shrunken form. For what we see in a vitrine display is an anamorphic fan-out of an elongated honeycomb-like pattern in pencil that has been stretched flat in an approximate semicircular segment around the base of a small chrome pillar—on which the bent drawing, its gridwork curved and oblong in a splayed and illegible geometry, is “corrected” when mirrored back to the viewer outside the vitrine. The image comes to us reconstituted as neither a curvilinear abstract drawing nor an iconic face in some tubular silver looking glass, but as nothing more nor less than “a Chuck Close” in reflected miniature. Hyperrealist with a twist, the transmediation here, implicit as well as visible, takes a return route from drawing (the

usual end product) through reduced sculptural monolith to disembodied likeness. What is manifested, without being materialized, is indeed a composite image not unlike the hyporealist palimpsest of Fontcuberta's "Googlegrams," their mosaics sieved through a canny art-historical (as well as geometric) grid.

Winner in 2013 of the prestigious Hasselblad Award, Fontcuberta certainly brought a varied post-1960s career in conceptual photography to a head that same year at the Met with his reconstitution of history's first (still extant) photograph, an 1826 print by Nicéphore Niépce (fig. 2). In this ironic adaptation of available technology, the processing of optical data files from key-padded Web searches is, by a further software process, configured into minuscule tiled patterns that (re)generate—by adjusted fields of tonality, chromatic weight, and intensity—the pixel-like gradations of an overall master image (fig. 3 [detail of fig. 2]). One of the most daring and least technologically predetermined works of this sort in his catalogue is the engineering, the imageering—from the micrographic ground up—of a hyperrealist duplicate of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866), with its scandalous vaginal close-up of a reclining nude. Whatever the debates over realism in Courbet's day, the computer-produced composite of this notorious image has the look now of borrowing back from early photography a reminder of those new pornographic conveniences that have proliferated a century and a half later with Web imaging. But other and more central media genealogies are also inscribed.

The pornographic legacy asserts itself only at first disconcerted glance. In Fontcuberta's systematic override of the organic by the machinic, his process also has a way of recovering the discourse-heavy bias of early conceptualism from the contemporaneous ferment out of which photorealism also arose. True to the transmedial electronics of these works in general, his puzzle-piece image of the Courbet doesn't resort to the overt microcosmic buildup of separate nude shots in a wholly geometric—and exponential—eroticism. Instead, with a conceptualist bias toward displacement and wordplay, and triggered by Courbet's own generalizing title, *Origin of the World*, this piecemeal wall of optic fragments (10,000 strong, with some of them strictly visual frames, some others illegibly small text blocks) has been motored into frozen and printed view by the triangulated search criteria of "Big Bang," "Black Hole," and "Dark Matter," the first two sexual puns drifting over to the metaphysical, the copulative become cosmic. What the overall look of this Courbet redux thus serves to figure, digitally to *configure*, is a wholesale break from anthropocentrism, one in which the "origin of the

world” is now understood otherwise—and in part as an electromagnetic phenomenon at that. But the ironies of the piece are more immediately medial as well. In its programmatic, automatized access to the so-called World Wide Web, the means of imaging—in what amounts to a self-proliferated optical thesaurus—take their mordant place within its exemplified sense of a global information ecology. In the new organon of fingertip knowledge, unstable and potentially disintegrative, the primacy of desire—carnal desire in its role as species reproduction—has been subordinated to a diffused epistemophilia, digital rather than genetal. This new *Origin of the World* suggests that the dominant form of origination in our day, sheer combinatory association, is marked not by interrupted menstrua but by intercepted data streams.

Digital F/Photosynthesis

Earlier than these mid-decade experiments exemplified by the Niépce “reprint” at the Met (generated by a bilingual image search in part on the term “Foto”/“Photo”), there is another computerized mode of transmedial irony—via synthetic imaging—applied by Fontcuberta in 2002 to the eclipsed ancestries of both spatial and ocular realism in painting under the series title *Landscapes without Memory*. It is certainly unsurprising, later in the decade, that Fontcuberta has been drawn to Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* (1966) and its problematic of scale in regard to the particulate molecules of a photo image—around which he has subsequently built a complex 2009 installation of his own, with the famous film’s grainy evidentiary snapshots of a suspected corpse enlarged yet again to an illegible “life-size.” But what may well take us by surprise is how the appropriated computer logic that would eventually result in his Googlegrams had earlier, quite beyond cinematic or even photographic allusion, sent him off in another and even more high-tech direction as well. For in those remarkable *Landscapes without Memory*, by generating scenic vistas of the never before seen through a process he calls “orogenesis,” the image plane results from his feeding the digitized data field of one or another canonical painting, often with its own two-dimensional approximation of three-dimensional space in the landscape mode—now a post-impressionist Cézanne, now a Braque—into a program designed by the U.S. Air Force to “translate” flat topographic maps into the more serviceable form of pictured landscapes. Cross-wired thereby is a virtual-reality apparatus in color print rather than video form (an André Derain, for example, spawning its electronically deciphered double, fig. 4 and fig. 5).

The results, in Fontcuberta's transmediation, are ad hoc procedural works, "landscapes without" even computer "memory." In his circuitous repurposing of this software, the more or less approximate perspectival craft of the source painting is thus reinstrumented by an algorithmic regularity that distorts the painterly *imagined*—by an imposition of the electronic *virtual*—into the genuinely and disturbingly *unreal*. The sense elsewhere of the queasy hyperrealism that attends the too-close-for-comfort duping of mobile human features in CGI animation, the dreaded "uncanny valley" of Hollywood computer engineers, has become quite literally the weird unpeopled landscape of a high-definition nowhere. And beyond experiments in this vein with actual landscape art, however far from realist treatment, Fontcuberta can disremember other more experimental work. When the all-over drips and squiggles of a Jackson Pollock abstraction are three-dimensionalized through such a filter, one gets in the digital printout a landscape with rock-formation loopholes. So it is that Fontcuberta's alternating electronic tropes emerge as tightly complementary. In his Googlegrams, computer searching dredges the digital base of mostly analog imagery and binds its findings into another analog image. In the earlier computerizing of his virtual topographies—the first stage of his hyporealist trajectory—a yet more arbitrary collaboration between art history and CGI technology serves to *transmediate* the aesthetic landscape, via military software, into a simulated and instrumental one: aesthetics reduced to tactics. We can't help but sense ourselves one step away, with these images, from "live-action" gunnery practice in a VR cockpit.

For their "After Photoshop" exhibition, the Met curators were quick to call Fontcuberta's experiments since the 1970s a probing "deconstruction" of the myth of "objectivity" in photographic art. In the case of their chosen display piece, what is in fact dismantled from within is the coherent plane of Niépce's 1826 *View from the Window at Le Gras*—with 10,000 "microchip" images (either sense of the modifier, digital cause or miniature effect) called up by the image search of "photo" as well as "foto." The resultant "thumbs" are all that is left of manual dexterity—an unflagged dead metaphor—in executing the composition as a whole. Two other lapsed metaphoric overtones shadow this electronic collage as well in relation to the photo's eponymous *View from the Window*: the idea of a real-world "viewing" rather than a machinic image production; and the longstanding trope of the Albertian "window," that millennial figure for the very frame of mimetic representation, downgraded now to everyday trademarked functions of the Windows operating system. Where the Courbet homage displaces any myth of origination, optical

or otherwise organic, onto the variable procedures of image generation, here the artist has sought explicitly, according to the Met gloss, to relate “photography’s chemical origins to its dematerialized, pixelated present”—and thus to dissipate its indexical authority across a permutational array. The ghost of an original impress is built up from cascades of inset backlit “tiles” matched in their muted colors to shadings of the black-and-white master image in a mimetic approximation according to density, luminosity, and hue—once the subsidiary icons are reshuffled, that is, from the interchanged lexical prompts of their f/photogenesis (fig. 3 again). Yet what splinters all organic integrity of image here, shivers it to bits, is the same optic material that constitutes it, that underlies it (again: hypo=under). These are the same ingredient fragments (or cloud-sourced “excerpts”) that therefore, in the postmodern photographic tradition, transmute the stylistic hype of hyperrealism to a new stratum of compositional irony and a new molecular grammar (beyond and beneath the gridded, sectored, and recopied photograph): a hypogrammar whose Net effect (every sense) is like an arrested motorization, by so-called search engines, of the overall image plane. What transpires is the demotion of photomechanical art to an operational expertise in digital graphics.

Again, the irony of scale: concordia in discord, the constituent tid-bit gradually perceived within the gallery enlargement. In a mode of coherent painting rather than digital collage, one may call to view here, from the photorealist camp, the oversize acrylic rendering of serial film frames (floating partway toward the scale of projection rather than celluloid imprint, and complete with time-worn scratches) in Ed Ruscha’s *The End #10* (1993), where the fixity of one medium refigures the closure of the other. This is to say that the transmedial gesture inheres in the hypermediation performed by an absorption into painting of an alien mechanical optics and surface treatment. Photomechanical evocation in paint is, however, only one such transit point between medial determinations. And cinematographic evocation only another. Further screen regimes have followed, increasingly totalizing. In Fontcuberta’s case, and this time from within the realm of automatic imagining itself rather than paint craft, we come upon works whose recognition—and power—hover (and so in effect *cross*) between a ubiquitous and etiolated screen culture of digital relay and some other precedent form, like photography or painting. His works aren’t rephotographed paintings or even rescreened photos. They are paintings and photos seen through (“across”) the filter of their own either splintered or transfiguring electronic aftermath.

Yet Fontcuberta—operating at the subsisting stratum of the hyporeal—negotiates a further dematerialization of means: this in his simulated pixelations of a picture plane that is in fact thousands of miniaturized (coherent but illegible—say suppressed) ones instead. Computerized image searches are a cognitive facilitation, to be sure. But when replayed by full-frame transmedial irony as photoprints, they install a figure for aesthetic belatedness from within the present artistic form. Under the thumb of the digital, as it were, in these versions of the postmodernist rather than high-modernist grid there is no aesthesis without prosthesis. To be thought of, once more, as *hyporealist* effects for their dependence on underlying computer codes, Fontcuberta's extrapolations from one graphic platform to another optical plane are vaunts of transmediation that subordinate all question of technique to the new global premium on data technology and its algorithms.

Picturings at War

The strategies cohere even as they diversify across Fontcuberta's experiments. The transmediation at stake repeatedly commutes between affordances aesthetic and commercial, disinterested and strategic—as if to expose a new and suspect continuum in our image culture. Certainly, in those *Landscapes without Memory*, his resort to computer-enhanced military cartography in the service of virtual reality terrain, in tacit association with surveillance tactics and ballistic science, bears out German media theorist Friedrich Kittler's relentless paradigm for the harbinger in military decryption technology of all advances in media art and commerce.¹ And the paramilitary dimensions of contemporary imaging are by no means incidental in the current practice of conceptual media art, well beyond Fontcuberta's sourceless, memoryless sites as travesties of tactical virtuality.

Freeze frame again, 2013. At the Vox Populi gallery in Philadelphia and the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, appeared two different iterations of American artist Mark Tribe's ongoing collaborative work with Chelsea Knight, called *Posse Comitatus* ("force of the county"). The performance and/or installation is named for the kind of right-wing paramilitary group whose training exercises (filmed by Tribe in upstate New York), and presented in life-size video projection, are set in contrast with either video or live choreography designed to mimic into abstraction their rifle practice maneuvers, turning lethal protocols into unnerving ballet. The work is in this sense not just collaborative but transmedial: the time-based formats of digital video and choreography confronting each other in the representation of a paranoid theater of war that happens to evacu-

ate from the parochial execution of his shooting practice the high-tech video that would itself be rendered tactical in more sophisticated and globalized defense systems. The distance here between combat's mechanized dance of death and its literalization in gesture is simply marked by the irony of videography, rather than co-opted and telescoped by it, as in our actual wired wars. No drones and their satellite imaging, just staged and projected war porn.

This particular 2013 thematization of Tribe's video work, in connection with military violence, would be familiar to his returning audiences. Just the year before, in a two-phased installation at Momenta Art (Brooklyn) called *Rare Earth*, Tribe mounts for gallery display eight large-format landscape photographs in the tradition of Constable or Corot, gently contoured and thickly forested, but somehow oddly untrammelled and spookily lit—what, misted?—with their sunlit leaves at times almost translucent around the edges. More uncanny valleys literalized, as if preserving the faint haze of their own backlit (we discover) origin. For as topography, they are a rarer earth yet than they seem at first look: indeed ersatz, pixelated, wholly rarefied in their virtuality. They are in fact high-definition frame enlargements from the background landscapes of combat video games, immobilized as if in wait for the targetings, the F/X artillery bursts, the digital zooms. See, for instance, *Black Creek* from 2012 (fig. 6). These virtual fields of view are images under the sign of reconnaissance. What they most resemble, within the aesthetic of gamer simulacra, is surveillance in suspended animation, the scene awaiting the sighting—and then the on-monitor mayhem. Again, hyporealism: an apparently photographic image undermined as index by its own underlying digital generation as video frame.

And these canvas-scale photographs are counterposed in another room of this same Brooklyn installation, within its overall theme of “paramilitary fantasy,” by a fixed-frame but moving-image video by Tribe (only the barest motion discernible) of a landscape from that same militia training ground in upper New York featured in his collaborative work, though serenely deserted this time, eminently “peaceful.” In its ironic reprise of American pastoralism, the recorded terrain is identified not as the computerized backdrop for some first-person shooter, but instead as a real armed “garden” into which (in Leo Marx's famous antithesis) the “machine” itself, in the form of weaponry, will soon disruptively appear. The linked ironies of the installation thus bookend each other. The too-nearly-real of so-called war games, temporarily suspended in their rehearsed violence, answers to the commercially generated scene of fictive violence in the combat genre mode of video game

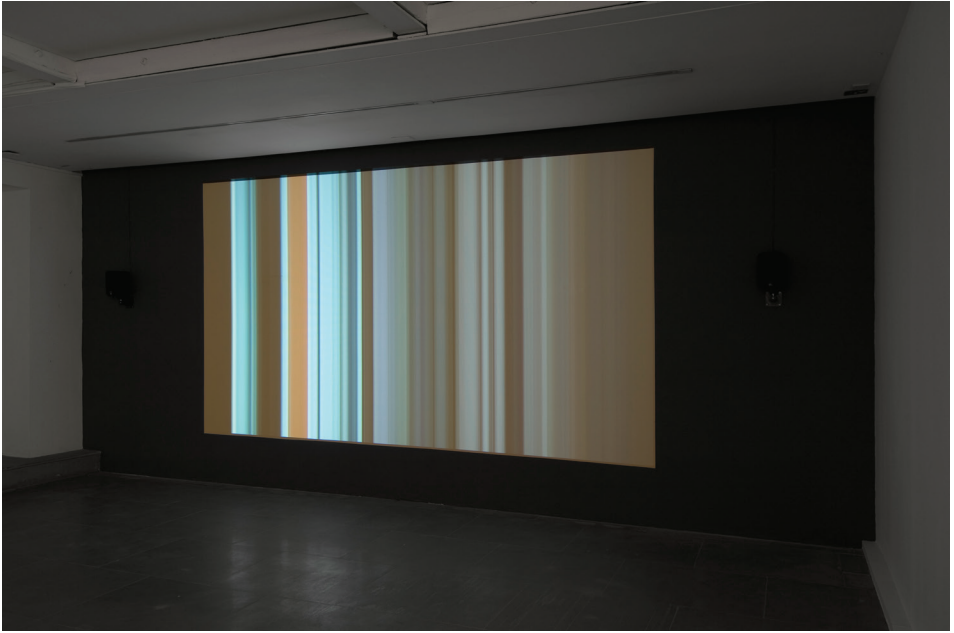


Figure 1. Cory Arcangel, Colors, 2006. (Installation view: Lisson Presents 7, Lisson Gallery, London, UK, 2009–2010.) Single channel video, artist software, computer. Duration: 33 days. © Cory Arcangel. Image courtesy of Cory Arcangel.

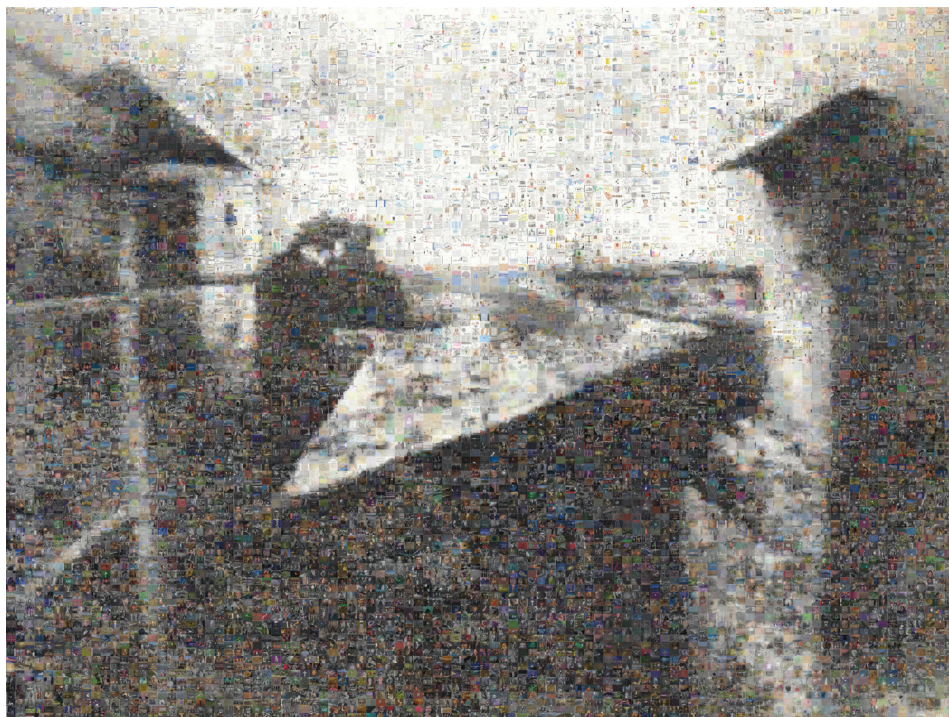


Figure 2. Joan Fontcuberta, Googlegram: Niépce, 2005. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid.



Figure 3. Detail of figure 2.



Figure 4. André Derain, *The Grove*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 117 x 81 cm. State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.



Figure 5. Joan Fontcuberta, Orogenesis: Derain, 2004. Type C-print. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid.



Figure 6. Mark Tribe, Black Creek, 2012. Archival pigment print, 44 x 69 in., edition of 5 with 1 AP. Image courtesy of Mark Tribe.



Figure 7. Christiane Baumgartner, Game Over, 2011. Woodcut on kozo paper, 90 x 120 cm (image size), 110 x 140 cm (paper size). Courtesy Alan Cristea Gallery, London. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid.

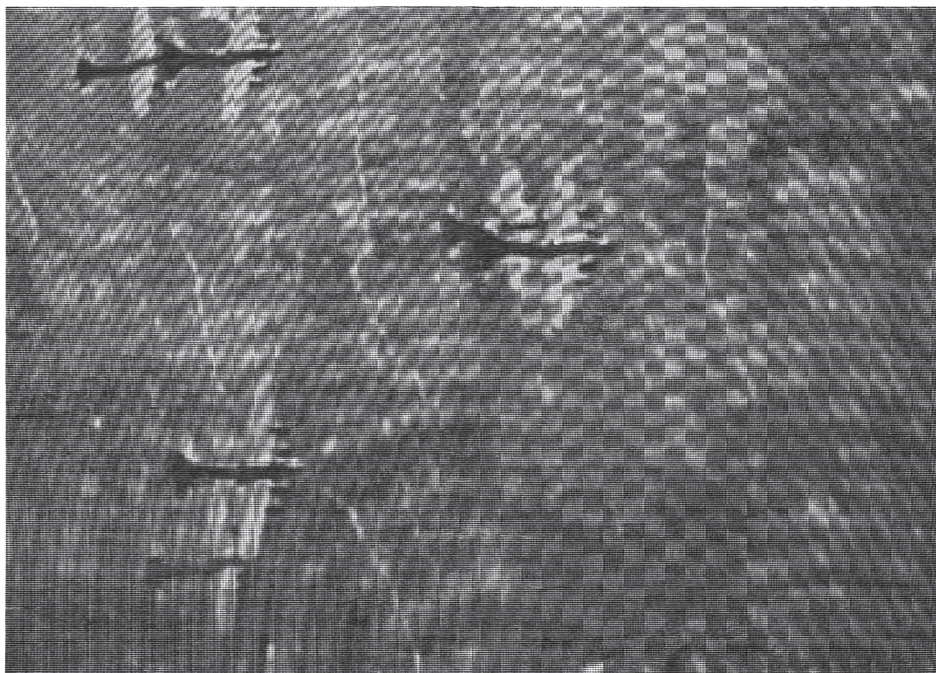


Figure 8. Christiane Baumgartner, Luftbild, 2009. Woodcut on kozo paper, 234 x 326 cm (image size), 260 x 350 cm (paper size). Courtesy Alan Cristea Gallery, London. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid.

imagery, even as the depopulated vistas of the former are neutralized, demilitarized, and the latter transmediated into a museum genre of its own as decontextualized art print.

Graphic Violence

And from these same years we're living through, and finding pictured back to us, there is the striking artisanal and conceptual work of German artist Christiane Baumgartner. Represented in over a dozen gallery exhibitions in 2013 alone, hers are manifestly "transmedial" artifacts (woodcut delineations representing linear video scans) in which the notion of the postwar and the postmodern disturbingly converge. This is especially obvious when she takes up as explicit topic—indeed as optical topos—the videography of combat imaging. Approaching an arresting transmedial work of hers in the painting wing of London's Imperial War Museum (*Game Over*, 2011 [fig. 7])—nearing it from the far side of the large gallery in which it is hung—one may think at first it's a screen grab of war footage photographically enlarged over a dozen times, losing any real fidelity in the process: an exploding plane from a bygone era in a grainy soft focus reminiscent of TV documentaries. Same with the attack planes in the 2009 work *Luftbild* (fig. 8). There seems in play here, moreover, an immediate allusion to Gerhard Richter's WWII fighter planes caught as if in blurry stop-action in his out-of-focus photorealism; or, especially in the overhead "shot" of *Game Over*, his bombardier's-eye view of Dresden under siege (*Bridge 14 FEB 45 (I)*, 2000), with released bombs receding into the vertical distance in their assault on a bridge.

But Baumgartner's images have been achieved not in scraped black-and-white oil, like Richter's often are, but in boldly carved woodblock prints whose rough-hewn table-knife gouges evoke—at least from the spectatorial distance necessary to mute their oversize jaggedness—the familiar striations of low-resolution video. In this way, at "heroically" enlarged museum scale (like landscape painting of old, or "historical" war tableaux for that matter), Baumgartner's reimagined image of attack planes works to "update" footage (or photographs) of WWII bombers into (twice transmediated) graphic transmissions. The woodcut treatment is typical of her work, whatever the setting re-pictured, but the specific intertext in Richter for the aerial warfare pieces (unlike her scratched-out capture, for instance, of the fixed-frame routine view of highway traffic cams in another print) gives a special edge to this particular skyscape (or skyscraper) as televisual image. And with *Luftbild*, moreover, the odd patterns of vertical interference, traversing her char-

acteristic lateral scan lines, have the uncanny effect of producing from within remediated video—as if in a phantom telescoping of screen technology—the further transmedial evocation of a pixel grid.

One may also note a certain irony in Baumgartner's graphics associated with that other sector of recent German work mentioned above, the imbrication of military technology and the industrial media complex in Kittler's theoretical writings. For in Baumgartner's craft the innovative military science of real-time image transmission, leading as it eventually does to commercial television, is being re-invoked by a simulated TV image. Then, too, there is the deeper logical irony of origin and aftermath inherent in such images. In the irregular, ridged cascade of her horizontal slicings, a sense of those former wars we normally see "classically" documented (archival photographs and film footage, like heroic painting before them) is overlapped, imposed upon, by a latter-day optic that, by extension, calls up war's current video waging in its Mideast "theaters." The remote imaging that used to be part of war's effect as reported, its epistemological aftermath, say its TV reminiscence (in History Channel retrospects on WWII, for instance), is now, in short, part of its operational system, its electronic execution—as to some degree suggested as well by Fontcuberta's paramilitary digital topographies.

This is the case even while the meticulous labor of this inference in Baumgartner's art—the productive action of its transmedial irony—returns any such contemporary electronic overtones of an increasingly unmanned aerial targeting to the humanized realm of the strenuously handmade. Though far from the slit-scanned pixel spectra swollen to full-frame mobile image in the more completely demediating fashion of Arcangel's time-based *Colors*, in Baumgartner's work, nonetheless, there is the ingrained pull between linear generation and rectangular manifestation, graphic trace and optic space. What is painstakingly delayed by Baumgartner's technique is not just the swiftness of the pictured motion but the motorized action of the video image itself in coming to view. Such is the full transmedial irony of her woodcuts, as of Arcangel's video: letting us experience one thing (conjured "video still," DVD in action) while showing us, otherwise, how differently its optics actually find manifestation.

The re-visionary charge of Baumgartner's practice results from exactly the double distancing, historical (WWII) and medial (from photomechanical imprint to block-print impress), by which such picturing looks again at the machinic specularity of past combat, as compared with Tribe's interest in the video game graphics of its contemporary simu-

lation. Fontcuberta's own version of such distancing is more entirely imagistic than, say, instrumental. In computerized camerawork rather than hand-carving, his pictures install no sustained phobic recoil from the automated electronics of a surveillance or video game ethos. In the more sardonic work of Baumgartner or Tribe, by contrast, emphasis falls on the medial continuity between the videosphere of art and commerce and the latently invasive deployments of these same imaging systems in other hands. Yet one might think to put it this way by generalization after all: warring claims for the most urgent form of contemporary museum imaging increasingly take other ocular modalities of contested terrain, like those of electronic warfare itself, into the picture.

The Receding Seen

Here, too, is where Fontcuberta's digital photography, even when not mobilizing military software in those *Landscapes without Memory*, intercepts the new global media ecology from a wry angle. One might readily want to follow the Met's lead, pointing us back into the precincts of photorealism itself, and see in the constituent color tiles of his gridded vistas a "deconstruction" not just of photography's objective basis but of its illusory indexical coherence under other medial circumstances. Which is only to begin measuring what else is being taken apart by his work. The point isn't for Fontcuberta simply that every photograph is a disguised pointillism, every coherence a construct, optically groundless at base. The crux isn't graphic and optical so much as cognitive, ultimately social, which is to say political. And, as such, all but an optic allegory of the bottomless. In the latter-day reign of image culture, representation is entirely derivative, or say cumulative. You never seize upon a separable pictorial moment without sensing in it, if not quite seeing, all the other images that precede and feed it, infuse and muddy it, that in effect *secondarize* it. That makes each arriving image just one evanescent rephrasing of a given *visual discourse*. In its strange scalar gestalt, getting us to see our inability to see otherwise is the schematic work of the Googlegram works. Where the founding gestures of conceptual art gave ironic priority to discourses of culture over its artifacts, here too in the Met example, with its collaged homage to our first optical automatism in the Niépce photo, is a foundational image sprung from the archive by none other than lexical cross-reference (*f/photo*) and its visual redistributions. What looks like a dated photograph is lots of more up-to-date and datelined ones, arbitrarily rearranged within a broad thematic protocol of word-search functionality. The overall image is not so much found and appropriated as engineered in its arbitrary increments and

rebuilt, its medium computational before visual. Or say again, rather than medium, its transmedial function.

Faintly cracked and spackled on first notice, the flattened-out data bank of text and image in these works is in the other sense banked, terraced, graded (by hue and brightness rather than height) in a unraised topographic scrim that is found ultimately resolving—at just the right full-frame distance—into a one among many possible pictures quite other than any that actually accrete to contour it. The whole is, in fact, far less than the sum of its parts: neither an aggregate nor an average but a spread of sheer difference gelling to “crazed” shape (and not least in the etymological sense, from *pixie*, of *pixilated*).² As such, of course, it discloses the truth of all imaging writ both small and a bit too large at once—too large for quite overlooking this fact in an encompassing look. In this rebooted Niépce, the logic of the congeries shows through the gestalt. The photonic composite is almost an optic rebus as well as an allegory. Who can see the Niépce *without* seeing its splintered legacy? How else to approximate its priority without reassembling some overloaded sample—and semblance—of photography’s historical and international fallout? And where more trenchantly than in a grid-work ubiquity of data registration that, with overtones of surveillance purview, resolves into picture only on a need-to-see basis? Inevitably conjuring up the more straightforward and seemingly holistic scans of Google Earth, Fontcuberta’s mosaic images in this vein infer the ogled dearth of the real.

It is by just such intrinsic scalar irony that the Googlegram works serve to fractalize one level up the microchip tilings of any pixelated image, webbed into view across its own bitmap array. Certainly this version of Niépce’s landmark vantage point, his *View from the Window*, offers up a window we don’t think to see *through*. This is one destiny of the lens that doesn’t lead us back to human optics. This is one illusion of an illusion, one transmedial picturing of a former visual index, that pitches us past spectatorship altogether to decryption and analysis, to reading, but with no coherent authority claimed for its discrepant checkerboard scheme. So this is one differential image surface—one like so many others we encounter lately (only more so, and insistently)—that actually yields up its strictly differential composite. With the philosophical stringencies of text-heavy conceptual art hereby parodied, or at least emptied out, by mere image-search linkages to certain freestanding lexemes (*foto*, *photo*), and with the earliest mimetic irreverence of the modernist grid downgraded from revisionary conceptual scaffold to a sheer sorting mechanism, electronics has vanquished the optic field, automaticity

lording it over invention. Isolated by composite simulation itself, such photonic hyporealism has rendered, and so tendered to view, one fragmented photo plane—advanced in the name of many, and indeed riding on the backs of many such—that won't stay put for spectation. Nor let us. Such a contrivance leaves the seeing human body nowhere to stand. Well beyond any painterly repression of the photographic moment in hyperrealism, routinely eliding the photographer's reflection we might expect to glimpse in storefront glass or chrome hubcap, we have come to a place where the *electronic* blind spot is no longer optical so much as ontological.

Notes

- 1 See especially, amid many approaches to this technological phenomenon in his work, Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), as well as the further development of this theme in *Optical Media*, trans. Anthony Enns (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010).
- 2 I'm alluding here, though they are summoned in a different context for his study, to the related etymological backstories of the two terms, *craze* and *pixilated*, given in Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 97.