

RODRIGO GONZALO

TRACTATUS

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

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

HISTOGRAMS

Digital developments are exciting and affect all photographic production. They also indicate a post-photographic era; thus both the technology and the uses of photography find themselves again on the verge of a new beginning. In this scenario “data” seems to be a more appropriate term when trying to define what photography is today in a digital world.

The referent, where much of the truth and authenticity in photography rests, relates to *Civilian Iraq Casualties 2003-2011* and *Oil Price Fluctuation 2003-2011* since they are the most abstract in form and conceptually they leave the classical notion of photography farthest behind. Especially in the process of creating these images, do I surrender photography’s relation to the real? *Civilian Iraq Casualties* and *Oil Price Fluctuation* metaphorically take advantage of the formal and symbolic coincidence between histograms and stock charts. Here the referent, or graphic, is a

signifier that already implies a previous knowledge from the viewer in order to recognize anything on the final image. There is no interaction with light sensitive material in the creative process, thus the word “photography” is inaccurate to define them. Nevertheless, they are born from a critical inquiry of how the photographic medium is increasingly becoming data and information bits and less a reflection of a given reality.

Civilian Iraq Casualties and *Oil Price Fluctuation* could be initially presented as a set of information maps benefiting from the similarity to stock market charts and other graphic charts with digital photographic histograms. Through a reverse translation method, a computer language translates one image into another, thus deconstructing the creative photographic process, consciously negating the skills of a photographer.

It is remarkable that in the era of digital images and instant communication, official images of war have almost disappeared from the media. When they do appear they are strongly mediated and have little to do with death. Images of war are not about death anymore but about showing technological developments in imaging. In this sense war is presented to us in the form of military technological developments to provide visual rationales for domination. It is this way of representing war and surveillance that has influenced the way in which I approach the subject.

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

BANKS

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

The idea of the colony informed by its legacy and continuation through economic power, its relation to western economic growth throughout history, and the recent economic events that question the foundations and practices of the system are the concepts behind *Banks*.

I construct a meta-linguistic narrative appropriating the advertising slogans of the banks whose offices I photographed. Here the verbal is articulated as a political reference and constitutes a visual part of the work. Presenting them in this way aims to function as a new layer of understanding and serve as the anchor point. Hence without the erased cultural markers of initials and letters in the photographs or the added slogan images, they would always be too indeterminate to function critically. Also, the deliberate lack of information in the photographs confront the viewer with an extreme lack of visual information and a photograph that stubbornly refuses to satisfy the expectation of knowledge and objective information. What we see is some sort of perimeter, delimitation in an urban space that implies a barrier. We are looking from the outside into an apparently quiet, even idyllic environment where nature is controlled and the panopticum of surveillance designates or signifies a place we should be aware of.

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VIEW FROM MY WINDOW

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

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

Due to the *mise en scène* on the web, images acquire new contextual meanings. Now, if the elements joined together do not correspond with some culturally constructed meaning—which occurs in the interpretation of vernacular photography more than any other classification of

images—but the formation of the signs is left open, interpretation is not indisputable but arbitrary, independent of a particular culture but dependent on the operation of a process. To dissociate even more from a search for meaning determined by the use of shared cultural markers, the linguistic message is obtained from an arbitrary process, which is the publication of comments and news from The Economist on my profile on the social network Facebook at exactly the same time I took the picture. The message without a code—or an arbitrary one that in this case relates to the working mechanisms of distribution of both information and images—is what is left.

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