

The Plates of the Present

By Brett Littman

Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot were experimenting with photogenic processes as early as 1829. By 1839 Fox Talbot had invented the “negative/positive” calotype which allowed multiple images to be made from one negative. That same year, Fox Talbot was made aware of Daguerre’s experiments in Paris and hurriedly lobbied the Royal Institution and the Royal Society in London to allow him to present a series of papers on his progress with the medium. In one of his talks entitled “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing,” Fox Talbot specifically references the relationship between drawings and his calotypes as a way to differentiate the greater ease of his method to more accurately delineate plants and botany over the artist’s pencil and drawing.

Later in 1844, Fox Talbot expanded on his early ideas when he published “The Pencil of Nature,” which also contained the first glued-in reproductions of his calotypes. In “The Pencil of Nature” Fox Talbot gives detailed scientific information about his various experiments with different chemicals and processes needed to create photogenic images, and he continues to develop his philosophy of the medium as primarily mimetic and in service to the 1:1 reproduction of things in the world. In 1846, Mary M. Howard published an album of photogenic drawings, cyanotypes and photograms entitled *Ocean Flowers and Their Teachings*¹ which contained reproductions of botanical prints of seaweed, nautilus shells, and plants that seamlessly merged the Victorian pre-occupations with science and the natural world with the general adventurous and worldlier spirit of the times. The ultimate goals of these early photographic innovators however was not to make art, they truly believed the medium they were developing and promoting would supplant art as a more scientific, objective and ultimately truthful way of representing the world.

In 1888, George Eastman developed the first simple camera called the Kodak Number 1, the first mass developing and processing service for film and in 1889 developed the first transparent roll film. The impact of Eastman’s invention had a profound impact on the world – as this new technology was now available to the masses. Camera based photography developed rapidly after that both in terms of affordability and reliability and also radically changed the way we understand, document and perceive the world around us.

Even with the rapid rise and use of the camera over the next 30 years, 20th century avant-garde practitioners like Christian Schad, Man Ray, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Xanti Schawinsky and Len Lye abandoned camera based photography and looked back to the early origins of the medium, specifically photograms, as a way to express new artistic ideas. These artists exploited the simple

¹ The exhibition and catalog for *Ocean Flowers*, curated by Carol Armstrong and Catherine De Zegher for The Drawing Center in 2004 deals extensively with the relationship between these early “camera-less” prints, their relationship to scientific research and to drawing.

process of using light to make an image on photosensitive papers and used the resulting photograms in artworks, advertising and graphic design. Their radical rejection of the photographic process as something tied to objectivity and truth-telling moved the medium into a more subjective and artistic realm.

In many ways then, the “camera-less” darkroom founded by Thomas Fougeirol and Jo-ey Tang in 2012 in Ivry-sur-Seine in Paris is extending both the scientific and experimental spirit of Fox Talbot (even the title of the project The Plates of the Present directly references the opening lines of his “The Pencil of Nature”) and the avant-garde proclivities of the 20th century artists who explored the potential of photograms. They have allowed more than 30 international guests, from a wide variety of backgrounds, to experiment with cyanotypes and photograms. Many of these people have had no prior experience with photograms, darkrooms or developing photos before. Thomas and Jo-ey provide the most basic introduction to the darkroom and the chemicals and then allow the guests to explore, in their own way, their own process.

The participants and results have been quite varied. Laetitia Badaut Haussmann, an artist based in Paris best known for her sculptural installations, created some text based photograms as well as images of furniture and lamps. Yonatan Vinitsky, a London based artist, whose work is deeply engaged in the idea of translation and transformation, created a series of almost filmic abstract photograms with curves, dots, and lines. Madeleine Aktypi, an art historian and media and digital culture theorist in Paris, created a series of “concrete poetry” photograms starting with the word POEM and then sequenced through words that share letters like FLAN, PLAN, FILE and ended with the word POEME. The artist Daiga Grantina, used expired chemicals to create the drippy, dimensional compositions in her photogram series. Raffaella Della Olga, an Italian artist who trained to be a practicing criminal lawyer and also writes concrete typewriter poetry, created a series of photograms using 35 mm slide frames to create the letters AEIUO.

What is most interesting to me about The Plates of the Present is the diverse nature of the output of the participants. Some approached the opportunity in the darkroom to explore pure abstract composition, some decided to base their work on language and others challenged the very nature of the photogram and the darkroom processes by manipulating the chemicals and the paper itself. With this project Thomas and Jo-ey have created a rare tertiary space in the art world where artists can engage in an open-ended way with a process that they are not familiar with no commercial pressures, or expected outcomes. For that they should be celebrated as these kind of purely experimental and cooperative environments are almost extinct in the art world as we know it today.