

Goodbye Images

Producing images that blind, the industrial exploitation of images is their pure and simple destruction - because there are only images seen.

Bernard Stiegler¹

Man, instead of using images as a function of the world, begins to live as a function of images. No longer deciphers the image scenes as meanings of the world, but the world itself is experienced as a set of scenes.

Vilém Flusser

When the invitation to imagine this exhibition was made, and the festival theme being *Community*, from the beginning, one thing was very clear in our minds: we wanted to create temporary communities of individuals that gather to play, deconstruct, wonder, process, criticise, produce or not, experiences of togetherness around the presence and absence of images (here defined beyond photography practice). Without knowing that a war would take place, we already felt that we wanted to create a community, whose building criteria would be based on our unbounded affection, admiration, and closeness to some of our contemporary artists that happen to be our friends. And to open this freedom and solidarity to others beyond our temporary encounter.

The title was chosen a long time ago, and we decided to keep it. Now as ever, we should understand why we need so many images, and what we see or do not see through them. If death is a point of deep transformation, symbolic death is always

¹ Author's translation from: Stiegler, Bernard, *De la misère symbolique / 1. L'époque hyperindustrielle*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 2004.

present in the art (at least in the good one). *A Happy death*² is also a title of one of Albert Camus's works, published posthumously, and seen as a sketch of *The Outsider* (also translated as *The Stranger*, published in 1942). From him we take inspiration from the absurdism philosophy that he developed, present in his novels and essays. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942), for example, he explores the possibility that within the condemnation of Sisyphus, (that is obliged by the gods to carry a rock to a top of a mountain, to roll it down, walk down, and carry back to the top again, repeatedly for eternity, in the underworld), constituted by a repetition of a single image, action that is neverending torture, he explores the idea that when Sisyphus walks down the mountain he has the time to think, he has a temporary place of freedom. Lately, and during the last years of pandemic existence, many people read or re-read *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947), one of Camus's masterpieces, that was published in the aftermath of the Second World War. If in his previous works he focuses more on aspects of human judgement and absurd conditions, here in fact, in the middle of a plot where health, humanitarian and existential crisis takes place, he focuses on human solidarity. One of his characters has an altruist attitude - he decides to act for the good of others when he has the opportunity to save himself. Boldly, the question that Camus makes through this character is: When a real crisis happens, how do we decide to behave with each other? Starting in the individual, and then in the community. Strangely enough, he was not very well understood, when *The Plague* was released, and even received a quite bad review from Roland Barthes, being accused, in this novel, of teaching men "to ignore history and abstain from politics". This moved Camus to write a response, where he summarises some facts that contradict Barthes arguments, concerning what we have just spoken of:

*Compared to The Outsider, The Plague does not represent, beyond any possible discussion, the movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from The Outsider to The Plague, it is towards solidarity and participation.*³

² Published originally as *Le Mort Hereuse* by Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1971.

³ Albert Camus, *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, Penguin Modern Classics, GB, 1987 (page 220)

When the invitation to imagine this exhibition was made, we saw an empty dark room, where sometimes an image would appear, and a community of viewers would gather around. Nothing would be still, and each image's appearance would follow the creation of some image debris that would be then put on the side, as artefacts, laying against the surrounding walls. We wished to underline the poetic use of the photographic practice, as to enhance and sharpen humanistic, critical and environmentalist attitudes towards the world. And celebrate the possibility of people creating temporary communities around the act of seeing, translating, discussing and imagining, just as a photographer in extinction would do normally.

(...) the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it.

Walter Benjamin⁴

The purpose of this exhibition is not to underline an eventual crisis, death or end of photography, or to create a simplistic critical view of contemporary mechanisms of image production, dissemination and the politics, capital, beyond and on the surface of it. We can still speak about all of this without pressing the screens against the spectator's faces. Also if we are working on the limits and margins of the medium, it's not a form of undefinition in our purposes, or merely an escape to important questions. We want to use photography and not to be used by it. And, yes, we learnt with Vilém Flusser about and importance of thinking about images in a broader technical/cultural revolution that we are taking part in and that technical images, that are produced with a backstage of written codes, are now being used to communicate instead of spoken or

⁴ A *Short History of Photography*, published in the journal *Screen*, Volume 13, Issue 1, University of Glasgow, Spring 1972, (pág. 7)

written text, challenging the development of human thinking. In the book where he sets together with the foundations for his philosophy of photography, he explains and adverts for this post-historical coding:

Images are meant to represent the world. But in doing so, they interpose themselves between the world and man. Their purpose is to be maps of the world, but they become screens. Such an inversion of the function of images is idolatry. For the idolater – the man who lives magically – reality reflects images. We can observe, today, how the magicization of life is processed: the technical images, currently ubiquitous, illustrate the inversion of the imaginistic function and re-magicize life. It is about man's alienation from his own instruments. Man forgets the reason why images are produced: to serve as instruments to guide him in the world.⁵

In the past also, when there was a crisis, a war or a shortage, often the artist and its production is seen as the first dispensable thing. Suddenly the investors, the nobles, and the big capital can convince the all working-class that production and profit are the only things that matter. Survival at any expense. But historical consciousness is not something that is held by firms and companies, but by individuals and communities that gather with more or fewer conditions to be together, sharing a distance, a struggle, a common pain or hope.

We want to reflect on solidarity with freedom. The standardisation and predictability of human beings regarding the use of tools to create images and be mediated in the world through them, the often lacking of critical scanning of the images and its means of production, makes urgent a symbolic death of the images. To give space for a life and the encounter of individuals that are part of a temporary community, beyond the cliché of contemporary imagetic needs of synthesised and surfaced images.

⁵ Vilém Flusser, *A Filosofia da Caixa Preta: Ensaios para uma futura filosofia da fotografia*, Ed. HUCITEC, São Paulo, 1985, (page 7)

Ben Burbridge wrote a seminal work titled *Photography After Capitalism*, that analyzes in-depth the politics and the dichotomies of image production, from a google car's view attempts of rendering reality, the conditions of digital companies workers, to the economy built on voluntary and self-need representational image uploading by millions of individuals, to the environmental waste in the digital life, the exploitation of individuals in poor countries mining coltan for highly demanded components of smartphones, just to mention a few (giving also insights about the work of artists that deal, address some of this subjects and problems, operating also in deconstructing *technical images*). In the chapter *The Wasteland*, partly dedicated to the decay of company Kodak, after the boom of the image digital social platforms, he compares:

Social media giants like Instagram, which profit from opportunities to share our digital photographs across computer networks, have created remarkably few jobs compared to a company like Kodak. A significant proportion of those they have - tasks linked to content moderation, for example - have been auctioned off to the lowest bidder as part of the gig economy. Associated roles, including the production of smartphones, have been outsourced to countries with cheaper labour. Yet here, as with the digital economy more broadly, the analysis of labour conditions is partially obscured by - or, at least, sits in marked tension with - the celebratory discourse around digital presumption, with its emphasis on choice, participation and abundance. We are too busy taking selfies, praising the insights of citizen journalism, and looking at LOL cats to think about the physical and psychological demands of the low-paid precarious labour that sustains the contemporary photographic economy.⁶

And as we are involved by images, by their producers and their capitalistic non-ethics, in such a way that we don't have the distance, awareness or interest in seeing a more composed picture, as we are distracted and as it is becoming easier to control the masses of individuals that are trying to be and represent the cliché of a given image of what is to be in the world, as we lose our capability of sustaining any other options outside the system of control, of the poor spectacle, as all of this is happening, real

⁶ Ben Burbridge, *Photography After Capitalism*, Goldsmiths Press, London, 2020. (page 100)

people are disappearing, the earth is collapsing, very much because of artificial addiction and dedication to all these images.

So this exhibition wishes to contribute with works that are ephemeral opportunities to think together about some of the above raised questions. The artist João Ferro Martins with the performative cluster work - *Position / Mode / Effect* is working with a group of people to make together a sculpture that will be built during the time of the show, activated and played upon by human beings that will create punctual living images, and will collaborate on a never-finished image. He is also going to screen the film *fatto di sottile sfumatura di rumore (made of the quietest shade of loud (2020))*, a work with almost no budget made with the participation of friends and artists from Lisbon, that started with a sculptural device to capture the images inside the gallery, following the deconstruction and aphoristic writing around modes of production and living, the landscape as place\prolongement of fiction, catharsis and renewal.

The Brave Boy Studio (from the artists duo Jan Kazimierz Barnaś and Wojciech Kamerys) worked with a group of fellow artists that were invited to use one of their self-made 3d printed pinhole cameras, to photograph only one image each, and then develop them in the darkroom, parallel to the exhibition place. Being asked to photograph something important to them, the images developed are not fixed, and have a short life. At the moment of the development and disappearance of the image, the authors will have a microphone to speak and tell histories about that image, which can be listened to outside the darkroom. The recordings of these descriptions will then be the only object remaining.

*The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*⁷ by Andy Merrifield, is one of the departing points for *Camp Amateur*, the project and temporary occupation of the Book Art Museum, mediated by Nico Baumgarten and Demelza Watts. Here a temporary community of people will decide what to make together, dismount systems of image production, create routines and rituals of burying images of professional selves and image expectations. It's a project that explores the Present-Continuous of a community

⁷ Andy Merrifield, *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*, Published by Verso Books, London, 2017

of individuals, that creates the conditions for ironic and critical review of the common artistic modus operandi and adult workers life farses.

Isadora Alves presents us with the one-at-the-time-only installation *Flash Box*, the first from a series of works she will do around the theme of visions. The relationship between a single recorded voice with a single person, (within the composition of the sculpture that can resemble a confession booth to an amplified version of an aeroplane black box) sets the conditions for the relationship and creation of a very delicate community of listeners, blinded by a common (and always personal) vision.

Joanna Dyba, in her video installation *The Audacity of Being Three Dimensional*, brings us the lure of the object translated to the image, finding ways to amplify the glitches and incongruences of the digital to create images that never existed, and that only amplify certain hidden, unwanted and poetic qualities of the object. Parallel to the work, she will invite people to bring objects that they wish to get rid of, that were part of their daily universe for some time, and those will be scanned and disappear through a collective new image-making, as part of the project *Mundane collectibles*, a temporary library.

The artist Graeme Miller will screen his film *WILD CAR*, a journey made with a single camera and a ride-on vehicle, along narrow-gauge railways, from Denmark to Sardinia, Italy, passing through Poland. Partly a landscape film, that captures and celebrates all the images that stay behind, filming continuously through different rails across Europe, is also a personal journey of *Winterreise*, from winter to summer, that was filmed in the anticipation of Brexit.

Finally, the work of Basia Budniak titled *I'm not a robot* plays with notions of materiality in the systems of reCAPTCHA, which enable web hosts to distinguish between humans and "bots" or other automated users, in access to websites. Normally someone (a human or a robot) is asked to match digital, low quality and often badly photographed and composed images - that are appropriated in the case of this installation, becoming a tangible and haunting presence in scale and interaction.

Images. Images. Images. How can we speak about photography in absurd times? When we are so broken? We invited artists that did not bring any finished photos, and worked within the limits of the medium, using photography to write and rehearse

situations in the community. Works that are only perceptible and attained by their internal movement and emergency to deconstruct the role of the artist and of art itself as a communal tool for participating, gazing, interpreting and being in the world. And yes, we saw things growing and disappearing together.

Bruno Humberto, 2022

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