

Joan Fontcuberta

Dust gardens

14.9 > 4.11.23

Opening: 14.09.23 – 6 pm

àngels barcelona. C. Pintor Fortuny, 27



The garden is a place of reunion with nature. The *dust garden* is a place of reunion with memory. Dust is linked to time and abandonment, to the origin and to the end: everything is born from dust, everything is returned to dust. Dust is a cloak that blurs vision and fades memory. With *Élevage de poussière* (1920), Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray paved the way to make dust a privileged poetic and conceptual substance.

The project presented in this exhibition is conceived as fluctuating paths in a garden. In it, Joan Fontcuberta goes through the inverse actions of decomposing into dust and recomposing from dust. He goes from the organic in the process of disappearing to the artificial about to emerge. Two bodies of images articulate these walks. The first one is in the first room of the gallery, where Fontcuberta exhumes damaged photographic documents that microorganisms have reduced to crops of mold and dust to then “portray”, with the help of an electric microscope, the microorganisms causing the degradation. The images that are now the subject of this dramatic deterioration were originally majestic alpine landscapes captured between 1902 and 1904 by Prince Francesco Chigi Albani della Rovere, whose collection is kept in the Italian national archives (ICCD), where Fontcuberta worked as an artist in residence during the pandemic. In the second room, as an opposite series, other representations of natural forms appear, landscapes devoid of memory, without history, non-existent landscapes which are the result of the generative processing of algorithms. These visual artifices are the consequence of another type of dust: the infinitesimal graphic repositories, that is, the enormous contingent of pre-existing images that the A.I. cannibalizes in order to give light to new images.

The works in room 1 are the last vestiges of a photography-thing, a photograph that is an object, that has a physical materiality, while in room 2 we find a post-photographic manifestation, a photography-non-thing, dematerialized, that has detached from the body and which is pure code, which is no longer born from a camera but from the calculations of a supercomputer. Computerized graphic generation techniques are becoming more and more central in our visual culture. A visual culture that is defined by the concept of iconophagy. We find ourselves in an era in which we devour images and images devour us, and most significantly: images devour each other. Here some microscopic fungi devour those old photographs in a slow biological process. We could interpret after this metabolic action that some organisms are eating the memory contained in the photographic documents. What algorithms do is a reverse action: they gobble up huge masses of images to extract and digest their memory and apply it to produce new information.

All of the images presented in this exhibition evoke nature, particularly botany, to varying degrees. From the real mushrooms invisible in Francesco Chigi's photographic plates, we jump to the undergrowth populated by imaginary, but insultingly convincing mushrooms, which perhaps predispose us to the lysergic journey of virtual nature. If the characteristic flower of the Alps is the edelweiss flower, A.I. is capable of replicating its delicate forms by introducing “genetic” alterations. The results are strange hybridizations that exude the terrible beauty of surrealism. Are these the dreams of an “intelligent” machine? To what extent can we still control and make sense of them? In the vestiges of the decomposed photographs we can still recognize the “real” trees and mountains on which the fictional trees and plants that symbolically replace them were inspired. We are witnessing, in short, the transition from ancient arcane alchemy to recent algorithmic alchemy.

BIO | Joan Fontcuberta (Barcelona, 1955) is a key figure in determining and understanding the social and artistic function of photography. He has worked as an essayist, a photographer, an artist, an exhibition curator and an editor. Among the most representative spaces where he has exhibited his works, the following stand out: MACBA (Barcelona), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid), La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, CCCB and MNAC (Barcelona), Zabriskie Gallery (New York), the Hermitage Museum (Saint Petersburg), Harvard University (United States), MOMA (New York), the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Paris), the IVAM (Valencia), the Parco Gallery (Tokyo) and the Science Museum (London), among others. His work is part of multiple public and private collections around the world, such as the Centre Pompidou, MOMA, MACBA or the Reina Sofía Museum. He received the David Octavious Hill Prize from the Fotografisches Akademie GDL of Germany in 1988, the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Ministry of Culture in 1994, and the National Prize for Photography in 1998. In 2011 he was awarded the National Essay Prize, in 2013 he received the prestigious Hasselblad Prize for photography and in 2016 he was awarded the Ciutat de Barcelona Prize.