# Kurtis' "vandalised" photographs: on the problem of technical images in post-documentary photography.

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"The mechanism: stamped black tin,
Leatherette over cardboard, bits of boxwood,
A lens
The shutter falls
Forever
Dividing that from this."

William Gibson, *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)*

## 1. Introduction: The photographic camera as a model for the philosophy of technology

Walter Benjamin's "Work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction" and Vilém Flusser's *Filosofia da caixa preta* have defined photography as a key problem towards developing a philosophy of technology. The roles of the press and the printed book have also been a major subject for both authors and it will be briefly discussed here as well.

The relation between the the two authors is still subject of debate. Márcio Seligmann-Silva states that Flusser could be read as a sort of undeclared continuator of Benjamin's theoretical speculations who assumes the task of interpreting culture in the context of the cybernetic reproducibility, taking Benjamin's theses on mechanical reproducibility a step further: "Em termos de uma estética da mimese, a superação da relação instrumental com o suporte, poderíamos pensar hoje — com o computador, com mais razão ainda que Benjamin, o qual ainda viveu na era do sistema de escritura mecânico —, levou-nos a essa nova paisagem onde os valores se pulverizam na mesma medida em que atingem largas esferas da publicidade. Flusser, portanto, deu o passo seguinte nesta teoria das imagens." (Seligmann-Silva, 2009: 15) In the same article, Seligman-Silva establishes another link based on Flusser's and Benjamin's particular and conflicted relations to Judaism and how it conditioned their ideas of language and time: "Apesar de todo distanciamento e das fantásticas diferenças entre as obras destes dois autores, o simples fato de Flusser, por assim dizer, ter escrito contra Benjamin, sem citá-lo, já mostra que, como o judaísmo de Benjamin, o *benjaminismo* dele era uma espécie de "ar" que Flusser respirava e não precisava explicitar. Ele apenas tentou transformar este ar em um novo combustível para o pensamento crítico depois da grande catástrofe que separou estes dois pensadores. Os dedos de ambos se

encontram e se tocam, numa epifania, mas decerto as diferenças entre ambos são mais importantes que as semelhanças e podem servir de pistas para continuarmos a desdobrar os universos infinitos destes dois autores." (2009: 16)[1]

In contrast, Claudia Kozak has pointed out that it is too tempting to start looking for the similarities between Flusser and Benjamin. Such similarities arise from the biographical coincidences but also from the common interest in the relation of technology and culture, language, translation or their particular theories of history. As Kozak warns, the most common ground between Benjamin and Flusser is that their fragmentary and heterodox theoretical productions allow partial and slanted interpretations: "Se dice por allí de Flusser que es el 'nuevo Benjamin' y –más allá del facilismo que pudiera estar contenido en una formulación de ese tipo– ciertamente hay algunos motivos para la comparación (así como muchos otros que la invalidarían). Entre los tópicos comunes a ambos, se cuentan no sólo el más obvio de su interés por los nuevos medios de 'reproducción técnica', sino una teoría del conocimiento de origen lingüístico –el interés por la traducción también les fue común–, y quizá una teoría del tiempo y de la historia con elementos vagamente semejantes –para ambos el tiempo histórico es el tiempo lineal del 'progreso' que, al decir de Benjamin 'acumula ruina sobre ruina', pero que para Flusser es 'diabólico' en un sentido más positivo que negativo (y allí se acaba la analogía)–. Hay sí, en los escritos de ambos pensadores algo que permite las lecturas sesgadas, parciales. Un Benjamin y un Flusser para cada gusto, tal vez, efecto de la compleja ambivalencia respecto de algunas cuestiones; la de la técnica, entre ellas." (Kozak, 2007: 70)

Keeping these objections in mind I would like to discuss the problem of technical images in post-documentary photography from a Benjaminian and a Flusserian perspective. Both perspectives assume periodisations of history that imply remarkable divergences regarding the stages of technology. In "The Storyteller" (Benjamin, 1968a: 83-110), Benjamin describes the gradual passage from a tradition-based society to an industrial and urban information-based society. He sets the basis of *storytelling* in a strong *authority* derived from *experience*. Three archetypal figures resume different forms of transmission of *experience* and the different information that can be assimilated by the listeners: the peasant, the *resident thriller*, who, tied to his land, transmits the lore of the past, or the experience of *time*; the *trading seaman* who transmits the lore of far countries, that is, the experience of *space*; and the Middle-Age trade structure *artisans* that combine both the experience

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[1] Curiously enough, Seligman-Silva's extremely well informed article does not mention Flusser's strong remarks on the Frankfurt Institute as a second-degree paganism ("A crítica de cultura da Escola de Frankfurt é bom exemplo desse paganismo de segundo grau, exorcismo do exorcismo.") at the end of the seventh chapter of *Filosofia da Caixa Preta*, "A recepção da Fotografia". Although Flusser's general statement might be attacking later productions of the Frankfurt Institute, it is the only theory he explicitly mentions when discussing theoretical interpretations of photography. All of the Institute members' productions related to the issue of photography have been influenced in one way or another by Benjamin's essay on the work of art. I think Flusser's strong statement must be taken explicitly into consideration when establishing a comparison of his work and Benjamin's.

of *time* and *place* in the interpenetration of the travelling journeyman and the resident master craftsman: "If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-travelled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place" (Benjamin, 1968a: 58). The expansion of industry, capitalism and urbanisation are the causes for the modern inability of *making experience* and for the *decay of aura* (Benjamin, 1968a: 220-226). These changes result in a crisis in perception due to the multiplication of inassimilable stimuli. The impossibility to make sense of the multiple stimuli are conceptualised under the concept of *shock* as described in Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire and Poe (1968a: 174-178)[2]. Summarising, and keeping in mind that Benjamin's work remains unfinished, the crisis in perception and the loss of authority linked to the change in the economic production modes not only imply a way to further class oppression but also a chance for social revolution, since static social class structure was, according to Benjamin, based on a *tradition* that new technologies put in crisis. In his periodisation, there are two technical devices that undermine *authority* and *aura*, and liberate *information* from *experience*: the press and the photographic camera.

The periodisation that Flusser establishes is less gradual, and there are no oscillations but sudden changes. *Filosofia da caixa preta* describes a passage from the *homo faber* and his instruments or tools (*instrument*) to an extension of his capacities to the industrial worker (*proletário*) that surrounds the machine, and, further on, to the *homo ludens* that becomes an operator (*funcionário*) that plays or actualises the programmed possibilities of the apparatus (*aparelho*). At this point the apparatus becomes a *black box*, that is, an object for which the operators provide *input* in order to obtain *output* -- without really knowing what happens inside. This periodisation is defined as the passage from prehistory (*pre-história*), characterised by the magical circular thinking of the *traditional images* (defined as first degree abstractions from reality); to history, characterized by linear thinking and *texts* (second degree abstractions); and finally, post-history, determined by a reenchanted programmatic thinking, a return to magic, and *technical images* (degree abstractions produced by the apparatus that are in turn produced by scientific theories,n therefore making the resulting image an indirect product of a text). (Flusser, 2002: 22)

The comprehension of the technical phenomenon and its inscription in history show the differences of the political dimension at stake that Benjamin and Flusser attribute to the man-apparatus relation. A somewhat similar vision of artistic creativity as a possibility of disclosure of the apparatus programme boosts the idea of similar philosophical systems (however unfinished those systems may be). Flusser vows for the intervention on the apparatus as an ethical impera-

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[2] For a very informed discussion on the concept of *shock* and perception in Benjamin see Susan Buck-Morss's articles on Benjamin's essay on the work of art (Buck-Morss, 1983; 1992).

tive aimed at transcending the role of the operator, exemplified by experimental photographers: "They strive, consciously, to force the apparatus to produce an informative image that is not included in its programme" (Flusser, 1985: 81)[3].

Benjamin, who wrote his essay during the irruption and rule of Nazism, saw in art the possibility of a rupture in a *tradition* that would open the possibilities for social change. But, at the same time, he pointed out the growing risk of an aesthetisation of life embellished by a technology whose most dangerous examples were the political mass-representations of fascism. In a rather ambiguous way he states that the liberating possibility of technology lies in the estrangement proposed by Surrealist avant-garde movement and Bertold Brecht's theatre, although these ideas did not fully develop into systematic categories due to the premature death of the German philosopher. Such strong political assertions are not explicit in Flusser's *Filosofia da Caixa Preta*, written in the early 1980s. Flusser's was a completely different political context, a time during which the Cold War fears of a nuclear apocalypse, triggered by highly automated defence systems, backed the idea of politics as a black box itself, although this specific topic largely exceeds the objective of this paper.

Considering Benjamin's and Flusser's appeals for the necessity of experimental artistic practices to overcome to social constraints imposed by technology, I'll discuss some of their concepts in relation to experimental practices in what could be defined as post-documentary photography. The artistic work of Argentinean photographer Seba Kurtis provides a fertile ground to discuss the similarities and differences underlying the two different approaches to technology as discussed above.


## 2. Why Kurtis?


In order to contrast Walter Benjamin's and Vilem Flusser's reflections on technical images, I would like to analyse the processes of regaining an *aura* by means of a subversion of photographic technology in contemporary photography. The creative intervention on the photographic camera, developing process and printed results involved in Argentinean photographer Seba Kurtis' images of contemporary diaspora will help exemplify these topics.

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[3] "Tentam, conscientemente, obrigar o aparelho a producir imagen informativa que nao esta em seu programa" (Flusser, 1985: 81). Another element that might induce rushed parallelisms is the presence of Jewish religious elements (the messianic nature of *revolution* in Benjamin, especially in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History"; or the positive sign of the *diabolic* as progress in Flusser's *História do diablo*). This is particularly relevant regarding the concept of *time* underlying their work. However, a discussion of these topics exceeds the objectives of the present article.

"700 miles", "A few days more", "Drowned", "8 years" and "Undocument" picture several ways of migration from the Third to the First world through *vandalised* apparatuses, films or copies. By subverting the established programme of modern photography, Kurtis generates unique images that argue both concepts of *registry* and of *representation*.

Kurtis' images disclose interpretations. His photographic projects seek to create an *aura* using the technical devices and processes in an unforeseen way. The artistic procedure and the interpretations it triggers offer an interesting chance to discuss the similarities and the differences between Vilém Flusser's and Walter Benjamin's ideas of a philosophy of technology. Georges Didi-Huberman's concept of *image anachronism* and Arlindo Machado's *content anachronism* on the technical reproduction devices are useful to discuss Benjamin's *aura* (and its underlying mimesis theory) as well as Flusser's *technical images*, taking Kurtis' photographs as an example. Kurtis' solarised photographs and their topic (illegal migration) reveal the political dimensions of "time" in the act of photographing which updates the aesthetic and political programme proposed by Walter Benjamin on the possibilities originated by mechanical reproduction. In Kurtis' work photography takes the form of a resistance and a solarised memory of those living in a diaspora marked by illegality, rather than a mere registry or document. But it is also a resistance against the *programme* of the photographic device, as demanded by Flusser.

## 3. Brief description of Seba Kurtis' work

Kurtis' work is an example of how only in the blurring line between the artistic concept and its physical medium resides the chance of a representation of the illegal migrant experience. The Argentinean photographer develops a complex poetics in which ethical, political, aesthetic, technical and topical issues intertwine. The immediate effect of such intertwinement is the renewal of the aura of the photographic copy. This implies a politicisation of photographic practice that opposes the aestheticisation, which sets the standard for documentary photography. Kurtis' formal choice is strongly conditioned by his own *experience*, in the Benjaminian sense of the term, determining the political meaning of his work. I think the work of Seba Kurtis actualises several aspects of Benjamin's famous essay on the work of art and offers an interesting possibility to discuss its relevance today. I also consider Kurtis' procedures to be an accurate example of the experimental photography Flusser calls for in order to go beyond the restraints of the programme he defines as the apparatus-operator complex (Flusser, 2002: 15).

Some of Kurtis' projects posted on his web page ([www.sebakurtis.com](www.sebakurtis.com)) and the relation between topic and technique proposed in them are reviewed below to understand the implications

of Kurtis' photographic poetics. The underlying subject for all of his work are the constant and present economic migrations from the southern to the northern hemisphere. The photographer himself has experienced such diaspora, having been a clandestine migrant and worker himself during five years in Europe, after the Argentinean economic crisis in 2001. Living in Europe, he worked without a legal work permit, first to help his parents and siblings living in his country and then to help them migrate to Europe.

Kurtis groups several projects explicitly related to this subject under the label "Immigration Files": "700 miles" portrays Latin American migration from the US border perspective. "A few days more" focuses on the wait by the sea shore of those crossing from Egypt to Italy and on the increase of the journey's life hazards due to Italian "closed borders" state policies. "Drowned" elliptically depicts the arrival of African rafters to the Canary Islands. In "8 years" Kurtis photographs red-tape documents and miscellanea (bills, stamps, hand notes) acquired during his residency application to represent the five years he lived as an illegal immigrant and how he obtained legal status. The last part of the "Immigration files" is "Undocument", a scanned image of an intervened picture and machine-typed text.

## 4. Kurtis' poetics: "Undocument"

The piece "Undocument" (which could be read as "No document" or "Do not document" but also "Undoing the documentation") portrays one of his friends and workmates who was deported on a raid in which Kurtis was not discovered. "Undocument" consists of a photograph, clipped to a crumpled piece of paper, accompanied by a typed text; both of which have been intervened with red pen writing and crossings. The result is a singular piece of artwork that constitutes a sort of manifesto for Kurtis' artistic and political practice: "The first time that I faced deportation was when the police raided the construction site where I was working. Three Moroccan friends, two Colombians and myself hid in a big water tower. One of them, 'el Loco', panicked thinking it wasn't a good spot so he hid a few metres away from us. They got him. After three days in prison they gave him half an hour to say goodbye to his six-months-old baby. After this experience I woke up every day concerned that if didn't pick a good place to hide next time the police showed up my life in Europe would be terminated. The constant fear and uncertainty of daily life eventually subdues your personality and paranoia sets in. Everything revolves around getting your papers and the perceived freedom that it brings. You can't make plans, want possessions or build anything solid as your life here may not exist tomorrow, you lose everything if they

throw you out. ~~Vandalising~~ the sheets of film is a reaction to the constant chaos experienced over five years of living as an illegal immigrant."[4]
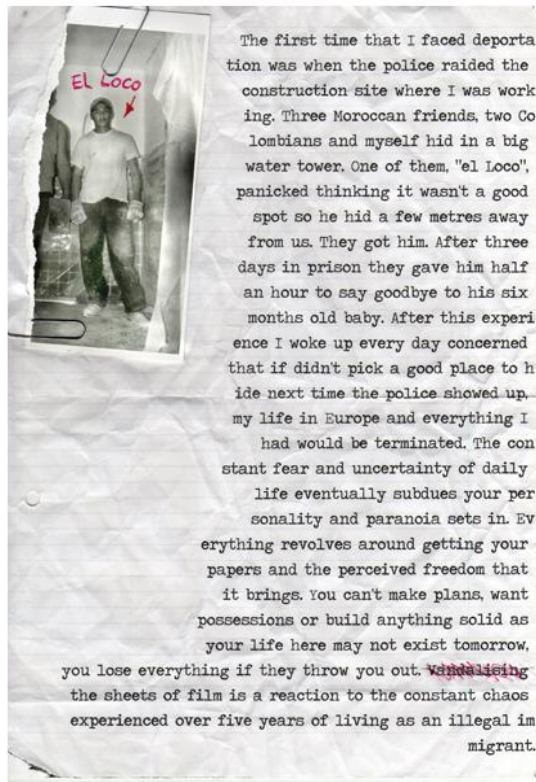


Picture #1: Spain. Crumpled paper, machine typed text, torn photograph, ink.

It must be noted that the text in "Undocument" is written in English by a non-native creating an intended estrangement effect. The *alienness* and *helplessness* of migrants' experience is present in the translation as well as in the exposure of fragile materiality of the art piece (i.e., the rugged note-notebook paper, the unjustified text written in an old typewriter). From a Flusserian perspective this can be seen as an experimental intervention on the device's *programme* (in full awareness of it) aimed at showing the fragile nature of the apparatus products (both the photograph and the typed text) in a way unintended in the programme. Moreover, following Flusser's theses of the modern State as an apparatus itself, being deported is part of a programme as well: the one that regulates the status of residency, which cannot assimilate undocumented subjects. Migration becomes, thus, a programme that police agents follow just as photographers do.

Interpreting "Undocument" from a Benjaminian perspective may illuminate the subject in a different direction, although partially coinciding with the Flusserian approach discussed above. As an individual piece of artwork, the uniqueness of the materiality of "Undocument" could be perceived as an *aura*: Although it is a scanned copy (that is, technically reproduced), the documental nature of its subject and the decay of the materials point to the vanishing "here and now" that survives in pre-mechanically reproduced art pieces and defines their *aura* (Benjamin, 1968a: 222-223). The photograph and the text of "Undocument" seek to produce this uniqueness on mechanically produced pieces (the text, the image). The process towards uniqueness involves the

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[4] Kurtis, Seba "Undocument". In: "Immigration Files". http://www.sebakurtis.com/index.php?/8-years/undocument/. Last accessed on July 5th, 2010. The words are crossed out with a red pen in the original text.

vandalisation of the products: the photograph is torn and written on by hand, the paper is crumpled (its particular creases making it different from any other clean piece of paper), and the typed text is crossed out with red pen. Of course, this procedure of making unique through artistic intervention is no novelty in contemporary art, from Duchamp's urinal onwards. The originality of "Undocument" is that substance and matter converge in a single object, determining each other, without losing their specific traits, emphasising the fragility of those remembered ('el Loco') and the mediums by which their memory is preserved. The Convolute N of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* tackles the theories of knowledge and of progress providing a definition of *dialectical images* that may very well describe the aesthetic and political effect of "Undocument": "In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural *<bildlich>*. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical–that is, not archaic–images. The image that is read–which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability–bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded." (Benjamin, 1999: 463)

The fear of deportation incarnates one such "perilous critical moments". Quoting Kurtis' own words again: "You can't make plans, want possessions or build anything solid as your life here may not exist tomorrow; you lose everything if they throw you out. ~~Vandalising~~ the sheets of film is a reaction to the constant chaos experienced over five years of living as an illegal immigrant."

In different but complementary ways, Flusser's and Benjamin's perspectives approach the disturbing effect of a technically produced (and reproduced) artwork. "Undocument" creates a tension between text, image and materials. Doing so is finding a way into and out of technical devices to represent the fragile nature of the subject that the registry devices capture, the migrant condition, in a fragile medium: the torn picture, the crumpled paper, the unjustified typed text, the pen-writing leaving traces of the hand. Where Flusser would see an escape of the programme leading to freedom, Benjamin would see a dialectical image showing the social conflicts inherent in art that can shed light on class struggle and, therefore, politicise against the *aestheticisation of politics* that mere mechanical reproduction generates.

## 5. Other works of Kurtis: The fragile memory of objects

The projects of Seba Kurtis after the "Immigration files" have a more indirect relation to the subject of migration, but it is still an issue. "Shoe box" is a selection of family photographs that

are the only remaining family heirloom that survived the impoundments and migrations suffered by the Kurtis family, resulting from the cyclic Argentinean economic crises during the last quarter of a century. These recovered photographs had been kept in a shoebox in Kurtis' grandmother's house, which had been hit by a flood. The photographs displayed in "Shoe box" have undergone the wearing out of both time and water, turning them into unique objects. The exhibition also includes the back of the photographs where the emulsions have left their trace.[5] The scope of Kurtis' work spreads out to other subjects including an ongoing project about political repression of the last Argentinean dictatorship, on the ethnic composition of contemporary British population, on the arranged marriages to obtain residency and on the humble photographical studies in northern African villages and towns.
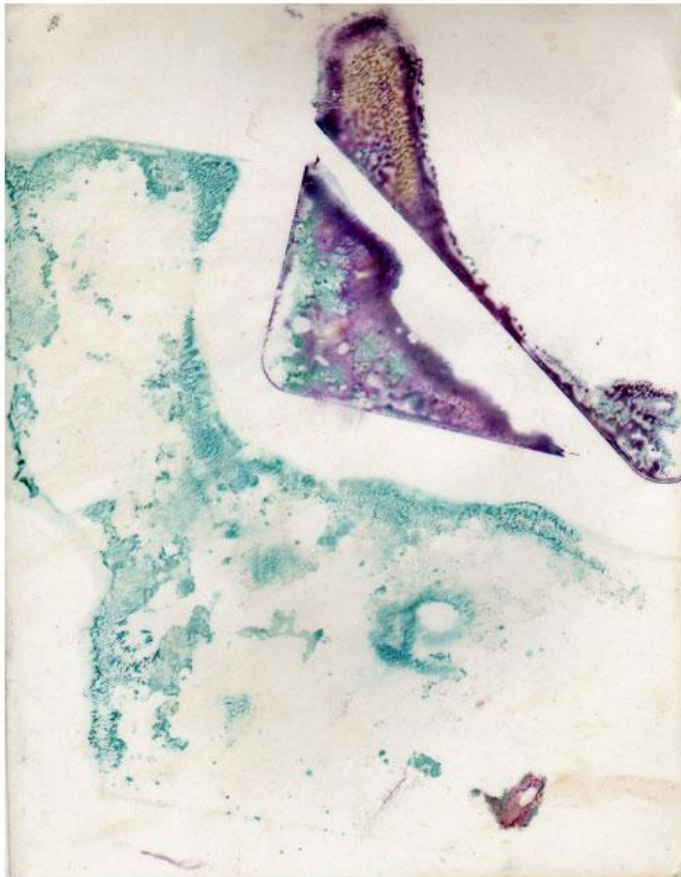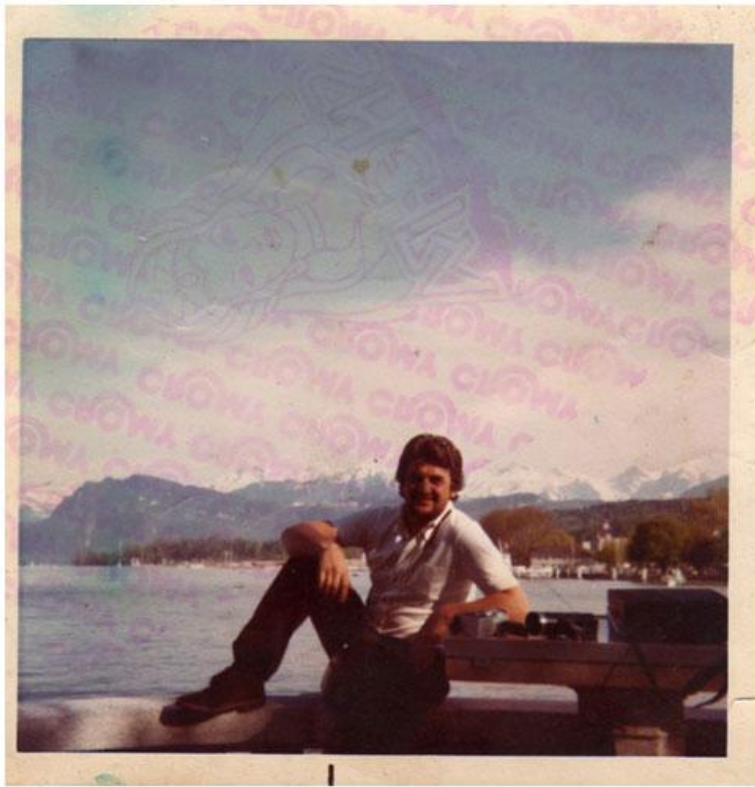


Picture #2: Argentina. Wet family photographs, front. "Shoe Box"

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[5] The problem of the material history of mechanically reproduced objects that "Shoe box" introduces has not been properly discussed either by Benjamin or Flusser. The former discussed the changes in the idea of art inherited from the nineteenth century, while the latter was looking at the problem of production of products as pure information, foreseeing digitalisation. None paid much heed to the bonds of people with the fragile reservoirs of memory, whose reproducibility might be in peril as well through the different catastrophes of modern life.

## 6. Subject and technique: the cracks in the machine

Substance-matter intertwinement is accomplished by Kurtis' aesthetic and political choices. In the "Immigrations files", Kurtis avoids "touching" scenes that generate empathic emotions and that appeal to the observer's feelings. Instead he shoots "neutral" situations. His artistic choices, however, delve deeper as he resorts to several interventions in the apparatus to expose the precariousness of the portrayed migrant condition. Kurtis deliberatively opens up to the risk of randomness in the mechanical process of the photographic exposure. Within the different projects of the "Immigration files", he uses chamber-cracked cameras that solarise the negatives and he uses expired film; takes unique shoots in large formats (recovering the practice from the beginnings of photography in the nineteenth century); and, in an extreme choice, literally *drowns* the negatives in the same waters that the African migrants must cross (in the case of the "Drowned" series). The last case is an eloquent example of how the intervention of uncontrolled nature intertwines the matter and the substance of the artistic product: some of the photographs will survive and some will not, and those that survive will carry the traces of that danger (stains and marks in the negative that will pass onto the copies), recreating in the artistic representation the tragic destiny of African migrants and the scar of their migrant experience. The novelty and effect of Kurtis' photographs lies in his intervention on the mechanism. Deliberatively, he alters registry process and brings uncertainty precisely where technique had guaranteed certainties for a hundred years. By reintroducing the dimension of uncontrolled nature, Kurtis reveals the fragility of the body and psyche of those cast to the inclemency of nature by the State policy of not including them in the documents that provide a way out illegality. Or, to phrase it differently, being rescued from nature into culture. State migration policies emerge as the true cause of the fatality of nature materialised by the sea.

The risk of drowning entails the possibility of shattering the *aestheticisation* that Benjamin foresaw in cultures fully mediated by technical reproduction. Kurtis' photographic projects complement each other on the matter and substance convergence: "Shoe box" aims to represent in the photographic copy what "Immigration Files" seeks to accomplish in the act of photographing. In the first case, the copy, due to the vicissitudes of material existence and the loss of negatives associated with the ups and downs of family life, regains an *aura* of uniqueness. The regained *aura* emanates from the experience of loss and hardships that make people cling to those surviving photographs, whose negatives and hence the possibility of reproduction was lost a long time ago. And the copies survive as their owners do: stained, torn and blurred.

Picture #3: Argentina. Wet family photographs, back. "Shoe Box"

## 7. Experience, Memory and Anachronism

Intervening in the process and on the product implies alterations for the homogenisation settled by technical devices: uncertainty (during the light exposure process or the physical existence of the family photographs) becomes an equivalent of the migrant's fragile memories and bestows a renewed *aura* on Kurtis' photographs. Walter Benjamin closed "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" with a warning and a practical proposition: "*Fiat ars—pereat mundus*," says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of "*l'art pour l'art*". Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its

own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics, which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art." (Benjamin, 1968a: 242). The use of Benjamin's concepts to discuss Kurtis is not whimsical since the problems of politicizing art can be explicitly traced in Kurtis' projects. Comparing his work with documentary photography, he made the following statements: "(…) And I think the aesthetic came along with my romantic notion of being a photographer, along with a bit of rebellion about the manipulation of the medium or documentary photography or whatever you want to call it. (…) we are in a really exciting time for photography, concerned photography doesn't have to just show people begging or dying in black and white, people have started to understand that photography is moving on… like Paul Graham said this year: 'We are clearly in a Post Documentary photographic world now.'" (della Bella, Federico, 2010)

## 8. Intervened photographs as an anachronism

The idea of *anachronism* may illuminate some aspects of the interventions on the apparatus and the awareness of the impact of time on material existence of photographic copies that underlie Kurtis' work as a whole. There are two instrumental concepts of *anachronism* that are useful to describe the complex images presented here. Once again, Benjamin and Flusser are the basis of these conceptualisations, which are not strictly complementary and yet help describe and understand the different aspects of the same object: first, the concept of *anachronism* as the source of truth in all images, postulated by French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, based on the essays of Walter Benjamin, Aby Wharburg and Carl Einstein; second, the concept of *anachronism* of contents proposed by Arlindo Machado taking on Vilém Flusser's thesis for a philosophy of technology suggested in *Filosofía da caixa preta*. Any attempt to conciliate both concepts of *anachronism* would be a methodological mistake since it is a nominal coincidence. Their only similarity is that they consider the problems of time in art and culture products. However, they can be used in a complementary way to describe experimental artistic procedures such as Kurtis'. I will therefore discuss the applicability of these concepts to tackle different aspects of his particular approach to photographic technology.

## 8.1 The image anachronism

Didi-Huberman proposes two different kinds of anachronism: a) the one that constitutes a "methodological sin" for historians, and b) the fertile one that reveals a new object: images as temporally impure, complex and overdetermined objects (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 46). The philosopher suggests a connection between *anachronism* and *mémoire involuntaire* (2008: 44). Anachronism allows the emergence of a complex narration that threatens the collective and individual processes of memory (2008: 62) constituting itself as the "unconscious of history", a social equivalent of the proustian *mémoire involuntaire* which Benjamin took on to develop some of the main aspects of his *aura* (Benjamin, 1968a: 158-162). As Didi-Huberman states, "[i]mage is not the imitation of things but the interval made visible, the fracture between things" (2008: 166).[6] I propose that the images produced by Kurtis create precisely that *interval*. The migrant uncertainty is a "permanent present" that opposes the teleology of the philosophy of progress and the social contract that enables the existence of citizens. Illegal migrants are therefore in a constant moment of intensity. This *time now* or "dialectics in standstill" (*Jetztzeit*) is described as the true conflicted condition of time hidden by bourgeois illusions of progress in the Convolute N3,1 of the *Arcades Project* quoted above and in the "Theses of Philosophy of History": "The tradition of the op-pressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism" (Benjamin, 1968b: 257).

Although the political context which the thesis VIII addresses has radically changed from the time Benjamin wrote it, his insights on the perception of time created by mechanical reproduc-tion are still illuminating to approach experimental and disturbing images such as Kurtis' photo-graphs. Setting momentarily aside the partisan Marxist appeal of thesis VIII, the migrant percep-tion of time and the permanent moment of peril within which migrants are forced to live can be conceptualised with such "state of emergency". At this point it is necessary to quote from "Un-document" one more time: "The constant fear and uncertainty of daily life eventually subdues your personality and paranoia sets in. Everything revolves around getting your papers and the perceived freedom that it brings. You can't make plans, want possessions or build anything solid as your life here may not exist tomorrow, you lose everything if they throw you out." (Kurtis) Summarising, Kurtis' "Immigration Files" create *dialectical images* that move away from the aes-theticisation of documentalism and propose *inside* photography a convergence of time: a meeting

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[6] "La imagen no es la imitación de las cosas, sino el intervalo hecho visible, la línea de fractura entre las cosas". My translation.

point for Now (instant), Past (latency) and Future (tension) as described by Didi-Huberman (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 168). The procedure questions standardised perceptions. From a Flusserian perspective, these kinds of images are "unforeseen" in the programme of the photographical apparatus. The topic will be addressed below.

As Didi-Huberman observes, there is a persistent misinterpretation of Benjamin's essay on the work of art: there is a decadence of *aura*, not a death (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 258). The problem of *aura* is the problem of art during the twentieth century. In his "Little History of Photography", Benjamin pointed out that the concept of *aura* arose in the dawn on photography (Benjamin, 2004: 21-54). At that stage in the history of photography, technical limitations forced long exposures which produced an effect of concentration and stillness in the portrayed models. At the end of the nineteenth century, portraits lacked this effect and photographers started to fake the process that enabled it for commercial purposes (Benjamin, 2004: 36-40). Without keeping in mind the technical origin of the concept of *aura*, Benjamin's later essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" may be easily misread. "Little History of Photography" was published in 1934 and set the conceptual grounds for Benjamin's most famous essay. The article emphasises the idea that, in their technical origins, photographs were the results of an artisan craftwork rather than those of a profession or industry and had an implicit *cult value* similar to works of art, which decay when they become a serial commercial product (Benjamin, 2004: 37). For Benjamin, early photography was closer to the constructive process of plastic works than to the standardised technical reproduction (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 304).

I think Kurtis pursues similar goals through an inverse path, avoiding technical standardised procedures, introducing the randomness of nature. The resulting estrangement of his photography accounts for the persistence of its *aura*. In this way, the unforeseeable irruption of the fatality of nature on the work of art provides an alternative to the false dichotomy of art history denounced by Didi-Huberman: the *sententious* (i.e., those that announce the death of *aura*) opposed to the *non-specific* (i.e., those that state an unaccountable transcendence of the works of art). (Didi-Huberman, 2006: 350-351).

## 8.2 Anachronism in the apparatus

Brazilian art critic Arlindo Machado (Machado, 1993: 28) postulates a negative, unproductive *anachronism* to describe the mechanical reproduction and circulation of contemporary art forms. The forced adaption of an art form meant for a particular technology turns the product into *content* that fills reproduction devices that have not yet produced their own specifics products. This

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operation voids it from its specificity, thus transforming it into an *anachronism* due to the inevitable inadequacy between the product and its new container.[7]

Reconsidering the thesis of Flusser on technology as a black box, Machado states that technology transforms artists into mere operators that create nothing, they only actualise the predefined possibilities of the technical device. In his analysis of technological poetics, Machado states that the only possibility to escape from the dominance of the technical programme is an intervention on the apparatus and a subversion of its pre-defined possibilities (Machado, 1993: 15). To survive and not be turned into a simple operator, artists must accomplish this subversion to place the devices under their service. If not, artists will only complete the possibilities anticipated by the programme of the device. The foreseeable use of a device does nothing more than actualise its possibilities, which is just a confirmation of its capabilities, turning the artist into a mere operator. The intervention on the device, on the other hand, implies an unforeseen creativity that subordinates technology to the creative artistic vision. From this perspective, only a non-anachronical content, such as Kurtis' vandalised photography, will subordinate the technology to the creator, allowing for the existence of art in which the product does not become a pure tradable content, foreseen by the programme.

# 9. Technical image and printed text

One of the main differences in Flusser's and Benjamin's periodisations of technology is the role of press. I will briefly discuss here the art/science/politics triad implicit in their theories of technology. Benjamin defends the revolutionary possibilities introduced by technology (politicising art), but warns also of the risks of life being rendered aesthetic by fascism using that same technology. Flusser aims for a different objective: freedom. He calls for an intervention of the apparatus that breaks open the closed universe of foreseen possibilities inscribed by the programme (Flusser, 2007: 72-73). In this direction, he looks for a transcendence of the *operator-apparatus complex,* which will result in creative control over technology that reunifies art, science and politics (Flusser, 2007: 76).

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[7] Machado's first examples are cinema films adapted to fit television screens; digitalisation, however, has extended the examples to almost any recordable product. Flusser's idea of code translation (Flusser, 2002: 79) underlies Machado's idea of anachronism. Machado's concept is also similar to the first kind of *anachronism* proposed by Didi-Huberman (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 56), that is, anachronism as a methodological error, but applied to an electronic arts poetics.

Different objectives underlie the apparent similarities in Benjamin's and Flusser's choice of photography as a central issue in their essays. Their main differences, however, arise with the role played by *text* in their respective periodisations.

## 9.1 Benjamin: *Aura* and mechanical reproduction, contingent reality and objective knowledge

There are two milestones in Benjamin's periodisation of technical modernity: the apparition of the press and the popularisation of photography. Both reproduction technologies carry out parallel processes converging in the impossibility of making *experience* and the decay of *aura*. The irruption of mechanical reproduction technologies gradually minimise the incidence of the specific and the contingent in reproductions. As authomatisation develops, the photographic camera moves away from the artisan knowledge and trades only to get closer to a standardisation. It is this process that sets the foundations for the constitution of photography as an objective registry instrument that is adopted by science and the modern State politics. At the same time, the aesthetic aspect of photography remains an unsolved issue in the field of visual arts, where it struggles for recognition as such. Although they did not emerge at the same time, once print and photography coexist they alter profoundly humans' perception and therefore of how society should be built: the three main technologies involved are print, the photographic camera, and, later on, the phonograph.

In the specific case of photography, cultural change implies an alteration of visual perception of objects that in the past was necessarily tied to their physical presence. What Benjamin defines as *decay of aura* is owed to the pre-eminence of the *exhibition value* of photographic copies over the *cult value* of the represented objects, especially amongst these the works of art (be they paintings, sculptures or architectural works) (Benjamin, 1968a: 220-226). The pre-eminence of the transmission of *information* occurs at the same time, supported by printed text over the transmission of *experience* validated by the *authority* of the storyteller which is rooted in a *tradition* determined by the uniqueness of the spoken word (Benjamin, 1968a: 84, 87). The uprooting of objects, tied to their ever-growing commodification entails a break in the ways of understanding the world within the *framework* of tradition. I will risk an excessive simplification: in his periodisation, Benjamin states that the inclusion in a *tradition* (understanding it as the modes of production transmitted from one generation to another) provided the products with a certain meaning. This originates in the artisan's relation with the products, centred in their uniqueness, and the experience acquired in pro-

ducing them. *Tradition* thus offers a vision of the world that integrates products and producers in their own history. The serial mass-production of the industrial age, enabled by the machine, breaks the artisan's relation to production, setting a new relation to objects in which they are no longer perceived as a part of the life of the producers. This impossibility to assimilate causes a defensive *shock* that defines the typical perception of modern urban life. Photography uproots in a similar way the perception of objects, providing them with an infinitively reproducible ubiquity and an existence outside of time and place. The press is the technology that uproots the wisdom from the practical wise man that had *authority* on the subject, allowing for transmission of pure knowledge, transforming it into codified information that can be reproduced, without the possibility of error or interpretation.

## 9.2 Flusser: Black box as a metaphor of the present

The photographic camera provides Flusser with a model for all apparatuses, and it is its privileged object of analysis. He considers the technical-images-producing-device as the reunification of image thinking (pictorial) and abstract thinking (written) which accounts for all the virtual possibilities of the post-industrial world. In a direction different from Benjamin's idea of convergent technologies, Flusser sees first writing (and only inside it the printing press), and then photography as sudden changes that determine different periods for humanity. The magic thinking of *traditional images* corresponds to a pre-historic stage dominated by *idolatry*. The apparition of *writing* marks the birth of the historic stage. The post-historic (and contemporary) stage is determined by the predominance of *technical images*. Photography marks the beginning of this stage and constitutes the main topic of his *Filosofia da Caixa Preta*. The extension of public education, the popularisation of books and the normative presence of the modern state (in the school system, the civil registry offices, and the standardisation of state procedures) during the XIX century results, according to Flusser's periodisation, in a *textolatry* which is overcome by the apparition of *technical images*.

Summarising, Flusser states that contemporary subjects perceive the *technical images* the apparatuses produce in an almost magical way. The *input* enters the black box and the resulting *output* is an image, without any knowledge on how this happens. The main difference between *traditional images* from the pre-historic period is that *technical images* are produced by an apparatus (which in turn is itself a product of abstractions that allowed its technical development and as such it is a result of the reunification of the abstraction of texts and the worshipping of images). What pervades Flusser's exposition is the understanding of writing as a *transcodification*. In the same way,

according to Flusser, photography operates the *transcodification* of the real into a *scene* that can be the conceptualised (aesthetically, politically or epistemologically).

His idea of history assumes that there are growing degrees of abstraction that set man aside, placing all the responsibility of making the abstraction in the registry device. Flusser sees a danger in this and that motivates his call for a philosophy of technology since humans are at risk of losing control over the apparatus and becoming mere operators. Accordingly, he writes about the piece that actualises the programmed possibilities: "Quem vê o input e o output vê o canal e não o processo codificador que se passa no interior da caixa preta. Toda crítica da imagem técnica deve visar o branqueamento dessa caixa" (Flusser, 2002: 21).

Flusser, however, places his expectations in the figure of the *programmer* as the only one that can determine the *programme* inscribed in the apparatus. In the case of photography, the camera is nothing more than a device whose programme foresees all possible combinations, the only thing photographers do is play permutations with the discrete concepts before the continuum of the real

## 10. Conclusion: Kurtis' vandalised pictures

According to what I have discussed above, the idea of experimental art as a possibility of openness and disclosure seems to stem from both philosophers, but their coincidences are only partly apparent. However, in the case of Kurtis, it seems possible to see both projects at work. In order to transcend the role of mere operator, Flusser exemplifies the intervention on the apparatus with experimental photographers who: "Tentam, conscientemente, obrigar o aparelho a producir imagen informativa que nao esta em seu programa" (Flusser, 2002: 76).

Intuitively, based on his own experience of daily uncertainty, Kurtis carries out this artistic commitment. The result is what I have briefly discussed here: the images of "Immigration files" and "Shoe Box" suggest the presence of an *aura* even in mechanically produced images. However, the *auratic* potency of this work resides not in its uniqueness, which is something contemporary art and the art market have strived to preserve, but in the strength of its political statement bestowed by the fragile experience of migrants that survives in the intertwinement of substance and matter to represent the subject of the representation. Kurtis' photographs dismantle the aestheticisation which could turn these images into mere contents, into valueless copies of the technical process of photography, by *vandalising* both the process and the product. *Vandalising* must be understood as subordinating the technical certainties to the unforeseeable randomness of nature. This way, he can represent the migrant experience as that of the *Jetztzeit* of uncertainty, a fragile time at the

cross-roads of hope, nostalgia and now, the "moment of danger" that Benjamin points out in the VI theses on the philosophy of history: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers." (Benjamin, 1968a: 255)

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