



CARLOS REYES

**PARIS, APRIL 8, 2015**  
**A CONVERSATION WITH**

MARA HOBERMAN

THOMAS FOUGEIROL

JO-EY TANG

Like many people who have come in contact with Thomas Fougeirol and Jo-ey Tang over the past few years, I was introduced to their photograms project casually, over a home-cooked meal. In early 2014, at Thomas's home in Ivry, stories of the artist-run darkroom he had set up nearby dominated the conversation. Our mutual friends, an artist couple, had recently made a series of photograms and were very enthusiastic about the experience. Describing other projects coming out of the darkroom, Thomas convinced me I had to see these works for myself. A few weeks later we spent several hours pouring through boxes upon boxes of prints made by artists both familiar and new to me. Every time Thomas opened a new box, a different story unfolded. Each series of eight prints was a new chapter filled with technical

experimentations, creative energies, and personal discoveries. The spirit of adventure and seemingly endless possibilities coming out of this improvised workspace on the outskirts of Paris was astonishing. I had to know more. Having seen the work, I wanted to understand the experience. And so, just over a year later, at another dinner, I coaxed Jo-ey and Thomas to draw back the curtain, so to speak, and shed more light on their ongoing project, “The Plates of the Present.”

MH: How did the photogram project come about? What’s the origin story: why photograms, why you, why now, why Paris? When did you turn it into the darkroom?

TF: I guess it really began with the space—the idea of a place where people could gather. My wife Nathalie and I bought this space in Ivry-sur-Seine in 2009 and we initially used it as storage before I started a project space under the name TAON there in 2012. I organized two exhibitions: the first was Carlos Reyes’s first solo show and the second was a group show that Jo-ey curated called “I Second That Emotion.” I think it was the night of the opening when we first began speaking about the

idea of working on photograms. To continue having an exhibition space with a fixed program was too heavy, but I liked the idea of turning the space into a place for production.

JT: When I came to Paris in 2011, I started going back into the darkroom again—going back to the origins of my art education, which began with photography. The darkroom was where I could finally be alone. I wanted this experience to be reactivated and shared with others. People could come and use the space, stay for a few hours, or a few days—sleep there even!—and engage with new materials. We want to pull in different types of people to make something without any immediate need for an exhibition or recognition or to sell.

MH: Had either of you made photograms as part of your own practice?

JT: Yes, I have a never-ending project, “The Precipice of the Thing Is, Is, Is, Is, Is, Is....” (2011-present). I used only light and photographic paper to generate the first print, in which the photo enlarger’s light is contained within the dimensions of the photographer paper. That print was then used as an object to generate a negative image of itself, a second print, and so on. So they are like photograms minus the objects.

TF: No. I come from lithography background and had never printed photographs before we set up the darkroom in Ivry. I think some people as teenagers print photographs at school or in their own bathroom. My older brother used to be a printer and he is also a photographer, so maybe because that was his thing, I never got into it myself. I went into painting instead.

MH: What is the physical space of the darkroom like?

TF: Usually darkrooms are small and tight, but this one is quite large. You really have room to move around.

JT: It's makeshift. There are curtains and tape blocking the light instead of a turnstile door, which is what keeps the light out completely in a professional darkroom. The sink is a bit too small; you need to be careful not to spill. It's how someone might do it in their own home and I think that makes the people who come to use the space feel more at ease.

TF: That's true. I did it my way, using the materials I had on hand. At the beginning, I had some ideas about photograms, but absolutely no practical experience. I really like the idea of non-technical photography, which relates perhaps more to sculpture, performance and also to my own work. I do imprints, and a photogram is about recording actions, so I could relate to it very quickly.

MH: Tell me about Ivry, where the darkroom is located.

TF: It's not so far away, a few blocks from the "périphérique," but even people who live in Paris don't go there!

JT: But it is linked to Paris by the metro. You get off at the Pierre et Marie Curie station. I like that connection to physics, radioactivity, and the thoughts of magnetic and electric charge.

TF: Compared to Paris with its grand Haussmannian architecture, Ivry is very humble. The darkroom is eighty square meters on the ground floor of a residential building, two blocks from my own studio. It used to be a dairy farm, just after WWII. To give some historical context, Ivry is a former industrial area and there is a series of photographs that Atget made in and around Ivry depicting "les chiffoniers" ("rag pickers"). There is also Atget's album titled Zoniers, which shows this area at the turn of the 20th century when people couldn't establish permanent housing because it was a military zone. At that time Ivry looked like the countryside. There were just a few shacks. It was a poor itinerant community; people would have to move immediately, if asked.



DAIGA GRANTINA



DROIDSZ

MH: I find it really interesting to hear about the history of the area and current physical space because it's now something that all these different artists share in common. They've all worked in this same darkroom—a peculiar production space—that you both created.

JT: Because it's kind of far away, at least psychologically, each visit becomes an occasion in itself, a residency of sorts.

MH: And say someone's never even been in a darkroom before, like you Thomas, what kind of support or guidance do you provide, if any?

TF: Usually I stay for an hour to start them off. When we first started the project, I would be there just to make sure everything was working with the chemicals. Since then I've gotten more used to the technical side of things so now I speak with the artists in advance to see what they want to do and how much I can help in terms of technical assistance and showing them simple techniques to manipulate gradation and chemicals to jumpstart their experimentation. For each participant, we provide ten sheets of paper and usually ask them to bring ten more.

JT: For now we keep an edition of eight prints together,



and half of the sales go back into the production cost of the project. But honestly we haven't announced this so we haven't really sold. Often the participants end up bringing a box of paper to experiment beyond the edition of eight that we ask for. Making photograms is a fairly easy process and once you get it you're like, what else can I do?

**MH:** I can imagine the artists feel both relief and pressure to do something different and new.

**TF:** We are always amazed by how well people respond to the medium and the process. It's always different. Some people are very quick to complete their edition; others have started but still haven't finished after a year and a half. Some people come more than once. Some people stay a week, others an afternoon. There's no schedule.

**JT:** It's almost like we're throwing down this gauntlet. When you tell people to do whatever they want, they have to figure out what it is they want. They have to decide what it means to them and how to do it. That's the challenge in freedom. There's a biographical imprint too, that it might not necessarily be about art that we are seeing from them, but showing the way they exist in the world. There's a history of artists working with photograms, so the participants are stepping back in

time and thinking about what it means to participate in this process in the present. We scan all the photographs and put them up on the website. So it becomes pretty competitive!

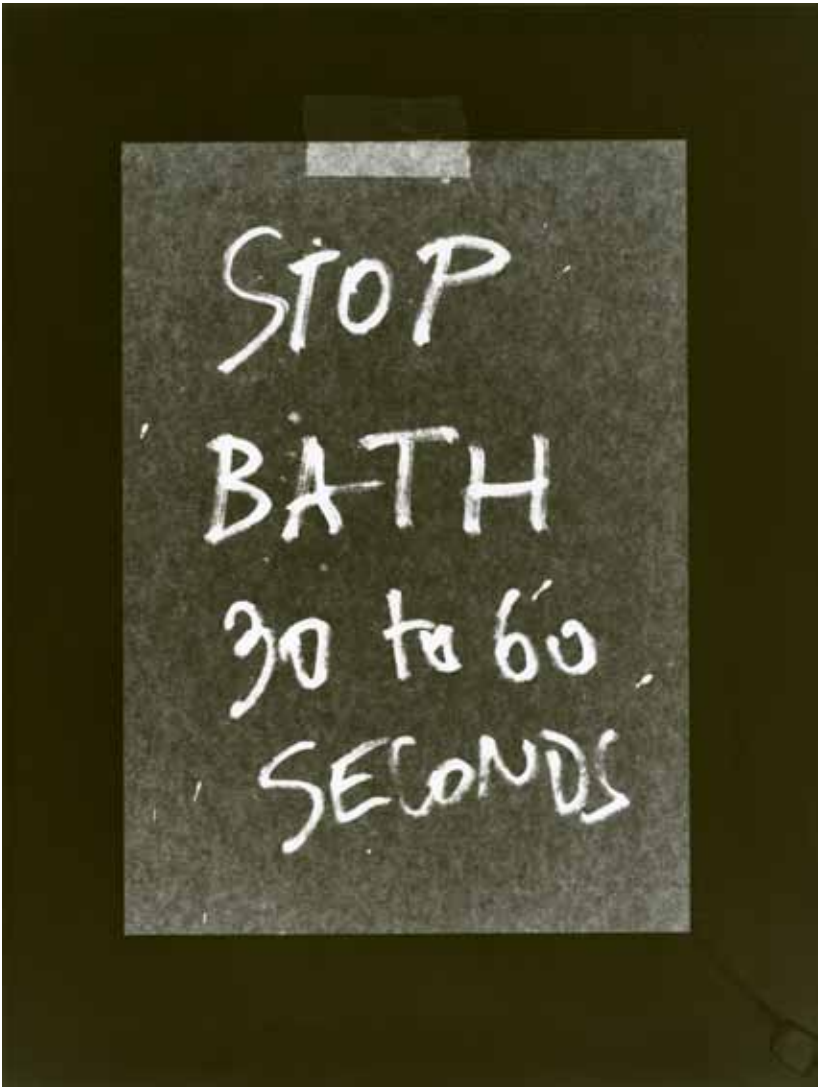
MH: It sounds like a very organic project with a lot of improvisation.

TF: G. William Webb was the first to come and he did eight prints. So we decided on the edition of eight. His is not technically an edition though, more like a phrase consisting of eight words. And we got only seven prints from some people for whatever reason and some people also do more.

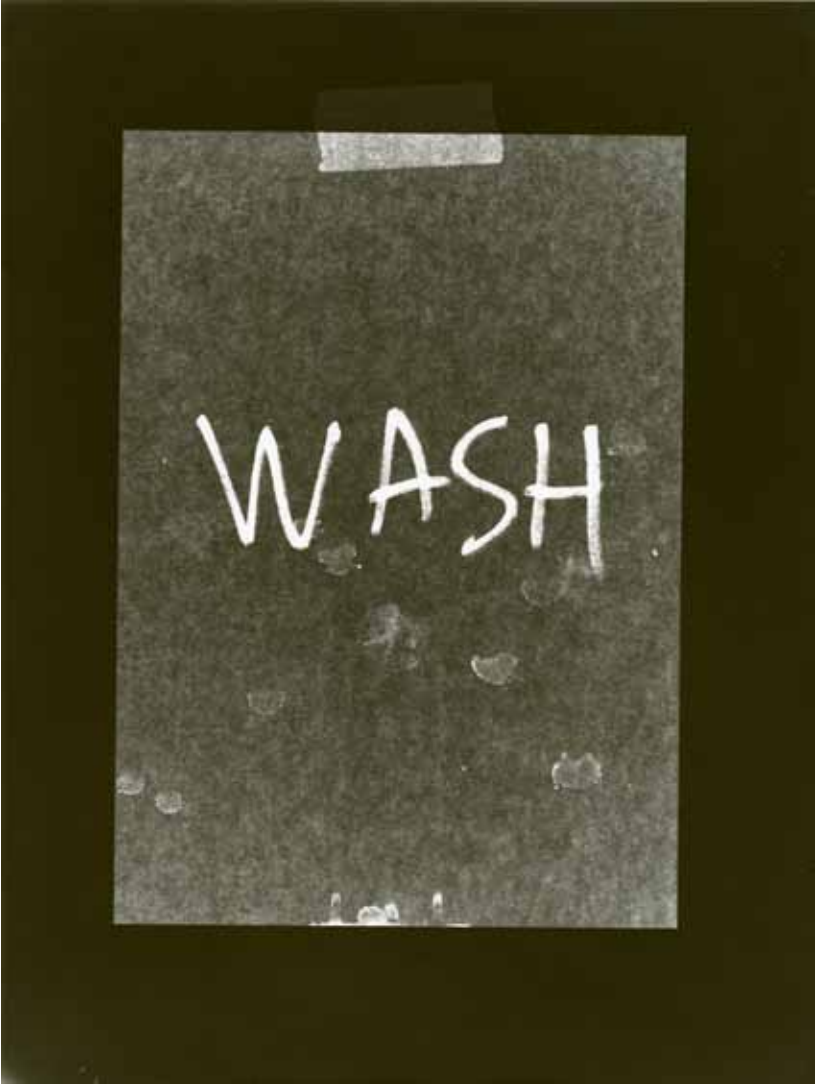
JT: Yes, we allow for these kinks. At the beginning we wanted Sonja Engelhardt to participate, but she was in Germany so we said, OK you can do it in Germany if you have access to a darkroom there and send the prints to us, and when she sent us the prints they were in color.

MH: Oh yes, I remember seeing those.

TF: It is really defined by the people who participate. Julien Carreyn, for example, did a book. He came with a model to the darkroom and he photographed her nude interacting with the chemicals, climbing the ladder,







BEN DOWELL

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really engaging with the space, like a performance. I had spent a day doing photograms with him, but in the end he wasn't happy so he decided to do the photo shoot and make a book instead.

JT: In that case, the situation of making a photogram became the content of a book. We also like to insert ourselves into different spheres by making the project more porous, to think beyond the image-making aspect of the project. We embedded some of the early editions in a group show and G. William Webb cooked beans based on N. Dash's recipe at the opening. On another occasion, we invited DROOID5Z, a band from New York that includes artists Ben Dowell, Nathan Gwynne, and Nickolaus Typaldos, to play a gig and make photograms. They came to Paris during FIAC because they worked as art handlers, and always played gigs when they traveled for work. They each did their own editions and collaboratively they did another one. The next day we displayed their photograms at their gig in the basement of La Cantine in Belleville, where people usually go after openings in Belleville galleries.

TF: DROOID5Z came around the darkroom at 5 p.m. and spent the whole night, about fourteen hours.

MH: At this point, has it spiraled out via the artists who have

already participated so that you have their friends and colleagues reaching out to you, or are you two still very much making the invitations?

TF: At the moment it's still very much the two of us asking people. For now we don't have that many people coming to us because the project is still pretty invisible. At this point we are producing a very large archive of sorts. Now we have about fifty of these editions, or "phrases" as we like to think of them: documents that record the traces of people who have all come through this one place.

JT: If someone asks to participate, we say yes. It's nice a way to free myself from that role of a curator.

MH: Is there a general consensus from the fifty people who have now participated in terms of their feedback about the experience?

TF: The project is becoming a platform where participants meet and make connections. Photograms have become part of the work of quite a few of the artists: Bettie Nin, Emilie Benoist, Robin Cameron, Nathan Gwynne, and Yonatan Vinitzky, for example. It makes perfect sense because photograms are at the intersection of so many things: photography, the real, sculpture, recording, drawing, technology...



MH: What are some of the most surprising works that you've seen come out of the darkroom? Either in the sense that the results were not at all what you would have expected from a particular artist, or, technically speaking, in terms of alternative techniques and processes?

TF: I'm pretty amazed each time. I'm not really able to make these types of judgments anymore, but the people who have never done it before can be really crazy, like I was, too, my first time. It's magical.

JT: The photograms are like forensic documents. If I know the artist's work already, I can relate to how he or she deals with materials, the idea of time, relationship to objects, and how he or she thinks and moves, both as an artist and even as a person. Time and space are collapsed in the photograms and I feel the struggle as well as the pleasure of being and thinking. Maybe the process of photogram reorients one's thinking about what it means to make something. Even artists who typically don't make things are forced to use their hands. That's why I haven't even done an edition yet myself: because the process is quite vulnerable.

MH: It sounds like you are way too close to it to enjoy the liberty that someone else might feel when they come into this space that's not their own studio and where they are just invited to make something (anything). I like what you're saying about the photograms documenting the maker's thought process. It's kind

of like the opposite of a logic problem where, in this case, the person has to create his way out of a situation.

TF: That's why I also wasn't able to do an edition myself and why I encourage collaborations. I have done three collaborations since we began this project. For me it's less about a personal demonstration. Since I consider the project a collective archive, I push other people to collaborate.

MH: I like the idea that each artist coming in adds another layer to the space—like shadows on the photogram. Are there other ways that the space makes itself known as an integral part of the photograms? I'm thinking of someone's series that used the handwritten signs identifying the "fix" and the "rinse" and wondering if there are other examples that document, as you keep saying, the physical space.

JT: Yes, that was Ben Dowell who engaged with the darkroom instructions, navigating around the idea of the "perfect print." He used the handwritten signs of suggested timeframes for each chemical bath—of developer, stop, fix, and wash—as his objects. Carrie Yamaoka also used the walls and the floors of the darkroom as materials for her photograms.

TF: She imprinted the space—with a rubbing on paper—

and used that as a transparency to make the photograms.

JT: And Daiga Grantina used exhausted chemicals. The prints are slightly solarized.

TF: Yes, she did. She was very linked with organic materials in the way that her work brings all different kinds of things together. So I showed her how to fuck with the chemicals. And she was so good at it.

MH: Hers are so beautiful! Those shadowy drips are fantastic.

TF: She had never done photograms before. She said to me three days ago: "I want to come back!" Carlos Reyes did a series using the tea that I offered him.

JT: Mariage Frères?

TF: Yes.

JT: Which flavor?

TF: At that time it must have been rooibos.

JT: That's important.

MH: From what you are saying, it seems like the photograms

are, on the one hand, an intimate self-portrait and, on the other hand, interpretations of the common environment where they were all produced. The artists are alone when they are in there, but they also all share the same space—just at different times. Has the initial idea that the two of you had grown and changed along the way? Where do you see it going?

JT: Nancy Brooks Brody, who will participate in the project, recommended Rebecca Solnit's book *The Faraway Nearby* to me. The part where Solnit talks about the "immortality of the unfinished" resonates. We always say we don't know when our project will end. If we have an exhibition, which we are going to, it won't mark the end of the project. The exhibition is not a summary of what has happened. We want to rethink the temporality for what a project like this needs to be: does there need to be a beginning and an end at all? We will do a book in the middle of the project and maybe another book that comes at it from a different angle. We talked about someone eventually absorbing the project and taking it away from us.

TF: We'll wake up one day and someone will be doing it in Tokyo!

JT: Or Yangon. If someone asks to take over this project, they can.

MH: So if the project is not tied to you, and it's not tied to

Paris necessarily, and it doesn't have a beginning or an end, and it's not building towards a final exhibition or book... what is it precisely that you would be giving to someone else if they asked to take over?

JT: The responsibility of taking over the project will have to be taken into consideration from whoever asks to take it over. We would stop, and they would start—by making the darkroom, inviting the people, and doing it their way. It's the spirit of doing things that we would impart. By the way, the title of the project, "The plates of the present," is the beginning of a sentence from *The Pencil of Nature*, by William Henry Fox Talbot, published in six installments between 1844 and 1846.

TF: Talbot's book is linked to a time when people were making drawings and not paintings. Photograms are closer to drawings and prints than photography.

MH: Do people leave things behind, little mementos, either evidence of their own work or just even personal items?

TF: It's funny; it's really like a photogram. The darkroom is like a plate and everything that people leave behind gets imprinted there.

JT: In that sense, the darkroom retains memories from all the different people who have used it, who have passed through this darkness, alone together.



CARLOS REYES