

Bonillas, Iñaki

(Born Mexico City, 1981)

Despite all appearances, Iñaki Bonillas is not a photographer. Rather, his work investigates the materiality and semiotic depth of said medium in a somewhat topographic manner: starting, and never ending, in a periphery that stands ambiguously as both the material margins of photography as well as its self-reflective dimension—that is, its apparent core. As he exerts infinite variations on generic aspects, alternately related to structure and meaning (primary colors; family photographs; erasures; captioning; fiction; archival habits; etc.), Bonillas delivers a paradox with each of his works where background becomes foreground, face pigment, anecdote main theme, stain signature, and vice-versa.

Unlike many contemporary artists of recent generations, Bonillas started his career before, and instead of, undertaking an official fine arts education. Widely and internationally exhibited before he reached age 20, his work started off with highly analytical studies of ordinary photographic procedures such as printing (in his foundational piece, *Trabajos fotográficos*, 1998) or pressing the shutter (*Diez cámaras documentadas acústicamente*, from the same year). Trained in the subtleties of image processing while he worked as an assistant in a photographer's studio, Bonillas saw his literalistic impulse transformed by the inheritance, in 2000, of his grandfather's photo archive; a corpus he referred to thereupon as the "J. R. Plaza Archive". Composed of nearly three thousand pictures grouped in thirty albums, along with eight hundred slides, two volumes of an encyclopedia on film, and a folder of composite documents, the J. R. Plaza Archive became the matrix of more than twenty works produced between the years 2003 and 2014. Although this collection is not the sole source, or territory, of Bonillas's production from this period, it has allowed the artist to map out a constellation of problems and themes in which the cultural history of photography, as well as its structural behaviors, clearly emerge. Thus, the question of "secondariness" (that is, why certain objects or aspects of an image are subordinate to others) is explored in works such as *J. R. Plaza: Reversos* (2005), *Ciudad y paisaje* (2005), *Tineidae* (2010), *Las ideas del espejo* (2009), or *A Storm of*

Secondary Things (2012). Other pieces interrogate the frail architectonic of personal identity (the image as “countermemory”) as it is constituted through the archive (*Una tarjeta para J.R. Plaza*, 2007; *A sombra e o brilho*, 2007; *Fisiología del matrimonio*, 2007-2012). Others, still, scrutinize the editing idiosyncrasies of the archive’s original constitutor (*Martín Lunas*, 2004-2012; *Fotografías delineadas*, 2006). The artist’s taste for cataloguing and indexing appears in the first and last of these works (*Pequeña historia de la fotografía*, 2003; *Words and Photos*, 2014). But the interest in alienating the medium’s most generic features didn’t only bring Bonillas to embrace his own family archive as one of generic familiarities waiting to be alienated. In recent series, such as *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (2012) or *The Idea of North* (2014), the artist builds intricate paths of literary and artistic reference where one image leads to another and then to many. A fragment of an image constitutes an index, and a minor, accidental gesture signifies a milestone in the history of another art—perhaps literature or music or architecture—at the heart of the photographic material.

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Selected bibliography:

Álvarez, Ekaterina and Minera, María, eds. *J.R. Plaza Archive*, Zürich: JRP Ringier and Christoph Keller, 2012.

McDonough, Tom. “Iñaki Bonillas” in *Artforum*, November 2010, pages 248-250.