

Editorial

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A stain knows she¹ will grow up to be a stain before she is even born. She can't be any other thing. It's a predisposition: to be stain. A stain has a disordered and unspeakable nature; because she is time and gesture, a stain invades, spreads and contaminates.

The subject may well think he activates a stain, but he does not control her. The subject acts like a kind of breath that makes a stain of latent dust evident. But he creates and he is there, helping the rock become a rock, the painting become a painting, the photograph become a photograph.

When we chose to dedicate Propeller's edition #1 to the stain, we were impelled by a desire to think about abstract photography. Overall, we wanted to investigate the morphological nature of photography, not only in respect to the material substance, but most importantly in respect to that which transcends the matter, turning photography into an artistical entity.

On the one hand, we wanted to consider the kind of photography that is less dependent on the lines that define universal codes – human figures, natural elements, etc. – on the other hand, we wanted to venture into the depths of the photographic mechanism of representation and, once situated there, to question how the absolute stain of photography is formed: how does a picture become an image? How does a photograph become an image from, with and beyond the elements that it registers?

As our questions about the stain contaminated the authors invited to collaborate with this edition, as well as those who participated in our open call, it became clear that 'the stain' concealed a complexity words could not reveal. When asked if it concerned 'error', we said 'chance'; if asked about 'warp', we suggested 'abstraction'. A stain does not make dirty, she dyes; she does not corrupt, instead she created the very same spot from which she will eventually blossom.

But the tendency to associate stain with guilt is understandable. The etymology of the word does point us in that direction, for *macula* rapidly gives way to the religious idea of what is 'immaculate'. However, these questions are properly addressed in *Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal*, an essay by Walter Benjamin, from 1917, which we reproduce next, accompanied by two translations: the Portuguese version, by Maria Filomena Molder, and the English version, by Soraya Vasconcelos. For now, what is important to emphasize, in respect to the idea of 'error' (frequently associated with stain), is that a stain is never an unwanted child. She is a first-born. As Filomena Molder tells us, in her *Reading Notes on a Text by Walter Benjamin*, "the stain precedes that which is immaculate", to which she adds:

The stain [...] is the revelation of a deeply rooted affection, alike growth and the way the color comes to petals or the blood to the face, it's a living process. The stain is always absolute, that is, it is always immanent and pregnant with immediate expressiveness, and it is less the result of an act than of a manifestation that occurs. It is a medium, a generative element, which reveals that – in a precise sense in the pictorial stain – it lets itself be passed through, it receives and transmits, vibrates.²

It's about piercing the graphic surface of photography, suggesting she may well be, in her essence, a stain, but also a set of particles ready to assimilate and distribute light. Although we'd like to confer to the idea of a photographic stain a metaphysical nature, what seems to mark a certain spiritual dimension to that original absolute is the author's unintentionality. As if, in some sense, what makes the stain possible is the soul of the gesture and not its trace.

When we're dealing with photography and semiotics, there's a natural tendency to mark, circumscribe, associate and interpret. The observer will only linger in a stain for a moment, rapidly shifting attention to the representation elements, focused on figuring out the *whys*. In this edition, we like to think the observer is challenged to oblivion, meaning he/she is challenged to abandon the memory of the language that makes it possible to formulate the question *why?*

In the visual essays here presented, particularly where the color manifests itself centerstage – as is the case with images by Jörg Sasse, José Luís Neto or Sjoerd Knibeller –, the stain fills the artwork: she is vibration. The stain is what guarantees the authenticity of these photographic entities, unveiling the strength beneath their being.

In fact, Benjamin's essay reveals the nature of the stain: she is a vehicle, a medium. As Filomena Molder summarizes, "above all [the stain] appears in the living"; while "the stain manifests itself", the sign is a mark that is printed, "it's scratched and grooved".³ It is when considering the field that encapsulates the sign and the stain that we realize that field can, in the end, hold the true photographic paradigm: does photography create or destroy images?

Without further context, this paradigm may point to nowhere, but what we're attempting to show, with this edition, is that in order to create autonomous images, photography needs to be able to transcend the surface of the cut, where she thinks she is window, perspective, narrative and history.

After all, photography can (also) be stain

¹ The use of the personal pronoun *she* to refer to *stain*, usually understood as *a thing*, is an intentional one. I think of *stain* as a feminine being, with a soul and a presence of her own.

² In: *Matérias Sensíveis* (1999). Lisboa: Relógio d'Água, p. 26. Translation by Sofia Silva.

³ *Idem*, p.27.