

# DOUBLE OR NOTHING

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## ABSTRACT

In this influential text (first published in 1983), Flusser accords the photograph the status of the first postmodern object and pessimistically links it to robotization of the social order. Douglas Huebler, Location Piece #2, New York City-Seattle, Washington, 1969 (detail), text 7 ½ x 7 ½", two maps, and sixteen black-and-white photographs, each 7 x 7".

## FULL TEXT

### Headnote

JOHN MILLER ON THE ART OF DOUGLAS HUEBLER

IN RETROSPECT, Douglas Huebler seems to have framed the scope of his work (or at least the general reception of it) with two irreconcilable declarations, the first being Conceptual art's most oft-quoted pronouncement, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." Despite its laconic tone, Huebler's remark, initially put forward in a 1969 artist's statement for a show at New York's Seth Siegelau Gallery, mercilessly lampoons the expectation that artists be prolific. It implies a cessation of production, not because the world is particularly wonderful, but simply because it meets a minimum standard: "more or less interesting." It hints at a certain ecology as well. To make more objects-particularly, boring art objects-would be redundant. Why bother?

As Huebler later complained, these words would come back to haunt him. During his lectures someone inevitably pointed out that he had gone on to add more things to our more or less interesting world. And, in fact, just two years after renouncing object making for good, Huebler seemed to double back, emphatically proclaiming his intention "to photographically document . . . the existence of everyone alive." Although this proposition, from the prospectus for his Variable Piece #70, (In Process) Global, 1971, 1971-, clearly telegraphed its own inevitable failure, it still invoked a kind of frantic and imperious hyperproduction whose purpose, even so, was murky. Document to what end?

However confounding and diametrically opposed Huebler's two statements seem, together they amount to a binary proposition that redefines the role of the artist. What links them is the quandary of an individuated subject confronting "the world" as an indifferent, globalized system. Rejecting production in the usual sense, that subject responds by systematically reproducing this uninflected world-or at least images of its inhabitants. This formulation is blasé and fatalistic. It is also discreetly utopian. The world itself is to remain as it is; the point is simply to recognize its completeness. Everything that need be known about it is known already.

Yet with these disarmingly provocative declarations-and the body of work that is keyed to them-Huebler, perhaps more vividly than any other artist, registers the drastic sense of ideological liberation and foreclosure swirling around photographic technology both then and now. What he grasped was the camera's force as an economic and social agent. He saw that its ability to produce an instant and objective image implies a process of continuous

reproduction, that its ability to disseminate images widely, cheaply, and immediately implies a degree zero of democratization bordering on complete devaluation.

These prospects are tied to a nascent postindustrial logic and ideology: the information economy. Huebler's work stands at the crux of that epochal shift. In a statement accompanying the 1969 group show "Prospect '69" at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, he wrote of his working method: "I use the camera as a 'dumb' copying device that only serves to document whatever phenomena appears before it through the conditions set by a system." Mike Kelley points out in his 1997 essay "Shall We Kill Daddy?" that, here, Huebler seemed to contradict the gist of his own work, simply repeating the Conceptualist mantra that photos are transparent. Clearly, none of the photos featured in his *Location, Duration, or Variable* works are transparent. For example, on March 17, 1969, Huebler took a walk in Central Park. His goal was to shoot ten pictures in a ten-minute period: When he heard an "individually distinguishable" birdcall, he would point his camera in that direction and shoot. The resulting photos, coupled with a short explanatory statement, became *Duration Piece #5*, New York, 1969. Obviously, the camera cannot capture what Huebler is after here; the birdcalls elude it. Ultimately, all ten pictures are rather opaque. They demonstrate little more than the camera's technological and existential facticity.

With this seeming contradiction in mind, it may be fruitful to reconsider Huebler's "dumb" approach to the camera vis-à-vis philosopher and cultural critic Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. In this influential text (first published in 1983), Flusser accords the photograph the status of the first postmodern object and pessimistically links it to robotization of the social order. Ruling out the possibility of transparent copying-in a formulation that resonates with Huebler's "conditions set by a system"-Flusser claims that "the photographic universe" is a closed system that not only fails to represent phenomena, but also excludes them. He posits the camera as a programmable apparatus, one that, paradoxically, programs the photographers (functionaries) who use it.

For Flusser, a program is a set of possibilities, a "combination game with clear and distinct elements," that serves to animate an apparatus; an apparatus, in turn, is any "non-human agency . . . organization or system that enables something to function," whether that thing is "the camera, the computer, . . . the State or . . . the market." As he puts it, "every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera. The number of such possibilities is large, but it is nevertheless finite: It is the sum of all those photographs that can be taken by a camera."

As photographers discover new possibilities, the camera, in turn, incorporates these into its program. In other words, the camera uses photographers as a feedback mechanism. Since their discoveries serve to expand the camera program, they are, per Flusser, "informative." That is, they "imprint a new, intentional form" on the program. Conversely, a photo that reiterates a possibility that is already in the program is redundant. What especially concerns Flusser in this respect is how images are made-their technical form, not the repetition of images per se.

Flusser also concerns himself with the large but finite sum total of all possible photographs. This yields the photographic universe, a Cartesian system in which every element corresponds to a point in the world, making the camera "omniscient and omnipotent in the photographic universe." Such matchings, of course, conjure up *Variable Piece #70*, Huebler's proposal to photograph everyone alive. The presumed one-to-one correspondence between (redundant) photographic images and the world population would map reality so closely that, as a map, it would be useless. In a 1969 interview with artist Patricia Norvell, Huebler observed: "The map is only a chart, you know. It isn't really a real thing, and yet we begin to assume it is a real thing. Most people experience maps or clocks or charts and so forth as very real life-defining phenomena, or whatever." (Likewise, Alexander Alberro characterized Huebler's *Rochester Trip*, 1968, which laid out the course of a road tip, as a representation "pushed 'to the point of

imagining a map so rigorous and referential that it becomes coterminous with its object." Here, Alberro quotes Fredric Jameson, who himself had been influenced by the paradox of Jorge Luis Borges's life-size map.)

It is within such a pointless teleology that Huebler takes on the role of photographer-functionary, dutifully reenacting the camera program. The role is performative and mimetic, nothing less than mummery.

Documentation is only the pretext for such a charade-Huebler does not and cannot fully enact all the elements in the camera's program. His enactments are reduced to gestures.

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE for Huebler's photo works is typically the experiment, couched as field research. Experimental protocols raise empirical expectations, and they also provide the pretext for following a set procedure. Thus it would be better to describe his activity as "operating the camera" rather than "shooting pictures." In Location Piece #5, Massachusetts-New Hampshire, 1969, he photographed roadside snowbanks. In the statement that formed part of that work, he stipulated, "Each photograph was made at an interval of every 5 miles; of every 5 yards; or of every 5 feet; or of a variable combination of all of those intervals." Duration Piece #2, Paris, 1970, presents the viewer with eight snapshots said to illustrate the "timeless serenity" of a statue seen behind some cement mixers. Here too he shot the photos at set intervals, then shuffled them out of sequence. The text for Location Piece #2, New York City-Seattle, Washington, 1969, tells readers that "an area was arbitrarily selected within which a person in each city photographed places that he, or she, felt could be characterized as being (1) 'frightening,' (2) 'erotic,' (3) 'transcendent,' (4) 'passive,' (5) 'fevered,' and (6) 'muffled.'" Despite the carefully enumerated adjectives, the operative word here turns out to be "arbitrarily"-the resulting images are presented without any indication of which terms they are meant to represent. In Variable Piece #135, Edinboro State College, Edinboro, Pennsylvania, 1974, Huebler invited look-alikes-just ordinary people who happened to resemble one another-to submit five-by-seven-inch photos to a juried contest. Many other works play with doubling as well. In Location Piece #17, Turin, Italy, 1973, he even found a "man who bears a strong resemblance to the artist... at least more so than most everyone else in the world."

Of course, such doubling raises the prospect of fooling the camera. Ultimately, the camera's claim on scientific objectivity can go no further than physiognomy. Although Huebler once asserted that "art is a source of information," he consistently destabilizes the photo's documentary status by pointing to the kinds of information it cannot convey. As Margaret Sundell wrote in these pages in 2002, Huebler applies "a discourse developed for the collection of empirical data and the verification of objective truths to situations that are by turns aleatory, outlandish, or simply mundane. . . ."

All this, however, is not necessarily a misapplication of photography, especially if, as Flusser argues, "the act of photography is that of 'phenomenological doubt' to the extent that it attempts to approach phenomena from any number of viewpoints." In other words, a looming array of possibilities leaves the documentary claims of any single photo tenuous and incomplete. Conversely, because cameras generate more information than the photographer intends, the multiplication of viewpoints only amplifies the fundamental doubt. Thus, as a means of reality testing, every photographic experiment is fated to collapse on its foundations. Huebler's phenomenological doubt is simply more overt and more discursive than that of conventional photographers. In noting "a tension between surface blandness and infinite meaning" in Huebler's work, Kelley might just as well be describing the greater part of all photographic practice. But given photography's inherent equivocality, "infinite meaning" may turn out to be nothing less than an abyss of meaning.

BEFORE CONCEPTUAL ART, photography, even modernist photography, took painting, which is to say, pictorialism, as a model. Photographs were either "mirrors" or "windows," as photographer and curator John Szarkowski has said. In contrast, for Conceptual artists, pictures-if used at all-became a means, not an end. As a discourse of so-

called dematerialization, Conceptualism favors documentation over object making, and the photo serves as its preferred vehicle. This destabilizes the conventional status of the picture and the image. Photographic information can lie loosely, so to speak, on any number of surfaces, from Xeroxed flyers to archival prints. The support can be discarded and the photographic information regenerated at will. The material support is, essentially, immaterial. It is for this reason that Flusser says that the photograph is the first postindustrial object.

Against the background of today's burgeoning information and service economies, we can discern how Huebler's refractory 1969 and 1971 statements suggest something of photography's radically postindustrial nature. In a photo, the information-not the material support, not the technique, not the composition-is what counts. Moreover, the point is not to own information but to disseminate it. Even so, Huebler reminds us of such information's potentially dubious character and warns us not to mistake it for reality. As his work makes abundantly clear, information is not synonymous with meaning. The power of information lies in its abstraction, which, in turn, facilitates its exchangeability-but the inherently reductive nature of abstraction is its weakness as well as its strength. The political economy of the photo hinges on the play between the proliferation of meaning and its obviation.

Alberro, notably, applies Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's notion of informatization to the emergence of Conceptual art. As the two famously theorize in *Empire* (2000), the contemporary phase of advanced capitalism embeds an information infrastructure within production processes. Such an infrastructure is inherently interactive and gradually becomes immanent in production itself. Thus, Negri and Hardt maintain, "Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services and relationships." Yet, as Huebler intimates, the negative flip side of democratized, information-based coproduction may be the onus of an informational phantasmagoria.

In his own model of Conceptual art, Siegelau distinguishes between "primary information" (content: the signified) and "secondary information" (the means of its presentation: the signifier). For example, in Huebler's *Duration Piece #5* (the birdcall piece), the primary information consists of the parameters within which the artist produced the work: Shoot in the direction of an individually distinguishable birdcall; walk in that direction until the next call is heard; shoot as before, and so on. The specific images, which function merely as vehicles for the paradigmatic schema of the piece, are secondary information. The significance of both the photographic support and the secondary information is arbitrary. (Had Huebler executed *Duration Piece #5* just thirty seconds earlier or later than he did, his set of photos would have looked entirely different.) Not coincidentally, both primary information and photographic information lend themselves to easy and widespread dissemination. This is why, as Flusser avers, "It is not the owner but the programmer of the information who is the powerful one." Material accumulation, accordingly, becomes a secondary goal. In this sense, one might document every living person without necessarily adding more objects to the world.

The information of the camera program differs significantly from the informational capacity of photographs. A photograph that disseminates information does not necessarily inform-in the sense of "imprinting a new, intentional form on"-or develop the camera program. The quest for new possibilities outside the camera program lies, by definition, outside established applications, and while such discoveries continue to shape photography's practical uses (e.g., the Global Positioning System), it is not these discoveries that carry conventionally useful information on a day-to-day basis. It is their reiteration. Thus, what institutions typically want are redundant photos, regardless of whether a human functionary, a satellite, or an electron microscope shot them. Conceptual art thus embraces the redundant photograph's informational capacity. Conversely, pictorialist photography, read in Flusserian terms, may be said to constitute a flight from redundancy that is doomed to fail, since the images it produces, however "original," will never be informative. Huebler, like other Conceptual artists-only more so-treats

the photo as a readymade and the camera program as a given, an approach that allows him to concentrate on the camera's social and political imbrication. To aspire to informativity is in fact to collude with the robotization of social relations, since informing the camera program, after all, means expanding and strengthening it. Conceptual art rejects this aspiration. To the extent that it critiques framing and institutional frameworks, it is more concerned with the metaprogram that encapsulates the camera (a nested complex of institutions) than with the camera program per se. As such, Huebler's photos approach an "art after philosophy," to use Joseph Kosuth's phrase, especially since they address not only their own a priori condition, but also that of the camera as a political and economic apparatus. (Ironically, Kosuth pointedly excluded Huebler from the realm of "pure" Conceptual art, relegating him to the status of "stylistic" Conceptualist.)

NEGRI AND HARDT ASSERT, "The passage toward an informational economy necessarily involves a change in the quality and nature of labor"-a new type of labor, for which Huebler's oeuvre suggests the photographer's work serves as model. Again, here it is worthwhile to consider Flusser, who characterizes the photographer not as a worker but as someone who plays with the camera program as a combination game. This inversion of work "dialectizes" all the terms involved. A pure combination game most resembles gambling. Gambling departs from traditional work's focus on an exact outcome. Unpredictability is its essence. Significantly, Huebler uses chance and gamelike rules to generate most of his photos. In *Variable Piece #107, London, 1972*, to cite one example, the artist photographed eighteen mannequins on London's Regent Street. After each, he turned around and photographed the first passerby of the same sex. This gesture caricatures the means by which conventional photos derive their authority: by resembling their subjects. Accordingly, Huebler revels in photography's exemplary arbitrariness-in the case of this piece, the unexpected likenesses and disparities between the idealized mannequins and quotidian pedestrians.

If Flusser likens shooting photos to throwing dice, this is disengaged play-the opposite of creative play, ordinarily associated with children-recalling Walter Benjamin's comparison of the gambler and the assembly-line worker. For his part, Huebler is more concerned with the rules than he is with playing. Or, more accurately, instead of playing with the camera, he plays with the rules. He brackets the work of the photographer-functionary by miming it, thus bringing its automated aspect to the fore. And here one may consider whether such automation, for all its darker implications, also harbors a liberatory potential. As Negri and Hardt argue, automation-or the robotization of productive relations-depends on an information infrastructure and therefore entails an increase of communication and interaction. They consider this spontaneous coproduction a new form of commonality, which they equate with the historical commons, i.e., common property to which everyone has a right.

We might correlate this logic with that of Huebler's *Variable Piece #70*. Without knowing the total number of portraits it comprises, one can safely surmise that it falls far short of its stated goal of "photographically document[ing], to the extent of [the artist's] capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner." By tying its prospective scope to a global demographic, the work quixotically aspires, for better or worse, to be an utterly democratic representation. It evinces the logic of an archive, albeit a fragmented one. As Webster's defines them, archives (in the plural) are both "a place where public documents and records are kept" and "the public records, documents, etc. kept in such a place." Huebler's archive, in other words, would document, reflexively, the very public that archives ostensibly serve.

Allan Sekula's seminal 1983 essay "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital" argues the reverse: that what gives an archive its definition is its status as private property. He also argues that photography constructs an imaginary economy, representing not the real relations that govern people's lives but an imaginary relation to the real relations under which they live. As such, the archive's status as private property contrasts

starkly with the imaginary aspect of its representative function. Proceeding from this logic, we might be tempted to conclude that any perceived liberatory dimension in Huebler's oeuvre is itself a pipe dream. Flusser, for his part, stresses the antihistorical-and therefore, apolitical-nature of photographs, which "replace events by states of things and translate them into scenes." In Flusser's sweeping historical overview, the linearity of writing gave rise to historical consciousness, which the photograph then eroded, reinstating a kind of magical thought that confuses cause and effect (making it irrelevant whether, for example, the cock crows because the sun rises or the sun rises because the cock crows). Likewise, in his 1969 declaration, Huebler says he wants only "to state the existence of things in terms of time and place." Yet just as we may recall that Sekula insists that the unity of an archive-which is what Variable Piece #70 purports to be-derives from ownership, so Bill Gates's monopolization of the Bettmann and United Press International archives (currently estimated at twenty-seven million pictures) comes to mind. His company, Corbis Corporation, even went so far as to sequester these underground.

In dialectical opposition to the ever-expanding reach of monopoly capital, Negri and Hardt foresee that, through the process of postindustrialization, "Private property, despite its juridical powers, cannot help becoming an ever more abstract and transcendental concept and thus ever more detached from reality." Nonetheless, photography remains intimately bound up with the juridical powers that allow private property to persist as an operative reality, rather than an abstract and transcendent concept-especially through surveillance, an empiricist undercurrent running through Variable Piece #70. It is exactly these juridical regimes, moreover, that turn an otherwise abstract and transcendent concept into an operative reality. And yet, because this work also posits itself as a public archive, a commons-"the incarnation, the production, and the liberation of the multitude," as Hardt and Negri would have it-it also militates against juridical power.

Although some see political quietism in Huebler's inclination to leave the world as it is, his authorial refusal to appropriate material from it suggests otherwise. It recognizes the world's sanctity as a commonwealth. What is perhaps most compelling about Huebler's particular approach to photography-and Variable Piece #70 especially-is that its internal contradictions so clearly sharpen the larger contradictions of the entire photographic enterprise in the postindustrial era. The surface blandness of a world filled with more or less interesting objects shows itself to be nothing less than a topology for localized ideological struggle and ongoing economic transformation.

### Sidebar

Opposite page: Douglas Huebler, Variable Piece #70, (In Process) Global, 1971, 90F (Blue Series), 1974 (detail), text 11 x 8" and eight color photographs, four 4 ½x 6 ½" and four 7 ¼x 9 ¼". All Douglas Huebler images ©Darcy Huebler. This page: Douglas Huebler, Variable Piece #70, (In Process) Global, 1971, 90F (Blue Series), 1974 (detail), text 11 x 8"; and eight color photographs, four 4 ½x 6 ½" and four 7 ¼x 9 ¼".

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What Huebler grasped was the camera's force as an economic and social agent. He saw that its ability to disseminate images widely, cheaply, and immediately implies a degree zero of democratization bordering on complete devaluation.

### Sidebar

Opposite page: Douglas Huebler, Location Piece #5, Massachusetts-New Hampshire, 1969, text 4 ¾x 5" and ten black-and-white photographs, each 8 x 10". This page: Douglas Huebler, Location Piece #2, New York City-Seattle, Washington, 1969 (detail), text 7 ½x 7 ½", two maps, and sixteen black-and-white photographs, each 7 x 7".

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suggest something of photography's radically postindustrial nature.

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Opposite page: Douglas Huebler, *Duration Piece #2*. Paris, 1370, text 8 x 7 ½" and eight black-and-white photographs, each 8 x 10". This page: Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #107*, London. 1972, text 8 x 7 ½", black-and white contact sheet 8 x 10", and twelve black-and-white photographs, each 5 x 7".

### Sidebar

Huebler is more concerned with the rules than he is with playing. Or, more accurately, instead of playing with the camera, he plays with the rules.

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Opposite page: Douglas Huebler, *Location Piece #17*, Turin, Italy, 1973 (detail), text 6 ½x 4 ¼" and five black-and-white photographs, two 8 x 10"; two 8 x 7"; and one 7 x 7". This page: Douglas Huebler, *Location Piece #17*, Turin, Italy, 1973 (detail), text 6 ½x 4 ¼" and five black-and-white photographs, two 8 x 10"; two 8 x 7"; and one 7 x 7".

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JOHN MILLER is an artist based in New York and Berlin who, since his first solo exhibition at White Columns in New York in 1982, has shown widely in the US and abroad. In 1999, Magasin-Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, hosted "Parallel Economies," Miller's first retrospective. "The Middle of the Day," the artist's ongoing photo series, was included in the 2005 Biennale de Lyon and will be on view next month as part of *Periferic 7*, a biennial in Iasi, Romania. Miller's criticism has appeared in *Artforum*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *Artscribe*; *The Price Club*, a selection of his writings from 1977 to 1998, was published in 2000 by JRP Editions/Les Presses du Réel. He teaches in Barnard College's art history department. Here, Miller considers the work of American Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler. PHOTO: CARMEN MILLER

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