On Arturo Herrera's Photographs

In the late 1960s when Mel Bochner was writing down on individual index cards a whole series of quotations about photography, it evolved into a series of experiments that was as concentrated as it was multilayered. In 1969 Bochner photographed one of these handwritten quotations he had originally collected to be published in a text entitled "Dead Ends and Vicious Circles," and by doing so refuted as plainly as possible its very assertion, which was attributed to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica:* "PHOTOGRAPHY CANNOT RECORD ABSTRACT IDEAS."[1] As clear and unambiguous as this line of argument might be, for Bochner it was not just conceptually relevant but also very practically so. He photographed minimalist grids, television signals and measurements, opaque and transparent surfaces—always searching for a way out of the dead ends and vicious circles of photographic illusionism. No matter whether this venture was successful or Bochner secretly failed, from today's perspective, his coming to terms with photography seems as fascinating as it is sensitive: "precariously poised between the world it describes and the one it inhabits."[2]

Thirty-five years later Arturo Herrera is pulling off an equally sensitive balancing act, namely, in an experimental series of photographs that at first glance seems to take up again the assertion that Mel Bochner disproved, though with different premises. Although it too operates on a high level of reflection, from which the artist considers not only his own work but above all the idea underlying it, Herrera himself is far less interested in abstract ideas than in the idea of abstraction. This is the primary interest that runs through his entire oeuvre. And it is this interest that decisively influences his photographic work. Thus the statement quoted takes a completely different turn, and even before any line of argument can be presented, it seems to have become relevant to Herrera's experimental series in question form: CAN PHOTOGRAPHY RECORD THE IDEA OF ABSTRACTION?

Arturo Herrera approaches this line of questioning in a grid of eighty black-and-white photographs. The images are confusing at first, because they show nothing whatsoever of the familiar reality with which we have always associated photographs. Instead, one could speak of dissected views of an artistic process of finding form,

each an autonomous and self-confident composition. Hence the individual photographs reveal abstract signs and codes that break off sharply at the edges of the image. In several cases, the gray values of the black-and-white prints reveal the surfaces of deckle-edged paper. Other motifs have the indistinct contours of a blown-up illustration, then a richly detailed drawing seems to disappear under the blurriness of a sheet of tracing paper. Sparse white fields emerge and recede again; brushstrokes and washed planes produce amorphous forms, and it is not clear whether they function as figure or ground. Very rarely the eye manages to complete an excerpted motif—the outlines of a comic book figure or the freely floating architecture of the roof of a house. The big picture of this arrangement does not follow a strict sequence or composition; the transitions and contacts between the individual photographs strive neither for thematic nor formal congruencies. Instead, the arrangement appeals to a kind of inner rigor that takes into account the procedural thinking of fragmentation.

Two things are particularly remarkable about this artistic process, and they pertain equally to the possibilities of the photographic and of abstraction. As far as the possibilities of abstraction are concerned, they return not only as a loose reference to Arturo Herrera's previous work but in every single photograph. As a matter of fact he seeks and finds the motifs in his own drawings and collages. And in some ways the latter are the models he uses to probe the photographic possibilities of abstraction. Herrera describes the role that photography plays in this as follows: "The lens of the camera served as a tool for fragmentation. Instead of the X-ACTO blade doing the cutting, the camera allowed me to focus on specific parts and views of the original sources."[3] Thus the artist uses the camera to cut out existing formal solutions and then recomposes them in a new formal order. In that sense Arturo Herrera seems to remain true both technically and aesthetically to his earlier working procedure: to the layers and fractures of the collage just as much as to the open structure of his cutouts or the richly detailed allover of his monumental wall paintings.

At the same time his photographs seem literally to have taken possession and assimilated their "original sources." It does not matter whether it is a deep black line on a gray background, a seemingly perspectival drawing in space, or a washed plane that in turn recalls Herrera's felt and paper cutouts—it is enormously difficult

to see in any of the given photographs only the depiction of a motif. This is because, first of all, the artist uses a comparatively thick, matte photographic paper for his prints; secondly, he chooses his details in such a way that they not only blur dimensions and relative sizes but also seem to overcome the distance of the photographic medium. In addition, the artist infiltrates the difference between motif and the real image by deliberately incorporating the principle of chance into the developmental process of several of his works: some of the film rolls spent between three and fourteen days in a water bath before they were developed, which causes unpredictable formations and deformations on the negative. Hence the blemish and the craquelée, the dots, streaks, and washed-out shadings that are the chance results of the developing process can scarcely be distinguished from the motif proper.

Much about this extremely dense relation between image and motif recalls the "pure installation of presence" that Rosalind Krauss described as the essential "photographic condition" of the art of the 1960s and 1970s in the sense of an "indexical" semiotic function.[4] This assessment seems as obvious as it is problematic, since covertly it is really about the broader question of whether the transfer of reality into the photograph is essential to the readability of the image and, if so, how much reality actually enters into the image. As Krauss rightly noted, this question cannot be restricted to the medium of photography alone but is also, and above all, relevant to the modernist trends to abstraction. Hence it is not surprising to find Yve-Alain Bois, say, describing Ellsworth Kelly's paintings and reliefs as "indexical"—particularly in light of the many photographs that may have formed the basis for Kelly's early "anti-compositions."[5] Conversely, however, the real value of Kelly's abstractions would seem to be precisely that in the wake of this supposed transfer of reality into the image, all that remains is a form that can scarcely be understood as having a reality content but only a structural one. Consequently, for Kelly the reality of the photographic image is significant only to the extent it fits with the overriding idea of abstraction.[6]

This is the disposition that Arturo Herrera's photographic work takes up and that he balances in a way that is as fascinating as it is sensitive—"precariously poised between the world it describes and the one it inhabits." And Herrera even goes a step further, if we consider the conditions and possibilities of photography

and abstraction. The indexical aspect of his work is no longer necessarily solely a photographic condition. Rather, the achievement of his photographs lies above all in the fact that we inevitably recognize the conditions of abstraction in the photographic conditions of dimension and distance, excerpt and developing process, and not least in the "anti-composition" and chance. In this sense Arturo Herrera's photographic work proves to be a broad playing field on which the idea of abstraction is able to demonstrate its extreme productivity. And the question articulated at the beginning whether photography can record an idea of abstraction is answered with an emphatic "Yes!" in his work, though under the proviso of a grand "vicious circle" that, in the most positive sense possible, spins round the accustomed possibilities of photography and abstraction.

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Notes

1. See Scott Rothkopf, "'Photography Cannot Record Abstract Ideas' and Other Misunderstandings," in idem, *Mel Bochner Photographs, 1966–1969*, exh. cat. Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge / Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 1–49, esp. 38ff.
2. Ibid., p. 18.
3. Arturo Herrera in a letter to the author dated February 2, 2005.
4. See Rosalind E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," parts 1 and 2, *October,* no. 3 (Spring 1977): 68–81, *October,* no. 4 (Fall 1977): 58–67.
5. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in Its Many Guises," *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Munich: Prestel, 1992), 9–36.
6. See Gottfried Boehm, "In-between Spaces: Painting, Relief, and Sculpture in the Work of Ellsworth Kelly," trans. Isabel Feder, in *Ellsworth Kelly: In-between Spaces; Works, 1956–2002*, exh. cat. Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 29.