

## Photography through the process files: reflections on the publication of the contact sheets

---

**Quote:** SOARES, Camila Mangueira; FAVA, Fabrcio. Photography through the process files: reflections on the publication of the contact sheets. *Porto Arte: Revista de Artes Visuais*. Porto Alegre: PPGAV-UFRGS, v. 22, n. 36, p.1-6, jan-jun. 2017. e-ISSN 2179-8001 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22456/2179-8001.80109>

---

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo and Bruno Declerque

**Abstract:** Based on the current recurrence of publications and discussions related to the materials of photographic creation process, this article presents an investigation on the contact sheets as an information material pertinent to the complexity of the making and, thus, thought in photography. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the contact sheets published in the books *Magnum Contacts* and *Proof* and the DVDs *Contacts*. The study took place under the theoretical perspective of the process criticism proposed by Cecilia Salles, which, based on Peircean semiotics, presents itself as a mean of perception of photography beyond the idea of product, enabling its understanding from the relations of interconnection and interaction between thought and materialities.

**Keywords:** Communication. Semiotics. Process Criticism. Photography. Contact sheets.

### INTRODUCTION

The invention and the constant reformulation of technologies, tools and platforms of online sharing of information, puts us in front of a process of production and diffusion of imaging content increasingly diverse. More specifically, in regards to the photographic production, we notice a tendency for the publishing of different original and/or unknown materials of photographic creation processes. Simultaneously, there is a recurrent promotion of events and debates concerning them, carried out by creators, curators, imaging agencies and also by those who research and/or produce in the field of visual language. Fact that can be verified in books and catalogs from exhibitions of photographic nature; on websites and on the social networks of artists and professionals who expose and discuss their creation and production processes; exhibitions of works alongside materials linked to the creative paths; in open to public events in ateliers; in the form of workshops and/or courses given by artists and professionals about their methods, etc.

Aware of the challenges of researching the diversity of actions and processes involving creative materials, we offer here an introductory reflection on the contact sheet. This will be done, specifically, through cases that integrate the projects from the books *Magnum Contacts* and *Proof* and the DVDs *Contacts*.

The choice of the contact sheet is justified, mainly, by its importance as an editorial decision making tool and, therefore, what interests us, to register work methodologies. We believe that the relational treatment of the indices provided by the materials allow us to bring to light the relations between the paths, the gestures and the actions of what we understand to be the photographic system.

Taking into account the importance of discussing photography in the contemporary panorama of new exchanges and situations of the image, this article is dedicated to some introductory considerations on the phenomenon of the publication of previously confidential photographic archives. The idea is, from a perspective of creation, to raise questions about the complexity of the photographic language.

### AN UNEXPLORED ENVIRONMENT: THE CHALLENGE OF A RELATIONAL LOOK IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Before we turn to the process materials, it is crucial to establish some implications derived from our proposal from a relational perspective to photography. Beginning with the expansion of the concept of photography from a mere object of contemplation and/or product, to that which also involves a greater environment of interconnections and interactivities between thought and materiality.

From different perspectives, we can see that most of the classical studies (BARTHES, 1984; BENJAMIN, 1994) and current ones (SANTAELLA & NOTH, 2008; DUBOIS, 2009) have theories about the photographic image that oppose the *act of taking*<sup>1</sup>, that is, from the idea of click<sup>2</sup>. Thus, taking it as

---

1. It refers to the act of capturing the image on a photosensitive apparatus (whether analog or digital) caused by triggering the click button on the camera.

2. This term includes the push-button gesture of a machine making images.

the central theme, they discuss on a good part of the imaging analysis and critical conjectures such as: automatism, reproducibility, truthfulness, record, real, etc. Being the *act of taking* fundamentally one of the characteristics of photography and, therefore, a fruitful point for debates in the field, we briefly set out to the problematization of the logic attached to this idea.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that the emphasis given to the *act of taking* in photography is not coincidental. This notion has some of its roots in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the idea of instantaneous appeared in the photographic logic and became predominantly natural in its experience. By *instant* we can understand as the least appreciable space of time. This notion refers to a "time of exposure in an inapprehensible duration, an abstract value in a strictly quantitative time scale" (LISSOVSKY, 2008, p.35).

The *act of taking* as a static definition of the photographic thought reflects a logic of simplification and linearity tied to its process of creation. Bias that has a connection to a machinic notion, where we can find, for example, expressed in the linearity of the instruction manuals from devices, and whose inheritance is in the industrial era. Thus, under this perspective of simplification, the photographic making seems to be understood as a kind of clock which, in turn, operates in an ordered flow of rectilinear steps and predetermined stages to generate visibility.

This thought, in general, has its roots in a Cartesian world view, in which "it is postulated that all material bodies are machines that operate by mechanical principles" (VIEIRA & SANTAELLA, 2008, p.48). However, the situation we face in the real world is more delicate. The high rates of production and the variety of possibilities of this making quickly dissipate over society in different forms and creations that indicate the need for reflections that take into account aspects related to its complexity.

In fact, as a specific practice, there are recurring, normative and characteristic moments of its making, like the clicking gesture, but we emphasize that, given the diversity of possible procedures in the field, they are not single and isolated points. The understanding of photography by the *act of taking* approach leaves unexplored questions related to other steps pertinent to its process of creation, and, above all, sublimated a communicational context to which it connects.

It is important to emphasize that we are dealing here with a perspective in the sphere of creation, a scenario that allows us to ponder and add other processes inherent to the photographic nature. Therefore, consideration is given not only to the work or to the product delivered to the public itself, considered as "concluded", but also to inclusion of a mobility look that involves the environment and the processes that constitute the work in the debates. That way, we turn to the theoretical bias of procedural criticism (SALLES, 2006) that, based on the Peircean semiotics, presents a relational approach as a way to perceive the dynamics of the creative movement and its implications.

## WHAT IS BEHIND THE PROCESS FILES: THE PUBLICATION OF THE CONTACT SHEETS

Going into the plurality of questions on photographic making, we start from the contact sheets as one of the means of material manifestation of the dynamicity inherent to the photographic nature, especially linked to the act of taking itself. The *contact sheet*, also known in the the photographic medium as *proof*, is a material obtained in the analog method<sup>3</sup> by the direct printing of plates, rolls (film), (or its sequence of negatives/positives), on photosensitive surfaces, such as photographic papers (fig. 01).



Figure 1. Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson examining his images on the contact sheet and, on the right, one of the sheets with the photographer's selection markings. Source: Magnum Contacts, 2012.

As a tool, the sheets present to the photographer and his team a first look at what was captured by the film, serving as the object of analysis; of selections in the form of screening; of studies for further enlargements (such as the definition of new framing and light studies); and as index for organization and

3. Nevertheless, in the digital scope there is also the elaboration of contact sheets through softwares, and its use is given as an instrument of study, sorting and filing in communication vehicles (magazines and newspapers), and it is also done by photographers, artists and curators.

archiving of matrices. In the case of advertising and journalism, these sheets represent a point of contact for discussions among photographers, publishers, and agencies about the resolution of publications.

In face of such importance in the construction of iconic images that have circulated and permeated the media over the years, it is worth noting, above all, its role as a denouncing phenomenon of a photographic thought under construction.

### THE CONTACT SHEETS AND THE DYNAMICS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESS: CASE ANALYSIS

In this article, we bring as a case study the reflection on the *contact sheets* of three renowned photographers, whose works are usually contemplated by critics for its precision of capture: Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jim Marshall. The materials selected for this research are published in the book *Magnum Contacts* (2012), in the *DVD Contacts* (2005) and in the book *Proof* (2004).

Published in 2012, the book *Magnum Contacts* presents for the first time files from 69 photographers, among them Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa, who integrated *Magnum Photos*<sup>4</sup>. This was an important cooperative of photographers responsible for producing reportages for renowned magazines, such as the North American *Life* and a variety of newspapers. It is interesting to note that the photographers from *Magnum* decided the directions followed by the works, as well as the people responsible for the orientation of their productions.

Organized chronologically, following the historical bias of the facts portrayed in the reports, *Magnum Contacts* curiously exposes materials such as: contact sheets, selected and enlarged negatives, selected photos, press credentials, photographers' notebooks, some pages from publications from the time of the photos, as well as reflective texts by the photographers themselves about their works and by specialists and researchers. According to Kristen Lubben, responsible for editing the book, "the intention is to give the reader the insight into how each photographer initially faces his or her work, and the intimate process of editing and selection that

happens next" (2012, p. 9). *Magnum Contacts* represents 70 years of history that could still be archived inside Magnum's bookshelves, but that are brought to the public in the height of the age of imaging diffusion in face of the digital apparatuses.

Among the vast material and the 139 contact sheets, with enlargements in black and white and in color presented in the book, we selected for the debate those belonging to the Hungarian photographer Robert Capa in the episode of the battle of the river Segre<sup>5</sup> in 1938, in the final period of the Spanish Civil War. One of the reasons for this choice lies in the interesting way the facts portrayed are organized and the editing of the photos exposed in the cover material, as well as the importance of the period (30's/40's) in which the *proofs* entered the process of photographic creation and stood out as an important communication tool of the photographer with his work and with the media (magazine).

Capa had the custom of creating notebooks of his photographic plates to index the images for each report, which also functioned as a *sketchbook* in which images were selected, discarded, organized. A fact observed in Capa's custom was that he numbered the images in the notebook, creating sequences for the presentation of the subject of the report and of annotations next to those images often destined to the editors of magazines and newspapers.



Figure 2 and Figure 3. The first image shows the original shooting sequence of the film, the second one shows Capa's notebook with the order of the images sent to the editors without the last two plates of the sequence. Source: *Magnum Contacts*, 2012.

In Capa's notebook of copies, the contacts in question (figure 2) present the sequence of some of the plates used by him in just one day covering the battle. In one of the pages from the notebook (fig. 03), we see images, numbered by

4. French Cooperative founded in 1947, in France, initially by Robert Capa, David Seymour, Georges Rodger and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

5. Robert Capa was featured in the media as the "greatest war photographer in the world", mention given by the English magazine *Picture Post*.

hand by Capa, ordered respecting the conception sequence in the time of the coverage of the event, except for the last two tracks of the notebook, which include plates belonging to a distinct moment in the capture process, but that curiously were included at the end as if they were sequential (figure 3).

"Capa, who had been specializing in telling a story through his photographs, may have wanted to close the narrative with two plates of soldiers amidst clouds of dust, thus creating a more intense ending to the page" (LUBBEN, 2012, p.27). These images, moreover, were presented sequentially by international magazines to emphasize the movement of proximity of the photographer in the scene portrayed. Capa, interestingly, made use of the logic of the irreversible sequence of shots during an event, to construct, through the elaboration of contact sheets, the presentation of a narrative more consistent to the situation with which he lived in the midst of war.

In this creative context, to add to the critical examination other pertinent moments in the making (besides the *act of taking*) entails the perception of the mobility of the photographic thought. The case of Capa's notebook, here briefly presented, suggests a break in linear, determinate and irreversible logic linked to the construction of meaning in photography. Therefore, the notebook reveals itself as a *space of possibilities*. Thus, the presentation and discussion about the *contact sheets* indicate a complex context in which the photographic permeates the idea of a pre-determined and isolated system, but it is shown as a space in which the establishments of strategies and criteria become fundamental to the nature of its conduction.

Adding to the analysis of the study of contact sheets published in other materials, we came to the DVD collection *Contacts* (2005). It brings, interestingly, comments from various photographers about their creative processes. *Contacts* includes three volumes: *I. The Great Tradition of Photojournalism*, *II. The Renewal of Contemporary Photography* *III. Conceptual Photography*. In the first volume, we find some of Henri Cartier-Bresson's negative proofs, and it is curious to note the markings – usually in red (fig. 04) – in the same sequence of negatives selected for future enlargement<sup>6</sup> and publishing.

This material, presented through the contacts, provides, on the process of Bresson's creation, the moment of selection of negatives, that is, the moment of the choice of the photograph that, among the others, seemed to be closer to what he sought to represent: a photograph (a visual moment) that met a certain aesthetic rigor and content with resonance. Thus, in fact, there was the marking of the photograph that best represented what Bresson called the *decisive moment*, the photo that reflected his "desire to capture in one single image the essence of a scene that arose" (BRESSION, 2004, p.16), whose form is endowed with theme and beauty from what is offered.



Figure 4. Detail of one of Bresson's negative test and the selection in red of a *decisive moment* among the "others". Source: DVD *Contacts*, vol. I.

Looking more carefully at the text *Decisive Moment* (2004, p.18), from Bresson, in *Imaginarium According to Nature*, one notices that Bresson himself discusses the stage of choosing the photographs when he says that during the process there are two selections, and thus there are two possible sorrows; one, when we are confronted with the reality of the viewfinder, the other, once the images are fixed and revealed, when we are forced to separate ourselves from those that, although correct, would be less strong.

The shot, for him, was seen as a *block of sketches* that reflected attempts, improvements, and findings. So, from another no less interesting point of view, the photographer Jim Marshall brings, with the book *Proof* (2004), a collection of proofs from some of his films taken with his Leica cameras. According to Selvin (*apud* MARSHALL, 2004, p.4), the contacts reveal "how he sees the world, how he evaluates people's emotions – through a viewfinder."

With the published contact sheets (fig. 5), Marshall exposed his criterion of choosing the images that bet

6. Enlargement moment is to make positive copies, enlarged from a photographic negative. This copy is made by projecting the negative image onto another photosensitive medium, usually the photographic paper.

represented (other than the composition and arrangement) the spirit he was seeking to portray in a person or situation for a particular publishing environment (magazines, newspapers, etc). For us, these contacts serve as process documents that, according to Salles (2012, p.17), are those that "always contain the idea of registration", and which, therefore, relate to the thought that the photographer retained, during his creative process, some elements that may become possible (in this case, the previously unselected negatives) of the work or elements that were auxiliary to that realization.



Figure 5. One of the contact sheets reveals the selection (yellow markings) in the proofs taken in a Beatles concert in 1966, in Candlestick Park and, next to it, the photograph chosen by the photographer for publication. Source: *Proof*, 2004.

The analysis of the material published in *Proof* presents, first and foremost, prospective and retrospective movements of the photographer during its creation. The first can be perceived by the critic, for example, in the appreciation of the other photos (brought in the sheets) that surround the most published ones in Marshall and that detonate its movement of approximation with the camera, of tests of framing and of the very friendliness in the environment (including light thinking) in front of the artists, that is, an interactive dynamic provided by the gestures of search for the photographic capture. The second movement indicated by the sheets refers to the artist's encounter with these images after the developing of the photos, in which there are studies of re-frames and selections of images in the contact sheet itself. In Marshall's case, the markings – usually in yellow, made by the artist himself – are proof of the process of choosing and establishing criteria to represent "the emotion" he intended to provoke with his images in future publications.

The opening of the contacts serves as an index for a panorama of projects and works that use the most varied

creative paths, choices and multiplicity of fields and techniques, which makes it increasingly difficult and inaccurate to find definitions and analyzes of isolated images from this compilation and interactivity of photographic frames.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We have seen that the act of making the existence of these materials known indicate, in particular, a concern in establishing a debate on imaging issues not dissociated from the context of creation. So that a recurring interest is perceived in regards to the plasticity of the movements between thought and photographic materiality. Fact here presented through the analysis of the publication of the contact sheets, which curiously could be still kept in the drawers of artists and photographers and/or archived in shelves in agencies, but which, however, are brought to the public, revealing an environment of interactive information and original movements on the creation, such as: the modes of action, the strategies and paths of the photographer, the supports used in the production, the sources of research, etc. The act of observing the contact sheets, therefore, shows itself as a path of information about the photographic universe in a more in-depth manner.

The publication of these materials reverberates in the discussion of the relational procedures of these fragments, such as the non-isolation of the gesture of the *act of taking*, which can be contemplated both from the point of view of the one who produces it, as well as the public. Thus, the cases of the sheets mentioned in this article discuss the multiplicity of interactions, emphasizing that the photographer and his materials do not refer to a private sphere, but to communicative agents.

As a space of possibilities, the photographic material expressed through the contact sheets indicates the possible and continuous movement of articulation and ordering of visual elements according to the criteria of production of meaning of each photographer and media. This fact reveals, therefore, a scenario of interaction between process and work.

Reflecting on photography does not only mean consideration of a certain kind of image, product or medium of symbolic exchanges, but a diverse field in which materiality and thought are inseparable. Therefore, usually thought through the

predominance of the result that it produces: the "fixed"; the photography calls for less static definitions, that is, a critical view of mobility whose challenge lies in the gradual inclusion of different variants concerning its nature and its creative environment.

## REFERENCES

- BARTHES, Roland. *A câmara clara*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1984.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. *Magia e técnica, arte e política*. Obras escolhidas, v. 1. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994.
- CARTIER-BRESSON, Henri. *O instante decisivo*. In O imaginário segundo a natureza. Translated by Renato Aguiar. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2004.
- CONTACTS, Vol. 1: *the great tradition of photojournalism*. Director: Richard Copans & Stan Neumann. 2005. 1 DVD, color (156 min).
- DUBOIS, Philippe. *O ato fotográfico*. Campinas: Papirus, 2009.
- LISSOVSKY, Mauricio (2008). *A máquina de esperar: origem e estética da fotografia moderna*. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X.
- LUBBEN, Kristen (Org.). *Magnum Contatos*. Translated by Jório Dauster. São Paulo: Instituto Moreira Salles, 2012.
- MARSHALL, Jim. *Proof*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004.
- SALLES, Cecilia. *Gesto inacabado: processo de criação artística*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Redes de criação: construção da obra de arte*. Vinhedo: Ed. Horizonte, 2006.
- SANTAELLA, Lúcia & NOTH, Winfried. *Imagem: cognição, semiótica e mídia*. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2008.
- VIEIRA, J. A. & SANTAELLA, L. *Metaciência: uma proposta semiótica e sistêmica*. São Paulo: Editora Mérito, 2008.
- 2007). She has published articles and chapters in books, most recently, in *Novas Formas do Audiovisual* (2016) and artworks internationally exhibited, in places such as the London Pinhole Festival (London-En, 2017) and #Art16 (Porto-Pt, 2017).

(\*) This text was submitted in Novembre 2014 and updated in 2017 for this publication.

---

**Fabrício Fava:** PhD in Communication and Semiotics at PUCSP, Master in Technology Intelligence and Digital Design at PUCSP, Specialist in Communication and Image Theories at UFC and Graduate in Advertising at UNIFOR. Currently researches and develops projects in the multidisciplinary context of creativity and design thinking, design for games-based experiences (ludic design and gamification) and motion design.

---

**Camila Manguiera Soares:** PhD in Communication and Semiotics (PUC/SP, 2016), Master in Communication and Semiotics (PUC/SP, 2010), Specialist in Communication and Image Theories (UFC,