Instagram as Non-Photography

Can we identify photographic social media, and particularly Instagram, as an instance of François Laruelle's concept of non-photography? Is Instagram not a clearer symptom of Laruelle's aesthetic theory than the art of contemporary photographers like Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall, who often reverse engineer in their works the 20th century's prevalent modes of reading art—dialectics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics—in order to secure a meaningful relationship between their oeuvre and the World? Can abandoning contemporary *poesies* and instead engaging with modern-day *techne*, to adopt the Greek categories, help us come to terms with Laruelle's thoughts on the photographic essence of Western philosophy?

Had he not been medium-specific in the first passage of the preface to *The Concept of Non-Photography*, one could wonder if Laruelle's comments about myriads of negatives "speaking in clichés among themselves, constituting a vast conversation," or photographs filling "a photosphere that is located nowhere," do not in fact refer to Instagram.[1] If for Laruelle the sheer quantity of photographs has always already been limitless, situated both nowhere and everywhere, then perhaps approaching Instagram as the instance of their most autonomous mode of production and circulation can help to clarify his concept of non-photography, and locate it within his larger project of non-standard philosophy.

I propose in this essay that the essence of Instagram is neither technological nor has it much bearing on photography and how it has been intentionally burdened, to use Laruelle's words, "with a whole set of ontological distinctions and aesthetic notions imposed on it by the Humanities, with the help of philosophy, which celebrate photography as a double of the world."[2] If aggrandizing photography with philosophy and burdening it with transcendental tasks produces, as Laruelle suggests, "a principle of sufficient photography," then perhaps the metaphysical insufficiencies of Instagram as a photographic tool incises the medium like a knife from all things meaningful and worthy of transcendence. As with Laruelle's definition of non-photography, Instagram *summons* the medium's *modest nature* and its abyssal character as a photo ID or what he calls the "identity-photo."[3] Like non-photography, Instagram's operational logic involves what Laruelle refers to as "vision-force," the "photographic stance," and, finally, the generic and fractal determination of "Identity" in the last instance. Instagram doesn't merely show or verify the fractal-being of photographic objects; rather, it is in itself a fractalogical machine for the propagation of non-photography.

The concept of non-photography helps us recognize Instagram not as a machine that generates a multiplicity of photographs through which a complex and eloquent image of the World can arise, but as an apparatus for reducing all pictures, genres and styles of photography, even photographers, into a single generic entity. Instagram at its every instance can only and repeatedly identify nothing but other photographs or, in its core, the essence of photography itself. It restrains interpretations of photos that explain their secrets in relation to the visible world, mocking their claims to human universality, facilitating the practice of a radically abstract theory of photography that is "absolutely non-worldly and non-perceptual."[4]

Thus, to instantiate the Laruellian non-photography we don't necessarily have to undo the work of philosophers and photographers. The rising tide of social media

photography and in particular Instagram is automatically achieving what otherwise would take volumes of arguments against the dominant theory and practice of photography. Let us make it clear. It's not that Instagram is *against* photography. Rather, by creating a non-worldly and virtual space for the proliferation and classification of images, whilst imposing its own logic over photography's standard mode of operation, it becomes the prototypical instant of non-photography.

As the heir to Facebook, which itself is a more limited version of its predecessors, namely MySpace and Friendster, Instagram further reduces the promise of boundless communication inherent to the rhetoric of older social media that permeated the BBS[5] and Internet forums prior to the emergence of web 2.0. It limits user interaction to a bare minimum, to a series of fragmented, abridged and pantomimic visual transactions. Instagram integrates its users, their photographs, and their friends with categories, locations, hashtags, and searches in a small 2" x 4" digital screen, simplifying its material as well as its logical and relational components into a group of lists and grids. The visualization of a complicated web of things and their relations in a limited space on the smartphone's screen further minimizes photographs and the act of taking pictures to a small part of a larger and more complex operation, involving different tastes, locations, comments, and types of popularity.

To declare Instagram an instance of non-photography is not to reflect on its revolutionary possibilities or to attribute to it greater emancipatory qualities than those already claimed unjustifiably for standard photography by critics and philosophers. On the contrary, Instagram needs to be recognized as the medium for a long-awaited downgrading, not only of photography but also of the philosophies of negation, perception, and being. Whether the decline of the sovereignty of photographs, or what I call "Photocracy," over the World should be celebrated or mourned is a different matter. At the very least, we need to understand how, and perhaps why, photography is beginning to fail its ultimate philosophical obligations in the encounter with its own networked and digital self, in the fractalogical mirror of Instagram.

Laruelle identifies Western philosophy as the source of the confusion between the World and its image. For him, the externalization of the world into a representational copy is a misguided project that was inaugurated by Western philosophy and later enhanced by both the technical capabilities of standard photography and those of its interpreters. Very much like photography, philosophy, he argues, is bound to the legend of "the fulgurant illumination of things and of its [the illumination's] imperceptible withdrawal, of that no-longer-photographed that founds the photographocentric destiny of the West."[6] Alexander Galloway goes even further and identifies the call of philosophy as the self-proclaimed metric for the ultimate splitting of the indivisibility of the World into being and seeing, aiming to measure all undefined and unified entities or the *riving* of the *given*. This is precisely the process Galloway believes to lie at the very core of digitality, or the binary division of all ones into twos.[7]

The synthesis between these two thoughts may finally bring us to recognize the false distinctions between photography and its digital offspring; if all three mechanisms of philosophy, photography, and digitality lead to the symmetrical estrangement of being from its picture, then one can argue that by obsoleting the human hand and eyes as the mitigating instruments of this sep-

aration in both arts and sciences, analogue photography was always already digital. One can also see why chemical-based photography didn't just foreshadow the arrival of its digital extension. By functioning as an apparatus for the mechanically automated separation of the world from its visible surface, photography succeeded in extending the logic of standard philosophy through conceiving of thought as a facsimile of the World. This is the process that Instagram, through its operational logic, is in the process of overturning.

As software products belonging to the attention economy and designed for a mass audience, social media platforms, including Instagram, embody the memory and long history of video and computer games before them. The identification of Instagram as non-photography has also to do with how its interface, rather than accommodating photography, limits the software's image making potentials to incorporate it into a generic form of an addictive social game. Instagram is advantaged over other forms of social media photography due to its explicit gaming features, i.e., the ability to like a photograph, to follow and to be followed by other users, to hashtag one's own photos and those of others, and so on. These features are important because they don't enter the logic of Instagram *after* a photograph is taken. Rather, the anticipation about the way a picture's dissemination plays out in the app's structure directly informs the act of picture taking. Simply stated, users, before taking a pic, begin thinking about the ways in which they can identify and promote it. Instagram photographs are therefore not *of* the World but instead exist autonomously *from* it, engaged in a collective game of attention exchange. Instagram is essentially non-photographic because it is a technological transformation of photography into a pure attentional form based on a complex and interrelated calculative logic derived from computer science. As a responsive game, Instagram subjects photography to the mathematical network of users and their "likes" and "hashtags," imperiling the pictures' symbolic signification and instead emphasizing their referential and contextual prominence.

Laruelle proposes two new terms, "photographic stance" and "vision-force," in order to challenge common assumptions about the photograph's relationship to the photographer's situatedness *in*, and his unique vision *of*, the World. Photographic stance addresses the problem of the photographer's presumed position *vis-à-vis* the subject of photography, a position Laruelle argues to have been inherited from the philosophical notion of Being in the World. For Laruelle, photographic stance is not a specific worldly position from which the photographer casts his gaze on the subject but is rather a generic renunciation of the body and its substitution with an auto-grounded and abstract stance. If this posture is a locus, unlike with phenomenology, it is rooted in selfhood, an existence within one's non-corporeal self, and not sensorially immanent in a body that itself is materially grounded in the world.[8] Instagram's electronic ephemerality heightens this Laruellian distinction by literally operating outside of the mechanical logic connecting ordinary analogue or even digital photography to the photographer's body and the World. While it is true that Instagram users have an immediate relationship with the smartphone, the Instagram camera is only one of a limitless number of uses for this hardware. The multifunctionality of the smartphone abstracts the camera's physicality, reducing it to a conditional electronic interface, itself a flat pixelated image.

The digital window on the smartphone used for taking and viewing pictures in Instagram functions both as the photographer's viewfinder and the universal picture frame for all users: what you see is not just what you get but also what everybody else gets. Hence, despite Instagram's claims to connect the photograph's maker and the viewer to the world or to each other, in reality the app's labyrinthine interface, which extends beyond the physical electronic device into multiple servers, evacuates the users from their physical domain and places them in its own realm. Instagram exists in a multidimensional virtual world which is over and above the already existing experience of the three dimensional space and one-dimensional time of the physical world to which the photographic camera has a materially continuous connection. As an app, Instagram resides within the mobile operating system, itself functioning mostly outside of the smartphone. The exteriority of Instagram's engine to the physicality of the smart phone is reminded to the users every time a technical problem causes its servers to go offline, rendering its entire global operations useless until further notice.[9]

Taking pictures with Instagram is not a matter of grabbing a camera and accessing the World directly through an instrument but a process in which, before taking a picture, users have to reorient their attention away from the world and enter into another dimension with a specific logic of its own. Galloway compares this difference with the split space that exists between a picture and its edges or between what he calls the diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of an interface. For him, while the former, like the regular camera, relates to the World by suspending the user's disbelief of the image, the latter, like Instagram, limits the appearance of direct access, simultaneously revealing and enforcing the rules (law) and structure (politics) that govern visibility and accessibility.[10] This is why interaction with Instagram doubles the photographic stance, first by placing the photographer within his abstracted self, and then within the virtual space of the application.

For Laruelle, the autonomous and pure force of vision that coils out of the photographic stance may initially depend on a perception of the World, but soon after and with the help of the science behind photography, it becomes more independently concrete than a mere visualization by the photographer or the camera. Photography may seem to reflect the World, but unlike a mirror that continually depends on the physical realm for reflectivity, a picture, once taken, is infinitely autonomous and no longer requires the camera, the photographer or even the World to validate its image content. Thus, vision-force is neither an objective nor a subjective intensity but mimics both to colonize the photograph's chemical or digital supporting material. In the case of Instagram, the strength of the vision-force is furthered by the connectivity with which various levels of telecomputation establish the application's rule over the electronic surface of generic mobile devices. By recording a digital image on the viewfinder that is qualitatively and quantitatively exact to the picture in the moment prior to its capture, Instagram's interface not only authorizes the photographic vision-force with determining the future of the image but also grants it autonomy to retroactively shape the image's prehistory.

Laruelle conditions his position on the representational content of photography by stating "photography is a fiction that does not so much add to the World as subtract itself for the World." For Laruelle, therefore, a photo is for the purpose of seeing but only in the name of confirming that a photograph was and can be taken. In his terms, one should not consider photography's specular quality a reference to the world or its double. What is seen in a photo is not the world but what the photographer, as vision-stance, sees through the camera as he takes the picture. Thus, while reluctant to completely deny the representability of the world via the camera, Laruelle finds the concept of photography as

representation ingenuous and compared to the medium's real essence "what a cliché is to rigorous thinking." For Laruelle, photography "only reflects vision-force without ever reproducing it … it represents it 'only in the last instance.'" [11] Thus, what is really being reflected or represented in every photograph, however invisibly, is the indivisibility and the oneness of the vision-force or its status, in the last instance, as Identity or the univocity of all photographs ever made in the history of the medium.

In the case of Instagram, this "through and through" and univocal quality of Laruelle's vision-force is sustained by the flawlessly infinite replication of the digital image across various networks' spatial and temporal dimensions. Instagram pictures are neither subject to the concept of aura nor to the image's conditions of mechanical reproducibility as described by Benjamin. Transmitted like radio or television broadcasts, they exist everywhere and nowhere. They never mature, remaining ageless in their exact original condition and incapable of gaining metaphysical or metaphorical significance in the passage of time. The non-specular, non-realistic, non-significant, and non-historical character of photography, which for Laruelle is normally camouflaged underneath the spectacular, realistic, significant and historical representations of the world on the photo's surface, are not only easily identifiable in Instagram but are circulated through the app. [12]

Laruelle's theories of photography not only differ significantly from those of Benjamin, but also contrast with the notions of *studium* and *punctum*, which constitute the core of the photographic messaging system for Barthes. Laruelle does not propose that photographs embody meaning, knowledge, or a form of visual intelligence, nor does he suggest that they should be believed to contain affectual content. On the contrary, he explains why photography is fundamentally meaningless, boring, and anticlimactic, "a naivety which, inversely, makes possible an almost absolute disenchantment." [14] The photographic stance and vision-force are ways to identify "an impotency in regard to oneself, a powerlessness to leave oneself so as to go amongst things—the intrinsic finitude of a vision condemned to see according to itself and to remain in itself—but precisely without being." [15]

Instagram's non-photographic essence can also be verified against the opinions of those critics who have resisted it and instead chosen to write about its adverse effects on photography. Nearly echoing Laruelle's claim of the photo's non-being in their criticisms, they often point out that regardless of the intention of its users, Instagram has facilitated the production of a form of substandard photography. [16] However, what appears to these critics as banality actually signals the emergence of the technical conditions for photography's release from what Laruelle identifies as the medium's onto-photo-logical burden, marked by the historical function of the medium as an interpretation of an already materialized interpretation:

> For onto-photo-logy manifests itself in the form of a circular auto-position of photographic technique and of the elements it takes from the World (body, perception, motif, camera), this auto-position signifying a vicious self-reflection, an interpretation on the basis of elements that are perhaps already interpretations and, in any case, on the basis of western onto-photo-logical prejudices that are redoubled and fetishized in the form of philosophies-of-photography, but never really put into question or "reduced." [17]

Instagram may look trite to those who insist on photography's transcendental significance. However, for Laruelle, this is only an "amphibology" not inherent to the medium but claimed on its behalf by the philosophical concepts of the sufficient image. This claim, to which photography has been tied since its emergence, is what the operational logic of Instagram is in the process of undermining.

Another characteristic of Instagram, namely its preset filters, is one of the key explanations of the platform's growing popularity. While the filters provide a limited level of artistic input for image manipulation at the user's level, on a higher level, they add a fractal and non-differentiable characteristic to most Instagram photographs. To be visibly effective on mobile phones' small screens, these filters (twenty in total within Instagram's latest version) have to drastically shift the appearance of the image. With five million digital uploads to the system every day, the widespread use of filters inevitably classifies all Instagram photographs into recursive sets; their hard-to-miss effects turns authentic pictures into clichés through aesthetic association with other filtered photos. The endless recursion of filter sets across user profiles contributes to their fractal genericity, their self-relatedness and consequently their further separation from the world they claim to represent. The repetitive use of Instagram's popular vintage filters that are supposed to make the immediate present seem like a distant past cannot potentially add authenticity to Instagram pictures. Instead they distance further away to an abstract temporal dimension from which the contemporary moment already looked predictably aged. [18]

Fractals are mathematically based, non-differentiable, self-similar patterns that cannot be formally measured through the standard methods of mathematics and geometry. Laruelle's metaphoric comparison of photography to fractals is a strategy to undermine transcendental theories that consider the essence of form external to its physicality. To propose a scientific theory of aesthesis, Laruelle uses fractals and detaches photos from theories of photography that describe it in terms borrowed from the studies of perception, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, or the medium's technical mode of production. He explains his "unified theory of the photography of fractality" as being present not in the physicality of the object represented in the photo but in the "state and the mode of representation of an object imposed by a photo independently of its physical, chemical, stylistic (etc.) properties." [19]

The fractal logic of Instagram can be identified in its Organizational scheme, through manufacturing several forms of multi-scaled recursions that split the photographs and mobile devices at the user's micro level and join them again at the macro level of both its generic operating system and servers. These include different recursively geometric schematics offered by the interface that regroup photographs into a scaled yet non-differentiable continuity. These recursions include but are not limited to the photographs' organically established formulaic identity to which most Instagram pictures belong: clouds, buildings, self-portraits, food, coffee, drinks, humorous text messages, and even soft pornography. Hashtags and other searchable text entered by users also impose their own fractality on Instagram photographs. Even photographers are not immune from Instagram's fractal logic; they too are catalogued and homogenized into a recursive Identity via their profile names and pictures.

From a temporal standpoint, Instagram is not only undermining the future of photography but is also having an obliterating effect on the history of the medium. Through its unstoppable production and circulation of photographs, the app reveals the fractal essence of all pre-Instagram photographs and imposes on them its own finite sets of recursive, self-similar and therefore fractal Identities. In the eye of its users, a great number of pre-Instagram photographs and organizational systems like photo albums, guestbooks, etc. have already begun to look and feel just like Instagrams. This retroactive rip-

pling effect will soon undermine the historical relevance and significance of many genres of photography and the signature styles belonging to particular artists.

If a standard photo claims to be a finite knowledge that "permits the power of reproduction or engenderment of that object," [20] if it demonstrates anew "the essence of being, of a situation," [21] then Instagram's overt mathematical fractologics spoil the photograph's hidden operations and further diminish the visible essence of being within the photo. It becomes the literal insertion of computer science into the condition of perception, or what Laruelle calls "a hybrid of science and perception ensured by technology." [22] Thanks to the mathematical essence of telecomputation—the synthesis of telecommunication and computation—Instagram further propels the medium's fractalization of itself as the picture of the "world picture", which by the late1930s, had already, for Heidegger, risen as a direct consequence of the mathematization of physics. If, as Laruelle claims, the repressive nature of photography is the medium of the phenomena's intelligibility as discussed in the philosophies of Plato, Leibniz, and Kant, [23] then oversaturation, superficialization, and mathematization of photography via the non-differentiable fractalogics of Instagram destabilize both photography and philosophy as the twin technologies of Western knowledge production. By mass-tele-managing the fabrication of photographs and by setting a new precedent for the medium's accessibility, Instagram dismisses the photograph's approximation of reality and refutes the medium's historically guaranteed claim to the truth of Being.

1
François Laruelle, **The Concept of Non-photography**, trans. Robin Mackay (New York: Sequence, 2011), vii.

2
Ibid, viii.

3
Ibid.

4
Ibid, 8.

5
BBS, or Bulletin Board System, is a computer system running software that allows users to connect and log into the system using a terminal program. Once logged in, a user can perform functions such as uploading and downloading software and data, reading news and bulletins, and exchanging messages with other users, either through email, public message boards, and sometimes via direct chatting. Many BBSes also offer online games in which users can compete with each other, and BBSes with multiple phone lines often provide chat rooms, allowing users to interact with each other.

6
Ibid, 2.

7
Alexander R. Galloway, "Ten Theses on the Digital," last modified September 2012, http://vimeo.com/48727142 (accessed January 4, 2013).

8
Laruelle, 11-12.

9
For example, In June 2012, a line of powerful storm caused a mass power outage, causing Instagram servers to go offline for several days.

10
Galloway, **The Interface Effect** (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 42-44.

11
Laruelle, 27.

12
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in **Illuminations**, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Random House, 1968), 256.

13
Roland Barthes, **Camera Lucida**, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25-26.

14
Laruelle, 14.

15
Ibid, 15.

16
Kate Bevan, "Instagram is Debasing Real Photography," **The Guardian** online, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/jul/19/instagram-debasing-real-photography (accessed September 11, 2013).

17
Laruelle, 5.

18
Ibid, 46.

19
Ibid, 75.

20
Ibid, 77.

21
Ibid.

22
Ibid, 11.

23
Ibid.