

# Knowing and Not-Knowing: The Photograph as Experiment in Marina Gadonneix's *Phénomènes*

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## ABSTRACT

The photographic image, when used in the context of scientific enquiry, produces an image with a language and signification that the conventional photographic viewer cannot access. Seemingly abstract or oblique, what is sought is not the summative photographic event: as Michael Doser has stated in his studies of the collapse of antimatter using photographic emulsion, the photographic process may not even be used in ways proposing conventional relationships to light, space or time. Such propositions might in fact cause a reconsideration of what we understand photography to be.

This paper proposes to examine Marina Gadonneix's photographic series *Phénomènes*, produced in France and the United States in Research Laboratories recreating planetary and extra-planetary phenomena, to ask questions about photographic representation and the limits of visibility as a condition for knowledge. Gadonneix's images move between fragmentary representations of laboratory space and spectacular experiments in action, maintaining an abstract sense of encounter which is resistant to the expectations of the image to explain and reveal. Conducting a reading of Gadonneix's images through theories of photographic failure – Flusser, Silverman and Geimer – this paper ultimately proposes to see Gadonneix's works not as recordings or as distant observations, but as experiments in knowing and not knowing, in which the scientific process might resituate the photographic act as a generative and not static activity.

## INTRODUCTION

In his popular history of scientific development *The Invention of Science*, with its focus upon the revolutions of scientific method in the 1600 and 1700s, David Wootton reveals that the experiment posed a problem for the established mode of knowledge of the time, reason. Aristotle's deductive method was dominant: reason assumed an innate and coherent understanding of the world that could be formed within the mind. By contrast, the experiment introduced an empirical acquisition of knowledge, produced from proposition, testing and observation, making and seeing. An alignment between experimental method and the development of optics – with its own embedded empiricism privileging vision – is one of the subjects of this current research, though here only preliminary remarks can be made. In one key example, Wootton notes that extra-mission – the belief that vision took place through light emitted from the eyes to illuminate its objects – remained common wisdom up to six centuries after Ibn Al-Haytham (c.965-c.1040AD) had proven that light was received by the eye. Such was the persuasive and political power of conventional logic in the academy, that it was not until Johannes Kepler's (1571-1630) study of optics, that the slow but persistent diffusion of Al-Haytham's thought – sometimes distributed, at other times appropriated – showed itself to be a foundation for the experimental method, and the development – which Wootton describes as the beginning of a culture of discovery – that would include a train of technical progress giving rise to what we now call photography.

French artist Marina Gadonneix returns continually to sites of testing and rehearsal, where reality is simulated and also formed. At the edges of each of Gadonneix's discrete projects is the conviction that the world is not as it already appears, simply there to be documented, but is continually brought into being, made, and re-made, shaped and moulded. Sites of training might appear to simulate the world – to provide an imitation or repetition of the world as it is, but are also the production of models, the structuring of possibilities: a process of practicing which has forming and making at its centre. The humble training site is always already the enacting of a subtle shift of a world to come, made by proposition, encounter or rehearsal, analysis, and repetition.

An early project by Gadonneix records what appears to be a training ritual, which reveals a complex array of operations simultaneously at work. In *The House That Burns Everyday* (2013), Gadonneix has produced images from the site of a fire training operation. We can see the site simply – this is where fires are put out - but a more complex reading would identify the iterative creating of fires and their extinguishing, the consumption and destruction of consumer goods, and the modelling of and traversing of vernacular architectures, which are examined repeatedly. Paul Virilio notes that the invention of the automobile is the invention of the automobile crash: “To invent the sailing ship or the steamer is to invent the shipwreck. To invent the train is to invent the rail accident or derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway” (Virilio, P: 2007:10). This site might similarly be construed as a part of a network of architectures which model practices and consequences. Gadonneix's *Landscapes* and *After the Image* record sites of production – filmic, televisual and photographic studios – with similar, if seemingly very different functions. As with training and the control of fire, we should be cautious in considering sites of televisual and photographic reproduction as either fully-fledged fictions or as their apparent opposite, documents and records. We cannot describe them as either mirrors or windows, but as intersections where choices are made about the world and its representations. The philosopher Vilém Flusser wrote, in a lecture to the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles, France, that photographs, and equally television, are models. He stated: “*The true photographer intends to make pictures which may be used as models for the experience, the knowledge, and the evaluation of their receivers.*” (Flusser, V: 1977: np) Gadonneix is indeed presenting us with images for our evaluation, from which we might determine how to think and act. In the blue and green-screen environments of the *Landscapes*, she seeks to pause, to allow us our conclusion. She records the studio out of use, at a moment of disconnection: these, we come to note, are elaborate non-places which facilitate the presentation of elsewhere. What is produced here, and after Flusser, which direction will in take in showing, or concealing the world we occupy?

### *Phénomènes*

It is in her *Phénomènes*, a multi-year study of research laboratories, that Gadonneix looks directly at the scientific experiment. A multi-layered visual study, *Phénomènes* approaches the reconstruction of natural phenomena where large-scale climactic, atmospheric, and chemical events are created in miniature for the purposes of study and examination. Such sites are conventionally recorded as dense forests of cables, or sites of human activity, tropes which mistake quantity for complexity, and human intervention for enquiry or knowledge acquisition. In their place, Gadonneix's photographs are ambiguous but immersive images of space, which absorb the body of the view into the space, without recourse to traditional tropes of grounding perspective or human scale.

What might surprise us is how Gadonneix plunges us quickly into the condition of not knowing: elaborate tools and spaces, are seen from carefully chosen, often singular positions. We do not know automatically or rapidly, and cannot depend on a carefully placed descriptive label (deferred in the book, and made distant in her exhibitions. It is not clear what each experiment reveals or enacts. We must approach each event and observe, and from our observation, ask questions. Gadonneix has not taken us to the site of the experiment to show us its utilitarian environment, to wow us with its technicality, to awe us with equipment and black boxes. She has resisted the documentary mode of recording, where a narrated event is performed for the camera. Instead, in the essence of a search for phenomena, she has begun with a condition that phenomenology urges us to confront: the encounter, which begins from without.

Eva Diaz, writing on art's relationship to the experiment in the context of the Black Mountain College, reminds us that:

Experiment shares with *empirical* and *experience* a common root in the Latin *experiri*, "to try or put to the test." Until the eighteenth century, *experience* and *experiment* were interchangeable in English usage, though subsequently experience came to indicate that which has been previously tested, a past accumulation of knowledge or skill." Diaz (2014:5)

Experience and Experiment are intricately linked. Wootton, in his history of science, notes that from the 1600s, as *experimentum* and *experientia* began to be gradually separated, Francis Bacon proposed that experiment was a specifically formed or sought experience. Is the photograph also an experiment? It has been reduced to observation, but we might expand our conception of the image to include a process of seeking. We can see it as not only representation, but as proposition, and test. Such a photography would require a revision to our histories of fixed and complete images. Work here has begun, with Kaja Silverman, who has re-examined the '*unstoppable development*' of photochemistry at the moment of the medium's public announcement, and Peter Geimer, whose *Inadvertent Images* supplies the revelation that the image does not emerge fully formed or perfect. It is Geimer who remarks that the photograph emerges from the fog of abstraction, and not abstraction that comes about in later photography. There emerges a photograph amongst accident and failure, knowing and not knowing, seeing and not seeing.

Gadonneix shifts between the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete, the specific and the universal, continuously adopting shifting points of view. A series of intervening book pages, held in hands that emerge from the space of the viewer, take us to study and discourse, whilst sequences of instruments and markers, including point-cloud readers, remind us that measurement and information is both abundant and outside of the range of the human eye. Science moves between the empirical and systems of thought. If we too can move between positions, we might access the generative capabilities of the experiment. Shifting between phenomena, discourse, and tool, Gadonneix is situating is placing us in an active position, beyond that of the passive observer. We are not privileged viewers with window seats to the world of spectacle: Gadonneix is examining the laboratory, and performing an experiment with photography at one and the same time. She is inviting us along.

### *Conclusion*

Much has been written about the artistic experiment, and the experiment in the history of science. It has been my intention here to propose that, to revisit the photograph's capabilities

and potentialities, that we explore the photograph as an experiment in looking, seeing and acting, which must contend with the conditions of knowing and not knowing. I have argued that Marina Gadonneix performs a model of this practice: in fact, we might suggest that as she documents the work of the laboratory, she produces an experiment in parallel, surrounding knowledge, encounter and reception. She is aware that the camera brings the controlled conditions of the laboratory towards us, though as we have seen, this does not fit squarely into the role of documentation, or evidence, not least because she reveals sites of testing, and rehearsal against the grain of their standard representations. She sets us down inside the laboratory, and leaves us there. We are left in a space, without a knowledge of its rules. From here, a different version of photography can begin.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank to Marina Gadonneix and Bruno Ceschel, who have encouraged my writing on the photograph as experimentation for this text.

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