

Ignasi Aballí speaks with Sérgio Mah

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Ignasi Aballí
speaks with
Sérgio Mah

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From painting to photography

Barcelona, 25 October 2010

SÉRGIO MAH: Well, Ignasi, let's start from the beginning. How did you become interested in art? Did it begin as an interest in the image?

IGNASI ABALLÍ: I always remember being interested in art. When I was small I liked to draw. I always used crayons, pencils and paint, and when I had a chance to decide what to do with my life, I studied fine art. From then on, I have always been in contact with this profession with varying intensity and professional dedication. I began with painting and actually specialised in painting during my fine art studies. Afterward, little by little, I began to use other media and techniques, such as photography, video and others that include unusual materials such as sunlight, dust, Tipp-Ex, etc. In short, depending on the idea I had in mind, I used the most appropriate material to develop it.

SM: What kind of painting did you do when you were at the School of Fine Art? With what did you begin?

IA: I was already painting before I began to study fine art. At the time, my painting resembled impressionism – I would go with some friends to paint landscapes outdoors, early in the morning and on weekends – although later my painting had a more surrealistic aesthetic. Afterward there was a maturing and learning process at the university that I think was very intense and positive, and there I began to think that painting wasn't just the representation of reality but could also incorporate conceptual aspects, among others.

When you finish your studies, at first you really don't know how to continue. I gradually found meaning in a type of work that contained a reflection on the medium itself, on what painting was and what possibilities it had as a means of expression in contemporary art. As a result of a series of questions and a personal consideration of the medium and painting as a discipline to reflect on things, my concept of it began to enter into crisis and I found other approaches that turned out to

be more appropriate for explaining what I wanted to express with art at that time.

SM: Did this reflection, this self-criticism of artistic media, and particularly painting, begin at the university or did you begin to define your creative and conceptual sphere within a wider artistic context? When did this reflection first arise?

IA: While at the university, I came into contact with certain approaches that I hadn't experienced until then. Before going there, I had already read the book *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* by Pierre Cabanne, which had been very important in bringing up many issues: what art was, what sense it made in the contemporary world and all those questions. The years I spent at the university, therefore, meant widening that foundation of knowledge. It's when you leave, when you're on your own, that you begin your own work and study process. It was a slow one in which I have discovered that painting is not only a system of representation of reality but can also be much more. I began to incorporate materials, not only in the material, informalist sense of the term but in a more conceptual sense: that of the value of each

material. The painting's size was defined by the amount of material and according to its economic value. The subject of simulation also interested me or, in other words, the way in which other materials can be imitated through painting, and the relationship of painting with language. This all gradually shaped a group of works that actually addressed painting, but from a non-traditional viewpoint, a more theoretical focus.

SM: What other artists did you feel close to besides Duchamp?

IA: Well at first when I was at the university, I felt closer to painters such as Rothko, Ryman, Reinhardt, etc. I had always felt a proximity to that type of monochrome abstract painting. Next, artists such as Yves Klein and Manzoni began to interest me. They employed other elements as well as painting, other ideas that gave a different meaning to the result, above all with the incorporation of the idea of the void and the work's dematerialisation. Later on, other much more conceptual painters began to interest me, including Palermo, Richter, On Kawara, Rémy Zaugg, Christopher Wool and artists who used painting in addition to other media

to express their ideas, such as Jonathan Monk. In fact, shortly after leaving the university, I began to be interested in conceptual art, which represented a fundamental change. I discovered the works of Joseph Kosuth and the first conceptual artists, such as Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, Daniel Buren, Stanley Brown and of course Michael Asher, who for me is the most interesting. Conceptual art in general had an important influence on my work as it has continued to have until today.

- SM:** They are almost all painters or artists who have reconceptualised the artistic practice, criticising or changing painting's possibilities. Within this context, at what moment and under what circumstances did you begin to use photography?
- IA:** One of the first works that I relate with photography is *Luz (seis ventanas)* (Light: six windows). Even though it is not strictly photography and there is almost nothing that relates it directly or from a technical viewpoint to photography, I believe that there is some proximity with it because it also works with light: sunlight directly affects the support and the light's action changes the colour

of the cardboard. By exposing these pieces of cardboard long enough to this light, I was able to create an image. Indirectly, I think it could be considered my first contact with the photographic in relation to art, because I was clearly making photographs at that time, not with the intention of using them as works but instead as reports on everyday life, on trips, etc.

From that work onward, I began to use photography as a medium for documenting or explaining some event or activity in which I had been involved. I think my first photographs were from the mid-nineteen nineties. They began with the series titled “Bibliotecas” (Libraries) and from then on I made some works that were actually more photographic, both in terms of the medium used and the final result, a photograph.

SM: It is symptomatic that an artist engaged in a reflection on the nature of painting and the pictorial, should make a work exploring the ontological nature of photography in his first contact with the medium, don't you think? You began with the relationship between the image and light, time and space. How did this window idea occur to you?

IA: I was very interested in making something where there was no physical contact with the artwork, where a distance would be created between the work's support and me, or in other words, where I didn't have to touch the surface. They proposed an exhibition at the Estrany-De la Mota gallery in Barcelona, and I thought about what I could make in that space, a basement with no windows that received no sunlight, no natural light. All of that prompted me to work on this idea of light.

On the other hand, I had seen newspapers in the studio that had been there for some time and had been yellowed by the light. Light and time had changed their colour. I thought that this idea of light as a representation technique could be interesting.

The following question was what to represent by that technique; I never considered painting a landscape or something figurative as I could have done with paint.

I thought of how the light entered the studio through the windows and how a window was really an object that related the inside of the working space to the outside, and that it would be interesting to transport those windows to the exhibition

venue. Part of my private working space would be moved to public space, which was the gallery. I decided to build some panels in the same size as the windows and cover them with grey cardboard. I left them on the flat roof of the building where I have my studio for a few days until the sunlight changed the parts in direct contact with the light. I had placed a template over the parts that I didn't want transformed.

SM: You made a photogram.

IA: That's right; it was a kind of photogram. The chemical reaction in the cardboard, which was grey and turned yellow, was also a basic component. On the other hand, I achieved what I mentioned at the beginning. I didn't intervene on the surface.

I used to say that it was a work that enabled me to devote myself to other things while it was made; during its exposure to the sun I could do other things. Then I saw that it was more complicated than I had thought, because I had to prevent stains on the pieces of cardboard and avoid having the wind carry them away. Sometimes it rained; cats stepped on them, birds dropped their residues on the surface, etc. In short, it was complicated, but

in the end I managed to solve everything and make the work. It's a very fragile work since it also deteriorates when displayed because light affects the surface and slowly destroys the contrast between shapes. The best thing is to keep it covered in a dark place, which brings up an interesting contradiction between the work and its visibility.

SM: But *Luz (seis ventanas)*, which you made in 1993, also has a pictorial component and is monochrome to some extent.

We are having this conversation for a publication that gives priority to photography, so how do you consider the medium: like a painter who uses different media or like an artist who at this moment is not defined within any specific discipline even though painting has always been a basic reference in your artistic reflection due to your training?

IA: Yes, painting was the beginning, and until the end of the nineties, and even at the beginning of the two thousands, my work continued to be located mainly within the sphere of painting, above all since the medium had slightly opened its traditional boundaries. Talk was of expanded painting,

in the way Rosalind Krauss had previously applied the term, but I wasn't the only one doing this; there was an idea in the air that extending painting's limits was a necessity because within its own boundaries, the traditional ones, the medium was becoming played out. For my interests at least, it was fairly useless. Currently, the classification of my oeuvre as painting is no longer as frequent, partly because over the last ten years I have done another kind of work.

It's interesting to see where you begin to be situated, although if I had to define myself, it would not be as a painter or photographer but instead, as you say, as an artist who uses the most appropriate medium for each occasion, the best one for every work. Nevertheless, it is true that it has sometimes been suggested – just as you have, for example – that I work in the photographic sphere and other times in environments closer to painting or in neither but in others that are more multidisciplinary. That's when I realise that making a technically diverse work leaves room for various options in terms of discipline.

SM: Do you think you turned to photography because it presented itself as the appropriate medium for

criticising and dismantling painting, or instead were you interested in looking for another creative, technical and conceptual horizon?

IA: Actually, I think I turned to photography as the result of a reflection on the image in general.

It's clear that painting is also an image or, in other words, the act of painting generates an image. It can be figurative, abstract or monochrome, it doesn't matter. At a certain moment, I began to consider what it meant to generate new images in a world so saturated by them. We all produce new images; it's a daily fact. As an artist and image producer, this reflection was fundamental for me, more so because the images produced by painting didn't satisfy me; they caused a conflict within me. So I began to look for formulas that enabled me to continue working with images or painting without creating new images. And I think I found some solutions, such as using transparent materials or even the sunlight technique that I already mentioned and others that precisely questioned painting's role as a tool for generating images. At that time, I still liked the physical fact of painting; it interested me, but not the result. The need

to look for new solutions arose from this conflict, as shown for example in the work *Malgastar* (Waste), which involves opening cans of paint and letting their contents dry out. On the one hand, this shows a certain criticism of painting and it also represents an autobiographical crisis: not knowing what to do with the paint. As a consequence of all this, I began to use photography, perhaps as a technique that allowed me to extend and resolve what I couldn't do with painting in terms of generating new images.

SM: Can you identify some artist who influenced you within the generation of those who began to give priority to photography, such as John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler and Ed Ruscha? Did you follow the work of these authors during that period? And apart from them, was there someone who particularly interested you in the more specific field of photography?

IA: Yes. From very early on, I was very interested in Bernd and Hilla Becher, for example. When I discovered them, it seemed that what they did with photography was just what was happening to me with painting. It was fairly debatable whether it

could be understood as photography in the traditional sense or whether they were proposing another kind of work, carrying photography to another territory. And of course I was interested in photography linked to the conceptual and particularly its use as a document more than a photograph, a document that allows someone to record or confirm something that has gone beyond photography. I was also obviously interested in more traditional photographers and those who were not traditional but were considered within the sphere of traditional photography. Jeff Wall interested me from the start. Later on, I was also impressed by Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and that entire generation.

In general, I liked the work of the photographers who derived from the Bechers. Afterward I focused on the Canadian group: Jeff Wall, as I told you, in addition to Dan Graham, Rodney Graham, etc. Among the Americans, I would highlight Eggleston and Robert Frank, for example, and then the photographic work of Ed Ruscha and Cindy Sherman. It was a type of photography used, or understood, differently from the

way traditional photographers had used it. In this sense, I would also highlight the work of Hans Peter Feldmann and Peter Fischli & David Weiss. Currently I am very interested in Christopher Williams's proposals.

SM: A more inexpressive photography in that sense.

IA: Yes exactly, colder. As you say, more inexpressive even without the attitude previous photographers may have had when the time came to shoot their cameras. The compositions I focused on at first seemed to have been studied little or conceived on the spot. They were more informal and almost always seemed a record of everyday life.

SM: That leads us to a very important issue: art history and the history of photography often have a close relationship, but sometimes they have each taken their own path independently. Currently there is a wide and very productive permeability between both fields, but we continue to speak of artist-photographers and artists who use photography, don't we? What do you think of that distinction? Have you felt it?

IA: I think there is a fairly clear difference between them, particularly because the starting point, how

photography is used in one case and in the other, is very different. In the case of artist-photographers, photography is the end result and, let's say, nothing exists outside the image; in the case of the artists who use photography, I think that almost always photography is a visual support for an ephemeral act, for something carried out somewhere else, like a document. I think this establishes two very different ways of understanding the use and intention of photography. It's also true that some have used it both ways. To give an example, a photographer like Jeff Wall is very different from the Bechers and Douglas Huebler, from the photographers closer to the conceptual, including Baldessari, to cite those you have also mentioned.

- SM:** The strange thing is that many of the photographers we are mentioning have as one of their main references artists who are more strictly photographic. Jeff Wall has been very influenced by Walker Evans; the Bechers' work is linked to the photographic tradition of Albert Renger-Patzsch. That's why I ask myself whether this distinction is real or is more something created by the market. Couldn't it be more a sociological difference or

do you feel that conceptually they are totally different fields?

- IA: My opinion is that they are fairly different fields. Perhaps you can't trace a totally straight, defined line between them because it's true there is some contamination in both directions; however, as a rule I see two very different ways of understanding images – what is expected of the image and why it has been made. I think the starting point is very different in each case, and therefore the result is too. Anyway, what you mention is true: sometimes the relationship or influence of one field on the other also exists. They aren't always incompatible; there are some authors who are between the two basic ways of understanding photographic practice. I think there may even be a third way and I suppose we'll speak of it later: appropriation, the use of already existing images that are recontextualised, reused. Although it continues to be work with the image, it's another approach, another way of addressing photography. A short time ago, I read a phrase by Joan Fontcuberta saying that the true creative act is to give a new meaning to images that already exist. It seems an interesting point of view.

- SM:** Yes. You have already mentioned how after finishing your studies and due precisely to this reflection on painting, the nature of your work changed significantly, didn't it? You went from a formal material base to a base that was perhaps more anti-formal and closer to the idea of concept, of fiction. I would like to know how photography participated in this process, particularly because in many artists, this turn toward photography is also related to the search for intermediate languages, for technologies with a common, daily, accessible use.
- IA:** Yes, that's true. I think that photography, as a mechanical medium, is colder and creates a distance between the author and his work. The machine is always in the middle, developing, an entirely mechanical process, which together with the speed in obtaining images, may make it the most appropriate format for explaining the contemporary world. I think in some way it's also a more objective, neutral and inexpressive medium. It was better adapted to work that explored distance and fled subjectivity, which I do believe is a terrain more fitted to painting where the relationship between

the work and its author is, not always, but almost always, much closer, even physically. I think that in my case there may be an evolution toward photography for the reason you mentioned, because it's a medium that actually works better for recording or explaining certain contemporary ideas by creating that distance. And it's more immaterial.

SM: When we analyse this relationship between fine art and photography in retrospect and particularly when we observe the work of artists who, like you, have had a pictorial training and have then entered photography, we see there are a series of correlative motivations that also define a set of issues important for contemporary art. An initial motivation is dematerialisation of the pictorial work. On the other hand, there is also the search for a more conceptual work that favours reflection on language itself, and finally, an interest in the everyday, in the banal topics of daily life. Furthermore, something that seems essential to me although I don't know whether it is significant in your case, is that many artists have sought a kind of aesthetic in photography, a non-artistic appearance, an amateur, more spontaneous and less mannerist

aesthetic. Have you shared these same important motivations in defining your work?

- IA:** Yes, these motivations can be applied in some way in my case. I identify to a large extent with the process you describe; I think that it is fairly common to many artists. Furthermore, now no one denies that photography is at the same level as other disciplines such as painting and sculpture, and I think that this “standardisation” may also have influenced some authors when the time came to decide to use it. Before, it was a medium that was much more on the fringes of the market. Photography was not very commercial and interested few people. Yet suddenly it was included in exhibitions and the market, and became a medium like any other. It’s strange, because it’s a relatively recent phenomenon; this comparison between photography, sculpture, painting, cinema and installations is only a few years old.
- SM:** What conditions do you believe have been decisive for this comparison?
- IA:** It seems important to me that, on the one hand, some museums have taken a series of steps in this direction and have shown the work of photographers,

but also the way in which some photographers began to treat photography as an extension of painting. Let's say that they built a kind of bridge between painting and photography almost without realising it.

I remember that when we began to analyse Jeff Wall's work, everyone said that it was painting, that his point of reference was painting and his work a new way of painting. They were clearly photographs, but everyone placed them in the sphere of painting. Even the large formats of photographs approached those of painting – I refer to the painting of the nineteen eighties and particularly American painting. It's also true that for a while the photographic image had been incorporated into painting, specifically since pop art and artists such as Rauschenberg, who had already used the photographic image in his works.

SM: Or Gerhard Richter.

IA: Exactly, the photographic image forming part of the painting. It's not something that appeared immediately but it was progressive.

Currently and particularly for the last ten or fifteen years, we see that photography is now situated at

the same level as any other work in museums, fairs and galleries. Exhibitions of photography only are held and no one thinks it strange; it's considered normal.

SM: Something else that seems significant to me in your case is that in some way photography enables a turn toward the real, a more direct representation of reality. For example, if we speak of *Luz (seis ventanas)*, we're dealing with the windows in your studio, aren't we? It therefore permits a link to concrete, real things.

IA: Yes, in fact something that has always concerned me is the size of photographs. That's why, whenever I have been able to, when I have seen that it made sense, I have tried to give them a real scale and have the size of the image correspond to the fragment of reality captured. And yes, almost all the works are closely linked to my environment, to the everyday, to what surrounds me; usually they are part of it. But it's true that while in painting, for example, abstract, monochrome colours appealed to me, in photography the presence of what is real is a fact. The figurative reappears; reality is represented once again. Because of that I have

always been interested in which parts of this reality I could represent and which parts were important for me.

SM: On the other hand, now that artistic disciplines are increasingly mixed and most artists use more than one means of expression, you can ask yourself what are the differences between painting, photography, sculpture, video, etc., because in spite of everything, we continue to use those terminologies. Do you think that areas of competence in the modernist sense still exist?

IA: I think that specific areas for different artistic media or techniques continue to exist. But it's also a reality that many artists, including me, work with different techniques according to what is best for each work. In fact, I think that domination of technique is not the most important thing for the artist today. A specialist in the technique you want to use can solve your technical problems. It seems to me that artists are particularly asked to have good ideas and that these ideas generate a new meaning, independently of whether or not they are going to formalise them. Each work in itself should maintain a perfect balance between its

concept and the technique with which it has been made, the best or most appropriate one so that the work becomes a compact unit. I don't know if you agree with this.

SM: Yes, totally.

You spoke of some artists who practice a photography closely linked to the history of painting. This has been a very significant trend in recent decades, to the point that the notion of a painting has become a recurrent notion in the practice and theory of photography. What is your opinion of this trend? And I also wanted to ask you, what does a painting continue to be for you?

IA: (Laughter) Let's see. I'm interested in the work of Jeff Wall, including his idea that an image condenses a very complex process. On the other hand, the process of building the image belongs to painting, particularly baroque painting.

If we take *Las Meninas*, for example, it's clear that here there is a construction that is in no way intuitive or accidental. All the elements that appear in the picture have a meaning, a motive and are placed there with a very clear intention that is very controlled by the artist himself. I think it's

the same thing that Jeff Wall does when he builds a series of elements before making an image, a photograph: all of that structure, the construction of the surroundings, the landscape as if it were a set for a film... in short, everything needed to simulate a fictitious situation that we will only see concentrated in an image.

I'm very interested in what he does, but I would never do that as an author because I prefer something more immediate, closer. I want the image to suggest things beyond the image itself, but without being a very complex construction, something closer to the everyday, to what surrounds us, which taken out of this context and precisely because of this, is capable of suggesting other things.

In terms of painting, well, there are still things that interest me, normally with a strong conceptual weight. In fact, I think you know that a few years ago I curated a painting exhibition at Madrid's Elba Benítez gallery. I was talking with her one day and she told me that she couldn't find interesting things in painting. I told her that in my opinion there weren't many but that there were some painters who did interest me. Then she

suggested, “Very well then let’s prepare an exhibition with those artists.” We did, and the selection of artists was: On Kawara, Jonathan Monk, Bernard Frize, Christopher Wool, Rémy Zaugg, Günter Umberg and Raoul De Keyser, artists who with their work are questioning the practice of painting itself. Let’s say they are talking about their own demise (laughter). And although it seems a contradiction, that’s the painting that interests me, the one that questions whether it is an adequate, useful means of expression. Another precedent could be Robert Ryman, who we already mentioned, and some others, but as you see when I speak of painting it’s something fairly distant from the idea of *tableaux* and the constructed image, although there are some photographers who use this system, which also interests me. I could also mention Gursky, for example, who builds his images in a different way, using computers and the new technologies, and above all Christopher Williams, for the strong conceptual aspect of his photographs and the rigour and precision of his approach.

SM: It’s interesting how at this time your interests in painting differ greatly from your interests in photography. We could say that you’re interested in a

more abstract painting that centres on itself and a more direct, figurative photography, connected with reality.

- IA: Yes. What happens is that when I work with photography, I almost never incorporate the idea of fiction. In a few cases I do, such as in the series of film posters, “Desapariciones” (Disappearances), which explores Georges Perec’s relationship with films. Those images were a fictitious construction because most of the films were never made, and the entire group questions the border between reality and fiction. However, in general, when I have used photography it was precisely to avoid fiction, to highlight an aspect of reality, both if the image was mine or if it was already made, published in the press or originating in another medium.

The works in which I have made a more “creative” intervention were the “Desapariciones” and “Sinopsis” (Synopsis) series. In them, I didn’t appropriate the image, I created it myself. We can also speak of “creation” in relation to other works in which the image is more autonomous and self-enclosed as in the series of photographs titled “Reflexiones” (Reflections) or “Bibliotecas.”

- SM:** In your oeuvre, “Reflexiones” seems to me to be a very paradigmatic series. It contains images of pictures reflected on the floor, doesn’t it? There are several things that seem interesting to me. On the one hand, the floor works as an obstacle and at the same time as a means of seeing the painting. This same obstacle is also present in series such as “Malezas” (Weeds) and “Bibliotecas.” There is always something that impedes complete perception.
- IA:** That’s right. All that need you mentioned to question sight comes up; in other words, putting on the table what we see since what we see isn’t always really what we’re looking at. Other ways of looking exist also, derived from the usual way, but also part of reality. In fact, the “Reflexiones” series arose at the moment in which I was still trying to speak of painting. Because what I do is divert attention from the image hung on the wall, from the painting – although sometimes it may be a photograph – from the two-dimensional object hung on the wall and direct it toward its reflection. I divert attention from the “correct” place where one should look and show how the

image is actually also someplace else, on the floor in this case.

Nevertheless, I think that this series is one more attempt in the process of abandoning painting and beginning to use other media to speak of it, because the resulting image is actually much more abstract and to a certain extent more pictorial. It can be clearly seen that there is a floor in the photograph, but the image reflected on it cannot be identified; it's blurred and indistinct.

SM: Of course, that's why it's a series between photography and painting. You mix both realities.

IA: Exactly.

SM: It's a denial of painting but at the same time it contains some denial of the photographic document, because you weren't looking for a direct description.

IA: That's it. I created a new image that contained another image that couldn't be distinguished, by an author different from the one who gave his name in the work's title. But what interested me was that photography enabled me to do two things: show the floor, the three-dimensional surface and the two-dimensional image, which appeared as

something ghostly, an apparition, a sort of mirage. Thus the photograph of the image wasn't real; it was an image representing the real one. It was all there: the ghostly image, the representation of the representation and at the same time something as simple and obvious as a floor, which was defined by the tiles or by the lines constructing that space. All that play of things really interested me.

- SM:** We could also speak of photographic abstraction, although according to how we perceive it in the series, it's very different from abstraction in painting.
- IA:** In fact, it's not an abstraction because I'm photographing something that's real. It's true that this part of reality is close to the abstract, but it continues to be a photograph like any other. What is being framed is simply a bit of something that in itself already tends to abstraction. But yes, those elements are what interested me about this series, that border between reality and fiction, between the figurative and the abstract, between painting and photography. All of that was there and it was something that appealed to me for its complexity and evocative capacity.

Contexts, language, history

SÉRGIO MAH: Now I would like to discuss some of your most exemplary series such as “Listados” (Lists) and “Calendarios” (Calendars), in which you use fragments of texts and images from newspapers. It seems that much more than an act of appropriation, those works are based on a double transaction: to decontextualise in order to later recontextualise.

IGNASI ABALLÍ: Yes. Furthermore, working based on an everyday object like a newspaper really appealed to me due to the idea of temporality; it’s an object that lasts twenty-four hours, just one day. The idea of measuring time through the newspaper is in some way implicit in the object, because when the day ends and the next day’s newspaper comes out, the last one becomes totally outdated and erased. The idea arose after reading the newspaper as usual, one I bought like everybody else to be informed. I always thought, however, that it was very connected to the time aspect, to the specific

day on which it appeared, to its duration. At one point I asked myself whether it would be possible to remove some elements and turn its content into something neutral, timeless or even anonymous. If the newspaper measured reality during one day, it was a question of seeing what elements could measure reality timelessly, and the first thing that occurred to me was to extract the figures of all types that appeared in the headlines. I began cutting out those numbers and pasting them on paper and little by little, the process kept getting more complicated until the present time when after some twelve years, it has turned into a kind of immense file of clippings of numbers and words, all linked in some way to reality. That is a very important aspect for me. It's not an invention; each of those numbers has been real for some reason. The dead people died for a real reason; people were together for some specific reason. Everything that appears on the lists has been part of reality. But what you say regarding these clippings being out of place is true. They have been recontextualised and therefore we no longer know to what they refer. From there onward, they begin to be an image for me. The fact of not knowing

their original context turns each list into an image, an image of part of reality: the list of dead people, for example, is equivalent to an image of death for me; amounts of money are images of the economy; time periods are images of temporality, and the same goes for all the rest.

SM: Well in fact, the numbers are images because you digitalise and organise them as an image within the work's catalogue.

IA: Yes, the idea is to present them in a very objective way where no type of expression or of aesthetic or conceptual intentionality is perceived at the time of arranging the paper cuttings. I decided to separate the numbers in groups according to content or subject, but from there on I want them to be very neutral and objective.

SM: But it's very important for you to maintain their index value, isn't it? They must be images of real clippings, reproductions of parts of a specific newspaper.

IA: I usually explain that the original, the collage on which I paste the pieces of paper directly, the original clippings, would be the equivalent of an analogue photograph's negative. These are works that

I have never shown and that can't be sold. They only exist as a foundation, as a document based on which I can later build an enlarged photographic image, because the final result is like a "photograph", since there is no camera, no roll of film, nothing like that. But the process is close, because there is an original, a negative and then an enlargement on photographic paper that eliminates all the collage-like manual and material quality that the original has, on the one hand, and on the other, takes the work toward the photographic. I repeat that what I wanted to do was to have that text become an image that when we see or read one of the lists brings to mind an image of something real, of a multitude, of death. Obviously that image will be subjective for each viewer.

SM: And to what point does this displacement of a fragment, a context, toward another new one, a work with a list of many numbers, also include a certain abstraction of the event itself? Some of those numbers have to do with violent events, don't they? There are figures about dead people. How do you see the final work? What type of connection does it continue to have with reality?

IA: I think that the only relationship with reality is the origin, where it has come from, but that the final work has little to do with reality. In fact, when I prepared the list of numbers of the dead, for example, I realised that I was manipulating a terrible image of death. Because there were thousands and thousands of dead people who were really dead; it wasn't an invention. They were really dead. It was fairly shocking for me. It was hard when I became aware of that, because I was uniting the entire aspect of reality that is normally dosed out to us in small quantities every day.

That is the connection those works have with reality: all the numbers have come out of one object, the newspaper, which represents reality, and in principle, we must think that it is telling us the truth. Surely no one would invent figures on deaths that were not real, for example. But it's true that the image, once finished, becomes something very abstract. We are no longer considering a specific event but the representation of death.

SM: Does this abstraction, in this case of the lists, have some metaphorical meaning?, Does it hold some kind of commentary on the insensitivity with

which we read those numbers in newspapers? For example, when we follow war news, the only thing that changes every day is a number.

- IA: Well that's also here in the work, I think, and it's part of this new awareness. But of course that's in the case of the deaths, because there are other aspects that aren't as serious and may appear to be banal, humorous or lacking any importance. Deep down, the idea is to build some kind of map of reality, as wide and open as possible, because reality is not presented in fragments; everything is mixed within it. The only thing I do is represent it and show it in a little different way, precisely as we would do if we took a photo. That photo is part of reality.

I use the newspaper as the starting object as if it were the camera, which speaks of reality during one day. Upon regrouping all of that information, another interpretation of reality presents itself that can be dramatic, humorous or sometimes totally insignificant. What I do want is it to be a mosaic as close as possible to the complexity of reality itself, to show all sides of that reality while knowing that it's an absurd task, because totality

cannot be embraced. It's a vain attempt, but I continue, although in a way that's a little different from how I began. I think this series is reaching its end. I've been very obsessed with this work over the last twelve or thirteen years, cutting out, storing and classifying material every day, a material that still attracts me. When I find a new or an interesting number for some reason, I can't help getting excited.

SM: That routine is crucial for you, isn't it? I imagine it's a little like the case of *On Kawara*. What he paints could easily be produced by technical devices, but he prefers the rhythm and duration of the pictorial process.

IA: Yes, I think he shares that same methodology, that attitude of establishing a daily discipline and following it almost without thinking in a very mechanical fashion.

SM: And is that discipline important for you as a creative process or is it just an ethical question of artistic production?

IA: It's both. It is also work that arose at a time when I was not very active. I went to the studio and didn't have much to do and there were not many exhibitions in perspective; I had time to digress. Various

works came out of this state almost of boredom, of not having anything excessively important to do to fill the hours. One day, for example, I saw that there was a bottle of Tipp-Ex correction fluid on the table; I opened it, experimented with its content and later thought that it might be interesting to do something with it. It was a bit the same with the newspaper: having the object, looking at it attentively, beginning to cut, little by little, and with time shaping the work.

My current situation is the opposite; now I don't have much time (laughter), and as you can see, there are many backdated newspapers accumulated on the table. Even Dalila, who helps me with work, is cutting out newspapers and I really don't know if that makes sense any more. Due to a natural process also, I think this work, the entire series, will end when the collapse comes and the newspapers take over.

SM: You always use the same newspaper, don't you?

IA: Yes I do. When the idea arose I bought the paper only to be informed and the newspaper I bought then – and continue to buy – was *El País*. That's where the work originated, as a consequence of that act of reading.

- SM:** “Calendarios” came later, in 2004, didn’t it? Where did you get that idea?
- IA:** I got the idea in 2002. That year I decided that during 2003 I was going to cut out the newspaper’s cover photo every day and keep them all until the end of the year to construct a work that was later titled *Calendario* (Calendar). It basically involved replacing the number of the calendar every day with the image that had appeared that day on the newspaper’s front page.
- SM:** What did you do when more than one image appeared on the cover?
- IA:** Usually *El País* only shows one photo on the cover every day. And that’s fortunate, of course, because there are newspapers that publish several. *El País* made it easier in this sense, because even though two did appear occasionally there was always one that stood out. I decided to use the cover photo because it’s usually a significant image of what has happened on the previous day, of some important event. I had to wait throughout 2003 to produce the first calendar, corresponding to 2003, in 2004, and it was the first I was able to complete with 365 photographs.

SM: For me, “Calendarios” and “Listados” seem like two sides of the same project. On the one hand, the word as image, and on the other, the image as word.

IA: That double relationship exists; in the case of the lists, the text displaces toward the image, and the images, which are presented without any kind of text or caption, can develop a story or trigger the memory of a news item and the reason why that image appeared on the newspaper’s front page.

The work on time is also interesting, because at year-end, when I order the clippings to make the calendar, I often can’t recall what some images refer to. I can recall others because they were important events or ones repeated for several days. The newspaper gave continuity, for example, to the Iraq war. At the beginning, images related to that subject were published on the cover for six or seven days, but other times it was an image that referred to a one-off event that was quickly forgotten. Seeing it again after some time, I no longer recalled why it had appeared on the cover.

Due to all of this, I think the project represents a reflection on memory, on fleetingness, on the excess

of information. It's a work that I have continued from 2003 until today; this will be the eighth year that I cut out, classify and file these images. And it's also very interesting to see various calendars with distance, how events, celebrities, wars, disasters, etc. have evolved; in short, everything that has occurred over these eight years. This was a project I planned to develop for ten years in order to have a large file of images that would enable seeing not just one year but also a group of years to observe how the world has evolved over time based on a large archive formed by a few thousand images. It's also somewhat absurd, because the information is only visual, but even so, I think it can be interesting to see retrospectively.

- SM:** What do you think can be perceived upon observing all those images with no captions? What type of historical perception emerges from these calendars?
- IA:** I have realised that two time speeds are perceived. One is immediacy, which makes us see as obsolete a newspaper from the previous day because a new one has come out with fresh news. Current affairs submit us to a very high speed of information, almost

in real time. The other is more long distance and has enabled me to observe how after two or three years the same faces, the same wars, the same disasters all repeat themselves. In other words, the evolutionary process of events is actually much slower than we think. I think it's interesting to witness that speed of the immediate, which seems very fast to us, and at the same time observe that actually the world doesn't move as quickly as we think.

That was my interpretation upon analysing the photos I gathered. And the public... well, I don't know whether the public also makes this interpretation or whether it makes a different one, closer to the chronicle and the documentary, recognition of what it sees in the images that it can identify. Actually, that is also part of the idea of this work since it deals with memory and how some events are engraved in our minds and others go totally unnoticed. And then there is that replacement of the number, the day, by the day's image. It's like summarising everything that has happened in the day with one image, and everything that has happened in a year with 365.

Another interesting aspect for me is that I was not concerned as to whether the images were good, bad, pretty, pleasant, unpleasant, interesting, etc. I didn't judge the quality of the image I cut out. I simply used the day's photo, whatever it was. In this sense, I maintained a distance, a neutrality, with it. Obviously I'm always curious as to what the day's image is going to be, but it all ends there; whatever it is, it's the one that will appear in the work.

- SM:** Appropriation is a practice that has been used frequently as a means of critical deconstruction in relation to the historical and political. I am thinking of Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, who even talked about “rephotography”. In your case, do these attempts at recontextualisation also imply a political dimension?
- IA:** If we understand the word political as meaning an ethical position toward the work, yes I think you can talk about a political dimension. Furthermore, all those works arose based on what I mentioned to you before, the excess of images. Why create new images if there are already some that are useful for talking about what you want to discuss?

I have never tried to make people think that the images in the calendars were mine, far from it. I'm interested in it being known that they were made by others, something that on the other hand I think is fairly obvious, and that I have simply recontextualised them, used them another way. We were talking before about appropriation and I think another term is also pertinent: translation. The images are translated from one language to another or from one use to another. A translation is a little different from simple appropriation, because there is also something creative and new in rewriting something. All those ideas, particularly the one regarding the crisis of the image, are there. What it means to put new images in circulation is also what has led me to use already existing images. I think this is a political attitude not only in terms of art, but also in terms of the type of images you use.

SM: Then you think we no longer need to make new images, just re-examine the ones we have.

IA: Said that way it may seem excessively radical, but in some way, the ones we already have allow us to treat them and present them in many ways and

therefore I sometimes think that it's not necessary to add any more.

SM: That attitude can be understood as an observation on the lack of integrity of the images themselves, can't it? As a way of recognising that images are very fragile, precarious signs and that in the end everything depends on the conceptual and social context.

IA: Yes. Whether or not their new use is able to add other layers of meaning to those they already have depends a lot on what is done with them. Images are usually fragile signs precisely due to their massive presence and limited ability to surprise us because of the everyday relationship we, both viewers and producers, maintain with them.

I have to tell you that, on the other hand, the idea of “re-photographing” also really interests me due to what you mentioned before regarding Richard Prince and other artists like Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger. A photograph is part of the environment; it fits into the landscape like any other object and therefore, why not photograph a photograph that is already in our environment when we want to photograph something? Nevertheless,

the ultimate interest of this reuse depends a lot on how or toward where the new reading proposed for the image is directed. I think that it can be done in a sense very close to pop art or in a more conceptual, political or critical sense. Depending on the use and the context in which it is situated, it will have one final meaning or another.

- SM:** But in “Calendarios” there is also something else, an archive of history that evokes the work of Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg. Are they authors who interest you? Did you think of them when you began to work on this series?
- IA:** Not directly, but it’s obvious that it does bear a relationship with them. With Warburg, for example, with his *Mnemosyne Atlas* and the idea of the archive’s use as a model to explain history based on its images and the relationships that can be established among them. And obviously with Benjamin also for the idea of mechanical reproduction, the serialisation of images, their use, how they are contextualised, etc. It’s clear that they are two references, two fundamental authors, who have reflected previously on something that I am doing with images now.

- SM:** But we are left with a very Benjamin-like perspective in that there is no history outside its representation. There is no event without its image.
- IA:** Based on that idea, the “Calendarios” are clearly within the orbit of Benjamin’s thought: to document with images a period, one or ten years of world history, because the images refer to everyone, based on an everyday object that has no more value than that of informing us about the most significant thing that has occurred during a day.
- SM:** Are you interested in the figure of the artist as a *monteur*, as someone who plays with the montage and re-montage of history?
- IA:** Yes. In fact, I’m doing something like that, although mine is a minimal gesture. It’s not a work that poses a new version of history but simply tries to offer an interpretation that’s a little different and based on another point of view.
- SM:** I say this in the sense that the artist works as a re-classifier, a reinterpreter, something like a mediator in the interpretation of reality.
- IA:** Yes, I think that’s present in these works, above all in the calendars, because the integrity and time connection of the images are respected. It’s

different from a work like Richter's "Atlas", which is an archive of images but without an explicit link with time. In the case of "Calendarios," the link to time, to the moment, day and year is very important. It's a collection of images, an archive that can't be separated from the moment, day and place when the image was produced and therefore I believe there's a substantial difference in terms of focus.

Processes

SÉRGIO MAH: Well, Ignasi, I'd like to learn about your working method and creative process. How do you begin? Do you begin with an idea, an image, a text?

IGNASI ABALLÍ: The beginnings can be very different. There are works that arise as a continuation of a previous work or a development of things I have already made, while others seem to be more immediate. They arise spontaneously, for example after reading a book or seeing a film or simply being outdoors or thinking about certain things all day. There are ideas that exist for a long time in the mind with no specific definition; I know that there is something there that can turn out interesting, but I don't immediately know how it can be channelled and formalised. Sometimes this process lasts various years. To the contrary, there are other projects that have a much shorter path. Suddenly you have an idea and almost immediately you imagine how to carry it out.

SM: Is it usually a rational, logical and analytical process, or is it more intuitive and spontaneous?

IA: I would say that it's almost fifty fifty (laughter). Yes, there's a very rational part; there are pieces that work very mechanically and that I almost don't consider now and others with a more spontaneous process; the two are mixed or advance in a parallel fashion. Perhaps ultimately the rational slightly surpasses the intuitive; I would say sixty-forty or seventy-thirty, in favour of the rational and reflective over the intuitive and daring.

SM: Another fact that seems revealing to me is that your attitude in relation to technique seems to be intentionally at an intermediate point. There is no excess of technicism but neither is there too much informality. Is this important? Is there a tone that interests you in the work?

IA: I usually try to do things that I can resolve on my own with my resources, with what I know, my technical knowledge and the devices I have, my cameras, etc. Sometimes I resort to outside professionals, obviously in order to produce the works but not just that: for example, to capture an image because I want it to have a quality higher than that

which my cameras can give me. In such cases I have gone to a photographer and said to him, “Look, I want a photo of this,” and he has made it following my directions. In principle, however, I am interested in self-sufficiency, working with means at the level that my personal infrastructure can provide me. I suppose that, for this reason, the work keeps a balance, because I use what’s around me and means that I can control.

SM: And as a consequence, your art usually does not contain large expressive gestures.

IA: No, I don’t think so.

SM: There is a programmatic restraint.

IA: Yes, it seems that this is something that I have incorporated as a basic principle; in other words, in some way intuition is already submitted to (laughter) this tyranny of restraint.

When I gave classes, I always discussed with my students a phrase that was very controversial for them. “Art is more a question of restraint than of expression.” That is to say that what you don’t include is more important than what you include. Or said another way, you have to take away more than you add; reflection is more important than

action. Following this idea, which is fundamental to me, even intuition is already subject to this principle. So when I work intuitively, what normally comes out is something very sober, fairly inexpressive and very controlled.

I was going to tell you before when we talked about the creation process of my works, that often when I travel I carry my camera and make photos of things that appear, for example, when I'm walking through a city although I don't know how I'm going to use them. They are things that attract me at the moment but usually that's it. Often this is a kind of visual exercise or the mechanics of looking, although sometimes what I photograph can become something definitive later on. It's also a way of keeping your mind always working, like keeping the engine running or regularly going to a gym (laughter), exercises to keep you in shape.

SM: The consequence of these minimal and very restrained gestures is that when one looks at the work, the author appears as a distant, absent figure. On the other hand, it seems that you like to work on things around you. Is this because there's another autobiographical dimension,

some psychological or emotional suggestion in your work?

IA: I think yes, it is of course autobiographical. What you do always refers to yourself and is autobiographical, although there is no evidence of what you are.

I think that it's autobiographical – and here's an example I sometimes mention – in the same way On Kawara's work is. I don't believe that there is any work more autobiographical than his, yet at the same time none that tells us less about him. He explains to us where he has walked, on what day he painted the picture with the corresponding date, whom he met, at what time he got up. But does this type of detail give us true information about him? No, the data is more an autobiography of what we have in common: we all walk, we all meet people, we all know what day it is and at what time we get up and so what he proposes is an autobiography of the everyday, of what is common to all human beings.

I think some of my works are autobiographical in this sense. They speak of the day to day, of aspects to which we all relate and therefore I do too, but

they don't give information that allows anyone to know what I'm like, how I think or how I live. In that sense, there's a possible double reading of the works.

SM: While we're talking, I see right here beside me a book by Georges Perec (laughter). He's a writer who also placed priority on experiencing the everyday as a way of forming a more spontaneous and inventive imagination, a creation less defined by conventions and previous classifications. Much of your work resembles that to some extent, doesn't it?

IA: I don't know whether Perec is an influence, but he does represent an important reference for me, a constant stimulus. In fact, I don't know if Perec interested me because I was already doing some things in his same direction or whether, in some way, I discovered Perec and from then on did work close to his. I think I remember that my work or at least my interests already contained aspects that I found very well represented in Perec's work, particularly in his more experimental texts on language and writing, on the very act of writing, the reflection on what it means to write now, at a time in which so many books and texts are

published. It was similar to what I was asking myself about art, the status of the image, etc.

It's clear that lists, inventories and enumerations are very important in Perec's work. He raises them to the category of literature and in my work, as we have already discussed, something similar happens. That gaze on the everyday that you mention, looking at what is close to you, is what Perec called "the background murmur" of the everyday, the "infraordinary", to which, being as close as it is, we pay no attention, but which turns into an element of great interest when we do. It can actually turn into what is most complex. The operation that Perec made is something I think can also be found in some of the works we are discussing.

SM: But in your case, as in that of Perec, the quotidian is important not only as a theme but also as a language, isn't it? The same thing happens with materials such as dust. It's a much more open relationship with the everyday that enables you to think of it as an artistic material.

IA: Dust was a material on which I focused because in the studio – you're here now and you can see it – it's permanently present. This is an old

building, hard to clean, with windows that don't shut well; in other words, dust is always around. You leave a paper on the table and it gets covered by a thin layer of dust. That daily relationship with dust led me to think of using it to do something and turn it into part of a work. I also thought that dust was a material that in some way represented the idea of synthesis that I wanted to express in my works. Dust is the synthesis of everything that erodes in the world and therefore, if we analyse it, we'll discover the entire number of materials floating in the air. Even in more recent works, this analysis of what we don't see but that surrounds us is something that I have also been interested in investigating.

SM: As in the case of the weeds you photographed in “Fotografía para jardines” (Photography for Gardens).

IA: That's another group of works that has the same approach. It's a look at what we reject, what bothers us, what we leave out. We clean the dust in houses because it's dirty and bothers us, and weeds are the most marginal plants existing. They grow on their own initiative; no one plants them, the seed flies around and when it falls, a plant grows

in impossible places. Sometimes it seems there is no space for it to develop, but there it is. And at the same time it's something we reject aesthetically.

SM: Can it be said that the everyday is also a subject that enables you to work with what is most basic and essential, a kind of “zero point” of artistic activity?

IA: That's a question that's hard to answer because we would have to consider the limits of the everyday, what it is and isn't. I almost always try to maintain an emotional distance with my work and propose projects that reconsider my ideas from a different, objective and neutral perspective, with no presence of the personal or subjective. I like to continuously reconsider my work and propose viewpoints and formal solutions that make me doubt, instead of turning time and again to what I supposedly know and control.

SM: Something that really impresses me about your work is the artistic productivity that arises from the experience of boredom, of waiting, of patience. They are working methods, aren't they?

IA: Yes, it could be said that often it's a question of letting things happen almost in spite of yourself.

A work finally comes out of so much waiting and turning things over in your head, but it's almost more a consequence of an environmental pressure in the sense that you have to do something and be productive, than of a real need. The artist's work is very debatable, don't you think? We ask ourselves if it is useful or not and why we do what we do. In fact, it's a privilege to devote yourself to art, to be able to spend the day thinking of things that have a value and a relative impact. That's why I think that since I can devote myself to this, I have to take advantage of it, although at the same time it's a responsibility.

The scope of the image

SÉRGIO MAH: I would like to analyse a group of works in which you use image and text. For example, “Sinopsis” I and II and the “Fotografía para jardines” series. Let’s start with “Sinopsis.” How did it originate?

IGNASI ABALLÍ: “Sinopsis” is a work that reflects on films. It comprises twenty-four panels, each divided into two parts: the top half is an image and there’s a text on the bottom half. As its title indicates, these texts are taken from the synopses of films that appear in the newspaper’s entertainment guide and summarise each film’s plot. I selected those small texts that suggest or try to explain a film and I eliminated all information about it, such as the title, the actors and any other reference to the film, keeping only this small story. Sometimes you can recognise what it’s about, according to whether you’ve seen the film or not. In the upper part of the panels, I built a narrative in twenty-four images, one for each

panel, about the entire filmmaking process: from the set where it is shot to the rooms where it is doubled, edited, sound is processed, etc. I ended it with a final photograph of the projector in the cinema just at the moment in which the film is about to be projected on the screen to the audience. So, on the one hand, we have the stories, what the film explains, what it tells us and, on the other, how a film is made. It was about confronting the plots and scripts with all that production process and showing the technology, the spaces and everything that in some way composes the process of creating a film. The text and images work here in a complementary fashion.

SM: But there is no correspondence between the image and the text on each panel, is there?

IA: In principle, the photos could be accompanied by any text and be equally valid because they are very neutral. They are photographs of a shooting, but which shooting is not explained and you can't see any actors, the director or producer, nobody. People do not appear. Only spaces and machines are represented, the devices needed to make the film, the spotlights, cameras, all of filmmaking's

complex infrastructure, the sets, all of that. The synopses of two films are written on each panel, one in Spanish and another in English, and they work, it would seem, in a complementary fashion. One text could be the translation or subtitle of the other, as occurs with a film's subtitles. Nevertheless, they have nothing to do with each other. It's not a translation but two texts that refer to two different films. I was interested in creating some confusion and letting the spectator think that it was the synopsis of the same film badly translated or explained another way. But anyone who recognises the films realises that there is no connection, although there could be. All those elements are what make up "Sinopsis."

- SM:** Images in "Sinopsis" have a very paradoxical nature, above all for their polysemous nature. They are images that change with the text. The text is what determines what type of imagination we develop based on each of them.
- IA:** I agree. On the one hand, the images work individually in each panel in relation to the texts on that panel, but they also function crosswise, because together they all reconstruct the entire

filmmaking process, from the set to the cinema. There is a vertical reading of image and text as well as a horizontal one of all the images together and all the texts together. In short, I was interested in explaining what films talk about now, what films tell us as a substitute, we could say, for the nineteenth-century novel. I was interested in the new form of narrative found in films and the stories they tell us: there is fiction, history, documentary, reality, in fact a little of everything just as in the novel. I also wanted to propose the idea that behind every representation there is to some extent a lie, a falsehood. A film is a construction made so that those of us who see it think it's real, but it is really no more than a convention the same as painting or photography. The images of "Sinopsis" are in themselves very neutral and open, but they transform and become specific when connected to a text that conditions them.

SM: Because images alone are unable to establish a meaning and they totally change with text. The text determines the relationship with the image and its interpretation, inserting it in a totally different context. However I wanted to ask you, don't

you feel that this implies some discredit of the image itself?

- IA:** Yes, the images need this crutch, the support of the text to reach total meaning. But I don't know whether this discredits them or simply establishes a complementary relationship. The texts separated from the images would also have a different meaning. I think the same thing would happen but in reverse, because the texts don't really say anything nor do the images accompanying them. To summarise a two-hour film in four lines is very complicated and the description is necessarily absurd and fragmentary. Sometimes I have gone to see a film and later read the synopsis and I have thought that it had nothing to do with the film, or that if it did, it was in purely anecdotal aspects.

The truth is that the film is contained in the synopsis in some way, and the image I have made is part of a moment in the process that made the film possible. So I think text and image work in a very complementary way.

- SM:** Once more, the images show empty spaces. There are no people, there is no action. They are images with a limited scope. Do you think there is some

speculation in your work about a certain lack of communication in the image? I say this because one senses an effort to reduce things to the minimum in many of your works. Doesn't the minimum create a situation of lack of communication even though it has productive effects?

IA: Yes, that's right. I think that's often true and it's something that appears naturally; in other cases, this idea of images that show very little and convey very little information is more forced. It's true that, for example, in other series such as "Bibliotecas" and "Reflexiones" the images are very opaque, aren't they? They are not very narrative but very self-enclosed and to some extent they do reinforce the idea of the crisis of the image.

SM: Many of your images have a documentary value in that they seek to reproduce something clearly and with neutrality as in the "Errores" (Errors) series in which you photograph small wrinkled papers; or in "Tiempo muerto" (Time Out), in which you document a photography installation in an abandoned factory. I would like to know what the notion of the photographic document, as you use it in your work, represents for you.

- IA: This idea of document is in some more or less clear form present both in the photos I take and in those I use. In the two series that you mention this is more obvious because, particularly in “Tiempo muerto”, it was almost a question of photographing an action that meant placing some photographs in an unusual place, an old factory where nothing was manufactured any more. From the contrast between the image and the environment, I obtained another image that held both and that also worked as a document because afterward the photo I had used was removed and never used again. So I recorded a one-time action made for the sole reason of taking a photograph in order to obtain an image of that sporadic contact between the place and the photograph situated in it. It's somewhat the same case in “Errores”, because what I did was photograph the wastepaper basket, the papers I had thrown away after making mistakes. I took them out of the basket again and made a photograph of the mistakes that I had rejected. Then, after taking the photo, the paper went back to the basket. This was to document a small action, made solely to obtain an image. The

main idea in this case was to consider the mistakes as a basic part of the working process with the same importance or more than what is correct.

SM: Another idea that is very clear in “Sinopsis” and in some other series is your interest in fiction through images. I think I am sure that for you criticising painting began with a rejection of fiction in painting, but nevertheless that fiction is what you look for in photos, isn’t it?

IA: I would say that above all photography is present in the works in which this intention exists, but it almost never appears on its own. In the case of “Sinopsis” or “Desapariciones” and in the posters of Perec’s films, the image is also complemented by the text and treated like a graphic image, more in the aesthetic of posters and graphic design than in that of photography. They are images used to build a new image, which upon being placed in relation to the texts and depending on the context in which it is situated, is going to have a reading different from what is strictly photographic. The idea of reality and fiction is present because we can doubt whether these posters and films are real, whether the poster actually illustrates the film, etc.

They also question, for example, the subject of authorship. They are posters that I have made putting myself in the designer's place, taking on a profession that is not strictly my own. What's more, these posters seek to summarise and also concentrate the film; in the case of those that don't exist, the poster is the film. It begins and ends there.

We could relate them to Sugimoto's work, with the photographs he makes of cinemas leaving the shutter open during the film's entire screening. His photograph is also the film because it is totally contained in a single image. You asked me about the relationship between reality and fiction, and in my work I believe it is defined in this way.

- SM:** Literary and film dimensions are more present in the works we are discussing, aren't they? There is a correspondence, a connection between the fiction and the way in which you call on literary experience and the experience of films.
- IA:** They relate with films and literature as in a respective displacement putting both disciplines on the same level, both visually and conceptually.
- SM:** Does your interest in the paradoxical, polysemous nature of the photographic image have something

to do with an intention to provide an incomplete work, something that is not finished and requires work on the spectator's part.

IA: Yes, although I think that more than building stories what I have done is to suspend them because in “Listados”, for example, which are fragments of stories and of written news about an event, I have removed a part thereby suspending the narrative. It's the same in the case of “Desapariciones”; I use elements that suspend the story and can generate another at the same time, simultaneously concentrating and suspending the complete narrative that would be the book or the film itself. Photography is very useful for concentrating narration to the maximum, because everything has to be explained in a single image. From then on, each spectator is free to interpret it as they wish, to extend it more or less and delve deeper or simply remain on the image's visual surface.

SM: In other words, you're not interested in creating fiction but in creating conditions for reflection.

IA: I try to create open images that in themselves can derive toward other interpretations according to the spectator seeing them.

- SM:** Another feature that characterises your work is your interest in production spaces. You have made series on laboratories, paint factories, film studios, as in the case of “Sinopsis,” etc. What does this mean? Does it mean anything?
- IA:** Well I suppose so (laughter). I have never thought of it that way, relating the entire group of works, but yes I suppose that it has to do with the desire to place myself at a certain distance from the subject. To speak of the laboratory and the factory where paint is made is also to speak of painting. And the same reasoning is valid for films and photography. I speak of the process and of what makes it possible, but without ever identifying the film, painting or photograph. I do think that in some works there is an appeal to analyse and represent those spaces because they are at the origin of all subsequent production. They are places where all possible films, photographs and paintings can potentially be found, yet at the same time not one is specified. They are places where nothing and everything is possible. I think that would be the reason why I have been interested in them.
- SM:** One of those spaces is the photography laboratory in which you made the *Revelaciones* (Revelations)

video, a work that shows and analyses the relationships between still and moving images.

- IA: Yes, in that work I wanted to show and insist on the problem of the accumulation of images and their current uncontrolled production while also making a more disciplinary reflection on the relationship between films and photography, between still and moving images. I discovered that there was a machine in photographic laboratories that develops photographs all day long at an incredible speed. I realised that an astonishing number of photos came out of that machine daily – more than ten or fifteen thousand – and that the parallelism between the machine developing the photos, which produces a continuous roll of images, and the film projector was very interesting. So I decided to record that continuous strip. As the photos left the developing machine I focused the camera on them and shot them as if in a film. What happened was that the result is not a film because each photo is different. For this reason, the sensation of reality is not reconstructed but a dizzying sensation is created; it's almost impossible to fix your gaze. An effect is produced similar to

when we look out the window of a train that is travelling very quickly and are unable to focus on details because as soon as we see one thing, the next appears.

So, on the one hand, I documented how and what people photographed since not one of all those photos was mine. It comprised an archive of photos of ordinary situations: trips, parties, friends, portraits, home interiors and children's baths, in other words everything we all photograph. There were good, bad and unfocused photographs, some that had not come out and were blank, overexposed rolls of film, an entire repertory of possibilities.

SM: The entire range of photographic culture.

IA: Yes exactly. And again it was a question of synthesising, establishing a distance and seeing the various possibilities of photography in daily life.

SM: The video also has something that is very suggestive. You use a moving image device, but you make a still shot. At the same time, the still images are the ones moving. There is something like a contradiction between the cinematic and the photographic, which are mixed. Do you agree?

IA: In that case, they are contradictory aspects that mutually cancel each other out. Speed annuls the static image and in films, if the spool is static, the film is annulled. I thought that there were many interesting aspects in this contradiction. It pointed out a reflection on what moving and still images are. The result is a video that lasts two hours in which some three thousand photographs impossible to see individually pass before the spectator. The impossibility of the visual present there resembles what we have already discussed in other works.

SM: It's a symptom.

IA: Yes, it's a symptom. We all take photos that we don't look at afterward. Some images pass in front of us at such a speed that when we try to focus on one, there are ten more behind to immediately replace it.

SM: There is no single image. We realise that we have lost both availability and the capacity to look at images with time, to perceive them in their duration. This is something the history of painting showed us.

IA: Perhaps gradual contemplation has been replaced by consumption. Normally in exhibitions we

don't spend more than five or six seconds in front of a painting or a photo or even a video. We consume everything quickly. And if it's an exhibition in which various artists participate, the thought that we still have more things to look at further accelerates our need to see. A state of anxiety to see everything is created, a desire to consume all that we have to see but without paying much attention. We apply the zapping mechanism to all aspects of sight.

Time: inaction, construction, execution

SÉRGIO MAH: This brings us to the last topic in our conversation, the link between your work and the experience of perceiving time. Time for you is a very important aspect.

IGNASI ABALLÍ: Yes, it's an important aspect that I have dealt with in various works. One of the first was perhaps *Luz (seis ventanas)*, where I worked with sunlight. From there on, it has been a recurrent and very frequent theme in many works, both photographic and with other characteristics.

SM: Of course, the dust... which shows how time is a builder.

IA: Yes, frequently time allows me to build the work. It takes a long time to carry out some of them, to obtain the material so that the work can be made or defined. Normally, these time periods are used in a constructive sense, although constructive in a contradictory way.

SM: Time builds through inaction, doesn't it? I'm thinking of works like *Diez años en el estudio* (Ten Years in the Studio), with the dust, *Luz (seis ventanas)* and *Malgastar*, with the cans of paint that you let dry out. They are works whose result is the consequence of inaction.

IA: Yes, the cloth covered with dust in *Diez años en el estudio* – which comprised taking a white cloth that had been around the studio for ten years and displaying it just as it was, covered with dust – would be that way, it's true. I don't know if we can use the term “destructive”, but it's clearly the result of inactivity. I consider these works to be in some way an anti-performance. It's not doing something so that something happens or simply letting something happen.

This *laissez faire* attitude is an idea that has sometimes been used to comment my work. It involves building a device that permits something to happen with no direct intervention. The mechanism itself is going to develop the process and eventually make something happen.

SM: But inaction often has a programmatic value, as in the work *Sin actividad* (Without Activity), doesn't

it? In that work you reproduce the text of a photography manual, but you put the camera in a showcase; it's a work that is never made.

- IA: Of course, therein lays the irony. It's a gesture between ironic and programmatic as you say: in a photography exhibition in which you yourself invited me to participate, I proposed as my work to stop taking photographs (laughter). The proposal implied my not adding more photographs to those that already existed, both in general and in relation to my own work, during the two months the exhibition lasted. Together with the camera in the showcase, instructions taken from the camera's manual on how to make photographs and take care of the camera were written on a wall.

There is a contradiction between leaving the camera enclosed and inaccessible in a showcase on the one hand, and explaining how photographs are made, on the other. This was the same contradiction that arose when I opened the cans of paint and let it dry out; in this case, I also displayed the instructions for the action so that anyone could perform it after seeing the work: "Open the cans of paint and let it dry out." In both cases there is

an attitude of renunciation, of stopping and saying, “Well, not only am I not showing photographs, but I’m also not going to take them.” Nevertheless, in a parallel fashion I tell spectators how to take photographs in a very schematic way, just as explained in the manual. A relationship is established anew between image and text. Upon reading how to take a photograph, you already imagine the photos or imagine yourself taking them: “Take the camera in both hands, lift it toward your face and eye, shoot by pressing the shutter button and take away the camera again”. It’s something as simple as a description that the text also turns into an image.

SM: In the book *Sin actividad*, you include a text that explores the same type of contradiction. In that text you say that for a long time you have wanted to purchase a camera, the best camera, but you have assumed that you are never going to buy a new one. You prefer the idea, the expectation and the desire to buy the camera ...

IA: Exactly.

SM: ... to making the purchase, don’t you? That’s very enlightening.

IA: Yes, it’s a permanent dissatisfaction that I have also

felt at other times and in relation to other aspects, for example in relation to painting, when I painted something and destroyed the picture immediately afterward. It's a little the same in this case.

But it's also a reflection on reality, on the moment in which we live. Continuous technological development provokes in us the anxiety of never being up to date, of buying a device and having it automatically become obsolete because the new model is going to come out soon after. When I have gone to the store, they have often said to me, "Don't buy that; wait two months, because the new model is better and more inexpensive," and I have waited. But when I go to pick up the new camera they promised, they tell me about the next model and so the time never comes to make the purchase. The text also works in a fairly ironic way. It's the evidence of the real situation that I face, and the truth is that I really don't know which camera to buy.

- SM:** Your interest in the void, in nothingness, silence and inaction is something that places you in complete contradiction with contemporary culture, which is very obsessed with hypermobility, simultaneity

and the frenzy of transmissibility. With this attitude, in some way you are looking for another kind of temporality for our relationship with art.

- IA: I think that art is one of the few spheres in which you can currently maintain an attitude that is critical or in confrontation with reality. You can think about slowness for example. You can position yourself against events. It's an appropriate space for resistance, one of the few possible because all the others inevitably lead you to assume the rhythm and speed of the day to day, to be productive in the sense that what you do has to be useful and economically feasible. Art is an environment in which many things are possible that are impossible in almost any other setting. Topics can be addressed and radical attitudes proposed; you can go against the mainstream in many aspects and generate a critical, reflective work on what is happening, where we're going and what will happen if we continue this way, obviously without any intention of giving lessons to anyone or believing yourself to be the only one who is right, but subtly influencing reality. Of course we can't change the world, but we can change little things. To me

art, and not just its practice but also the work of other artists, has made my life more interesting and intense. My reflection is whether all of this makes sense or is it better to stop a moment and see how we should approach things from now on. I think only art can do this and it is under the obligation to do so.

SM: With more patient time and a more attentive, thoughtful spectator.

IA: What I try to do with my works is to confront the viewer with a void, with a sensation of immateriality, lack of a work, which I think is what can provoke some kind of reflection on what surrounds him and on the moment he is living. Whether or not a long time is needed to understand these works is a very subjective question and will depend on each viewer. I'm interested in proposing open works apt for multiple interpretations and approaches. Based on the visit to the exhibition you can continue reflecting on what has been seen in the works.

SM: One of the most explicit series you have made on time is "Secuencias temporales" (Time Sequences).

IA: Yes, that's one of my most recent series where I

have also used press material, relating images in which a time lapse existed, a more or less long time period. There is almost a century between some pairs of images and a second between others. By putting one next to the other, they show us a before and after, an interval, what has happened during this more or less long time space. In some cases, time's passage is represented by more than two images. It is built from a sequence of images that draw out an action or an event in a more exhaustive, detailed way.

SM: You have mentioned the idea of expanded painting, the pictorial category, as something much wider than the very idea of painting. I'd like to know what you think of the photographic in relation to photography.

IA: Well in the same way. I think that the photographic – if we understand the pictorial as expanded painting – could be understood as expanded photography. I don't exactly know how to explain this, but it's clear that sometimes we are faced with works that are not exactly photographs, like videos or even paintings, which take the photographic as a reference. This would be the reverse process to

what we discussed before, where painting adopts photography as its point of reference.

In any case, I think that in some of my works you can talk of “expanded photography” when the photograph is one more element in the group of what makes up the work. That would be the case of the posters in “Desapariciones,” of “Sinopsis” and the *Revelaciones* video. Here there is a look at photography, a reflection on photography that goes beyond what is strictly photographic, it seems to me, and displaces it toward other environments: narrative, literary or cinematographic.

In fact, I’m very interested in the idea of making films without a camera, without actors, without a script, making photos based on the disappearance of the usual mechanical elements. It’s something I have forced myself to work on in some cases. I’m interested in this idea of building films or creating images without the right tools to do so.

- SM:** We could say that each discipline has less to do with the material territory than with a territory of experiences related to its origin that over time have “displaced” its material territory, don’t you think?
- IA:** You’re right. They have evolved and developed

toward other formal possibilities. Above all, they have opened boundaries and they also dilute them, because deep down many works are a hybrid, a contamination among various disciplines: literature, films, photography, texts, design, architecture, music, etc. It seems they all share a common, neutral territory, close to all of them and converge in a new language.

SM: The end! (laughter)

IGNASI ABALLÍ

Born in Barcelona in 1958, Aballí studied fine art, specialising in painting, and soon added photography to his creative process as well as the use of various materials, most of which were taken from daily life, such as sunlight, dust and newspaper clippings. His oeuvre, with a conceptualist influence, reflects on artistic practice and questions the importance of producing new images within the fathomless information framework in which the contemporary human being is now immersed. Aballí, who was a professor at the Escola Massana in Barcelona between 1990 and 2007, is interested in education and teaches numerous courses and workshops on photography. Since the nineteen nineties, he has continuously shown his work in museums and exhibitions all over the world. Outstanding among his most recent shows are those held at the Today Art Museum in Beijing (2009) and the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (2010–2011) as well as his participation in the Venice Biennale in 2007. Works by Aballí, winner of Spain's National Graphic Art Award in 2006, can be seen in most Spanish art centres and in the most outstanding international collections.

SÉRGIO MAH

The Portuguese curator and sociologist Sérgio Mah was born in 1970. Currently, he lives in Lisbon where he teaches History of Photography at the School of Social and Humanistic Sciences of the Nova Lisboa University and the Centro de Arte e Comunicação Visual (AR.CO). He has written many texts on visual arts, particularly in the fields of photography and video. As a curator, his most important activities include the curatorship of LisboaPhoto 2003 and 2005 and the PHotoEspaña International Photography Festival in 2008, 2009 and 2010. In the near future, he will be in charge of curating Portugal's representation at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

Desapariciones, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2002. Text by Manel Clot.

Ignasi Aballí, Nada para ver, Ed. Museo de Bellas Artes de Santander, 2004. Text by David G. Torres.

0-24 h, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Barcelona/Museu de Serralves, Porto/ Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2005. Texts by Bartomeu Marí, Dan Cameron, Robert Bresson, Andrew Renton, Samuel Beckett, Georges Perec, Gérard Wajcman, and Ignasi Aballí.

Sin actividad, Museo de Portimão, Portimão, 2008.

Nothing or something, Ed. Today Art Museum, Beijing, 2009. Texts by Latitudes (Max Andrews and Mariana Canepa Luna).

Cien mil pares de ojos, Ed. Galeria Manel Mayoral, Barcelona 2009.

Sobre el color, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, 2010. Texts by Ivo Mesquita and Ignasi Aballí.

La Fábrica and Fundación Telefónica publish the Conversations with Photographers collection within the framework of PHotoEspaña, the International Festival of Photography and the Visual Arts, in order to offer the public the reflections of master photographers as they converse with interviewers who are well acquainted with their artistic trajectories. Each volume of this collection provides a broad overview of the career of a Spanish or international photographer, which is not limited to their relationship with photography but also delves into aesthetic and biographical aspects and their personal opinions.

JOAN FONTCUBERTA

speaks with Cristina Zelich

CHEMA MADOZ

speaks with Alejandro Castellote

DUANE MICHALS

speaks with Enrica Viganò

GRACIELA ITURBIDE

speaks with Fabienne Bradu

ALBERTO GARCÍA-ALIX

speaks with Mireia Sentís
and José Luis Gallero

JAVIER VALLHONRAT

speaks with Santiago Olmo

MIGUEL RIO BRANCO

speaks with Tereza Siza

ALEX WEBB

speaks with Max Kozloff

MAX PAM

speaks with Pablo
Ortiz Monasterio

WILLIAM KLEIN

speaks with Eric Daviron

BERNARD PLOSSU

speaks with Juan Manuel Bonet

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA

speaks with Nan Richardson

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BERND & HILLA BECHER

speaks with Moritz Neumüller

ANDRES SERRANO

speaks with Oliva María Rubio

PEREJAUME

speaks with Juan José Lahuerta

STAN DOUGLAS

speaks with Lourdes Fernández

ZHANG HUAN

speaks with Michele Robecchi

ALLAN SEKULA

speaks with Carles Guerra

PAUL GRAHAM

speaks with Charlotte Cotton

CANDIDA HÖFER

speaks with Giovanni de Riva

BLEDA Y ROSA

speaks with Alberto Martín

JÜRGEN KLAUKE

speaks with Heinz-Norbert Jocks

HELENA ALMEIDA

speaks with Isabel de Carlos

VIK MUNIZ

speaks with Joan Fontcuberta

JAMES CASEBERE

speaks with Okwui Enwezor

MARINA ABRAMOVIC

speaks with Jovana Stokic

JAUME PLENSA

speaks with Doris von Drathen

PER BARCLAY

speaks with Judicaël Lavrador

JORGE MOLDER

speaks with José Augusto
Bragança de Miranda

PIERRE GONNORD

speaks with Rafael Doctor

JOHN BALDESSARI

speaks with Analia Saban

HANNAH COLLINS

speaks with Ingrid Swenson

AXEL HÜTTE

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speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist

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speaks with Diógenes Moura

GABRIELE BASILICO

speaks with Roberta Valtorta

DAVID GOLDBLATT

speaks with Katherine Slusher

LUIS GONZÁLEZ PALMA

speaks with Gerardo Mosquera

BORIS KOSSOY

speaks with Beatriz de las Heras

