

From left: Iñaki Bonillas, *Photographic Works*, 1998/2008, color photographs and silk screen displayed in binders, four parts, dimensions variable. Installation view, Liste Art Fair, Basel, 2008. Iñaki Bonillas, *Photographic Works* (detail), 1998/2008, one of five color photographs (displayed in binders) from *Laboratories*, 8 x 10".

OPENINGS

Iñaki Bonillas

TOM McDONOUGH

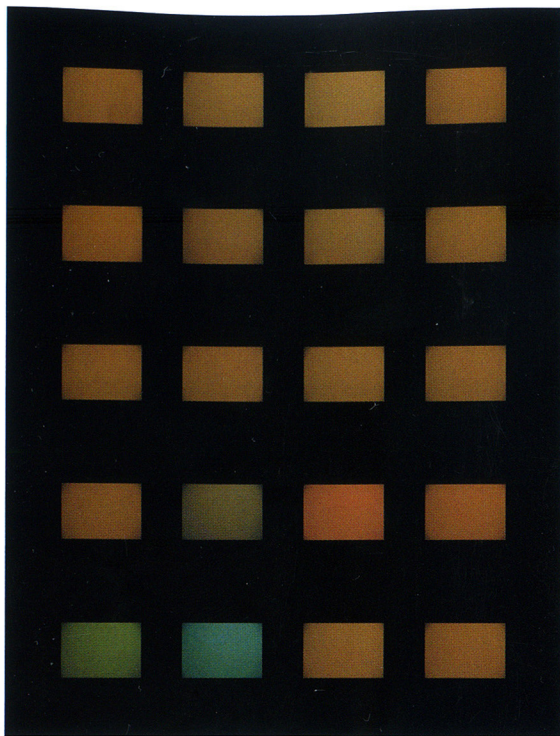
IN 1998, IÑAKI BONILLAS was a young assistant at a Mexico City photography studio when he began a series of projects that would come to be collectively titled *Photographic Works*. A dry label, certainly, but that factual tone accurately captures the deadpan delivery of the entire body of work: Each project aimed to document a particular aspect of photographic technology or procedure, from camera to film to developing lab and so on. Having shot through a complete roll of film, for example, Bonillas had each print developed at a different lab for *Documenting Thirty-Six Photography Labs*, 1998, while *Documenting the Vivitar 2000 Camera's Eighty-Four Possible Exposure Settings*, 1998, methodically analyzed the subtle distinctions of light levels between blown-out highlights and crushed blacks. The systematic approach and neutral exploration of all possible variants within a delimited field clearly signals a debt to Conceptual practices of the late 1960s and early '70s, as does the mode of presentation: *Photographic Works* consists

of the relevant prints and technical information contained within simple office binders and arranged on a table, recalling the display techniques of Mel Bochner or On Kawara. Critical response to these projects has tended to emphasize their rigorously experimental approach to photography as material practice, their devaluation of the artistic subject, and their eschewal of the medium's documentary role in favor of abstraction. Bonillas's work would subsequently depart from this austere investigation of photography's first principles, growing ever more richly referential; yet his most basic subject—the search for origins, whether technical, aesthetic, narrative, or even familial—has remained constant, underpinning a practice that has addressed the place of photographic multiplication and reduplication with uncommon poetry.

Some critics have noted a fetishization of the textural processes and qualities of these images, a kind of technological involution that stamps them as products of their belated relation to the medium;

but Bonillas's art seems notably free of that sense of romantic melancholy pervading the work of today's surveyors of the obsolescent. His documents do not mourn a narrowing of photographic possibilities but rather disclose an inherent multiplicity within the analog: Each brand of film has its distinctive characteristics, each lab its particular methods—and all aspects of the photographic process are witness to the virtually infinite alternatives possible within “the” medium of photography. Their reflexivity discloses not the singular nature of their means but what we might call their manifold origins—dispersed across a range of apparatuses and technical supports.

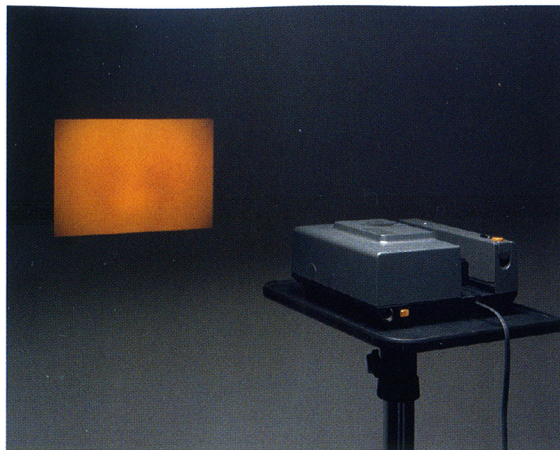
One origin of photography is, of course, light, and it is perhaps unsurprising that after completing *Photographic Works* Bonillas undertook a similar documentary catalogue of this aspect of the photographic process. In 1999, he was invited by artist Fernando Ortega to produce a piece for the alternative space Ortega ran out of his Mexico City home; the result was *Lighting*, also titled *Twenty Lightbulbs*



Iñaki Bonillas, *Lighting*, 1999, slide projection, dimensions variable. Two views.

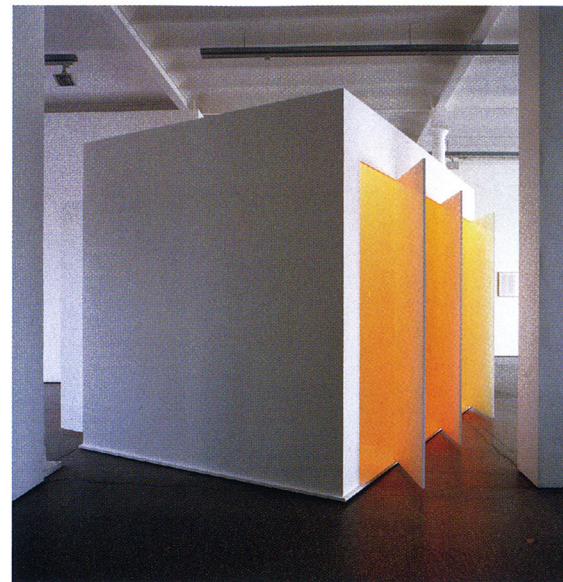
Documented Photographically, for which Bonillas used a screen to block the window of a large white room and proceeded to make photographs of different lightbulbs illuminating the space. These images were developed as slides that were then projected onto the screen, creating what the artist has called “a photographic ‘view’ of color and light.” Each bulb cast a glow of different intensity and hue, producing an array of cool and warm light that simultaneously represented previous moments and instantiated that variegated light in the present. *Light Rooms*, 2000/2003—a group of freestanding cells, each of which can hold a few people, and each illuminated by a different lightbulb—moved further toward an immaterial archive of artificial light. This work could be understood as a species of cameraless photography, and as a literalization of the medium’s origins in the camera lucida. But what stands out equally in both this and the earlier *Lighting* is the gesture of sundering “photographic” color and light from the outside world and even from any kind of trace or recording activity. Photography is implicitly positioned as something like a self-sufficient world unto itself, with its own perceptible reality and its own richness, even as it sheds much of its historical task of representation.

Yet when *Light Rooms* was exhibited in Brussels in 2003, it was accompanied by an installation in the gallery’s office that could not have seemed further from the abstract self-reflexivity that had thus



far defined Bonillas’s work: Placed on the library’s shelves were thirty albums from the archive of the artist’s grandfather, José R. Plaza, a highly prolific amateur photographer. This was the first version of what would become a multiyear exploration of this family legacy. The artist, who inherited the albums after his grandfather’s death in 2000, has explained his initial interest in this bequest: “I was more attracted by the precise arrangement of the collection: thirty identical black leather files, numbered and ordered chronologically, and placed on top of a wooden shelf.” It was, he said, reminiscent of Kawara’s work, presumably for both its mode of presentation and the sense of time’s accumulation within the pages of the albums. This modest installation is the hinge on which Bonillas’s more recent trajectory turns; it was at this point that he began, without renouncing his earlier experiments, to examine issues of narrative, biography, and self-presentation.

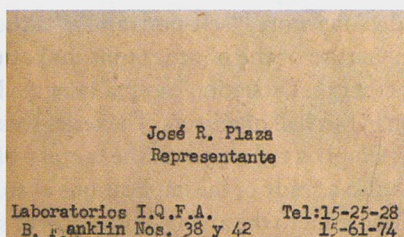
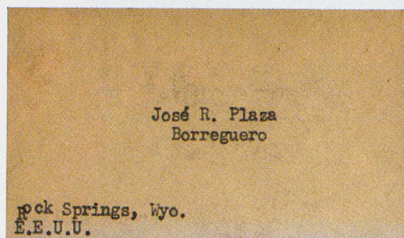
Bonillas, as heir to these albums, has subsequently subjected their contents to a range of operations, displaying a selection in the form of 630 slides illuminated on thirty light boxes (*Little History of Photography*, 2003); rephotographing only the vertical images (*Every Vertical Photograph from the J. R. Plaza Archive*, 2004); recording the notes found on the back of many photos (*J. R. Plaza Archive*, 2005). But the most remarkable of these projects are those that explore Plaza’s own self-fashioning in front of the camera. *A Presentation Card for J. R. Plaza*, 2007, gathers together a group of images in which Bonillas’s grandfather seems to imagine himself in various professions, and pairs them with homemade business cards, complete with imaginary addresses, that Plaza had typed for himself, on which he identifies these various personae: administrator, salesman, boss, model . . . With the simplest of props (a telephone and some papers, a large cutout ad for a brand of television sets, a union suit) or with just a pose (feet up on a desk: the manager at leisure), Plaza invented an alternate life,



Iñaki Bonillas, *Light Rooms*, 2000/2003, MDF and lightbulbs. Installation view, Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels, 2003. Photo: Philippe de Gobert.

a life lived for the camera—a life, we could almost say, lived within the photographic itself. To the business cards typed out by his grandfather, Bonillas added one more, “self-portraitist,” although the fictive nature of the photographs makes one wonder whether that vocation can really name Plaza’s position in this hall of mirrors. The series seems in the end not simply a reflection on the fantasy life of the self but also a study of the implications of submitting the self-portrait to the archival pressures of serialization, of multiplication and cataloguing—of a multiplicity summoned forth by the very process of photography.

One photograph included in *A Presentation Card for J. R. Plaza* shows him in cowboy garb, lying on the ground with one leg propped over the other, hat pulled down over his eyes and head resting on his gear; the accompanying card reads JOSÉ R. PLAZA / BORREGUERO (stock hand) and provides the series’ only address outside of Mexico: Rock Springs, Wyoming. Here there was some basis in actual events: In 1945, Plaza went north for a brief and disappointingly unpleasant stint as a ranch hand. Returning to Mexico, he had himself extensively photographed leading the life of which he had dreamed. In *The Shadow and the Flash*, 2007—its title drawn from a fantastical Jack London story concerning two childhood rivals competing to discover the secret of invisibility—Bonillas printed these photographs in negative, displayed them in small light boxes, and exhibited them with excerpts from the despairing diary Plaza kept during his time in Wyoming, which the artist had transcribed into typed text. When the series was first shown, the photographs were placed vertically on a column while the text panels were



In Iñaki Bonillas, we find two different approaches to invisibility: a literal escape across space to a life in the American West, and an escape into the image.

hung in a long horizontal line along the wall. Bonillas has spoken of the contrast of fantasy and reality here, but we might also read the installation as a reflection on the structural contrast of word and image, via a classic Saussurean schematic whereby the verticality of the pictures' installation speaks to their paradigmatic dimension—to the way they operate along an axis of substitution and equivalence, in which these enacted moments are endlessly repeatable and interchangeable—while the horizontality of the text enacts a syntagmatic dimension, in which the diegetic linkage of events relentlessly drives the narrative forward. The photographs are static, repetitive, almost ritualistic, whereas the diary is dynamic, although both are transcriptions—a fact emphasized by Bonillas in the negative printing of the photos and the conversion of handwritten to typed text. We find, as in the work's



Left: Iñaki Bonillas, *A Presentation Card for J. R. Plaza* (detail), 2007, black-and-white photographs and ink on paper mounted on paper, six parts, each 10 x 8". Above: Iñaki Bonillas, *The Return to the Origin #9*, 2010, still from a color video, 6 seconds.

namesake, two different approaches to invisibility: a literal escape across space to a life in the American West, and an escape into the image, a disappearing into the archetype of the cowboy.

Bonillas's task here is less one of restoring the lost grandfather than of inscribing him within a matrix of multiplication and reproduction. This logic is implicitly thematized in Bonillas's recent *Double Chiaroscuro*, 2008–10, which reworks a photograph of Plaza that already bears the traces of Bonillas's grandmother's previous gridding (in anticipation of transcribing it as a painting or watercolor). The artist subsequently subjects this image to a series of operations, based on its black-and-white gradations of shading, that obliterate the likeness while extending its existence in space and time. But it appears most clearly in a new body of work that turns from Plaza to Bonillas's father, who died when Bonillas was a young child. He was a bullfighter, and in "The Return to the Origin," 2010, Bonillas makes use of memorabilia he inherited from his father related to this career: collections of newspaper clippings, films of his father in the ring, recordings of him playing the guitar. In each case, the artist returns an end product—photos, film, newspaper, audio—to an "original" state from which further reproductions could be made. So the guitar recording is transcribed into sheet music, the film converted into strips of stills, the newspaper into a printing plate—so many matrices from which infinite copies might be drawn. The photographic negative, the guarantor of reproducibility, provides the model for this redemptive vision. Photography and biography conjoin in a project of returning to an origin that is never singular or unique but is itself a site of generative duplication—the archive not as a mausoleum for the obsolete, but as the potential space of reduplication. □

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