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A Hidden History of Photography For Screenshot Photographers

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Part 3: Fairy Screens and LCD Photograms by Eron Rauch

"William Henry Fox Talbot (Detail)" 1864 - John Moffat

In the second installment of this series I talked about how our understanding of screenshot photography tends to focus too narrowly on simulating cameras within video games. We unconsciously understand our characters as a nifty virtual tripod-and-DSLR camera combination to explore a world judged by its realism. Or we hope game developers include a good selection of simulated apertures, ISO, focus options, and color balance options in the photo mode camera. Even the criteria with which we judge our images are based on what 'real' photography has done—that is, photographic translations of things out in the expanse of the world—not made from the flickering patterns on a 2D screen.

"Articles of China" 1844 - William Henry Fox Talbot

But what if we've got our model backwards? What if photography been deeply invested in capturing and sharing the fleeting impressions seen on screens since its inception? Flipping back through my college textbooks to brush up for this series, I found a striking observation in an otherwise orthodox book, *Keepers of the Light*, which described the pre-history of photography in a rather curious manner:

"On his return to England in January of 1834, Talbot set to work to find a means to capture the 'fairy pictures, creations of the moment,' which passed so temptingly across the screen of the camera obscura."

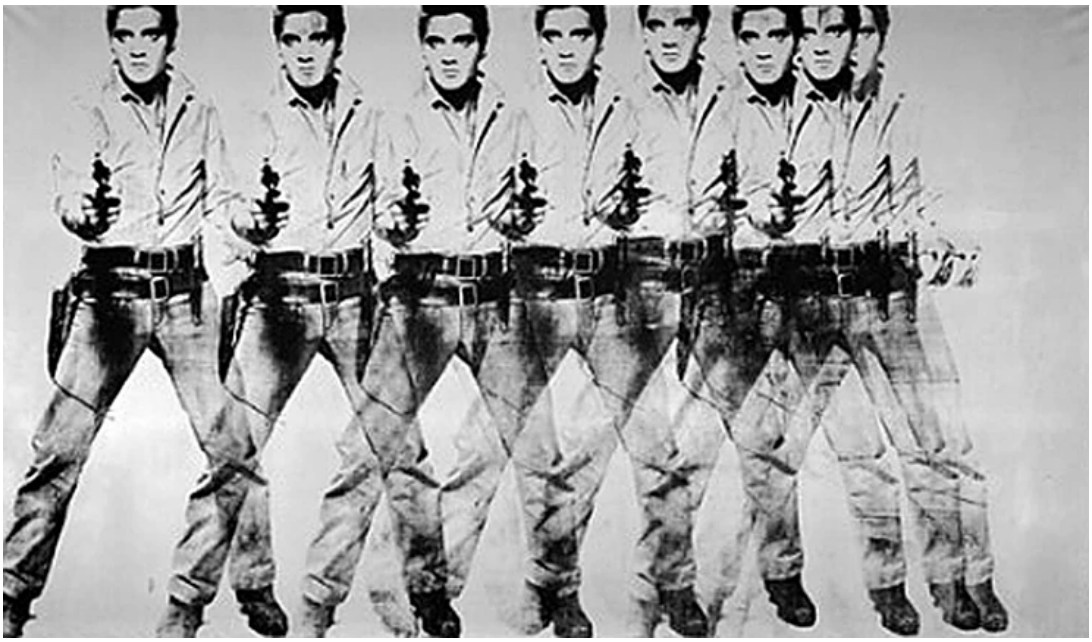
Sure, a camera obscura is an antiquated wood box and brass lens combination used as a drawing aid since the Italian Renaissance, not an HD monitor. But how might we expand our imagination of screenshot photography if we understood that the core impulse to share the flickering of our contemporary computer screens was same with William Henry Fox Talbot's camera obscura screen, just with different fairies?

Pillars of Eternity Inventory Screen, 2015

Indeed, if you look through the expanded history of photography, the recording of screens is surprising common. And why wouldn't it be? The decades following the invention of photography would see an explosion of screens, and their importance, from the grand glamor of movies, to the silver screen of the television, and eventually to computer displays and now mobile devices. Screens have been and still are a major part of our lives.

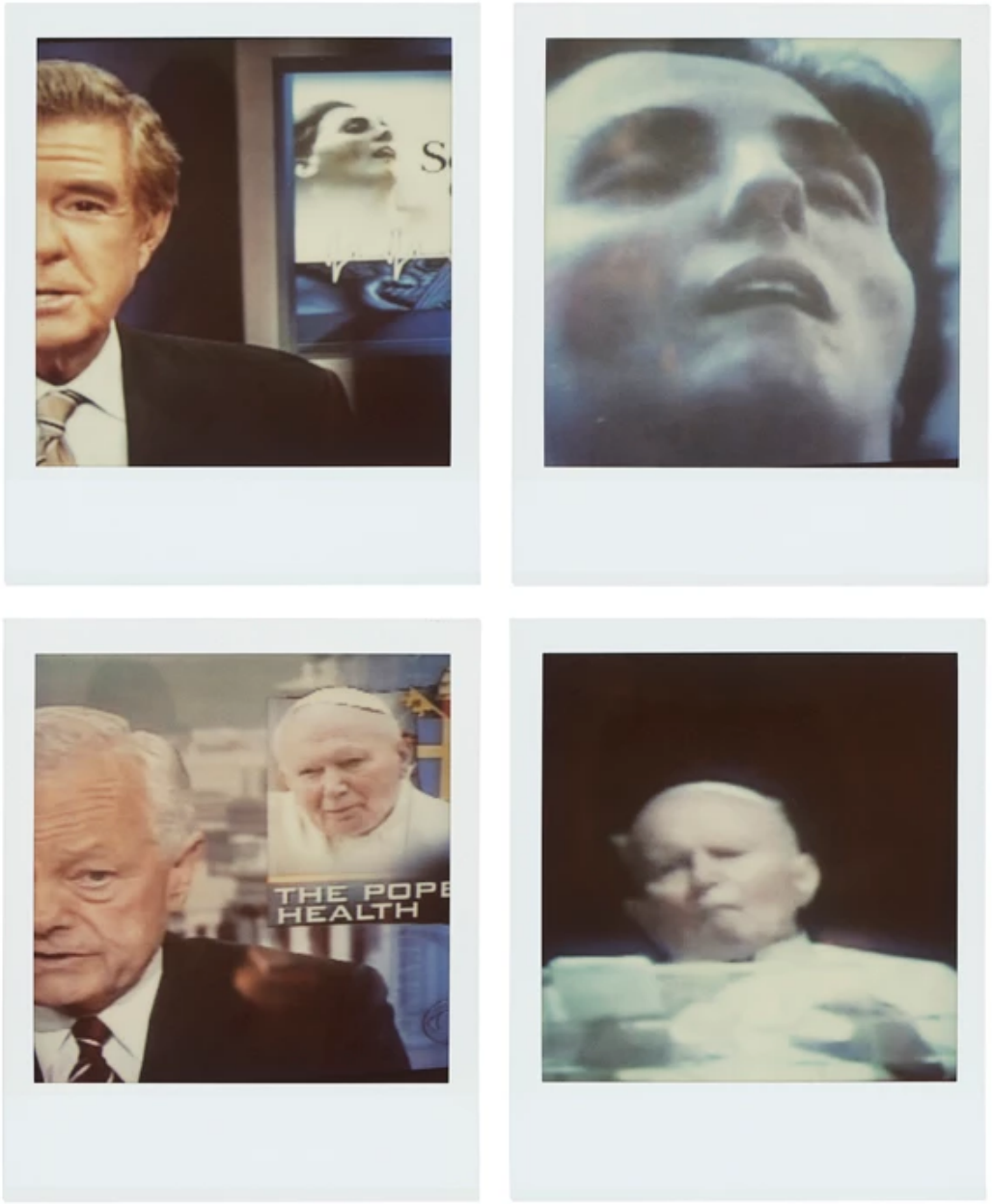
“Florida” 1963 - Lee Friedlander

For example, Lee Freelander, one of photography’s most legendary artists, regularly included television screens in his black and white photos that blurred the lines between fine art and documentary. Though these “Little Screens” might at first seem like an oddly banal choice of subject matter for work that graces the halls of many museums, it makes perfect sense given the massive impact of TV on America life in the 50s and 60s. A photography project about that period which didn’t include screens would be no more complete than one that avoided cars, or one from 2018 that didn’t include video games.



“Eight Elvises” 1963 - Andy Warhol

We typically don’t think of Andy Warhol as a photographer, but if you look at any show of his work, you’ll see used a surprising amount of photographic processes in his large-scale silk screen works. His focus was on the mythical land of media screens, especially movies, and their celebrity inhabitants. But this is the 1960s, not the 1860s, so of course the fairies Warhol wanted to share from his screens look like Elvis and Mao and Marylin instead of country manors and fine china.



"Terry Schiavo and the Pope John Paul" 2004-2005 - Catherine Opie

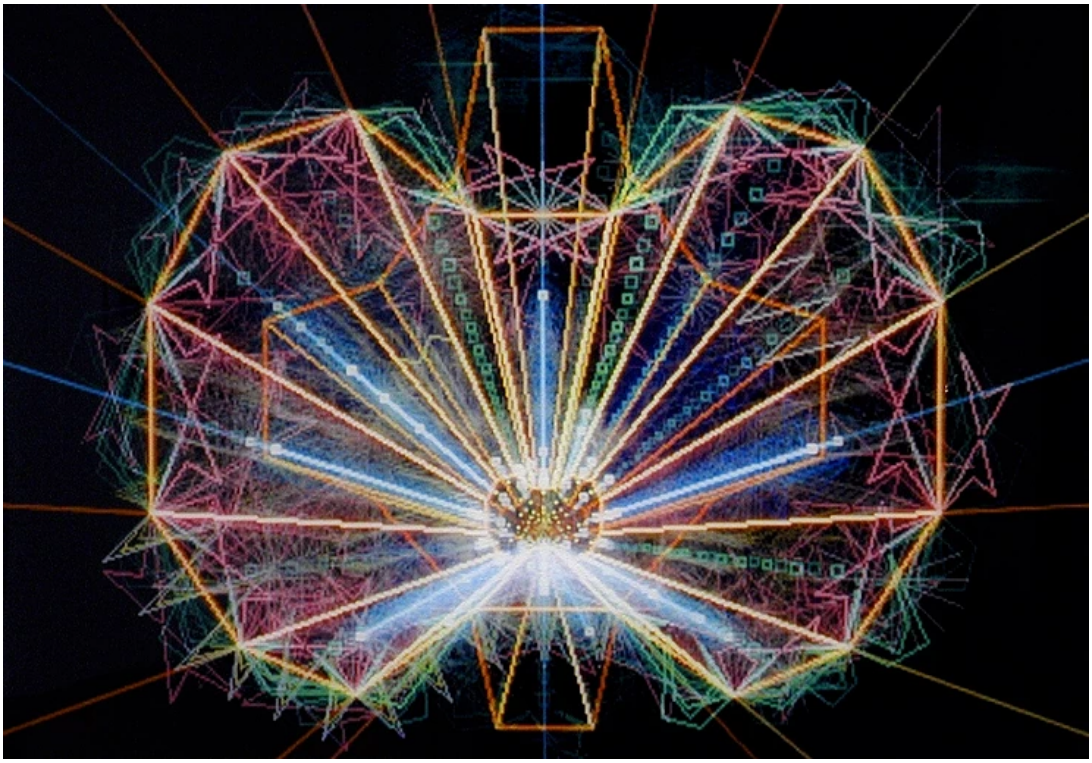
As you come up to the present, again and again you see photographers capturing fleeting fragments of their eras' screen culture as an important subject of their art. *Breaking News*, a recent major photography show at Getty Center in Los Angeles, featured dozens of artists who made art about how much media and screens are a major part of our visual life. Some of the images from this show were almost painfully direct and intimate, cutting away Freelander's wide-angle context to zoom in on the experience of the pale fire of the screen and how it has almost become something that lets us all see intimate moments as spectacle. Catherine Opie's "Close to Home" Polaroids particularly use photography to take these fraught images of public spectacle, almost too awkward or painful to hold, such as the above images of the Pope and Terry Schiavo.

"Bank Robbery" 1975-1976 - Masao Mochizuki

Breaking News also featured shots of screens that are much more formally radical—images that try to break the typical way we experience screen imagery so we can see it afresh. Masao Mochizuki's work is made up of closely printed grids of small photos culled from the duration a television show or movie. The final images have jarring blurs and gaps in the original narrative of the source material, but which merge into beautiful geometric patterns, each screen shot a scale in the hide of the phantasmagoric glowing beast.

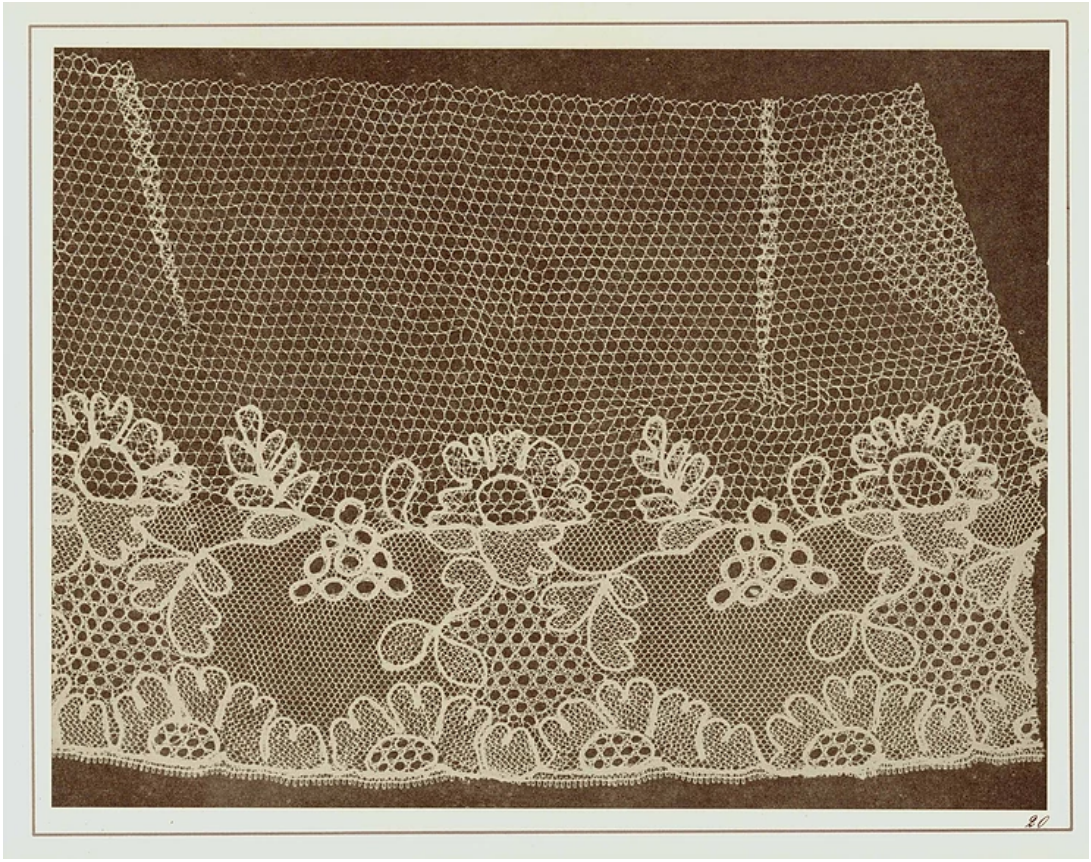
“Untitled” 1968-1969 - Donald R. Blumberg

Donald R. Blumberg’s “Television Abstracts” are even more wildly composed, with each piece being made of numerous similar photos from television screens overlaid and in different sizes spinning around on a black background. When I look at this work, I can’t help but think he’s trying to make images about the feeling of what it is like to sink into a fuzzy couch, watching those pixelated fairies racing past at the edge of your consciousness. Or to put it in a way that’s more relevant to video games, Mochizuki, Blumberg, and so many other artists are making photographs of screens that are trying to talk about flow state.



“Tempest 1” 2001 - Rosmarie Fiore

You can see this fleeting beauty especially in the work of Rosemarie Fiore, who makes large scale long-exposure photographs of classic arcade game screens in action. There are countless blurs, streaks, pixel clusters, and luminescent colors that accumulate into abstract patterns. The traces of these 8-bit fairies give us a whole new perspective on our relationship with screens and video games.



"Lace" 1844 - William Henry Fox Talbot

As he pushed past these early desires to share the images on his screen, and his research progressed, one of the main uses Talbot envisioned for photographic technology was to share exact details of objects for scientific study, especially plants, since he loved botany. As the Metropolitan Museum's website describes his earliest work:

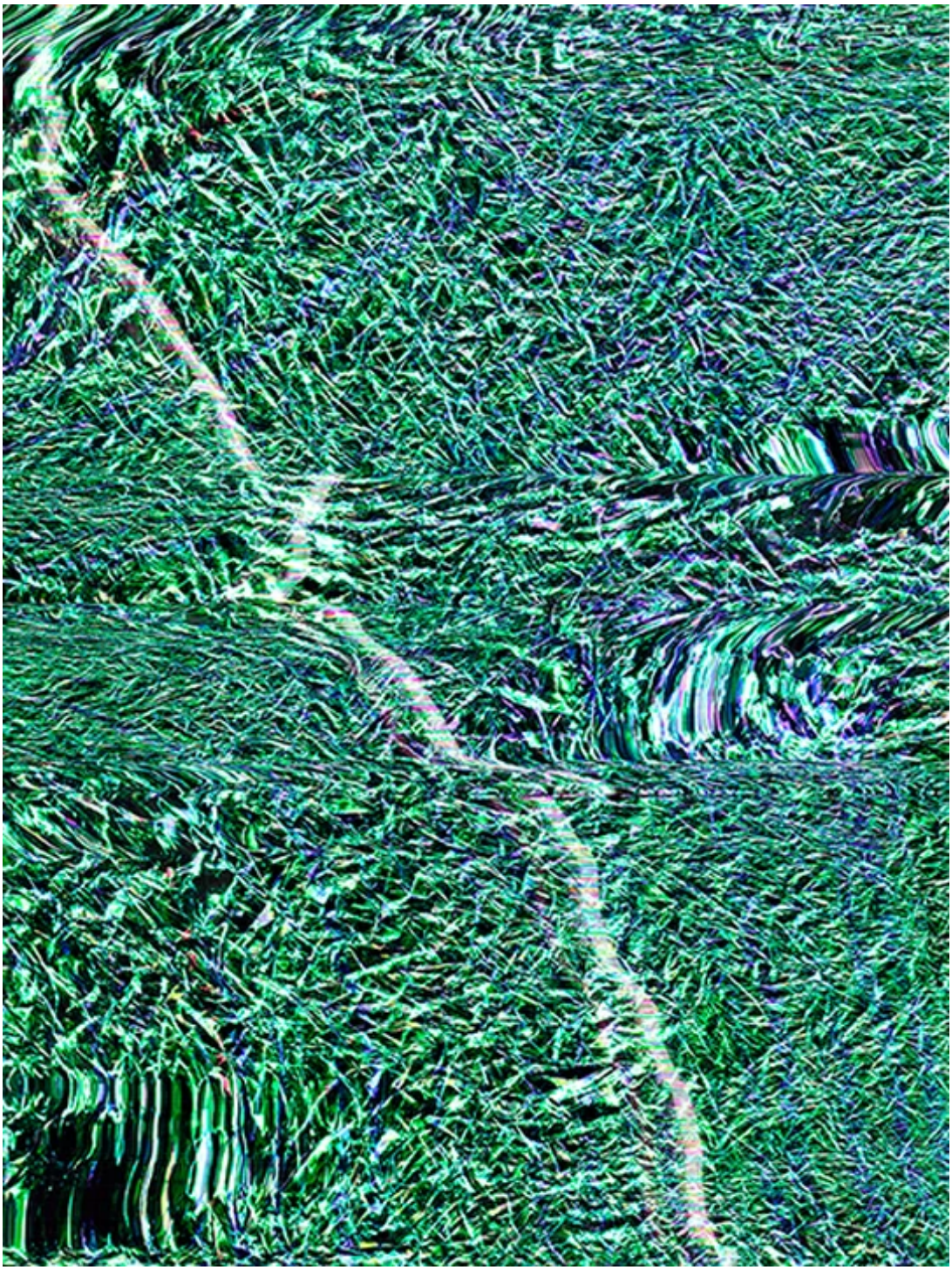
"Leaves, ferns, grasses, and other plants were often the subject of these early photogenic drawings, for Talbot was a serious and enthusiastic amateur botanist and he envisioned the accurate recording of such specimens to be among the important practical applications of his invention."

One of the first things most new photographers do in their introductory photo class is make one of the earliest kind of photography, a type of photography that doesn't include a camera. These are called photograms, and are made from placing objects directly on photo paper, exposing them with a quick flick of the light switch in the room, and then developing that photo paper to reveal inverted tracings of the shapes of the objects.

"Untitled (From Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions" 1843 - Anna Atkins

Some of the earliest photographic experiments were often photograms. In fact, the first published photography books wasn't even Talbot's work, but another well known botanist from England, Anna Atkins. She made an extensive catalog of British algae and sea plants in a blue-colored photographic process called cyanotype. Talbot's book of plant photograms came shortly after, and the work in both share a peculiar is a combination of two elements: their flatness, and their direct 1-to-1 ratio impression of the actual subject.

These humble but luminescent photograms from scientists like Atkins and Talbot were amazing to other botanists: it wasn't a drawing, a translation through someone's artistic rendering, it was someone saying, 'Here is an image of this specific real plant, I know its not complete compared to the living thing, but this still represents a real, albeit frozen moment of contact with the things itself, rich with subtle details that we can marvel at.' Though it might not seem obvious, what we do as screenshot photographers—taking impressions of specific arrangements of pixels on our screens—still has a lot in common with these early, direct photograms.



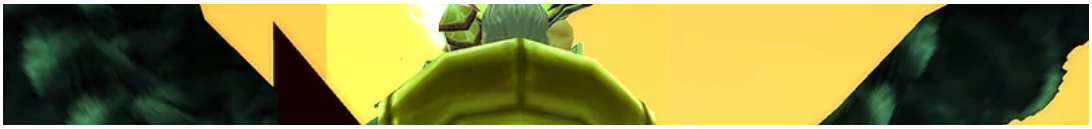
"Light Field 032" 2015 - Taisuke Koyama

With a photogram, the object is exposed directly pressed against the paper, and so you end up with a linear trace of the thing itself at 100% scale, with any opacity or transparency through the object responsible for rendering the final image. At the largest conceptual level, a photogram is simply an abstracted documentation of whatever light that was or wasn't landing on a piece of paper (or sensor) during an exposure without a lens refocusing that light. The work of Taisuke Koyama is something of an update of these wavering images of algae, but instead made from our current environment: glitched and broken scanners. Like a squished assortment of ferns, you have a recording of light and dark, a recording of specific forms as they are, albeit an electronic device.

In most popular screenshot and photo mode video games, there is an elaborate mathematical system that recreates the lens, which lets us mimic the optical quality of photography, which is usually what we pay the most attention too. But expand your perspective a bit and think about happens when you press F12 to make a screenshot: the jpeg you get when you make a screenshot is really a recording of direct 1:1 data of the luminosity of pixels that was assigned to your screen at that moment.

"Lawrence Welk Show" 2005 - Matthew Gamber

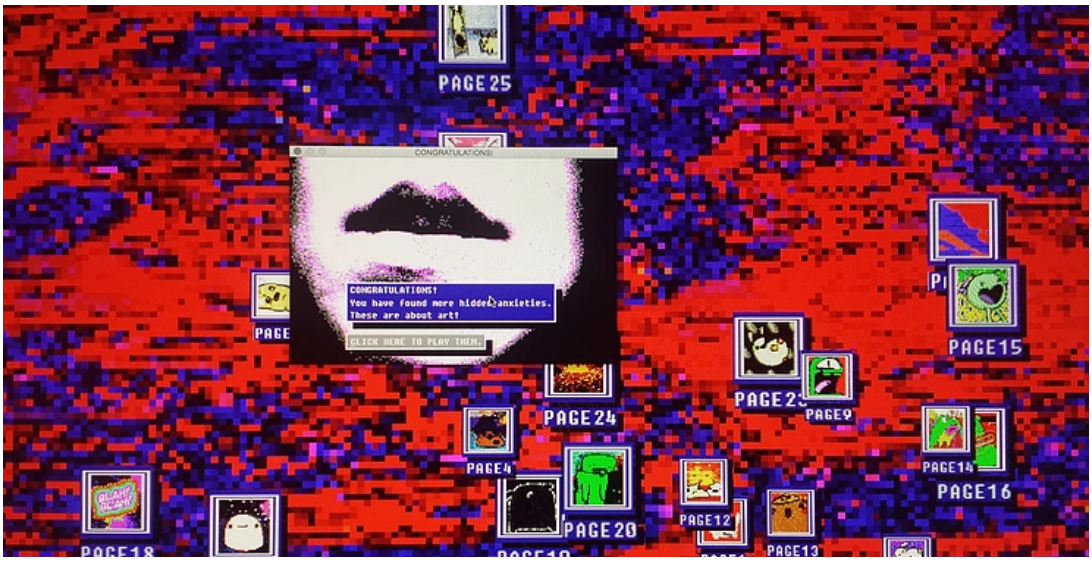
If you have a 1920 x 1080 pixel screen (without the addition of post-processing and post-rendering programs like Ansel) the screenshot you make is going to be an exact 1920 x 1080 pixel image with luminosity values assigned to your monitor, or to put it another 1:1 rendering of the patterns of tones and colors. In some important ways, you could say screenshots are video game photograms! This conceptual idea might seem really esoteric, but I've found it quite practical. For other example, look at the work of Matthew Gamber, who like Robert Heineken before him, is pushing photographic paper against a television screen to make direct photograms. They break us free of having to understand good photography as sharp and having a good sense of perspective. They wallow in mystery and shadow and flatness.



“Untitled (Glitchscapes 3)” 2006-2010 - Eron Rauch

One good example that highlights how screenshots have a connection to photograms is one of the most unique subjects we as screenshot photographers are confronted with: glitches. In the more extreme examples from my “Glitchscapes” series, what makes these screenshots of mis-rendered *World of Warcraft* landscapes interesting to me as an artistic subject has more in common with the flatness and 1-to-1 presentation of photograms than the criteria of judging traditional perspective-based photography. Similarly, this idea connects screenshots into a richer context with tis neighbors, such as a game in windowed mode within the broader expanse of a computer desktop, the landscape and the chat log and the desktop image all mixing together.

Understanding that the history of photography has always included screens and that screenshot photography has a lot in common with the long lineage of photograms really helps me expand my idea of what screenshot photography can be. Right now, AAA video games dominate the screenshot community, with their astoundingly sophisticated simulated worlds and increasingly simulated cameras. But think about how many other kinds of video games that we love that we could make images with.



Everything is going to be OK, 2017 - Nathalie Lawhead

This hidden history, a history of the fairies dancing behind screens, and of photograms, might help us understand what it might mean to make screenshot photography in games that aren't photorealistic, don't have 3D perspective, or otherwise stray from our assumptions about human/camera vision. Video games are especially rich for this exploration, since we have a long history of text games, 8-bit games, arcade cabinets, side-scrollers, shooters, mobile games, or even fascinating projects that are a recreation of a computer desktop themselves, such as *Everything is going to be OK* or *Cibele*!

Thinking of the screenshot as the photo paper in the photogram sandwich, and the LCD array as the subject, creates whole new ways of exploring what a screenshot can be, and opens us up to so many more video games to use as subjects, challenges us to develop new techniques to explore ideas like flow, and encourage us to find our unique criteria for judging successful and beautiful screenshots.

In the next installment, we hop the channel and head to France to check in with the dashing entertainer extraordinaire, and passionate set painter, Louis Daguerre, and spend some time thinking about what it means to take pictures of places that don't really e

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