

Iñaki Domingo (ID): When we started the conversation that led to this interview, I proposed that you face it in a fresh and organic way, like some kind of friendly user's manual that could help people to easily understand what AUTOMAGIC is and how it works. Are you still OK with this?

Anouk Kruithof (AK): Yes, sure. AUTOMAGIC is not meant to be properly understood, but yes of course, let's give it a try. AUTOMAGIC started out with a massive amount of photos, thousands that I took between 2003 and 2015 with small digital cameras which later were replaced with successive versions of iPhones. Rapidly, this enormous archive of images grew and developed quite playfully. But it was a long process to arrive at the moment to start thinking that this archive could turn into a book project. In the first, let's say 8 years, this was never an idea. But in 2011, I started making a first selection by looking at all those images and questioning them in their relation to the others.

ID: OK, so let's start from the beginning. Could you please explain to me why you decided to use this title for the book?

AK: The title of this book is a blend of automatic and magic. It derives from the principle (often called Clarke's third law) that any sufficiently advanced technology is being perceived as magic. AUTOMAGIC refers to the unexplainable behavior of something.

ID: I guess that when you began to produce images for this archive you were mostly following your intuition to see where this led you. Also, looking at your photographs, I feel that you really enjoy being an image maker, even if it is just for your own pleasure.

AK: Yes you're right, for my own pleasure. I would say it's a natural habit ingrained in me. I am always seeing things around me and photographing them, kind of like sculpting in the world out there. The images are not snapshots, they are more playful, registered moments. Sometimes what I photograph is more organic, while other times it is more deliberately constructed. Actually, I did not put any value on this growing archive of images up until I had enough images that it felt legitimate to make a new

book out of. This wasn't the case until April 2011, but I started producing these images many years earlier, when I was still studying at the art academy, around 2002. What I think is a bit strange in this process is the fact that I did not consider this archive becoming a serious work such as a book at all, but I kept on collecting and organizing the images as a proper archive on my hard drives. I don't see it as a minor work, next to my more concept-based practice. It's just that occasionally taking images in the real world or constructing something playfully and then documenting this, I didn't really consider it as something to become an artwork in the first place. You know? The total result, those thousands of images I took and the time over which I made those photos and then the years after rethinking and reworking them has now formed a valuable body of work for me.

ID: And when you started thinking about the possibility of turning this archive into a book, was it then?

AK: Yes, around April, 2011, AUTOMAGIC was my studio full of prints of these images on the walls. The only thing I knew was that I didn't want this book to have a clear narrative, because it exists out of a very wide collection of images made everywhere that I travelled to or lived in. The whole point was the idea of mixing an enormous, mostly travel photo archive without the obvious organizing based solely upon chronology for example. I took the freedom to mix up all origins of the images in one big pot and stir it around for years. Looking at them, thinking about them, de-contextualizing, interpreting and reworking them into the nine different image chapters which together with this one textbook now form the ten separate books which constitute AUTOMAGIC. It is an attempt at erasing geographical locations and borders and to unify people. I like to see the book as a holistic idea. Maybe pretentious? Maybe impossible? That's fine. It's about ideas.

ID: And how did you manage to turn this initial intuitive process of image making into the rich and complex visual essay your audience is looking at in this very moment?

AK: I think that it is because I took a long time to develop this book. It took me almost five years to arrive here. I see photography as a starting point of infinite possibilities and have always thought about photography in this way. AUTOMAGIC is an exploration and demonstration, which represents a transformed, revisited, re-conceptualized image archive by means of editing and various ways of manipulating the images, which you can see as treatments manifested in different ways in each book.

ID: In this moment where everyone is hysterically posting images on social networks as soon as they produce them, why did you decide not to follow this strategy and instead make a physical work out of it?

AK: There is a lot of research about how taking photos changes our perspective in memory. We're outsourcing our memory to the cards in our cameras and our smart phones. The interruption of attention when taking a picture can also hinder our future retrospection. I am guilty of those thoughts by always making images. My memories might not be rooted in my mind as actual memories of events, but unreal memories created by taking photos, looking at them, thinking about them and reworking them. It took me a long time to see the value this book would have in comparison to just posting these images on our mediated online landscapes (social networks) and be satisfied with that. This book overpasses that ethereal element of picture posting. Specifically this archive, together with my recontextualization of it, needs to transform into the physical object that it became.

ID: But this is not the first time you worked with an archive, right?

AK: I made a few other projects in which my starting point was an archive, but the images were created by someone else: the vernacular photos of Brad Feuerhelm in my book THE BUNGALOW, and more recently with #EVIDENCE, a project based on a screenshot archive of the Instagram accounts of various American organizations. I often start with a source, a group of images, and then develop this in various ways into a book, a set of sculptures or an installation. With my personal image archive this

happens as well in the transformation of it into AUTOMAGIC. It's maybe the most personal work that I have ever made.

ID: Hey, Anouk, why don't you explain to me in a few words what this book is about? As if I did not already know anything about it.

AK: AUTOMAGIC exists as 10 separate books, which I see as individual chapters of one visual essay, which is the whole AUTOMAGIC object together. Every chapter brings you into another world and also has a different treatment (image manipulation) in relation to the narrative or subject matter of that chapter. AUTOMAGIC shows the sheer infinity of possibilities that the medium of photography as a vehicle of resourcefulness provides when the computer and human mind become processors of ways to look at our world. But it's also about my encounters and engagement with and projection onto the real world. It's a transformed image archive of photos arising out of my movements, engagements and statements in this world. I like to play. Conscious and unconscious. Making those kinds of images to me is a way to escape reality and digest my curiosities, to shape ideas and give interpretations of what I encounter and what touches and challenges me out there. I should add I enjoy collaborating with people and most of the individuals involved in the photos that you find in AUTOMAGIC are strangers who I asked to pose for me or to collaborate with me for the more staged situations depicted in the photos. But they can also be neighbors, acquaintances, friends, roommates or lovers. I hope to have injected my adventure and my energy, because making photos in this way means ultimate freedom and I wish for everyone involved in the photos and for everyone who is going to look at this book now exactly the same. Freedom is the highest value. With this thought in mind, I wish AUTOMAGIC to be open for people to create their own stories. It's not me who tells one story with AUTOMAGIC and it's not me who's going to tell in words what this huge visual essay is about. Because after you have a look at AUTOMAGIC, you will decide what it is about for you. Also, an image archive created over so many years, that is revisited so often feels like as if it is somewhat continuously reinterpreted and therefore not fixed in any meaning.

ID: A thought just came to mind while you were talking. I don't know if you might agree. As the typology of the archive you are describing is ever growing, like some kind of lifetime project, why do you feel now is the moment to approach it in this very way? And at the same time, how do you feel about the idea of having the book in your hands but knowing that the archive will keep on growing?

AK: This collection out of which the AUTOMAGIC archive exists now has enough “body”, which wasn't possible in 2007, for example. I also see how complex it is to make this book. It's a struggle because the AUTOMAGIC archive keeps growing so every time I revisited it over the last couple of years, I felt that there was already new stuff, which I had to blend in or I felt like I forgot something. I have to be very precise with myself. This project got so overwhelming. I turn crazy from it quite often when I work on it, so this pressure made me have to make the moment become true a book, an outcome.

ID: At some point you mentioned that you spent a lot of time in front of your images working with them, and creating new images out of this process. I would like to know more about this.

AK: Yes, that's correct because AUTOMAGIC is not a book where straight photos are edited and placed in order on the pages. For every chapter I created an action, which I see as image treatment to work with those images, in order to reinforce what I need to express with them. I know those treatments might be more logically done with appropriation rather than working with my own images, but now I am looking to do something more personal.

ID: I'm more used to seeing artists manipulating or transforming images from an appropriated archive, but in your case you are doing it with your own personal images. Can you explain this decision?

AK: It is fundamentally different to make a book out of your own images versus with a collection of found imagery. I know the difference very well, because in my practice I do both things. I think the way I freely use or abuse my own photos in this book is in this time completely related to appropriation, that's why I like to place emphasis on this fact that the book does not contain any appropriated imagery. Every photographic situation depicted in those photos, I bodily was the human engine of it. The effort of taking certain photos out there in the real world is a completely different process than searching for and collecting photos in markets or on EBay or dragging photos from the web, magazines or old books. Somehow I feel at this particular moment it's necessary again to say something about this, since we as humans become more and more digitally connected with each other using our devices and social media tools. Also, the way we look at and experience nature in different places in this world is often through the images on our screens. Now that appropriation is somewhat tired out, human connection through photography in the outside world starts to mean something again. The effort it takes to ask people on the street to collaborate for photos or to build situations with objects to photograph, to dive and be busy with materials underwater while holding buoyancy and using a technical device is difficult and therefore interesting, adventurous and fun. I hope this book shows this joy and engagement I have in being out there, working in the real world.

ID: As this has been a long process for you, the visual language and working methods that you have used within this project evolved along the years, as the archive kept on growing. Is that correct?

AK: Yes, my photographic language has evolved over the 12 years I gathered the photos out of which AUTOMAGIC exists, but this is quite invisible in the book, because all imagery is deliberately mixed and then divided into those chapters with different treatments with which I reinforced this new final photographic *AUTOMAGIC* language. A specific element for example is that I often isolate the subject of the photograph from its surrounding. I make decisions on where I want to place the viewer's attention and obscure the rest, which is less relevant to me for what I want the image to show the

viewer. The methods for doing this could be staging, as in rearranging the real world, or using a backdrop in the studio, making analogue cut-outs and re-photographing them or layering images in Photoshop and either making screenshots of them or photographing the computerscreen with my iPhone. I don't believe a single photograph has the possibility to conceive the world or any subject in all its layers, therefore I use this isolation method for my images, but then by combining them on pages, spreads, whole books or photo installations I manage to achieve this wholesome expression.

ID: Hey, why don't you let me know a bit more about the content of the books, and what kind of connections exist between them?

AK: The books together form the word A-U-T-O-M-A-G-I-C and by those letters, which you can see as titles for each booklet, they are automagically connected. So maybe it makes sense to talk a bit about each one?

ID: The first book A (blue) seems to be devoted to the water world. In what ways are you connected with this element and why did you decide to begin AUTOMAGIC with it?

AK: The underwater world is the opening of AUTOMAGIC because I have always had a very strong relationship with water. Water to me is openness, so that's why this book has a flowing beginning. I love the feeling of being very light and floating under the water. The underwater world is very mysterious, until the moment you engage with it. For example, when you start to swim, snorkel or scuba dive, you don't know. I am addicted to this world because of the scariness, wonder and unexpectedness. When you dive you never know what you will encounter and all is up for chance. It's a world that you can't control. Also it's extremely challenging in the working process to control a camera, a flash, hold buoyancy and at the same time, alter an object, frame and press a button and mind your breathing. It's difficult. Also the risk of drowning is thrilling and therefore in this chapter you have some photos of people struggling against the water surface, which emphasizes those feelings. Generally I aim for making work that flows

like water. Maybe this states the theme of this book, my connection with that mysterious world: the underwater world.

ID: The next one (book U) seems to be a tribute to portraiture, as it's full of overlaid portraits of people from all over. But at the same time you also include some mysterious pages with strips of images, as if you want to stress the importance of the material that you used to print these images. Could you tell me more about this?

AK: I have always been deeply attracted to observing people and this led me to make lots of photographic portraits. In this chapter you see portraits taken all over the world. I randomly printed them in different sizes on US letter pages with a laser printer and then I took the prints and placed them back in the drawer of the printer and randomly printed photos on top of them. I photographed the fronts and the backs of those laser prints. The backs of those prints show the edges of the picture frame. The absence of photographic portraits, like empty souls, which I placed in a steady rhythm, alternated with the fronts. Like breathing in and out. Continuous. Page after page. The fronts are quite rich in their layered information. There is a lot to discover. If you look at those newly created images, you can actually see different visual information that becomes richer each time that you look at it. The new photos show gatherings of a variety of different people. Something of the idea of impossible meetings. Poetic merging. Human blending.

ID: Nature is the subject of the book that comes right after (book T), but we see a very particular kind of nature here, like a digitally reinterpreted version of it. I would like to know why you decided to treat these images this way?

AK: Looking at my pictures of nature made me very disappointed, you know. All of them were very flat and it completely frustrated me. My intense experiences of being in this magnificent nature that I somehow had been a part of did not show through in any of my photos. This disappointment caused me to mount two different nature photos and layer them both in 50% opacity on top of each other in Photoshop and after I photographed

my computer screen with my iPhone and its flash. The experience of nature for human beings is impossible to translate in photos. Even the best high definition image still shows the surface of something, which is far from the actual experience of being in nature. The problem lies within the depicting of the human-nature relationship. There needs to be way more magic to it. Like when one spends a long enough time in it, nature becomes meditative. Now it's more necessary than ever for people to keep their connection with nature. The threat of global warming, the normality of eating more processed food. We're losing knowledge of what we eat, where food comes from, how it grows... We're more and more urban, city driven creatures, producing and consuming. We are stimulated by our growing digital online existence and as a result more distanced from our own nature. My book shows this conflict. On one hand the new, layered photos are quite visually psychedelic, they feel more like being high on nature. They show the magic of this world, which is rooted in its nature. On the other hand, the photos of this book are clearly photos taken of the layered images on the computer screen, which shows this hard barrier in between us, almost digitalized people and our further and further growing disconnection with nature.

ID: All the books together create a harmonized symphony but I feel there is an especially strong connection between the two black and white books: O and G. This also seems to be the case with books M and A (green). Am I right?

AK: Yes you're right. These two pairs of books are both diptychs. They are related to each other, you could see those two books as "a" and "b". I decided to separate those bigger chapters into two separate booklets, because I want all the booklets to be light enough to engage with them in a relaxed way. When holding them in your hands, it feels light, effortless. That's also why AUTOMAGIC exists as nine different image booklets, rather than one enormous volume, where it would be nearly impossible to engage with due to the overall weight and amount of pages. As well, I thought it would be better to have the possibility, over some days in the evening for example, just to look at this book and then an other one on another night. You know, like when you read a volume of short stories. This is related to our present time, where most people have less

concentration to read full articles, to complete a book in a week or to watch a video longer than 1.5 minutes until the end. I don't want to be negative about this modern dilemma of focus and time. It is more that I observe and experience it and then act upon it by taking it into consideration when I bring out a work myself.

ID: There is a strong sense of the human being's relationship to technology in these two books. But strangely enough the images that you include are black and white and the way that you created the collages seems to be quite crafty. Why did you decide upon this particular treatment?

AK: In those two black and white booklets you see a mix of straight photos, which are sometimes layered on top of each other as well as quite a lot of analogue photomontages, which I re-photographed. Although in AUTOMAGIC you find a lot of image manipulation, I actually never digitally construct an image out of several loose entities in Photoshop. Here, I think you hit the nail on the head. My visual language in this chapter is far from the technologized, almost post-human life we're arriving at right now. This has to do more with an atmosphere that I want to create, which reflects my thoughts. The subject matter in those black and white books starts off as fluid, going off in all directions, like an octopus' arms. Smoothly, they undertake individual itineraries but keep their balance at the same time. Open windows. Broken windows. There are some wooden blocks of triangular shapes that fit perfectly together. These blocks were actually used as mental testing objects at the main inspection station for immigrants arriving in the United States of America at the end of the 19th century. There is a wall with a hole to climb through. Borders are not permanent. Variable realities. Everything is interrelated. I photographed my former roommate every morning with my iPhone. I loved how the texture of the cream he applied on his face looked different everyday. Like some evolutionary face painting. I thought the cream was facial bleach until I realized it was regular facial cleaner and it made me think how prejudiced I was. I am fascinated by the relationship between humans and technology. This you can see in my search for and creation of images where the mental state of someone is manifested and where technical devices such as surveillance cameras, antennas, phones, satellites,

remote controls, cameras and other recording devices are interwoven with elements of the human body or sometimes someone's face. Pictures of people layered so they become more sculptural. Messed up into another kind of post-human.

ID: In book G you focus your attention on the contemporary way of living. This book is full of excess in all possible ways. What did you want to symbolize with these images? Ah! And one more thing keeps intriguing me. All of sudden, there is a moment in the middle of this black and white language where a color section appears. I would like to know why you decided to do this.

AK: In book G I dedicated a whole part toward *the escalator of excess*. Escaping in conflict with liberation. Screaming, dancing, loving. Rolling around on floors and forgetting everything. And yes, out of the blue, I placed 16 color pages as a contrast. Some kind of color bomb. What you see are photos of a sculpture made out of dripped candles, which I placed against gravity in a horizontal way as if they are melting over the spreads of the book. People light a candle for death, the deceased and loved ones. This enormous candle sculpture was created over 40 years by the lighting of a fresh candle each day. The images of this ever changing colored candle sculpture I symbolize in the way I use them as a break in the black and white chapter, a moment of higher spiritual energy. Always dripping. Afterwards you see only people, who are almost floating on the pages as if they are in an elevated state of mind. I took some photos of people sleeping in the public domain, I know it's unethical, but I had to make those out of jealousy. I can't control myself watching people who fell asleep in, to me, impossible positions and situations. That is because this is my biggest dream; to be able to sleep anywhere, or any place or any moment. The end is about insomnia. I tried to visualize this peculiar mental state, when you're hanging between being awake and where you almost hit sleep, the place where subconscious can do its work, but can't yet. This feels like you're fading out and that is what you see on those last pages of this chapter.

ID: Books M and A (- green) are the second case where they work together as a diptych and they are full of color images. It looks to me like you created some kind of color hue that goes from warmer to colder colors. Is this the case? Also, looking through your previous other works, one notices that your relation to color is essential to your artistic practice. Could you please elaborate on this?

AK: Yes, book M and book A - green are also related to each other. They both exist mostly out of straight color photos, even if sometimes those color photos are layered on top of each other. I filter life through color. I hope my maneuvers while making the photos is reflected in my broad and vibrant color palette. I want it brimming with strong mental qualities, often with indeterminate hues. I tend to manipulate, filter and order with color in ways that might seem more painterly. It's inherent in me to juggle with color's distinctive soul. For example, one of my previous books, *Happy Birthday to You*, is printed on dirty mintgreen colored paper, because that is the color I saw on most of the walls and in the isolation cells of the mental institution where I was doing the project. This color is supposed to have a calming effect on patients, just like medicine, although I think it might just be a placebo effect. So, in this case, the specific color adds something special to the project's content. In *Becoming Blue*, I used blue because of its art historical and psychological meaning. Sometimes, I deliberately remove color. The combination of black and white is a statement in itself. As colors can add something to the meaning of an image or strong mental visual impact, they can also distract from the subject matter. Removing color in digital photography is a clear expression of this idea. As a scavenger I find calm. As you can see in some of the photos in this chapter, I made arrangements out of the continuously growing amount of un-biodegradable plastic lying around. I know it does not change things a millimeter, but it led to some good conversations. Bellies full of plastic. Swirling seas of waste. Ecosystems destroyed. I always collect washed up plastic when I wander on the beach. Organizing things based on color creates visual meditation. I think this world we live in is chaos and we are trying to cope with this chaos by molding it into balance in a variety of ways. We are all overwhelmed with information. Ordering things on color somehow has a brain calming effect to it. Because a minimal effort is required to interpolate the visual stimuli and

since our brain likes efficiency, it gives a calming effect. Personally, I am often overwhelmed with information and also with photographic material. Organizing on color has a meditative effect on me and I hope that I translate this in my work, on to the viewer.

ID: In book I the topic is destruction and instability and you decided to show quite old images of yourself crying juxtaposed with others from the aftermath of a recent hurricane. The idea of human collapse comes to mind and it goes from a personal approach to a general one, as if the book is pointing toward some kind of ending.

AK: Yes, there are two series in this book, which are treated in a similar way. A series of pathetic self portraits, where I am crying which I made back in 2006. Insomniac, burned out and depressed. At the time I started taking those pictures, it felt like an emotional escapade. I made these pictures and by looking at them on the screen of my camera I saw this horrible face of myself which looked so uber-dramatic that it made me laugh, even for a short moment. It worked like a mini self-made medication, you know? So that's why I kept on doing this for days, weeks, months. I combined those portraits with photos that I took while I was volunteering for a hurricane aftermath clean-up. While I was working and helping I also took some "disaster tourism pics" of the collapsed buildings and the chaos on the streets. Later in the studio I projected the photos on an unstable, light, cardboard construction that I built. This image treatment portrayed the element of general instability and also abstracted the images. A similar approach is applied to the portraits, which makes them even more absurd and funny to me. These are memories as well, which need to be relativized. And that's what this is, the twisted faces. The image treatment makes this visual story more open and wider in the general meaning, which is about human emotional instability in correlation to the physical world falling apart.

ID: In this last book, book C, color is again soft and very present but the subject you are talking about is maybe a bit creepy and apocalyptic that in a way reinforces this idea of

an end that was present in the previous book. On top of that, there is one black spread in the book as well. Do you follow this assumption?

AK: This book is the end of AUTOMAGIC. This book exists out of re-photographed analogue photomontages of mausolea and images of color smoke bombs in abstract architectural settings. Together they form a choreography, where the smoke embraces the architectural elements in the pictures and is somewhat entangled with the mausolea. Mausolea are freestanding constructed monuments enclosing the interment space of a burial chamber of the dead. I see what you mean with creepy, basically I made part of the photos out of which this chapter exists in different graveyards. This book shows in my opinion how misleading life can be. Everything can look colorful in the figurative meaning of this word and all of a sudden, everything can be over. The combination of the images of mausolea and the smoke bombs expresses a fictional ritual of spiritual exit.

ID: Thanks for your answers, they were really helpful to understanding the multiple layers out of which AUTOMAGIC exists. Let me ask you one more thing. How and when did you decide the final form of this book? I mean, what role did the design part play in the final outcome and how much you were involved in the decision making? For example, I would like to know why you decided to present it through separate booklets inside a box instead of one single volume.

AK: I created the design-concept of this book because to me this is part of artist-book making, to think about design as well. But on the final design I worked together with Piera Wolf and I asked the designer and my friend Christof Nüssli for advice. Those 10 separate monochrome booklets relate to the colored labels that you give to the folders on a computer. Before AUTOMAGIC was made, this former AUTOMAGIC digital image-archive was always just chilling on my hard drive and the whole idea this archive could turn into a work seemed to me as quite abstract. If I did not click on the folders for a year, I did not encounter any of the image-stories which were hidden inside. AUTOMAGIC manifests this idea into this physical book-object. If you leave all the

monochrome books in the plexiglass case, it is an abstract sculpture. But once you take out the books and start to browse through them, you feel the different papers, you see and imagine the various visual short stories. The fun, the fuel. The visuals of the nine books form this very elaborate and just AUTOMAGIC experience.

ID: Finally, I would also like to know if you think of the AUTOMAGIC Archive also as photo installation, or do you prefer to keep it just as a book project?

AK: The transformation of this artist-book into a space with different rooms or created spaces with an architectural construction into an exhibition could be interesting, yes. I myself would not push for this though. I have to say that for now, this quite complex and layered artist-book is the only focus for me, but once I have this object in my hands, I am sure I can open my mind for possible translations towards the space. From the book to the physical space... sounds good! I have made more artist-books before, where I never aimed for exhibitions actually, but in this case of AUTOMAGIC I do like the idea of a translation as much as I can also be satisfied with just this book as a result, so we'll see, we'll see...

ID: Ok, Anouk, thanks for your time and thoughts. Congratulations on this fantastic and very rare gem that is your book. I wish you best of luck with it.

AK: Yeah! Iñaki, finally we arrived to an end here, thank you very much for helping me to explain my thoughts and ideas which are translated in this book. I hope that the readers of this text enjoy it as much as I enjoyed this interview process!