"I was obsessed with this punk band, Fugazi, in high school…" John Houck raises his eyebrows at me for emphasis. I have little to no understanding of any sort of musical canon, but the conversation so far and Houck's charismatic inflection insinuate more good stuff is coming my way, so I widen my eyes knowingly and make an "mmm" noise. "And what they said is that at some point they realized they were playing their amps as much as their guitars."

I'd been pressing John on the complicated relationship between his work and "photography" intermittently throughout our conversation. How did he feel about cameras? That sort of thing. Fugazi's equal interest in the amp and the guitar is suitably analogous, Houck explains, to his own equal interest in the printer and the camera. We are at Max Wigram Gallery in front of one of Houck's large prints from his *Aggregates* series, part of his new show "ij". Houck was educated as a photographer and speaks fondly of photographing LA on large-format film, New Topographic style, during his years as a student. In recent years, though, his experiences of technology, his work as a software programmer, and his interest in the sort of allegorical quality of technology's inclination towards repetition have moved his practice much closer to the fringes of photography.

So far, for his *Aggregates* series, Houck has produced abstract photographic inkjet prints. The images, the result of varied experimentation with self-programmed software, would otherwise be considered "digital art". However, Houck rigorously lights and rephotographs the pixelated compositions his software produces, and exhibits the resulting photographs. The software Houck has developed allows him to input a given number of colors (colors he carefully selects from the hexadecimal color matrix) and a given grid size (e.g., 2×2, 3×3, etc.). The software then produces every grid combination of the given colors and arranges them methodically into an

index sheet. The printed index sheets are then creased, lit and photographed before being folded, lit and photographed again. Sometimes this process is repeated several times, sometimes fewer. The framed prints have varying numbers of creases criss-crossing their surfaces, and it becomes difficult to tell which of the folds is a photographed fold, and which is in fact present. Join this effect to a grid that—too coarse to appear as pixels, too fine to be notably "glitchy"—looks like a roughly woven textile, and the works oscillate uncomfortably between digitality and physicality.

While Houck inputs numbers into his program and watches the printer churn out the art, there is no pretense of any relinquishment of control. Though a non-human process is frequently credited with the production of beautiful works of art, Houck is resolute in acknowledging that he has designed the software, chosen the colors, limited the number of blocks in the grid, and so forth. The technology becomes a collaborator with Houck, and if anything, it is his accomplished negotiation of this relationship that allows for the production of such resolved works. Houck has a magical admiration for technology, arguably exclusive to his generation—the one nestled between technophobia and digital-nativity. As such, the works in the Aggregates series combine his own playful interruptions in the image surface with the equally playful incidentals of digital technology, chromatic aberrations and moirés also contributing to the gradual transformation of the image.

Along with the seven larger existing Aggregates, Houck is also presenting fourteen new works, much smaller two-color offerings that abandon the grid generator and instead focus on the intervention of Houck's folds. Each work consists of only a pair of the hexadecimal colors, one lining the frame, the other occupying the entirety of the print itself. Houck has maintained his crease-photograph-crease-rephotograph technique, and the intensity of the actual and photographed folds is even greater than in the larger grid works. The prints take on a web of gradation, so that where previously Houck's software was applying colors, the artist's hand is now responsible for the rich and varied palette. The new works seem markedly less exciting than the works generated by Houck's software, but there is a genuine lust for resolve in his experiments that clarify these recent progressions as being simply the latest step in Houck's sincerely engaged trajectory.

Houck's practice is somewhat formulaic in the way it addresses photographic technology and its daily role at the tail end of art practices. The reiteration of the digital image. The depressing enormity of digital rubble. The impossibility of the "original" image in an increasingly networked society. Conversely, however, Houck's approach is refreshing and unique in the way it reintroduces the human hand into the utilization of these technologies, and in Houck's own omnipotent utopianism toward the back-and-forth bleed of art and technology. Houck makes no excuses for the arrangement of these experiments with software and printer, and as a result, the technology recedes, allowing the Aggregates series—perhaps normally boxed in as "digital art"—room to operate as Art.

Nick Warner

at Max Wigram Gallery, London
until 18 January 2014

Above – *Untitled #267, 234,255 combinations of a 2×2 grid, 22 colours (from Aggregates series)* , 2013