

# Jean-Christian Bourcart

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Life is a dream  
and images are the proof

Nov. 9th 2024 ...

Jan. 19th 2025

Opening

Friday

Nov. 15th

6.45 pm

musée  
Nicéphore  
Niépce



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Curated by:  
Jean-Christian Bourcart  
Guillaume Blanc-Marianne  
Sylvain Besson  
Scenography, installation:  
musée Nicéphore Niépce

The museum  
would like to thank:  
Les Amis du musée  
Nicéphore Niépce  
Canson  
La Maison Veuve Ambal  
Charlotte Boudon  
Philippe Artières  
Nathalie Chapuis  
C.O. Jones

Photography has been in a state of constant flux ever since it was invented at the start of the 19th century. From the self-proclaimed artist to the enthusiast who records their everyday life, from compulsive shooters to studio portrait-takers, photographers have to ride the wave of change in the medium as they attempt to capture their reality and share their vision. The pace of change has greatly accelerated with the emergence of digital cameras, the spread of smartphones and the development of the Internet. Today, artificial intelligence is causing a profound shake-up in the photography profession and creating new types of imaginary worlds. While the Musée Nicéphore Niépce has always defended the idea that there are as many practices of photography as there are practitioners, its policy is to accompany photographers on their chosen artistic paths, to study their archives and to show them to the public in order to shine a light on the relationship we all have with photography, at a time when the huge progress being made in image-making technologies is calling our certainties into question.

Jean-Christian Bourcart donated his entire photographic collection to the Musée Nicéphore Niépce in 2016. It includes negatives, contact sheets, exhibition prints, and various archival elements. This is a unique collection in many ways, as it is incredibly diverse in terms of viewpoints, forms and practices given that Bourcart's forty-year career has spanned so many eras and seen so much change. In all that time, he has consistently brought an attentive and critical perspective to bear on the medium and the way it has changed without ever confining himself to one path.

As a wedding, press or corporate photographer, whether working as an independent or for an agency [Rapho, Getty], and as an artist who blended photographic and animated images, Bourcart experimented with all of the technological advances of his time [the transition from traditional to digital photography, cinema, social media, algorithms] all the while examining the way images are produced, who they are aimed at, how they are circulated, reused and received. Ever since the eighties and his early days at French newspaper *Libération*, Bourcart has always sought to poke holes in the accepted wisdom about photography and has always played with the vast range of possibilities it offers.

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His photographic series progressively left the printed page of newspapers and magazines for the walls of galleries and museums but always reflected his ongoing examination of photographic images, how they connect to reality and how the public perceives them. In his role as “photographer-voyeur” [in reference to an exhibition of his work at the museum in 2018, *Une excuse pour regarder* – An excuse to look], Jean-Christian Bourcart sampled the real, constantly accumulating, organising and reorganising in an attempt to find meaning, and to examine how he and others felt: “At the beginning, I thought I had to go somewhere, that I had things to accomplish. But we always get the real motives wrong. I tend to forget that I am just trying to remember something, something linked to a primal non-meaning, the space between two lines, two lives, two words.”<sup>1</sup>

While he seems to wander with no specific aim, his apparent detachment serves a never-ending interrogation of his own work and status as a photographer, and the perception of the real that it leads to or generates, by him and for others. The result is an extremely coherent body of work, despite its apparent heterogeneity, that truly explores the limits of photography, to the extent that it seems at times to have been created by different artists: “Marcel Duchamp’s declaration really speaks to me: ‘I make a huge effort to contradict myself to avoid conforming to my own taste.’ I am completely at ease with the paradoxical nature of my work, I leave it to the viewer to draw their own conclusions, to see where the work touches them, what they love and what bothers them or what bores them. Obviously, I am not just taking any old photo, there is an underlying structure. If you try to isolate a through-line, what comes to the surface is perhaps a multifaceted portrait of an ordinarily complex person in a fast-changing era.”<sup>2</sup>

1.  
J.-C. Bourcart,  
*Naitre sans cesse*,  
L’Écailler, 2024

2.  
*Art Press* n° 526,  
November 2024,  
interview with Étienne Hatt

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Boucart's New York notebooks form junction points between eras, providing the most concrete material traces of his constant search for new forms to question the real and how it is represented in photographs. Just when photography risked becoming nothing but an overly-formatted means of making a living, he moved to New York in the early 2000s and he took off around the city, photographing his surroundings. For seven years, he gathered and organised the images he produced in small, plastic albums, as a way to connect with the sprawling city and its inhabitants:

"These are not really photo albums, in which people usually document the rituals of family life, with one stage following on from the next, only depicting the good times, that are often confused with the most memorable. Bourcart's notebooks are closer in form to an atlas, but not quite. The power of the images and the way they are assembled do indeed make them atlas-like, but they do not pretend to cover everything in the way an atlas often claims to with regard to the topic they cover, but never really succeed. [...] The huge collection of photos put together by Bourcart during this New York years, not unlike the notebooks of an archaeologist, forms something of a uniquely heretic, visual ABC for children, on the margins of the alphabet and anything resembling norms of language, put together for a child to whom one cannot lie, and as such, to whom one tells the whole story. These notebooks were produced with no real aim, and are available to anyone who shows an interest, depicting something

akin to the tunnels of a mine. The viewer descends into the teeming depths of human activity, whose darkest aspects are suggested or exposed, but, in the end, they also take us to the centre of the volcano they are creating [...] by systematically producing moments of grace, stolen from the crudeness of the real."<sup>3</sup>

3. Guillaume Blanc-Marianne, in *Les carnets new-yorkais*, Atelier EXB, Paris, 2024

In this light, these notebooks, that were rediscovered when the artist donated his collection to the Musée Nicéphore Niépce, reveal themselves to be the very essence of his approach, an accumulation that is not content to exist just for its own sake. It is no longer merely the avatar of a commonplace visual cataloguing of the world, it is, in fact, the continuation of an [un]conscious interrogation of the photographic image and its destiny: "Bourcart's notebooks, from one to the next, almost compulsively sample fragments of a reality that is, by definition, both shared and unique, depicting a multitude of intentions that feed off one another. They start to form a body of work, but not the work we expect of an artist's career. Instead, they start to create something, to inaugurate a narrative, a way of speaking the world through images. The fragments end up forming a unit, with scattered elements catalysing a viewpoint that is neither authoritarian or omniscient, but polymorphous, uncertain, dubious, and worried. A viewpoint that is sensitive to what it is looking at, a viewpoint that is always troubled by what it sees and that spurs a desire to know more, to take bigger risks."<sup>4</sup>

Jean-Christian Bourcart's New York notebooks are placed at the entrance to the exhibition, which is a retrospective that won't admit to being a retrospective, to provide a key to understanding his work, while at the same time covering its tracks. They are a go-between, a dream where illusions and reality collide. The floating yet determined path taken by the photographer is reflected here, from the clusters of images collected in notebooks to their organisation into artificial series that form potential sources of new bodies of work.

Even though they are the last avatars of Bourcart's traditional photography, the notebooks are not the last word. We do not have to believe Bourcart when he says: "I still love this medium, the extraordinary power it has to capture an instant, to save and kill it at the same time, even though my rational self sees how artificial it is, what an absolute illusion it can be, but I no longer feel the need to 'capture' everything compulsively like I used to."<sup>5</sup> Since 2020, his compulsiveness has found an echo in the infinite possibilities provided by A.I. His regular posts on social media are evidence of this. Bourcart's latest research using artificial intelligence are his new notebooks, "that seem to want to retain the memory of what was dreamt over the course of one night – one life, even if it is turbulent, confused and sprawling. They accumulate images like a memorandum, because 'life is a dream and images are the proof'."<sup>6</sup>

4. Guillaume Blanc-Marianne, in *Les carnets new-yorkais*, Atelier EXB, Paris, 2024

5. *Art Press* n° 526, November 2024, interview with Étienne Hatt

6. Guillaume Blanc-Marianne, in *Les carnets new-yorkais*, Atelier EXB, Paris, 2024

*Carnets new-yorkais* [Atelier EXB, out on November 11th 2024] is a companion piece to the exhibition. This publication was made possible by Les Amis du musée Nicéphore Niépce

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1.  
NRA  
Texas, North Carolina, Arizona  
2018  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart
  2.  
Camden  
2008  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart



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3.  
The Most Beautiful Day of my Life  
1995  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart

4.  
The Shrink's Trash Can  
[The Shape Of Your Grief]  
2007  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart



3



4

5.  
The Frenchies  
Paris,  
1983-1990  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart





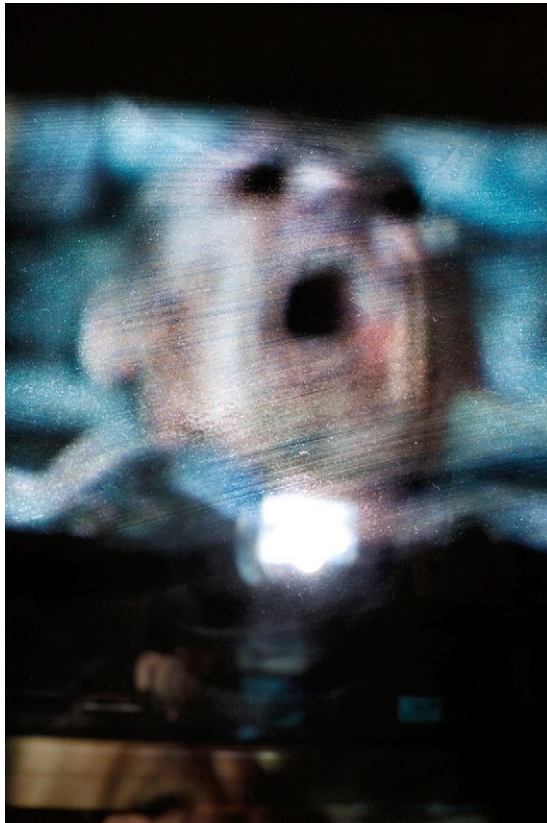
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6.  
Forbidden City  
1998-2001  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart

7.  
Stardust  
New-York,  
2005-2006  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart



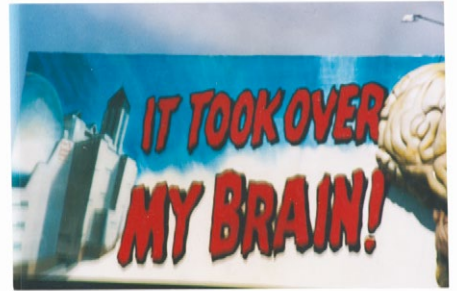
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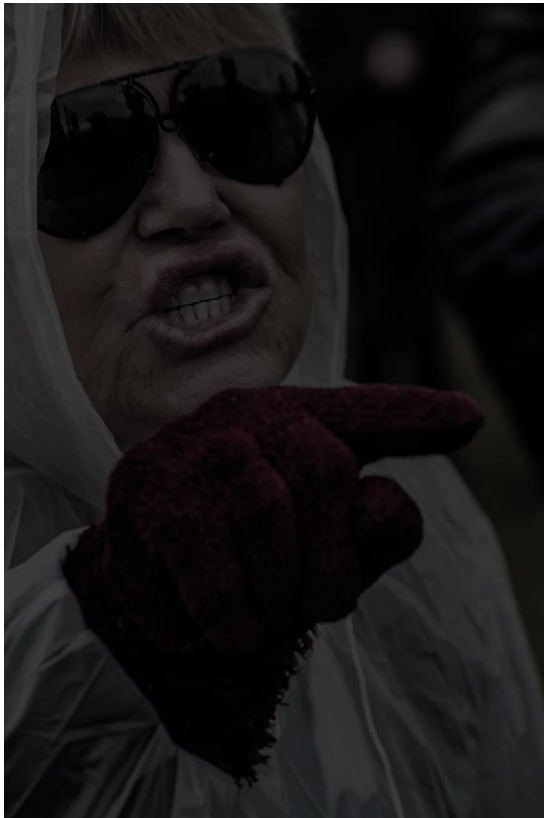
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8.  
New York notebooks  
1998-2005  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart

9.  
Day of Wrath  
2017  
© Jean-Christian Bourcart



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