

JOAN FONTCUBERTA

# MONSTRORUM HISTORIA



**KUTXA  
FUNDA  
ZIOA**

**JOAN FONTCUBERTA**  
**MONSTRORUM**  
**HISTORIA**

**21. 03. 2025 - 29. 06. 2025**

Organization and  
general coordination  
**Kutxa Fundazioa**

Curatorship and Texts  
**Sonia Berger**

Museography  
**Sonia Berger +  
Nerea Garcia Pascual**

Graphic Design  
**TGA + Nerea Garcia Pascual**

Setup and Lighting  
**Expolan**

Photo Printing  
**Tinta Invisible  
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Framing  
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Education  
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Printing  
**Artes Gráficas Lorea**

Kutxa Fundazioa would like to thank  
the people and bodies that have  
played their part in one way or  
another in this exhibition.

Cover:  
Joan Fontcuberta,  
from *Monstrorum Historia* series (2024)

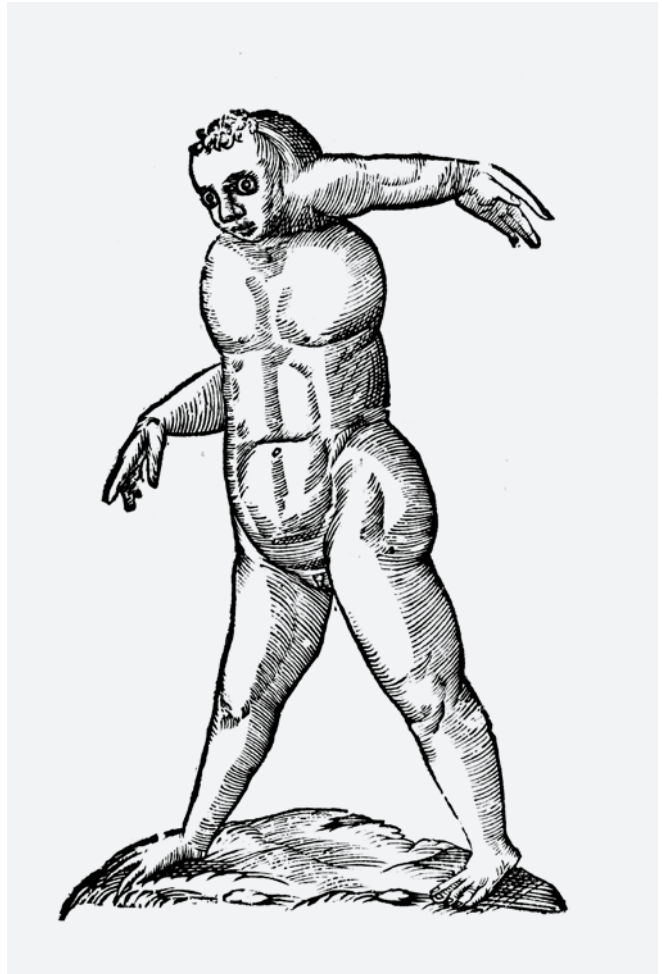
Spanning a five-decade career in visual theory and practice, the artist, essayist, teacher and curator Joan Fontcuberta has focused part of his work on examining the impact of techno-scientific thought on the production and reception of images, highlighting the conflicts between nature, technology, photography and truth. As he has argued in his essays, 19th-century positivism established science as the dominant form of human knowledge — with its system of neutral values, its requirements for truth and its methodology — as part of a hierarchical relationship superior to “the poetic” and other forms of non-empirical knowledge. According to relativist philosophy, however, the scientific is a socially constructed discourse that legitimises its power by presenting itself as truth.

As a tool traditionally considered capable of unambiguously recording “reality”, photography has been associated with the idea of objectivity from its inception, and its use has served to bring veracity and authenticity to all manner of discourses. Like a hacker, Joan Fontcuberta has explored the creative limits of both photography and the traditional means of conveying information and experience — document, archive, museum — subverting their authority in order to trigger a critical attitude on the part of the spectator.

In the current context, with the advance of information technologies, this critical attitude proposed by the artist becomes even more necessary: the speed and excess with which data and images circulate prevent discrimination and reflection, instil mistrust and suspicion, lead to thoughts of dehumanisation and give rise to the most insane conspiracy theories. The foundations of knowledge become questioned, the realm of science and technology — machines — is turned against us, as has been widely discussed in fantasy literature and science fiction.

The exhibition *Monstrorum Historia* brings together four artistic projects by Joan Fontcuberta that explore the questioning of techno-scientific culture and simultaneously propose a game, a deviation: recourse to the imagination. In them, the artist has addressed themes such as biology, monstrosity and verisimilitude, delving into the fictional status of photography and examining the changes that have taken place in its production, use and reception, until arriving at the current scenario, in which the meteorite of artificial intelligence has reactivated critical doubt towards the image. *Monstrorum Historia* is made up of, on the one hand, *Herbarium* (1982) and *Fauna* (1989), two of Joan Fontcuberta’s early works from

the pre-digital era, and, on the other, *HeghDI' vem ghaH tu'lu' Dinosaur* (2023) and *What Darwin Missed* (2024), two of his most recent works, in which he uses generative visualisation systems with AI. The artist's purpose has remained the same over the years, but his languages and technical procedures have evolved enormously.



Engraving  
from *Monstrorum Historia*  
by Ulisse Aldrovandi (1642)

Joan Fontcuberta's exhibition takes its title from a treatise by the Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), the first Professor of Natural History at the University of Bologna. During his lifetime, Aldrovandi amassed an extraordinary collection of animals and plants, which he bequeathed to the Senate of Bologna, and he published a large number of written works. His most famous, *Monstrorum Historia*<sup>1</sup>, published years after his death in 1642, is a treatise documenting the most extraordinary aspects of the human and animal kingdom, including the great monsters of myth and legend, all illustrated with fantastic woodcuts of diseases, curiosities and creatures. A work, therefore, in which the boundaries between art, science, myth and reality are completely blurred.

The figure of Aldrovandi has been of particular interest to Joan Fontcuberta since he visited various Italian collections in 1980 and discovered his legacy. It was to them that he dedicated his book *Paralipomena* (Silvana Editoriale, 2016), in which he collected images of these Italian cabinets of curiosities, in particular those of the Spallanzani Collection in Reggio Emilia, with its ambiguous hybrid creatures, and those of the Palazzo Poggi, the seat of the Rectorate of the University of Bologna, which houses Aldrovandi's legacy. The Greek term *παραλειπομένων* (*paralipomenon*) refers to "that which is omitted", "things left unsaid" and, in particular, to the supplementary information of a text, its notes or alternative information.

His visit to these collections led to Fontcuberta's interest in the monstrous, anomalous body capable of challenging scientific paradigms or ideas of normality and harmony, as was his attention to collage or the Surrealist *cadavre exquis* as a correlative artistic form. Thus, in one of his early projects, *Animal trouvé* [Animal found], he extended the Surrealist idea of the *objet trouvé* [object found] to animals, decontextualising them, a work that allowed him to consolidate his idea of photography as a record of a "found" reality.

Joan Fontcuberta's work thereafter has been guided by the idea of monstrosity as a vector that allows him to trace the changes taking place in a world in full mutation or crisis. As Antonio Gramsci wrote in *Quaderni dal carcere* [Notebooks from prison] in 1930: "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters."

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<sup>1</sup> Aldrovandi, Ulisse. *Monstrorum historia. Cum Paralipomenis historiae omnium animalium*, 1642. A digitised edition by the Library of the University of Bologna can be consulted at the following link: <https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/78076>

From photography as a promise of truth and memory to images generated by artificial intelligence, from document to speculation, the artist and essayist reveals in his work the monstrosities — of language, of technology, of politics — that are emerging.



Joan Fontcuberta,  
*Dendrita victoriosa* (1982),  
from *Herbarium* series

As he himself describes in *Ciencia y fricción. Fotografía, naturaleza, artificio* [Science and Friction: Photography, Nature, Artifice] (Mestizo, 1998), photography has historically been viewed as a tool for reliably recording of reality, which has fulfilled like no other the values of objectivity, truthfulness or authenticity demanded by science and the positivist postulates upon which it is based, a tool capable of transcending human capabilities – even providing what the eye cannot see — and from which any doubt of subjectivity, any hint of partiality, has traditionally been removed.

Joan Fontcuberta opposed this mechanistic, uncritical conception of photography in an article published in 1977<sup>2</sup> with the idea of “countervision”, which has formed his creative practice over the years. Fontcuberta’s countervisions therefore attempt to break with the logic of the literal transcription of reality that has been implicit in photography since its origins, in order to focus on the aesthetic, ethical, social, historical and technological aspects involved. In other words, to take into account a cultural dimension of which we must not lose sight and to make us aware of the prejudices that lead us to see the world in a particular way.

It is interesting to note that at the time when this article was published, the photographers of the New Topographics movement were seeking neutrality in images that were supposed to be purely formal, without any aesthetic or ideological intention. In the same year, however, in line with Fontcuberta’s concept of countervision, the photographers Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel published *Evidence*, a disturbing book for which they researched the archives of the Los Angeles Police Department, the US Department of the Interior, the Stanford Research Institute, and dozens of other government agencies, companies, medical institutions, etc. They selected 59 images that had been used as purely objective instruments and edited them, completely decontextualised, with the care of a high-quality artistic photo book. The result was a poetic surrealist work like no other, in which the images lost precisely their evidential nature and were abandoned to the enigma of the ambiguous.

*Herbarium* is framed within Joan Fontcuberta’s early projects in which he subverts the “scientific” mediation of the photographic camera. In 1928, the German photographer and

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2 Fontcuberta, Joan. “Contravisiones, la subversión fotográfica de la realidad”, *The Village Cry*, no. 7, 1977. Art and thought magazine published in Basel by Rolf Paltzer and edited by Beat Presser.

sculptor Karl Blossfeldt, a proponent of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, movement, published *Urformen der Kunst* [Art Forms in Nature], from which the artist drew inspiration for this unique treatise on botany. Karl Blossfeldt photographed and enlarged fragments of plants against neutral backgrounds and natural light to show their details, with the aim of demonstrating that nature's creations are the source of artistic forms. Half a century later, Joan Fontcuberta imitated the German photographer's style with a collection of imaginary species, using waste that he came across in the industrial belt on the outskirts of Barcelona, as well as fragments of plants and animals, in order to demonstrate that the medium of photography was no longer credible and that the new techniques applied to the image made the idea of authenticity, to which Blossfeldt had appealed, obsolete.



Joan Fontcuberta,  
*Cercopithecus  
icarocornu* (1985),  
from *Fauna* series



One could also interpret Joan Fontcuberta's collection of carefully assembled detritus in line with the avant-garde art of the early 20th century and the countercultural values of the 1960s, as a critique of a system built on utility as the supreme value, leaving out that which is defective, dysfunctional, that which cannot be turned into merchandise<sup>3</sup>.

Shortly after completing *Herbarium*, Fontcuberta, with a great deal of humour and the desire to continue offering a critical pedagogy of the image, collaborated with the artist and writer Pere Formiguera on *Fauna* (1985), a project that went even further in its idea of questioning the credibility of scientific rhetoric. They asked themselves: what is true in books and museums? *Fauna* presents the lost archives of the German zoologist Peter Ameisenhaufen, who was disowned by the scientific community for his unorthodox research and disappeared under mysterious circumstances. In addition to the photographs, the project this time also questioned the institutional discourse that images serve, going beyond the pages of a book to create an installation that recreates a fantastic bestiary, appropriating the staging of natural science museums and providing a great deal of data through texts, sound recordings, drawings, maps, stuffed animals, letters, etc.

Over the years, both *Herbarium* and *Fauna* have become projects that, far from being obsolete or outdated, speak to us about truly current issues. On the one hand, they can be seen as two stories with a moral about the future of biotechnology. While on the other hand, as far as the image is concerned, by emphasising its fictional status, Joan Fontcuberta anticipated the arrival a few years later of digital tools for recording and editing images, which opened up the creative field and definitively banished the certainty of the photographic document.

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<sup>3</sup> *Herbarium* dates back to 1982. We already know how capitalism later swallows up revolutionary desires for creativity, networking, the utopia of a global world, etc. Let us see later what impact this fact has on photography and Fontcuberta's work.

## THE POST-PHOTOGRAPHIC ERA

The debate about the principle of reality attributed to photographs and the interesting use that could be made of them has been surpassed as we have settled into the post-photographic era<sup>4</sup>. As the artist has described: "The turn of the millennium brought with it a second digital revolution, characterized by the prominence of the Internet, social networks, and mobile telephony. All facets of life, from personal relations to economics and from communication to politics, have been rocked to their foundations: the world has become a place governed by instantaneity, globalization, and dematerialization."<sup>5</sup>

This so-called "second digital revolution", characterised by a glut of image production and consumption<sup>6</sup>, has ultimately paved the way for the emergence of fake news and conspiracy theories. In this new digital ecosystem, the idea of fiction has become one of the essential elements of our current political, economic and cultural life, among other aspects.

The game proposed by *Herbarium* and *Fauna*, whose aim was to introduce fiction into our consciousness so that we would be able to react on our own and realise that we must always be cautious when dealing with images, is now completely valid, as humans seem to have refined their ability to lie.

In recent years, after the emergence of another milestone that marks a turning point in the production of images, such as generative artificial intelligence, the artist and thinker has continued to investigate and conceive projects with the same enlightening spirit. The image now poses a new challenge. It no longer has its referent in reality, but is the daughter of algorithms, of a non-human camera.

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4 For a summary of the post-photographic theory according to Fontcuberta, see: Fontcuberta, Joan. "Por un manifiesto postfotográfico", *La Vanguardia*, 11 May 2011. Available online: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/cultura/20110511/54152218372/por-un-manifiesto-posfotografico.html> You can also consult: Fontcuberta, Joan. *La furia de las imágenes. Notas sobre la postfotografía* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2016).

5 Fontcuberta, Joan (2016), *op. cit.*, 31.

6 Returning to the idea of *Herbarium* working with the dysfunctional, the defective and the superfluous, Fontcuberta's post-photographic decalogue indicates "appropriationist strategies of accumulation and recycling" for this new post-photographic era of excess. Point 10 ends thus: "On the politics of art: not to surrender to glamour and consumption but rather to embark on the act of agitating consciences. At a time when art prevails as a mere genre of culture, obsessed with the production of artistic merchandise and governed by the laws of the market and the entertainment industry, it may be good to remove it from the spotlight and the red carpet and return it to the trenches."

## GENERATIVE VISUALISATION SYSTEMS

In 2023, Joan Fontcuberta used the twist of returning to his own *Herbarium* by employing the image-generating tools that are available today. *eHerbarium* is an experiment that retains the aesthetic parallelism and iconicity of Blossfeldt's work, as well as Fontcuberta's original purpose of making us distrust the objectivity of the photographic process. But it also shows us how far the "design" of the image has moved away from the photographic fact, while also symbolising how far the "design" of nature has progressed.

In one of his most recent projects, *What Darwin Missed* (2024), Fontcuberta assumes the role of the German photographer and documentary filmmaker Alfred Ehrhardt, whose project to locate and photograph a rare species of coral was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. Together with the curator of the coral collection at the Hamburg Museum of Natural History, Ehrhardt was to complete the cataloguing that Darwin had undertaken a century earlier after the Beagle expedition, published in 1842 as *The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*.



Joan Fontcuberta,  
*Montipora aequituberculata*,  
(2024), from  
*What Darwin Missed* series

Fascinated by Ehrhardt's photographs of corals, Fontcuberta has recently embarked on the mission that the German photographer was unable to complete, presenting in this project both photographs taken in the remote places he visited and others taken in natural history museums in various European cities. The exhibition includes images of a recently discovered species called *Cryptocnidaria*, which displays a few unusual characteristics — adaptation to extreme environmental conditions, such as extremely high or low temperatures, unusual pH values, or high water pressure in the deep sea — and whose origin may be linked to chemicals or radioactivity.

Displaying his usual irony and humour, Joan Fontcuberta in *What Darwin Missed* refers to not only *what Darwin missed* on his expedition, but also what he failed to consider in his study of the evolution of species. What Darwin really “missed” was the dizzying adaptation and progress of evolutionary lines — not necessarily the most beautiful and ominous — towards much more sophisticated forms, such as the *Cryptocnidaria* imagined by the artist with the help of new image-generating programmes. Once again, we can interpret this project as another transgression that underlies very real current concerns, such as the geological changes and impact on biodiversity that mankind has caused to reach the Anthropocene period, or the opposition to evolutionism as an ideology because of the threat it poses to religious dogmatism.

In the fourth and final project presented in *Monstrorum Historia*, we finally enter the realm of science fiction. *HeghDI' vem ghaH, tu'lu' Dinosaur* (which translates from Klingon as “When it woke up, the dinosaur was still there”, the famous flash story by Augusto Monterroso) offers us a cosmic adventure akin to speculative fiction and places us in one of the most famous science fiction series: *Star Trek*, the Klingon race would have genetically modified dinosaurs to invade and dominate the Earth.

Fontcuberta's dinosaurs approach the cyborg theory by proposing a chimerical world of fusing animals and machines, a dystopian perspective in which there is no distinction between reality and myth, between the natural and the artificial, as in the world described by Aldrovandi in his treatise. First of all, it is interesting to note that the image we have of dinosaurs is nothing more than a representation created by artists on the basis of palaeontological remains and scientific data. The likeable machine-dinosaurs of this project are the photographed replicas that Fontcuberta has come across during

more than forty years of experience in palaeontological sites, natural history museums or theme parks. In addition to these, other images are presented that have been specially generated by text-to-image programmes, with which he visually completes the fiction.

As in *Fauna*, the artist creatively draws on a text originally published in Klingon created by the linguist Marc Okrand for Paramount Studios, whose translation can be accessed via a QR code. In this narrative, an enlightened Klingon commander recounts the vicissitudes of “Operation Time’s Arrow”, while offering an exhaustive review of the most outstanding products of 20th-century pop culture and science fiction, until arriving at the present day, in which certain real events are seamlessly integrated into this mad fiction, thereby echoing recent conspiracy theories such as the reptile myth.

In *HeghDI’ vem ghaH, tu’lu’ Dinosaur*, Joan Fontcuberta has created a setting for the confused world in which we live, where the rise of disinformation coincides with the first images produced entirely by algorithms, without cameras or optical devices.

Through these four artistic projects in *Monstrorum Historia*, we can see how Joan Fontcuberta has reflected over the past few decades on the links that have been established between nature and photography, initially questioning the techno-scientific culture from its origins as the main source in the formation of “the real”, and then examining the dizzying changes that have taken place in the field of science, communication and the image.

In the particular evolution of photography, it has gained semiotic power as it has lost its material quality and moved away from its referent. In other words, it has become a powerful tool of communication and an indispensable element in our way of understanding the world. A world penetrated by computers, telematics and biotechnology, in which information, communication and knowledge have become strategic, and in which it is therefore still important to pay attention to the conditions of production and reception of the image, all the more so when the representation is now the product of non-human eyes.

Joan Fontcuberta’s stance in the 1980s was based on the need to overcome rigid, authoritarian approaches, to unmask interested communication strategies and to modify our representation of the world in order to provide it with a different

meaning or orientation. This stance today, his concept of “countervision” — understood as a critical questioning of the image — is becoming more necessary than ever. As the novelist Benjamin Labatut puts it in *The Stone of Madness*: “We must learn to see things in a new light, because the flame of reason is no longer enough to illuminate the complex labyrinth that is slowly taking shape (although some would say it is being built) around us.”

Joan Fontcuberta continues to masterfully use the image — whether analogue, digital or generated by software — to reflect on the world through lucid fictions that expand the creative field, while at the same time extending our visual culture and putting us on guard against current communication strategies.

The problem is apparently not so much what these new algorithmic eyes can “see”, but that we allow ourselves to be shaken by their hallucinations, remaining paralysed and unable to make sense of what surrounds us through common narratives. Can we ultimately be sure that AI will be able to create stories as wonderful as “Operation Time’s Arrow” in *HeghDI’ vem ghaH, tu’lu’ Dinosaur*, or *Cryptocnidaria* in *What Darwin Missed?* Resorting to the imagination and experimentation with these new images turns out to be a good strategy for understanding how they work and identifying their limits. If, as Goya expressed in one of *Los caprichos* [The Caprices], “the sleep of reason produces monsters”, Joan Fontcuberta invites us to “assume the duty of reversing this and making the sleep of monsters produce reason”.<sup>7</sup>

## **Sonia Berger**

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<sup>7</sup> Moliné, Gerard. “Los ‘monstruos’ de Joan Fontcuberta”, *TheNBP*, 12 November 2021, on the exhibition *Monstruos* [Monsters] by Joan Fontcuberta at the Can Framis Museum of the Vila Casas Foundation.



Joan Fontcuberta, *Dinópolis, Teruel* (2020), from *Dinosaur* series

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## Mediation

### Guided Tours

Sundays at 17:30 in Basque and 18:30 in Spanish.  
Free, with prior booking online.

### Family Workshop

#### **Egia karratuak, gezur borobilak eta iruzur hirukiak... adi ibili irudien artean!**

[Square truths, round lies and triangular deceptions... pay attention to the images!],  
with Amaia Urzain

Saturday, April 5 and June 7, 2025, from 11:30 to 13:30, Kutxa Fundazioa Artegunea.

For children aged between 6 and 12 accompanied by an adult.

Basque. 5 euros per child, free for adults. Prior booking on the website

We will have to sharpen our gaze and our tongue in search of the truth, lies or deception. The proposals of the artist Joan Fontcuberta will open the way for us to awaken discussions with words and shake the imagination with images. We will walk among plants, animals, dinosaurs or corals telling stories until they are (un)done... One layer, another, another, another, another... what a goal, what a montage, what a memory, what a *monstrorum!*

### Family Workshop

#### **Beleari so. Munstroak** [Monsters], with Ane Rodriguez and Maider Aldasoro

Saturday, June 21, 2025, 17:00-18:30, Kutxa Fundazioa Artegunea

For children aged between 6 and 12 accompanied by an adult.

Basque. 5 euros per child, free for adults. Prior booking on the website

This workshop is developed within the *Beleari so* program, a mediation proposal that in different sessions seeks to activate dialogue and a critical perspective around issues linked to the image and the visual story. On this occasion we will create other possible bodies with our own, bodies that trigger imagination and fantasy from estrangement. We will try to make the impossible possible.

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## Public programme

### Dialogues

**Iconofagias. De nuestros contemporáneos** [Iconophagies. From our contemporaries], conversation between the photographer Joan Fontcuberta and the essayist, critic and art curator Iván de la Nuez

Thursday 29 May 2025, 6.30 pm, Z Hall (Tabakalera, 1st floor)

Spanish. Free admission with prior booking on the website

### Information

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**Register for events:** [www.kutxafundazioa.eus](http://www.kutxafundazioa.eus)

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## Opening hours

Tuesday to Sunday

**12 pm - 2 pm**

**4 pm - 8 pm**

Free  
entry