



**Cardelli & Fontana**  
arte contemporanea  
Sarzana

## Preserving events that vanish <sup>1</sup>

by Davide Daninos

<sup>1</sup> “The reality of the photograph neither grows nor diminishes in value whether it is classified as method of recording, means of scientific investigation, or method of preserving events that vanish...” László Moholy-Nagy, *Una fotografia senza precedenti* (1927), in Paolo Costantini (ed.), *La fotografia del Bauhaus* (exhibition catalog: Venice, Palazzo Fortuny, 16 October - 19 December 1993), Marsilio, Venezia 1993, pp. 116-118.

Three sheets of cardboard colored egg-yolk yellow, burnt sienna, and ocean blue are left in the sun for days, even months, behind the window in photographer Luca Lupi’s studio.

Leaned up against the glass, the three A4 format sheets are covered by a second element, a smaller square that shields a part of their surface from the inexorable action of the sun. The photons striking the uncovered areas begin to slowly graze, rub, and finally erode the pigments on the cardboard, dissolving molecular bonds and crippling the capacity to reflect the colors of the spectrum.

After months of exposure, the boards change. Sculpted and impressed by the sun, the unshielded parts now show a new pigmentation of their own, paler, pastel, that frames the two square areas at the center and transforms them into the subjects of this new composition, the fruit of the long, slow dialogue between daylight and degradation (of color) (*Esposizione I-III*, 2019-2020).

Grasping the potential of this process, Luca Lupi began testing sunlight’s ability to paint forms and fields of color by slowly passing over them while exercising greater and greater control over his inks.

Following his first experiments conducted with direct exposure to Spring sunlight directly (*Esposizione*, April-May 2020), Lupi brought his testing into the laboratory and began using ultraviolet lamps that let him keep all conditions under control and direct his sources of light. Albeit more measured and measurable, the process remains experimental. Born of the spontaneous choreography between the light source’s intensity and quality, the color of the pigments, and the texture of the paper, the results are still a discovery (*Esposizione*, February 2021-in progress).

In *Esposizioni*, Luca Lupi registers the luminous calligraphy of visible and invisible solar radiation and its capacity to create and model—via the sculptural process of subtraction—the new shapes and colors that emerge slowly on the paper.

In his panoramas of color, Lupi records the acts of seeing, imagining, and discovering. If in the past his photos were dedicated to contemplating the heavens with fields of pure color hovering always over horizons only hinted at the back of the image (the *Landscape* and *Finis Terrae* series, 2012-2019), his pigments modulated by photodegradation now become the means for the creation of “an image that does not yet exist but one you can only intuit in the mind as idea, as thought.”<sup>2</sup>

This tension between human control and the volition of materials reveals the same alchemy that led to the discovery of the earliest photographic processes that also involved using light’s writing to fabricate new images<sup>3</sup>.

But if all the tension that led to the birth of photography was oriented to making reproductions of the real, Lupi uses this luminous handwriting to create unpublished, unexpected, interior images. New “heliographies” in which the eye can move freely between free color and only hinted traces of figuration.

As in previous traditions intent on constructing images without the use of photographic equipment<sup>4</sup>, also Lupi is committed to revealing—in the absence of subjects—the photographer’s physical unconscious, the ideal terrain for the imprint of his mental landscape of solid color onto paper.

<sup>2</sup> Luca Lupi, cited in *Luca Lupi. Esposizione*, Cardelli & Fontana Editins, Sarzana 2021, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Also these were born from the window. See *Veduta dalla finestra a “Le Gras”* by Nicéphore Niepce (heliograph on pewter, 1827, Humanities Research Center, Gernsheim Collection, University of Texas, Austin). See Beaumont Newhall, *Storia della fotografia*, Einaudi, Torino 1984, p. 11 et seq.

<sup>4</sup> From László Moholy-Nagy’s photographs to Man Ray’s rayograms, from Raul Ubac’s *brûlage* to Pierre Cordier’s chemigrams and Wolfgang Tillmans’ *Blushes*, to mention merely a few examples of this tradition.



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But whereas in the past such experiments explicitly used techniques and tools from the photographic printing process—such as the camera obscura, unimaged negatives, and chemical processes to make their media photosensitive—Lupi instead limits the responsibility for execution only to the slowest action of the light. Never encountering any chemical agent on their way, the sunbeams brighten instead of darkening their surfaces, causing pigments to evaporate in search of new tones of color.

In his *Variazioni* series (May 2021-in progress), Lupi broadens his attention also to the final variable in this experimental process. After obtaining greater control over his sources of light, Lupi began using an ink-jet printer to calibrate both the number and the quality of colors with which to begin the erosion process, in this way opening his method to a new series of potential variations.

In this sense, Lupi creates experimental systems. Controlling the points of departure of all parts involved with both scientific and aesthetic attention, the artist lets the natural photodegradation process bring with it new discoveries, new images, and variations in a process that is both unique and repeatable at the same time.

In cultivating his lights and pigments, Lupi seems to be searching for the words László Moholy-Nagy offers in the book never far from the table in his studio: “Photography is the first means to give tangible form to light, albeit it in transposed—perhaps for this reason—almost abstract form”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

In offering a few guidelines for a new photography, the Hungarian artist suggested studying and recording “changes in light intensity and exposure times, variations in movement through space produced by light [...], the triggering of lively charges latent in us and in our brains. Chiaroscuro. Palpability of light, movement of light. Distance and proximity of light. Penetrating and cumulative light rays.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 118.

In this sense, Lupi’s *Variazioni* are also studies. Studies of color, observations and notes that record these material experiments, and document the results of the changes in intensity and proximity of ultraviolet lamps, the starting colors, and other variables in this luminous equation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Information that the artist carefully records together with exposure times.

This is also thanks to the increasingly conscious use of masking which in contact with the surface or raised over it guides the erosions and shades of light, on the one hand, and the backgrounds and gradations of color on the other, which are now printed by Lupi in superimposed or solitary layers.

Many of his latest *Variazioni* feature magenta as the main hue, and are only sometimes accompanied by dusty gray intonations that when mixed in the printing process come to be gradually revealed by luminous radiation.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For example, *Variazione 18, 20 e 24*, July-November 2021. In order to appear as such, magenta pigments reflect and repel the luminous radiation closest to the visible end of the infrared spectrum while instead absorbing all the other color frequencies up to the ultraviolet end that are stronger and more damaging in the photodegradation process, and for such reason, are more receptive and easily modelled.

His *Variazioni* can therefore be read as new sculptures of light, always polished by ultraviolet lamps that reveal new, pasty nuances by scouring the layers of ink with their incandescent gaze.

With his *Esposizioni* and *Variazioni*, Lupi has succeeded in developing an investigation intent on discovering photodegradation’s numerous aesthetic applications in which the artist is the initiator, choreographer, and spectator of the process all at the same time. Having opened his method to suggestions from pure chance and Mother Nature, having renegotiated his collaboration with agents of light, Luca Lupi has succeeded in redefining his practice of photography from landscape photography to studio artist, a studio he has now turned into a laboratory from which he makes landscapes and phenomena otherwise invisible emerge. To give form—tangible, observable, palpable—to light. In this way, giving body and visibility to vanish events.