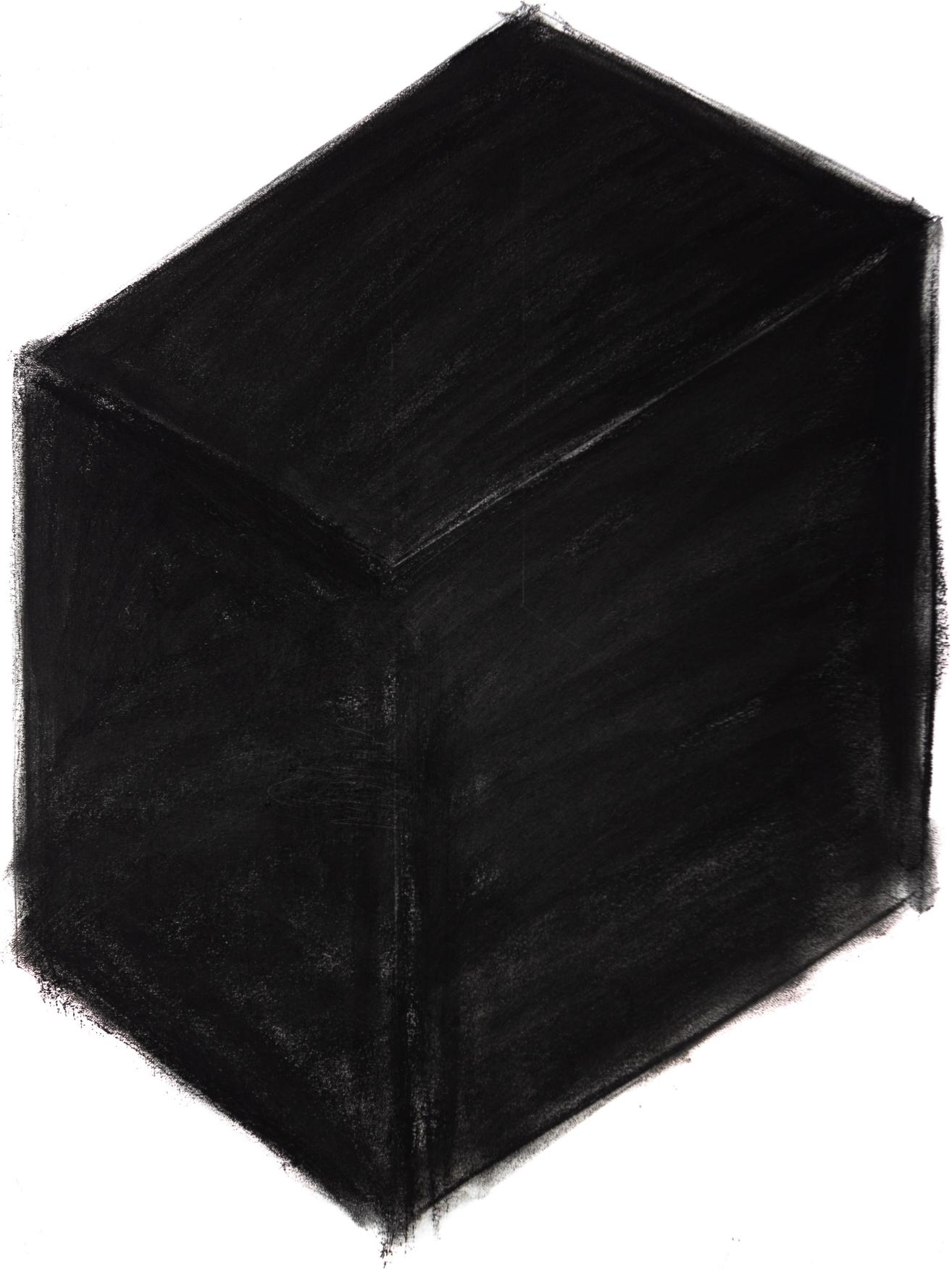


May I make a confession? I don't really know how cameras work. Despite an MFA from a prestigious art school, despite years running the photography labs of another, despite shamelessly introducing myself as a 'photographer' to anyone I meet, and even mounting shows consisting solely of photographs, I can honestly say that I do not understand how my chosen artistic medium works. Sure, I understand that a lens focuses light by bending light rays to concentrate them in a certain area, and yes, I totally get that thin strips of metal open and close, often fantastically fast, in order to shine that focused light through the lens onto a surface. But this is where I start having trouble, as that surface is somehow able to capture and fix that light- to transform it into an image, a two-dimensional thing that simulates, but does not precisely replicate, what I see. Before you get all high and mighty about how this is a digital problem and if we all just shot film things would be so much simpler, this also applies to the chemical alchemy of salts on plastic and perhaps is even more fitting, e.g., how is it that from some silver and color dyes glued to a piece of plastic a clear and recognizable view of our reality can arise? When said surface is a digital sensor, the problem only becomes compounded, not differently-categorized. After all, a digital sensor is a piece of silicone and rare earth metals that absorb light and somehow move that light along a series of other metals, eventually transmuting said light into a recognizable simulacra of reality. A simulacra whose basis, whose building blocks, are small squares of color that themselves are text, ultimately ones and zeros, rather than, well, whatever quanta our analog reality is composed of. And more and more in society we are surrounded by similar objects, things, very useful things, that help shape and reshape the world myriad times over, yet that we cannot truly understand. Objects that are either so complicated a single person cannot hope to understand all of its aspects, or something simply closed off to use by what appear to be laws of existence (although they may just be technological limitations). These things, these black boxes, are increasingly familiar to us, we create more and more of them every single day, yet we rarely stop to think about that effect they have on us, on society, on culture, on art. We ask them to perform tasks, we give them inputs, they perform their tasks admirably, they output what they should. What is missing is how.

Cameras are one clear example, but black boxes have existed for as long as humans have. From the very first black box, that of Pandora, who unknowingly brought this concept into the world, to artificial neural networks, massive conglomerations of algorithms that function together to learn skills and solve problems on their own, from technical creations to social theories to celestial bodies, black boxes are the lattice on which contemporary society is woven. However, their production, their creation, is pre-programmed: a camera can only produce what it was created to make, a neural network can only "think" about what it is given, the big bang can only expand outward. Black boxes are inherently constrained objects. The more we use them, the more we advance, yet the more we advance the less we are able to understand. The less we understand, the more we are at the mercy of these seemingly essential constructions. The more our everyday life is shaped in order to feed them, 'work', 'art', 'play' become moving digital symbols in a simulated environment, not for the sake of production, but for the sake of creating more inputs and expanding the power of the box. Feeding data into spreadsheets/increasing the analytical power of the neural network, smiling into the lens/producing likes on a digital platform, choosing a TV show to watch/feeding the control algorithm, etc. In other words, growth for growth's sake, capitalism as its purest. Meaning itself becomes encased in black boxes, until all we are left with are a series of nested boxes, matryoshka dolls of cause and effect. Freedom meaning little more than choosing which black box to feed- photoshop, lightroom, instagram, google? Only by prying open the boxes can we hope to wrestle back any sense of freedom. By cracking open the exterior and examining their contents, even if it appears to be empty or non-sensical or overwhelming or by simply looking do we destroy it or taint it, can we regain that tiny sliver of control and thus of freedom. At the very least, we will have broken some very expensive things.



Algorithms
Black Holes
Books
Brains
Cameras
Cats
Coffins
Computers
Cell Phones
Crystals
Flight Recorders
Matruska Dolls
Newspapers
Neural Networks
Paintings
Polaroids
Saturn's Storm
The Kaaba
Urns
etc.