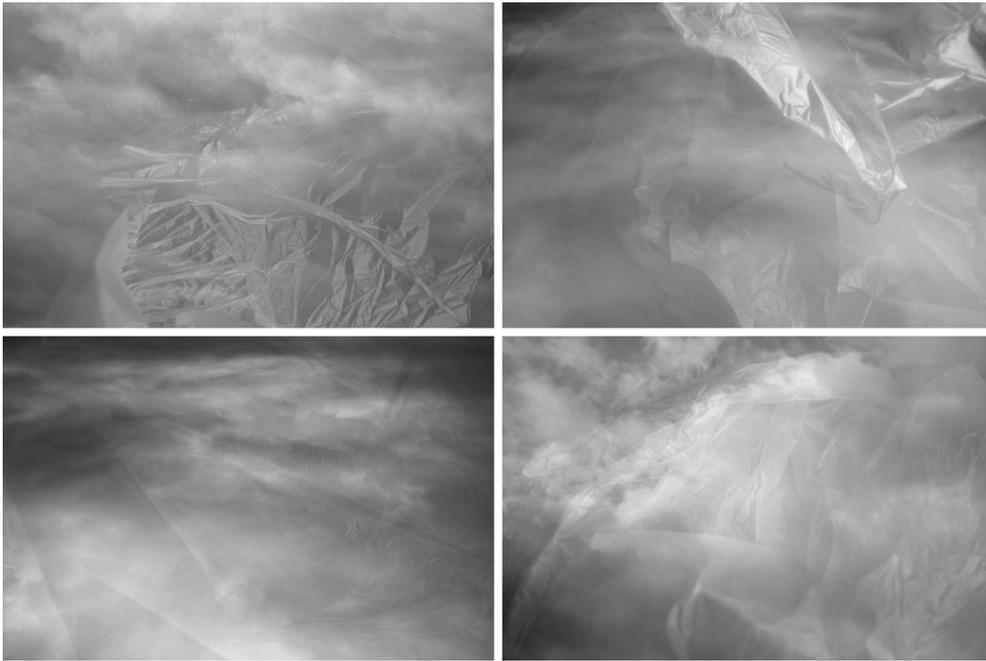


# The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography

JOANNA ZYLINSKA

## Abstract

Living in the media-saturated society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become tantamount to being photographed on a constant basis. Our identity is constituted and confirmed by the ongoing flow of photo streams on our mobile phones, tablets and social media platforms such as Facebook and Tumblr, not to mention the thousands of security cameras invisibly registering our image when we pass through city centres, shopping malls and airports. This photographic process is largely automatized: it is subject to the logic and vision of the machine. Even the supposed human-centric decisions with regard to *what* to photograph and *how* to do it are often *reactions* to events quickly unfolding in front of the photographer's eyes, or *responses* to pre-established visual categories: landscape, portraiture, play, war. This chapter argues that human-driven photography – involving an act of conscious looking through a viewfinder or at an LCD screen – is only one small part of what takes place in the field of photography, even though it is often made to stand in for photography *as such*. Yet, rather than contribute to recent jeremiads about photography – what with it being seen as supposedly dying in the digital era because it is no longer authentic or material enough, or imploding due to its excessiveness and banality as evidenced on Instagram and in the much maligned selfie phenomenon – it also suggests that it is precisely through focusing on its nonhuman aspect that *we can find life in photography*.



Images 1–4 (from above left). Joanna Zylińska, from the series *Topia daedala*, 2014.

*Photography as philosophy*

This article offers a philosophical exposition of the concept of ‘nonhuman photography’. What is meant by nonhuman photography here is not *just* photos taken by agents that are not human, such as CCTV cameras, body scanners, space satellites or Google Street View, although some of these examples will be referenced throughout the piece. Yet the principal aim of this article is to suggest that there is more to photography than meets the (human) eye and that *all photography is to some extent nonhuman*. With this, no doubt still somewhat cryptic, proposition in mind, let us take a small detour from philosophising to look at a photographic project which introduces the key ideas behind this article.

Called *Topia daedala* (Images 1–4), this series of twelve black and white photographs<sup>225</sup> arises out of an ongoing exploration on my part of various forms of manufactured landscape. Taken from two vantage points on both sides of a window, the composite images that make up the series interweave human and nonhuman creativity by overlaying the outer world of cloud formation with the inner space of sculptural arrangement. Remediating the tradition of the sublime as embraced by J.M.W. Turner’s landscape paintings and Ansel Adams’ national park photographs, the series foregrounds the inherent manufacturedness of what counts as ‘landscape’ and of the conventions of its visual representation. Through this, *Topia daedala* performs a micro-sublime for the Anthropocene era, a period in which the human has become identified as a geological agent whose impact on the geo- and biosphere has been irreversible. It also raises questions on the role of plastic – as both construction material and debris – in the age of petrochemical urgency.

*Topia daedala* is not meant to serve as a direct illustration of the concept of nonhuman photography this article engages with. However, it does introduce us to a wider problematic of human-nonhuman relations, raising at the same time the politico-ethical question about our human responsibility in the world in which the agency of the majority of actants – such as wind, rain or earthquake – goes beyond that of human decision or will, even if it may be influenced by human action. The question of human responsibility in the universe which is quintessentially entangled, on both a cellular and cosmic level (with us all being ‘made of starstuff’),<sup>226</sup> is an important one. Even if we cannot be entirely sure what this fragile human ‘we’ actually stands for, the responsibility to face, and give an account of, the unfoldings of this world – which is made up of human and nonhuman entities and relations – *belongs to us humans in a singular way*. Philosophy, in particular ethics, has typically been a way of addressing the

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<sup>225</sup> This series was developed as a visual track for my book, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*.

<sup>226</sup> This is a famous line by physicist Carl Sagan from his documentary TV series, *Cosmos*.

problem of responsibility.<sup>227</sup> But written linear argument is only one mode of enquiry through which this problem can be approached. Alongside philosophical writing, over the recent years I have been attempting to experiment with other, less verbal, modes of addressing ethical and political issues: those enabled by art, and, more specifically, photography. These experiments have been driven by one overarching question: is it possible to *practice philosophy as a form of art*, while also *engaging in art-making and photography as ways of philosophising*? The reason photography may lend itself to this kind of cross-modal experimentation is because of its ontological, or world-making (rather than *just* representational), capabilities. We can turn here for support to literary critic Walter Benn Michaels, who, while upholding ‘the impossibility (and the undesirability) of simply denying the indexicality of the photograph’,<sup>228</sup> also argues that ‘It is precisely because there are ways in which photographs *are not* just representations that photography and the theory of photography have been so important’.<sup>229</sup> My proposition about photography’s ontological capabilities entails a stronger claim than the one made by Michael Fried in the Conclusion to his book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, in which photography as practiced by representatives of what Fried calls ‘the anti-theatrical tradition’ such as Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth or Berndt and Hilda Becher is positioned as ‘an ontological medium’, because it ‘makes a positive contribution’ to ontological thought via its engagement with issues such as absorption and worldhood.<sup>230</sup> While for Fried photography just *makes philosophy better*, my claim in this article is that *photography makes philosophy*, full stop – and also, more importantly, that *photography makes worldhood*, rather than just commenting on it.

It may seem at this point that what was meant to be an account of nonhuman photography is revealing itself to be quite strongly attached to the concept of the human – as philosopher, photographer or art critic. This is true, because there is nothing more humanist than any unexamined singular gesture of trying to ‘move on beyond the human’. My ambition here, as in my other work, is therefore to explore the possibility of continuing to work with the concept of the human *in the light the*

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<sup>227</sup> In my books *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor, 2014), *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 2009) and *The Ethics of Cultural Studies* (Continuum, London and New York, 2005) I explored this question of responsibility by taking some steps towards outlining a non-prescriptive, non-moralistic, content-free ethics.

<sup>228</sup> W B Michaels, ‘Photographs and Fossils’, in *Photography Theory*, J Elkin (ed.), Routledge, New York and London, 2007, p. 447.

<sup>229</sup> Michaels, p. 445.

<sup>230</sup> M Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, p. 347.

*posthumanist critique*,<sup>231</sup> taking the latter seriously as both an injunction and a set of possibilities. The reasons for this proposed retention of the human have nothing to do with any kind of residual humanism or species nostalgia. Instead, they spring from the recognition of a *strategic* role of the concept of the human in any kind of artistic, creative, political or ethical project worth its salt, while also remaining aware of the fact that in many works of recent posthumanist theory the human has been successfully exposed as nothing more than a fantasy of unity and selfhood. This fantasy has been premised on the exclusion of the human's dependency, both material and conceptual, on other beings and non-living entities. Seen as too Eurocentric and masculinist by postcolonial and feminist theory, the human has also been revealed by various sciences to be just an arbitrary cut off point in the line of species continuity on the basis of characteristics shared across the species barrier: communication, emotions or tool use. This (non- or posthumanist) human this article retains as the anchor point of its enquiry is thus premised on the realisation that we are in (philosophical) trouble as soon as we start speaking about the human, but it also shows a certain intransigence that makes (some of) us hang on to the vestiges of the concept that has structured our thinking, philosophy and art for many centuries. So, onto a posthumanist theory of nonhuman photography, as articulated by a human, all too human, philosopher-photographer...

*Towards nonhuman photography (and all the way back)*

By way of contextualising our discussion of nonhuman photography, I want to look at two important texts in photography theory in which the relationship between human and nonhuman agents, technologies and practices has been addressed explicitly: a 2008 essay by John Tagg titled 'Mindless Photography' and a 2009 book by Fred Ritchin titled *After Photography*. Tagg's essay is a commentary on the supposed withering of the critical paradigm in both photographic practice and its interpretation, a paradigm articulated by Victor Burgin in his 1984 seminal text *Thinking Photography* and subsequently adopted by many scholars and students of photography. In his article Tagg references two then recent phenomena which, in his view, had radically altered the relationship between photography and the human: the CCTV system introduced in 2003 to

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<sup>231</sup> Although the tradition of posthumanist critique in the humanities extends as far back as at least the work of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, and includes writings by authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway, some of the recent key texts that critically expound the concept of posthumanism include: N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999; Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013; and Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013.

monitor the implementation of congestion charge in central London and the visual rendering of data captured by a radio telescope, in June 2005, of solar dust cloud radiation in the Taurus Molecular Cloud, with the data representing an event that 'took place in 1585, or thereabouts'.<sup>232</sup> While in the 1970s and early 1980s 'photography was framed as a site of human meanings that called the human into place', the more recent developments cited by Tagg are said to have undermined 'this confident assumption'.<sup>233</sup> Tagg seems disturbed by the fact that, in the London traffic surveillance system, the relationship between the embodied human subject and the technical apparatus has been irrevocably broken, with the technological circuit which consists of 'cameras, records, files and computers'<sup>234</sup> doing away with visual presentation, 'communication, psychic investment, a subject, or even a bodily organ'<sup>235</sup> – until the visual data concerning the car with a given number plate that has missed the congestion charge payment reaches the court. Tagg is similarly troubled by the severance of the relationship between photography and human sensation, between stimulus and response, in space photography. He goes so far as to suggest that in those new technological developments

*photography loses its function as a representation of the ego and the eye and even as a pleasure machine built to excite the body. In place of those figures, photography is encountered as an utterly dead thing; mindless in a much blunter sense than imagined [by Burgin] twenty-five years ago... [It is] driving towards a systemic disembodiment that, accelerating in the technologies of cybernetics and informatics, has sought to prepare what has been hailed as the 'postbiological' or 'posthuman' body for its insertions into a new machinic enslavement.*<sup>236</sup>

Photography which is unable to provide stimulation and pleasure for the human is then immediately linked by Tagg with mindlessness, emptiness and, ultimately, death. It may seem that, with this articulation, Tagg is engaging in a belated attempt to rescue photography from its long-standing association with mortality established by canonical texts such as Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, and to retrospectively postulate *the possibility of photography acting as a life-giving force*. However, this no doubt radical possibility, briefly hinted at in the above cited passage, is immediately withdrawn. Photography does not deliver life to the human any more and, for Tagg, it is only the human that can be both life's subject and its arbiter. This is of course a familiar philosophical gesture, first enacted by Aristotle,

<sup>232</sup> J Tagg, 'Mindless Photography', in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, J J Long, A Noble and E Welch (eds), Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 21.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

whereby technology is reduced to a mere tool for human existence, survival or improvement and is then assessed on the basis of how well it performs this function (rather than being understood as a dynamic network of forces the way Michel Foucault and Bernard Stiegler respectively suggest, or as an ‘intrinsic correlation of functions’<sup>237</sup> between the human and the apparatus the way Vilém Flusser apprehends it). Conceived in these instrumental terms, as the human’s opponent and enemy – and not part of the originary techno-logic that brings forth the human in the world, and the world itself as a space occupied by human and nonhuman entities – photography must inevitably fail.

It would be unfair not to mention the political motivation that underpins Tagg’s argument. His concern with ‘machinic enslavement’ is driven by what he sees as the deprivation of the human subject of both corporeal integrity and political subjectivity as a result of the encroachment of those new photoimaging technologies, in which ‘there is nothing to be seen’, on our lives.<sup>238</sup> This concern no doubt becomes even more pressing in the era of global networked surveillance enacted by the likes of the NSA, GCHQ, Facebook and Google. Yet to blame photography for the immoral and inhumane actions of its users is to misidentify the enemy, while also weakening the power of a political critique developed in its ambit. In his essay Tagg takes some significant steps towards analysing the changes occurring to photographic practice at the beginning of the twenty-first century but then recoils in horror from the brink of his own analysis. What could have served as a stepping stone towards developing both a radical posthumanist photography theory *and* a radical posthumanist political analysis ends up retreating into a place of melancholia for the human of yesteryear, one who was supposedly in control of both his personal body and the body politic but who can now only tilt at windmills – which are turning into drones in front of his very eyes.

If only Tagg had allowed himself to hear the exhortation from another photography theory radical, Fred Ritchin! Admittedly, Ritchin’s work is not free from a sense of melancholia espoused by Tagg: in *After Photography* Ritchin clearly reveals how he misses the time when people believed in images and when images could be used to solve conflict and serve justice. Yet, even though his book opens up with a rather dispiriting account of the changes occurring to the photographic medium and its representationalist ambitions, it ends with an affirmation of *life in photography*. Dazzled by the horizon of scale opened by telescoping and physics in a similar way Tagg was, Ritchin nevertheless admits that ‘in the digital-quantum world, it might be just possible ... to use an emerging post-photography to delineate, document, and explore the posthuman. To dance with ambiguity. To

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<sup>237</sup> Cited from a letter written by Flusser in S Zielinski, [... *After the Media*], Univocal, Minneapolis, 2013, p. 114. Zielinski explains that, for Flusser, ‘the apparatus does what the human wants it to do, and the human can only want what the apparatus is able to do’, p. 114.

<sup>238</sup> Tagg, p. 24.

introduce humility to the observer, as well as a sense of belonging. To say yes, and simultaneously, no'.<sup>239</sup>

*(Always) nonhuman photography*

It is precisely in this critical-philosophical spirit, of saying yes and, simultaneously, no, that my opening proposition that *all photography is to some extent nonhuman* should be read. While I am aware of, and concerned with, ways in which the nonhuman aspect of photography can produce inhumane practices, I also want to suggest that it is precisely in its nonhuman aspect that photography's creative, or world-making, side can be identified. Therefore, rather than contribute to recent jeremiads about photography, what with it being seen as supposedly dying in the digital era because it is no longer authentic or material enough, or imploding due to its excessiveness and banality as evidenced on Instagram and in the much maligned selfie phenomenon, I want to argue in what follows that it is precisely through focusing on its nonhuman aspect that we can find life in photography. This line of argument is partly indebted to the work of Flusser, who, in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* writes: 'The photographic apparatus lies in wait for photography; it sharpens its teeth in readiness. This readiness to spring into action on the part of apparatuses, their similarity to wild animals, is something to grasp hold of in the attempt to define the term etymologically'.<sup>240</sup> Flusser builds here on the Latin origins of the term 'apparatus', which derives from *apparare*, 'make ready for' (as a combination of the prefix *ad-*, 'toward', and *parare*, 'make ready'). This leads him to read photography as facilitated by, or even proto-inscribed in, the nexus of image-capture devices, various chemical and electronic components and processes, as well as sight- and technology-equipped humans.

Flusser's proposition challenges the humanist narrative of invention as an outcome of singular human genius: it recognises the significance of the technological set-up in the emergence of various human practices. This is not to say that these practices function *outside* the human but rather that the concepts of self-contained human intentionality and sovereign human agency may be too limited to describe the emergence of specific technological processes at a particular moment in time. Flusser's idea seems to be (unwittingly) reflected in Geoffrey Batchen's proposition outlined in *Burning with Desire* that photography was invented – seemingly repeatedly, by Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre, Hyppolyte Bayard and William Fox Talbot, among others – due to the fact that in the early nineteenth century there already existed a desire for it. This desire

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<sup>239</sup> F Ritchin, *After Photography*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2009, p. 183.

<sup>240</sup> V Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, pp. 21-22.

manifested itself in the proliferation of the discourses and ideas about the possibility of capturing images and fixing them, and of the technologies – ‘the camera obscura and the chemistry necessary to reproduce’<sup>241</sup> the images taken with it – that would facilitate such a development. We could therefore perhaps go so far as to say that the photographic apparatus, which for Batchen contains but also exceeds a discrete human component, was awaiting the very invention of photography.

The above discussed ideas on the photographic apparatus will eventually point me not just towards rethinking the photographic medium but also towards a possibility (one that has been withheld by Tagg) of a posthumanist political analysis. For now, taking inspiration from Flusser, I want to suggest that human-driven photography – where an act of conscious looking through a viewfinder or, more frequently nowadays, at an LCD screen held at arm’s level – is only one small part of what goes on in the field of photography, even though it is often made to stand in for photography *as such*. The execution of human agency in photographic practice, be it professional or amateur, ostensibly manifests itself in decisions about the subject matter (the ‘what’) and about ways of capturing this subject matter with a digital or analogue apparatus (the ‘how’). Yet in amateur, snapshot-type photography these supposed human-centric decisions are often affective reactions to events quickly unfolding in front of the photographer’s eyes. Such reactions happen too quickly, or we could even say *automatically*, for any conscious processes of decision-making to be involved – bar that original decision to actually have, bring and use a camera, rather than not. This automatism in photography also manifests itself in the fact that these kinds of ‘snap’ reactions are usually rechanneled through a whole database of standardised, pre-programmed, pre-existing image-frames, whose significance we are already familiar with and which we are trying to recreate in a unique way, under the umbrella of so-called individual experience: ‘toddler running towards mother’; ‘girl blowing a candle on a birthday cake’; ‘couple posing in front of the Taj Mahal’. It is in this sense that, as Flusser has it, ‘weddings conform to a photographic program’.<sup>242</sup>

Similar representationalist ambitions accompany many professional photographic activities, including those undertaken by photojournalists who aim to show us, objectively and without judging, what war, poverty and ‘the pain of others’, to borrow Susan Sontag’s phrase,<sup>243</sup> are ‘really’ like, or those performed by photographic artists. Even prior to any moment of making a picture actually occur, fine art photographers tend to remain invested in the modernist idea of an artist as a human agent with a

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<sup>241</sup> G Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p. 25.

<sup>242</sup> V Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001, p. 56.

<sup>243</sup> See S Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York, 2003.

particular vocation, one whose aesthetic and conceptual gestures are aimed at capturing something unique, or at least capturing it uniquely, with an image-making device. And thus we get works of formal portraiture; images of different types of vegetation or geological formations that are made to constitute ‘landscapes’; still-life projects of aestheticised domesticity, including close-ups of kitchen utensils, fraying carpets or light traces on a wall; and, last but not least, all those works that can be gathered into that rag-bag called ‘conceptual photography’.<sup>244</sup> In this way, images inscribe themselves in a cybernetic loop of familiarity, with minor variations to style, colour and the (re)presented object made to stand for creativity, originality or even ‘genius’.

### *The automated image*

Through the decisions of artists and amateurs about their practice, photography becomes an act of *making something significant*, even if not necessarily *making it signify something* in any straightforward way. It is a practice of focusing on what is in its very nature multifocal, of literally casting light on what would have otherwise remained obscure, of carving a fragment from the flow of life and turning it into a splinter of what, post-factum, becomes known as ‘reality’. Traditionally, this moment of selection – referred to as ‘decisive’ by followers of the documentary tradition in photography – was associated with the pressing of the button to open the camera’s shutter. However, with the introduction of the Lytro camera on to the market in 2012, the temporality of this seemingly unique and transient photographic moment has been stretched into both the past and the future. Lytro captures the entire light field rather than a single plane of light, thus allowing the photographer to change and readjust the focus on a computer in postproduction. Interestingly, Lytro is advertised as ‘The only camera that captures life in living pictures’ – a poetic formulation which is underpinned by the ongoing industry claim to ‘absolute novelty’, but which merely exacerbates and visualises the inherent instability of *all* photographic practice and *all* photographic objects. Lytro is thus just one more element in the long-term humanist narrative about ‘man’s dominion over the earth’, a narrative that drives the progressive automatising of many of our everyday devices, including cameras, cars and refrigerators.

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<sup>244</sup> There are of course many ways of systematising art photography, with additional categories and subcategories – such as ‘abstraction’, ‘architecture’ or ‘nude’ – being frequently listed. The quick typology proposed here does not aim to be comprehensive or scholarly: rather, my aim is to highlight the traditional categories frequently used by professional fine art photography exhibition and competitions, as well as amateur artist photo hosting sites. The last category, ‘conceptual photography’, is perhaps the most open and the most contentious. I am using the term here in the expanded sense it has gained on many art photography websites. To cite from one of them, Fotoblur ([www.fotoblur.com](http://www.fotoblur.com)), conceptual photography is a ‘genre of photography in which the artist makes a photograph of a concept or idea’.

Giving us an illusion of control over technology by making cameras smaller and domestic equipment more user-friendly, the technoscientific industry actually exacerbates the gap between technology and the human by relieving us from the responsibility of getting to know and engage with the increasingly software-driven 'black boxes'.



Image 5. An example from Véronique Ducharme's series *Encounters* consisting of images taken by automatic hunting cameras.

In the light of the dominance of the humanist paradigm in photography, a paradigm that is premised on the supposed human control of both the practice of image-making and the equipment, it is important to ask what gets elided in such conceptualisations. Of course, I am not the only one who is asking this question: the problem of nonhuman agency in photography has been explored by other theorists, artists and curators. *One recent photography event that brought many of these ideas to the fore was Drone: The Automated Image, a series of shows taking place under the umbrella of the photography biennale Le Mois de la Photo in Montreal, curated by Paul Wombell, in 2013.*<sup>245</sup> The uniqueness of this 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the Montreal biennale lay not so much in highlighting the machinic aspect of photographic and video practice, as this aspect had already been mobilised in the early days of photography – for example, in the works of Alexander Rodchenko or László Moholy-Nagy. *Drone: The Automated*

<sup>245</sup> This article arises out of a catalogue essay I wrote for this exhibition: J Zylinska, 'All the World's a Camera: Notes on Nonhuman Photography', in *Drone: The Automated Image*, Paul Wombell (ed.), Kerber, Bielefeld, 2013.

*Image* (which was concerned with much more than just drones) took one step further on this road towards not just nonhuman but also posthumanist photography by actually departing from the human-centric visualisation process. In many of the works shown, the very act and process of capture were relegated to a computer, a camera mounted atop a moving vehicle, a robot or a dog. To mention just one example, Canadian artist Véronique Ducharme presented a photography-based installation called *Encounters*, consisting of images taken by automatic hunting cameras (Image 5). As the artist herself explains,

*Over the course of one year, automatic cameras, installed in various parts of the Quebec landscape, recorded images from the forest. The images included animals, sunrise, wind and other actants susceptible of triggering the shutter of the cameras. These digital images, including the ‘mistakes’ of the cameras (i.e., blacked-out or overexposed images) were then transferred onto slide film in order to be projected in the gallery space using slide projectors. Accompanied by its rhythmic mechanical click, each machine has been programmed to sporadically and unpredictably project the images around the space, leaving the viewer entangled within the dialogue created by the machines and the images.<sup>246</sup>*

Ducharme’s project offers a thought-provoking intervention into the debate about (human) intentionality in photography theory, whereby the former is seen as a condition and a guarantee of the medium being considered a form of art.<sup>247</sup> Photographic agency is distributed here amongst a network of participants, which includes not just nonhuman but also inanimate actors – even if ‘the beholder’ of the installation is still envisaged to be a human gallery-goer.

Ducharme’s work has similarities with another project which foregrounds and remediates nonhuman photographic agency without reneging on its human dimension: *Stolen Images* by British photographer Juliet Ferguson (Image 6), published in the London independent photography magazine *Flip* in 2012 and online in *Photomediations Machine* in 2013. Accessing CCTV cameras using appropriate search terms via Google as part of her journalism job, Ferguson was able ‘to see through the all-seeing eyes of the CCTV camera places’<sup>248</sup> what she would not have access to in the real world – without leaving her sofa. The process led her to reflect ‘on what it means to take a photograph’ and to pose the following questions: ‘The majority of

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<sup>246</sup> V Ducharme, *Encounters*, 15.02.2014, *Photomediations Machine*, <http://photomediationsmachine.net/2014/02/15/encounters/>

<sup>247</sup> For the exposition of this argument, developed in response to the work of Michael Fried on the work of Thomas Demand, see Michaels, pp. 443–44.

<sup>248</sup> J Ferguson, *Stolen Images*, 29.04.2013, *Photomediations Machine*, <http://photomediationsmachine.net/2013/04/29/stolen-images>

the cameras I used I could pan, zoom and focus. Is this any less photography than someone using a fully automatic camera and taking a picture from a designated panorama point at a beauty spot? Does photography demand a presence or are photographs taken using appropriated cameras controlled from another country in another time zone just as valid as “created” images?’.<sup>249</sup> Ferguson has revealed that, in the process, she began ‘to see a certain beauty in the images as they became removed from their original intention of surveillance. Instead, they offered a unique perspective on the ebb and flow of a day, from a vantage point and rigidity that ordinary photography doesn’t offer’.<sup>250</sup>

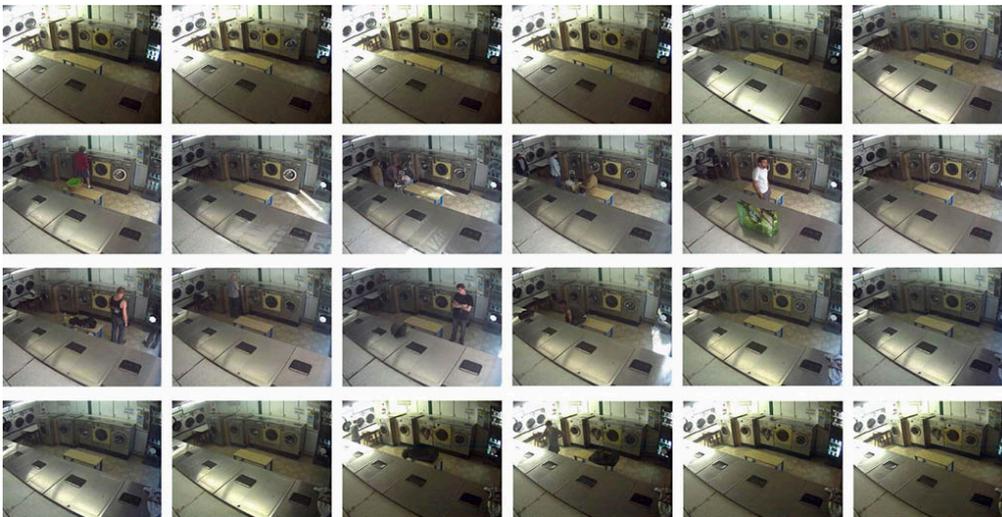


Image 6. An example from Juliet Ferguson's series *Stolen Images* created with CCTV cameras.

### *The photographic condition*

These two projects discussed above demonstrate that art practice is merely part of a wider *photographic condition*, with things photographing themselves, without always being brought back to the human spectrum of vision as the ultimate channel of perception and of things perceived. Naturally, humans form part of this photographic continuum – as artists, photojournalists, festival organisers, computer programmers, engineers, printers, Instagram users, and, last but not least, spectators. However, what the examples just presented make explicit is that we are all part of that photographic flow of things being incessantly photographed, and of trying to make interventions from within the midst of it. In this way, Ducharme’s and Ferguson’s projects fall into a category that we might term ‘insignificant photography’ – not in the sense that they are mindless (as Tagg would perhaps have it), irrelevant and of no consequence, but rather

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

in the sense of allowing us to see things that have been captured almost incidentally and in passing, with the thematic ‘what’ not being the key impulse behind the execution of the images. It is worth emphasising that this idea of insignificant photography has not just come to the fore with the development of networked digital technologies but was actually present in the early discourse of photography, even if the latter tended to confine photography’s nonhuman aspect to the fairly conservative idea of ‘objective observation’. Steve Edwards explains that

*Throughout its history, the camera has repeatedly been seen as an objective machine that captures information without any interference from the artist. ... in the early years of photography this was an often repeated theme: it was assumed that the sun made the picture, or the camera did, or even that the object in question depicted itself (Talbot spoke of his country pile, Lacock Abbey, as the first building ‘that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture’).<sup>251</sup>*

The separation between the mechanism of photography as ‘objective observation’ and the human-centric notion of the ‘intentionality’ of the photographer has been used as a disciplinary device in art history: as signalled before, the elevation of photography to the status of art has been premised upon it.<sup>252</sup> It is this separation that the work of many contemporary photographers such as Ducharme and Ferguson troubles to a significant extent.

So what is meant by this notion of *photographic condition*, and does the postulation of its existence stand up to philosophical and experiential scrutiny? To explore these questions, let us start from a very simple proposition: *there is life in photography*. If living in the so-called media age has become tantamount to being photographed on a permanent basis, with our identity constituted and verified by the ongoing development of our photo galleries and photo streams on mobile phones, tablets and social media platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr and Pinterest, not to mention the thousands of security cameras quietly and often invisibly registering our image when we pass through city centres, shopping malls and airports, then, contrary to its more typical Barthesian association with the passage of time and death, photography can be understood more productively as a life-making process. As Sarah Kember and I argue in *Life after New Media*, it is ‘precisely in its efforts to arrest duration, to capture or still the flow of life – beyond singular photographs’ success or failure at representing *this* or *that* referent – that photography’s vital forces are activated’.<sup>253</sup> Photography

<sup>251</sup> S Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 19.

<sup>252</sup> Fried’s *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* espouses this point of view.

<sup>253</sup> S Kember and J Zylinska, *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 72.

lends itself to being understood in a critical vitalist framework due to its positioning in a network of dynamic relations between present and past, movement and stasis, flow and cut. In making cuts into duration, in stabilising the temporal flow into entities, photography is inherently involved with time. Significantly, for vitalist philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, time, duration and movement stand precisely for life itself. As Bergson provocatively asks, ‘But is it not obvious that the photograph, if photograph there be, is already taken, already developed in the very heart of things and at all the points of space?’<sup>254</sup> Photography’s proximity to life is therefore revealed in its temporal aspect, which is enacted in photography’s dual ontology, whereby it can be seen as both object and practice, as both snapshot and all the other virtual snapshots that could have potentially been there, and, last but not least, as both being something here and now and as something always unfolding into something else. It is also in this dual ontology that the nonhuman side of photography comes to the fore, enacted as it is through agents as diverse as CCTV, aerial camera systems, satellites, endoscopy equipment and webcams as well as camera and mobile-phone-sporting humans. It is perhaps worth making a quick reservation here that, to acknowledge the life-making aspect of photography is not necessarily to condone the politically suspicious yet increasingly widespread technologies of ubiquitous surveillance, control and loss of privacy enabled by various kinds of cameras. However, much has already been written about the latter, with little acknowledgement so far of the vital potentiality of photography – which, in an ontological sense, *does not have to* be agent of control, even if it often is. There is therefore a danger of moralising photography in academic and public discourses before its potential has been truly explored. The foregrounding of the inherently creative power of photography as a practice is part of the philosophical argument of this article, although issues of politics never disappear from its agenda.

### *Photography and life*

The on-off activity of the photographic process, which carves life into fragments while simultaneously reconnecting them to the imagistic flow, may allow us to conclude not only that there is life in photography, but also that life itself is photographic. Interestingly, Claire Colebrook explains this process of creative becoming in and of life by drawing on the very concept of image production, or ‘imaging’. She writes: ‘All life, according to Bergson and to Deleuze after him, can be considered as a form of perception or “imaging” where there is not one being that apprehends or represents another being, but two vectors of creativity where one potential for differentiation encounters another and from that potential forms a

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<sup>254</sup> H Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, George Allen & Unwinn Ltd., London, 1911, p. 31.

relatively stable tendency or manner'.<sup>255</sup> This idea has its root in Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, where our experience of the world, which is always a way of sensing the world, comes in the form of images. We should mention here that, on the whole, Bergson is somewhat hesitant about the role played by images in cognition: in *Creative Evolution* he dismisses them as mere 'snapshots' of perception, post-factum reductions of duration and time to a sequence of the latter's frozen slices.<sup>256</sup> It may therefore seem strange to be revisiting the work of a philosopher who only used the concept of photography negatively, to outline a 'better', i.e. more intuitive and more fluid, mode of perception and cognition, in an attempt to say something new about photography. However, my argument here, as in my previous work,<sup>257</sup> is that Bergson's error is first and foremost media-specific and not philosophical per se: namely, he misunderstands photography's inherently creative and dynamic power by reducing it to a sequence of already fossilised artefacts, with the mind fragmenting the world into a sequence of 'snapshots'. This is why I want to suggest that, its mystical underpinnings aside, we can mobilise Bergson's philosophical writings on duration understood as a manifestation of *élan vital* to rethink photography as a quintessential practice of life. Indeed, photography is one possible (and historically specific) enactment of the creative practice of imaging, with the cuts into duration it makes always remaining connected to the flow of time. If we accept the fact that cutting – be it with our visual or conceptual apparatus – is inevitable to the processes of making sense of the world, then we can see any outcomes of the photographic cut, i.e. photographs and other products of the image-making process, as temporary stabilisations of the flow of duration that still bear a trace of life – rather than as frozen and ultimately deadly mementoes of the past. It is important to point out that, in order to recognise any kind of process as a process, we need to see it against the concept of a temporary stabilisation, interruption or cut into this process. A photograph is one possible form such stabilisations take, and a rather ubiquitous one at that. It is precisely because of its ubiquity and its increasingly intuitive technological apparatus that it serves as a

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<sup>255</sup> C Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life*, Continuum, London and New York, 2010, p. 11.

<sup>256</sup> Bemoaning our suppression of intuition – which can offer us a more accurate and less fragmented picture of the world – Bergson highlights our overreliance on the intellect in the cognitive process: "*Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself. Perception, intellection, language so proceed in general. Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us.*" [H Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Random House, The Modern Library, New York, 1944 (first published in 1911), p. 362.]

<sup>257</sup> This section develops some of the ideas discussed in chapter 3 of Kember and Zylinska, *Life After New Media*.

perfect illustration of Bergson's ideas – or rather, of my own 'differentiated reading' of Bergson. Bergson himself foregrounds this mutually constitutive relationship between process and stoppage when he says that 'Things are constituted by the instantaneous cut which the understanding practices, at a given moment, on a flux of this kind, and what is mysterious when we compare the cuts together becomes clear when we relate them to the flux'.<sup>258</sup> This supposition allows us to posit photography as an ultimately salutary and creative force in managing the duration of the world by the human as a species with limited cognitive and sensory capacity.

The notion of the creative role of the imaging process in life has also recently made its manifestation in the work of radical biologists, such as Lynn Margulis. As she puts it in a book co-authored with her son Dorian Sagan, 'All living beings, not just animals, but plants and microorganisms, perceive. To survive, an organic being must perceive – it must seek, or at least recognize, food and avoid environmental danger'.<sup>259</sup> This act of perception, which involves the seeking out and recognition of something else, involves the making of an image of that something else (food, predator, sexual partner), one that needs to be at least temporarily fixed in order for the required proximity – for consumption or sex – to be accomplished. We could perhaps therefore suggest that imaging is a form of proto-photography, planting the seed of the combined human-machinic 'desire' explored by Batchen that came to its own in the early nineteenth century. After Bergson, images (which are not yet photographs) stand for 'a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing – an existence placed half-way between the "thing" and the "representation"'.<sup>260</sup> It is precisely through images that novelty comes into the world, which is why images should not be reduced to mere representations but should rather be understood as creations, 'some of which are philosophical, some artistic, some scientific'.<sup>261</sup> To put this another way, the creative impulse of life takes it beyond representation as a form of picturing what already exists: instead, life is a creation of images in the most radical sense, a way of temporarily stabilising matter into forms. Photographic practice as we conventionally know it, with all the automatism it entails, is just one instantiation of this creative process of life.

If all life is indeed photographic, the notion of the photographic apparatus that embraces yet also goes beyond the human becomes fundamental to our understanding of what we have called the photographic condition. To speak of the photographic apparatus is of course not just to argue for a straightforward replacement of the human vision with a machinic one, but rather to recognise the mutual intertwining and co-constitution of the

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<sup>258</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 272.

<sup>259</sup> L Margulis and D Sagan, *What Is Life?*, University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000, p. 27.

<sup>260</sup> Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. vii.

<sup>261</sup> Colebrook, *Deleuze*, p. 23.

organic and the machinic, the technical and the discursive, in the production of vision, and hence of the world. In her work on the use of apparatuses in physics experiments, the philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad argues that such devices are not just 'passive observing instruments; on the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena'.<sup>262</sup> We could easily apply this argument to photography, where the camera as a viewing device, the photographic frame both in the viewfinder and as the circumference of a photographic print, the enlarger, the computer, the printer, the photographer (who, in many instances, such as surveillance or speed cameras, is replaced by the camera-eye), and, last but not least, the discourses about photography and vision that produce them as objects for us humans are all active agents in the constitution of a photograph. In other words, they are all part of what we understand by photography.

### *Becoming a camera*



Image 7. An example from Lindsay Seers's series *It Has To Be This Way*, 2009.

As signalled earlier, it is not just philosophy that help us envisage this nonhuman, machinic dimension of photography: photographic, and, more broadly, artistic practice is even better predisposed to enact it (rather than just provide an argument *about* it). A series of works by British artist Lindsay Seers is a case in point. Exhibited, among other places, at Matt's Gallery in London as *It Has To Be This Way* in 2009, and accompanied by an aptly titled book, *Human Camera*, Seers' ongoing project consists of a

<sup>262</sup> K Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*,: Duke University Press, Durham, 2007, p. 142.

number of seemingly autobiographic films. These are full of bizarre yet just-about-believable adventures occurring to their heroine, all verified by a body of ‘experts’ – from doctors and critics through to family members – that appear in the films but also leave behind ‘evidence’ in the form of numerous written accounts, photographs and documentary records. In one of the films, a young girl, positioned as ‘Lindsay Seers’, is living her life unable to make a distinction between herself and the world, or between the world and its representations. The girl is gifted with exceptional memory so, like a camera that is permanently switched on, she records and remembers practically everything. ‘It is as if I was in a kaleidoscope, a bead in the mesmerising and constantly shifting pattern. Everything was in flux, every single moment and every single object rewritten at every turn’, as ‘Lindsay Seers’ recalls in a short piece called ‘Becoming Something’ included in *Human Camera*.<sup>263</sup> This terrifyingly magnificent gift is lost once the girl sees a photograph of herself. She then spends her adult life clothed in a black sack, photographing things obsessively. In this way, she is literally trying to ‘become a camera’ by making photographs on light-sensitive paper inserted into her mouth, with the images produced ‘bathed in the red light’ of her body (Image 7). This ambition is later replaced by an attempt to ‘become a projector’ by creating things ex nihilo through the emanation of light. Some of Seers’ films presented in the show are screened in a black hut modelled on Thomas Edison’s *Black Maria*, his New Jersey film studio that was used for projection as well as photography. With this, Seers invites us not just to witness her process of becoming a camera but also to enter a giant camera ourselves, to literally step into the world of imaging, to re-connect us to the technicity of our own being.

Although Bergson’s argument about life as a form of imaging is posited as transhistorical, we can add a particular inflection to it by returning to Flusser, and, in particular, his study of the relation between the human and the technical apparatus. For Flusser, that relation changed significantly after the Industrial Revolution, a state of events in which ‘photographers are inside their apparatus and bound up with it... It is a new kind of function in which human beings and apparatus merge into a unity’.<sup>264</sup> Consequently, human beings now ‘function as a function of apparatuses’,<sup>265</sup> limited as they are to the execution of the camera’s programme from the range of seemingly infinite possibilities which are nevertheless determined by the machine’s algorithm. Arguably, humans themselves are enactors of such a programme, a sequence of possibilities enabled by various couplings of adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine, arranged into a double helix of life. To state this is not to postulate some kind of uncritical technological or biological determinism that would remove from ‘us’ any possibility of action – as artists, photographers, critics, or spectators – and any responsibility for the actions we are to take. It is merely to acknowledge our kinship with

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<sup>263</sup> L Seers, *Human Camera*, Article Press, Birmingham, 2007, p. 36.

<sup>264</sup> Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, p. 27.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

other living beings across the evolutionary spectrum, with our lives remaining subject to biochemical reactions that we cannot always understand, control or overcome (from blushing through to ageing and dying). Just as ‘the imagination of the camera is greater than that of every single photographer and that of all photographers put together’,<sup>266</sup> the imagination of ‘the programme called life’ in which we all participate (and which is an outcome of multiple processes running across various scale of the universe) far exceeds our human imagination. Such a recognition of our entanglement as sentient and discursive beings in complex biological and technical networks is necessary if we are to become involved, seriously and responsibly, in any kind of photography, philosophy or other critical or everyday activity in which we aim to exercise ‘free will’.

### *Re-forming the world*

By reconnecting us to the technical apparatus, by letting us explore our machinic kinship, artists such as the appropriately named Seers and the other image-makers discussed in this article are all engaged (even if they are not always up-front about it or perhaps even entirely aware of it) in exploring the fundamental problem that many philosophers of technology who take science seriously have been grappling with: given that ‘there is no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses’, how can we ‘show a way in which it is nevertheless possible to open up a space for freedom’?<sup>267</sup> Such an undertaking is very much needed, according to Flusser, ‘because it is the only form of revolution open to us’.<sup>268</sup> Flusser points to ‘envisioners’, that is ‘people who try to turn an automatic apparatus against its own condition of being automatic’,<sup>269</sup> as those who will be able to undertake the task of standing ‘against the world’, by pointing ‘at it with their fingertips to inform it’.<sup>270</sup> In this perspective, codification and visualisation are seen as radical interventions into the world, and ways of *re-forming* it, rather than as ways of dehumanising it the way Tagg seemed to suggest.

Any prudent and effective way of envisaging and picturing a transformation of our relation to the universe must thus be conducted not in terms of a human struggle against the machine but rather in terms of our mutual co-constitution, as a recognition of our shared kinship. This recognition of the photographic condition that encompasses yet goes beyond the human, and of the photographic apparatus that extends well beyond our eyes and beyond the devices supposedly under our control, should prompt us human philosophers, photographers and spectators to

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82; see also Flusser, *Into the Universe*, p. 63.

<sup>269</sup> Flusser, *Into the Universe*, p. 19.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

mobilise the ongoing creative impulse of life, where the whole world is a camera, and put it to creative rather than conservative uses. The conceptual expansion of processes of image-making beyond the human can also allow us to work towards escaping what Colebrook calls the ‘privatization of the eye in late capitalism’,<sup>271</sup> where what starts out as a defence of our right to look often ends up as a defence of our right to look at the small screen. In challenging the self-possessive individualism of the human eye, photography that seriously and consciously engages with its own expansive ontological condition and its nonhuman genealogy may therefore be seen as a truly revolutionary practice. Indeed, the concept and practice of nonhuman photography reconnects us to other beings and processes across the universe: including those of the Taurus Molecular Cloud. It serves as a reminder that the short moment in natural history when the human species has folded ‘the world around its own, increasingly myopic, point of view’,<sup>272</sup> and that has allowed it to become ‘seduced, spellbound, distracted and captivated by inanity’,<sup>273</sup> should not obscure the wider horizon of our openness to the world, our relationality with it through originary perception. Nonhuman photography can therefore serve as both a response to ‘man’s tendency to reify himself’<sup>274</sup> and an opening towards a radical posthumanist political analysis. It can do this by highlighting that there is more than just one point of view and that, by tearing the eye from the body and embracing the distributed machinic vision, it may be possible to see the drone as a more than just a killing machine – although of course there are no guarantees.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Colebrook, *Deleuze*, p. 17.

<sup>272</sup> C Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1*, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor, 2014, p. 22.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>275</sup> For a playful, tactical media-style exploration of what a drone would do in times of peace see IOCOSE’s project, *Drone Selfies*, 2014, <http://photomediationsmachine.net/2014/08/06/drone-selfies/>.

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