Contingent, but Necessary
(and/or)
Necessary, but Contingent

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Introduction

This paper is my attempt at “speaking nearby” to the work I have been making over the past three years, rather than about it, to borrow an idea from Trinh T. Minh-Ha.\(^1\) I have been working primarily on a body of photographic works, along with a few related projects in sound, film/video, and performance. All the projects share a thematic link, in that they are meditations on photography—what photographs are, and what they do. I will go more in depth about this throughout the paper, but to put it briefly: I see photographs as objects that hide behind themselves, and they do this by pointing to another body, in another place, at another time. These things may seem painfully obvious and not worth thinking about, but I proceed along anyway in a belief which Heidegger has articulated as: “our relation to the obvious is always dull and dumb. The path to

\(^1\)“…a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition — these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language.” Chen, Nancy N. (1992) “Speaking Nearby:” A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha. Visual Anthropology Review 8(1), 86–87.
what lies under our nose is always the furthest and hence the most difficult path for us humans”.

I insist on thinking about the body of an image, since there is a general sense floating around in the world that our so-called digital age is one that is increasingly dematerialized. This assertion—of the unnecessity of physical things—goes against my own experience, which is of one of an increased reliance on highly refined material objects, even if they are hidden from me. Photographs are particularly suited as a material through which to explore this contradiction, since on the one hand a person experiences a photograph primarily only as an image that is looked at, divorced from any specific body, while on the other hand, as I argue again and again throughout this paper, the body of the image is completely necessary. Without a body to house the image, there is nothing to look at. Hence, though a photograph may be experienced solely as a dematerialized image, it nevertheless relies on being materialized in order to exist. Since the photograph is always pointing elsewhere, it is easy to miss this thing out of which a pointing away is taking place.

In different ways, the work I’ve been making attempts to, as Leslie Scalapino has put it, “mak[e] a picture of something in order to see it”. I think

that while the qualities of a photograph I’ve listed above are apparent enough to be taken for granted, trying to actually see these qualities is probably impossible, but one that I pursue anyway. This is a pursuit with no specific goal, and in fact it’s not even a singular pursuit, but rather a series of meditations on a theme. I consider my work a practice of meditation, in a similar sense to how David Ireland conceived of his own work, which I will discuss later in this paper. The object of my meditation is roughly the materiality of the seemingly immaterial, specifically photographs, which seem to be a paradigm case. Alongside this is the indirectness of the photographic object, or the way in which it directs one’s attention away to another thing that is absent. Related to these two is the idea of a thing that is both one thing and it’s opposite, or at least is simultaneously two things that are seemingly irreconcilable with one another. I’m also interested in the simultaneous experience of layers of time that a photograph is able to provide—it always provides an experience of a past moment, but a past that is experienced in the present. This paper is a parallel meditation on these same themes that occupy my visual work, though one that takes place in words rather than through actions that result in objects. Since my work is not typically goal-oriented but rather is a thinking-through-making, this paper will likewise be

3 Scalapino, Leslie. Objects in the Terrifying Tense / Longing from Taking Place, 34-35.
mostly not-goal oriented, but a circling around, in a similar manner to how my work circles around some of the same themes—approaching them from different angles, not trying to come up with a complete statement, following digressions, concentrating on small areas and working through them—making pictures to see what comes up.

No. 1: Paper Piece No. 5
Silver gelatin print, 8x10”, 2016.
Second Introduction

In my work I’m thinking—through making, not through words—about what photographs are and what they do. They are representations of something, in the sense that they re-present a thing that once was in front of the camera. A photograph is this representation, spread across the surface of a piece of paper, or made manifest in an array of lights. A photograph is always an image that rests on top of, or exists through, something else. A photograph is always also this something else.

So a photograph has two parts: a representation, and a body upon which the representation rests. The former is both opaque and transparent; opaque because we can see it—in fact, this representation is usually the only thing a person “sees” when looking at a photograph. When you look at a photograph, you see an image. But the representation is also transparent because you see through it: it’s a representation because what you see when you look at it is what is being re-presented. (People are always showing things to other people, by way of photographs.)

The second part of the photograph—its body—is present, but invisible. You don’t see it, even though you are looking at it, because the surface spread across it is seen through, to something else/somewhere else. Think of how John
Szarkowski divides photographs into two types: windows and mirrors. Both are things which show something else—a transparent screen to look out into the exterior world or a reflective one to see within. Neither a window or a mirror is meant to be seen as it itself is.\(^4\) This is why even a careful person who would not admit to having “seen” a painting via a reproduction of it will often still have “seen” a photograph via a reproduction, because it is “just” the image—the thing the window or mirror is showing you—and not the photograph as an object, that is understood as the photograph. What does it even mean to say that, for instance, a photograph has been “reproduced” in a magazine, alongside the more understandable reproduction of a painting, drawing, or sculpture?

But, however the photograph is reproduced, it is always reproduced in a body. A photograph may be seen in a museum, in a magazine, on a digital screen. Although we often think of the body of the photograph as inconsequential, it is essential, in that without it, there is no image to look at (again, this is true not just for photographs on paper, but on screens too—they are not, no matter how much people want to believe, immaterial. A screen is as material as paper.)\(^5\) Each photograph has a body, and has one by necessity. But

the body of the photograph is itself just an accident; it’s not essential to the photograph as an image—the same image could exist in a different body. At the same time, the photograph just is this body—you can’t find it anywhere else without its being made manifest within a new body.

5 Projected images of various kinds may seem to evade this and truly dematerialize themselves. However, a projected image must always be projected both from and on to something. The image doesn’t exist without the apparatus of projection, and without an object on which it is projected. Seen this way, a projected image has even more of a material burden than a photograph. There must be an image stored in some way (a piece of plastic with an arrangement of colored dyes or silver in the case of slides or film, or a hard drive containing various electrical charges in an arrangement that can be accessed and interpreted by a different arrangement of electrical charges, a projector / machine to project the image with light, a space through which the projection is cast, and some surface upon which to project. Ironically then it seems that an even greater apparatus of materiality is necessary to support and maintain the illusion of immateriality.
**Amy Adler’s Centerfold**

Near the center of the February 2002 issue of *Artforum* can be seen a work spread across two facing pages: a drawing of a nude woman laying on her side while petting a cat, which is labeled “Amy Adler. Centerfold. 2012.” There is no other information present on the pages. Turning to the list of contributors near the beginning of the issue, I can read a brief biography of the artist, accompanied by a photograph of her. The photograph of the artist resembles the woman seen in the drawing enough that I can conclude it is a self-portrait. Also in this text I learn that the work, which I believed to be a drawing, is in fact “a photograph of a drawing based on a photograph; the drawing is destroyed and only a single print produced”. There is something strange here: looking again at the work reproduced in the magazine, I see only a drawing. Although this piece looks like a drawing, it is not what it seems.

The work is, like much of her output, a photograph. The process by which the work was made began by having someone make a photograph of her posing nude with her cat. Adler then made a life-sized drawing of this photograph. This drawing is itself then photographed onto reversal film.

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6 Reversal film, as opposed to negative film, means that the piece of film which is exposed in the camera is developed into a positive image, which can be looked at
photographic transparency, a single Cibachrome print is made. Adler then
destroyed the original photograph, the drawing, and the transparency, leaving
only a single, unique, life-sized photographic print. Much like a painting or a
drawing that exists as a unique object, this photographic print then had to be
photographed in order to reproduce it in the magazine.

The fact that the work is a photograph is important to Adler. The list of
contributors near the beginning of the issue contains both a brief biography of
the artist as well as her portrait—this time unambiguously a photograph. The
text also states that the work is “a photograph of a drawing based on a
photograph; the drawing is destroyed and only a single print produced”. 7 None
of this is directly accessible from the work itself without explanatory text, or
without knowledge of Adler’s practice. Without this information, a viewer
looking through the magazine will see her work as a drawing. A viewer will
never see a photograph when looking at this work, because a photograph always
points away to some other thing. So how to get people to see the photograph,
through a photograph, when the photograph is pointing at something else? It is,
in fact, a photograph that we are seeing, but this fact isn’t brought into focus

without being explained in words. I am attempting, in my work, to bring this kind of problem into focus through sight alone. In Adler’s work, the transparency of her photographs—their window quality—looks out onto a drawing: what you see is a drawing. I want my work instead to look out onto itself, or to look out onto a mirror which reflects its own body.

No. 2: Photograph of Amy Adler’s Centerfold as published in Artforum.

David Ireland’s Meditation

My photographs are meditations on the materiality of the seemingly immaterial.

Meditations in the sense that David Ireland calls his entire body of work a meditation.

These little scraps of dirt that I’ve put on the wall are my avenue toward meditation. If I can accept this dirt as art, this piece of cement on paper, why can’t I let the universe also be my art? That’s the focus of my meditation—saying I can accept this piece of dirt, I accept the universe and all within it.8

Ireland’s work was partly a response to Duchamp and the readymade: if the artist can claim anything as their art, then I will claim everything as my art. This is an elaboration on Duchamp’s act of claiming authorship over discrete objects, with Ireland instead creating work which makes a claim for authorship over everything within reach of the senses. In laying claim to everything, the idea of authorship becomes absurd. Ireland talks about art as a thing that is not a thing, but is instead an experience: namely, the experience of things as art. This is the sense in which Ireland’s work is Conceptual Art, in the most banal sense—the primacy of the idea over its material realization.9


9 Definition of Conceptual Art from Wikipedia: “art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and
about the experience-of-things-as-art as being the art work, and what the things-experienced-as-art are is totally arbitrary, because the things-experienced-as-art are “the universe and all within it”.

However, Ireland’s work does not take the form of a *statement* in which he claims authorship over everything in the universe; compare for instance works by Yoko Ono or George Brecht that exist as text functioning as a kind of score, which may or may not be realized. Ireland’s work is instead a practice of meditation which takes place through working directly with physical material. He says of himself “I am a builder and I deal with surfaces … Process and material go hand in hand with one another, sometimes light being an ingredient, or else some more dense materials”.\(^\text{10}\) If we can in retrospect look at Ireland’s home—500 Capp St.—and all that it contains as paradigmatic of his practice, then we can see that his meditation on the consequences of Duchamp led to a stubbornly materialist and aesthetic experience.

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\(^{10}\) Tsujimoto, 57.
It is important to point out that the house is not itself an artwork; Ireland repeatedly insisted people understand throughout his life. It is rather an arbitrary frame within which one can experience everything inside of it as art. I think arbitrary is the right word to use here because I take seriously Ireland’s contention that the focus of his work was that anything could be his art. It merely happens to be the case that this building is the one which became the primary focus of his meditation, but the practice could have accepted any location or object. I see this supported in his incorporation of every material that happened to be present in the house—old brooms, dried out pears, piles of rubber bands, sunlight—as objects which became either material-to-be-worked-with or presented as-is in works that Ireland put his name on. The house was a frame analogous to “the universe” wherein a person could experience “all within it” as art. The house is merely a vessel that predisposes one for viewing its contents as art, the way a gallery or museum is by default for most people. To reiterate

11 “It was not my intention to make an art-work out of the house. I always insist that people understand that this isn’t what I’m doing. I mean, I’m just cleaning house. I called it a Maintenance Action. So I could sort of think of it as a performance, installation, kind of all of the different art forms: painting, sculpture, more traditional sculpture.” Riess, Suzanne B. “Inside 500 Capp Street: An Oral History of David Ireland,” transcript of an oral history conducted 2001 by Suzanne B. Riess, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2003, 25.
again, it is this experience of all-within-it-as-art and not the house itself that is the focus of his meditation, the meditation which is his art.

In Ireland’s work, there is no idea outside of a material experience. If we can look at his statement that “the universe can be my art” as being the core concept of his practice, what he is not saying is that everything in the universe is in fact his art, but rather that it could be. This ‘could’ is not divorced from the material contingency of actual material in an actual space. Anything ‘could’ be his art, but what it happens to be is the material that he finds laying around within reach, and which is in fact art because it is experienced that way. The work is neither solely material, nor is it solely about preconceived ideas that just happen to be made manifest as art. Rather it is the necessary connection between the two. The work takes places between himself and the material world.

This is not different than with any other artists’ work: the difference between a painting in a museum and one in a thrift store may have the weight of history supporting it, but it is ultimately the willingness of a viewer to experience one as art, and the other not, which constitutes the difference. However, this is almost always operating in the background and is accepted as a matter of course. The exhibition apparatus of the art world ensures that no decisions need be made about what is and is not art. Donald Judd’s wall sculptures are, in the context of a
museum, clearly a work of art. A viewer can interpret it however they would like, and may pass judgment on whether or not they like it, but the fact of the work being art is authoritatively decided by its inclusion within the walls of the museum. In a person’s house, however, it could just be a convenient shelf to set down an unwanted plate of hors d’oeuvres. Ireland’s work attempts to make a theme of this decision to experience something as art; it becomes his subject. If we can understand Duchamp’s invention of the readymade as pointing to the activity of selection and framing being the creative act over and above any manual labor, I see Ireland’s as updating this gesture to a time when it has

12 This is based on an experience I had at a party in Beverly Hills in 2006 or so. I watched no less than a dozen people place used plates covered in the remains of tuna tartar onto a Donald Judd sculpture. A vegetarian at the time, after realizing what I had been handed, I followed suit. At the same party, I saw a glass box with a cow’s head floating in a fluid propping the front door open: what I assume was a work by Damien Hirst, but for that night at least, a very elaborate doorstop.

13 It’s also interesting to consider a further distinction here: Ireland’s house wasn’t an art object because it was his house: he lived there, and had friends over for dinner there, and hung out in the living room. In the case of the Donald Judd sculpture being used as a receptacle for dirty dishes, one’s experience of the object as art is lessened in being used outside of a clear art context—at least, mine was. Contrary to this, visiting 500 Capp St., the experience of Ireland’s work as art is in fact heightened by use—the most illuminating part of the tour is sitting down at the table in the dining room and chatting with the rest of the tour group and guides. The table is covered in sculptures, but also dishes, and some things that could be sculptures but are also perhaps dishes.
become a given that any object or activity can be seen as art—given the proper frame. To choose an obvious example of the newer context, John Cage’s work 4'33'' structures four minutes and thirty three seconds of time into a tri-partite experience of any-sounds-that-happen-to-occur as being the music to be experienced as Cage’s work. 4’33 takes the concert hall as a given, with an audience receptive for a musical experience, and the work structures this time into a familiar three-part sonata form, within which any traditional expectation of what should occur within that frame is completely frustrated.

What is different in Ireland is his attempt to get rid of the specificity of the frame, to make the experience of anything as art no longer contingent upon the space of a gallery or museum. He insists instead that it is an experience that could potentially take place everywhere at all times. 500 Capp St. forces viewers to consider every sensory experience they have as an authored artwork, from the objects Ireland made to those he found, from the smells and sounds, the light permeating each room, in fact even everything outside of the house that you can experience from within. One could argue that the house then is the artwork, and that anything outside would remain not art; that Ireland is the author of the experience within the house. Ireland insisted this was not the case, and it’s a point that I think should be taken seriously. The arbitrariness of what is
presented inside the house, the similarity between what is experienced in the house with what is experienced outside of the house, is a kind of proposal that there is only a perceptual block to one’s experiencing the entire universe the same way. From one perspective, Ireland has authored a series of discrete artworks which, accumulated within the boundaries of 500 Capp St., constitute another artwork. From another perspective, he has provided a path pointing towards a way of experiencing the entire world as artwork.

Something about this continues to be a problem for people, since it means giving up a clear sense of authorship. It is the same kind of problem that plagues photography: if a camera can be used to photograph anything, then in what sense does a photographer author the work? There are different responses to this question, ranging from Geoff Dyer’s book *The Ongoing Moment* where he talks through the history of photography not by the person doing the photographing but by the thing being photographed, to something like the work of Thomas Demand or Jeff Wall, who in different ways claim authorship by actually constructing or directing the objects they then photograph. The really dumb and obvious answer to both, which is in some ways what I see as Ireland’s answer, is that: it could be anything, but is has to be something, so why not this?
No. 4: Works by David Ireland installed in his living room at 500 Capp Street.

Contingent, but Necessary

A photograph is like an object wearing a mask. A piece of paper, it holds on one side of it a reflection of some other thing in some other place at some other time. This is the side that we look at and consider, which we believe is expressing what the photograph is. It masks its own body, and directs us to consider the objects that we see represented on its surface. Behind this image is a thin body, barely there, but one without which the image on its surface would be unsupportable—it would not exist for us to look at. It is therefore inaccurate to regard the photograph as being merely the image that rests on the surface of the paper, since this paper is its body. However, it would be equally wrong to insist that the paper is the essential part, and that the image is secondary. That would be ridiculous. The photograph, then, is both things at once. It is a piece of paper that goes unnoticed; it is the fancifully decorated mask that directs our attention to another time and place. Because the mask isn’t a mask, it is the face of the photograph. The photograph isn’t a photograph without this mask. The photograph isn’t a photograph without its body: it is contingent, but necessary.

So how do we see the necessary contingency of this body? How do you even make a photograph of the body of a photograph, when that body is a mask that looks like something else? A mask which points to some other thing in some
other place at some other time? My attempt to deal with this has been through a work that is created anew for each exhibition, and which is created in situ. In this work, I have tried to collapse back onto itself the thing, the place, and the time that the photograph points to. I have done this by making photographs that show nothing other than the photographs-as-thing, located in the place where they were made. The layers of time in the successive levels of re-photography are clearly of a past-time, but a past that is more or less the same as the present in which they are seen now, in that nothing has changed except for the photographs. But because a photograph only exists in the present, and points back to a past, the layers of photographs seen within the image point back to a pointing back to the place where they are located, to a place that exists just below and before them.
No. 6: *Hours before this, early April (for Julia)* (2017)
Thirteen silver gelatin prints & graphite, made in situ (installation view)

No. 7: *Hours before this, early April (for Julia)* (detail)
No. 8: Hours before this, early April (for Julia) (detail)

No 9: Hours before this, early April (for Julia) (detail)
Janus, or One Who is Two

Janus is a Roman god with two faces, one that looks forward and one that looks behind, to the future and to the past. Janus stands at the threshold between things, between one space and another, at the beginning and at the end, hence how he became the god of both war and of peace—standing at the beginning of both, which is the end of the other. Janus is the god of this between, which is both, or maybe neither, but rather something that faces both at the same time but not from the same place. Of neither, but there partaking of each the same. This is like a photograph, which is both—but neither just—an object and/or an image.

Not included in my thesis exhibit is a work called *Five Attempts at Catching the Air (Janus-faced)*, which is a series of five wooden objects each bearing two silver gelatin prints on opposite sides (faces) of the objects. Both faces wear an image of my hand holding up a photograph that I made of air. Because it is a photograph of air, which has no visible body, what you see in the photograph is what is beyond the air that I photographed. Made with a shallow depth of field, what is beyond the photographed plane appears out of focus. The photograph in my hand, however, is sharply in focus, so you see a sharp edge around a rectangular space of air, where what is within and what is beyond the photograph—while the same space—do not quite match up. On the one side,
you see an image which was made in front of the work that sits behind the
photograph. A viewer approaching the work will see the relationship between
what is on the Janus-faced photograph, and the work on the wall behind it. The
other face of the work however presents images of a space that is not the space
where the work is shown. It is an empty white room—a space that could be any-
place, but which, when presented in a space that it is elsewhere, becomes
particular. For me this work has something to do with the fantasy of the
placeless-ness of art. One face shows a room that could be any place, but which
becomes decidedly not-this-place when exhibited, and on the other there is the
specificity of the place between the object and the work on the wall behind it.
This second place, however specific it seems, can be created in any space
provided the two works are shown together.
(left) No. 10: Five attempts at capturing the air (Janus-face [Side A: the air in front of Possible Reconstructions parts one & two) (2016)
silver gelatin prints and wood (detail)

(right) No. 11: Five attempts at capturing the air (Janus-face [Side B: the there there of some anywhere) (2016)
silver gelatin prints and wood (detail)
No. 12: Head of Janus sculpture at the Vatican Museum.

The Fantasy of “The Cloud”

There is a widespread fantasy of dematerialization. Just think about the language of “the cloud”. Contemporary propaganda encourages people to ditch their material objects (books, records, photographs), and to instead digitize them and store them in something called “the cloud”, which we are told isn’t a place but is just free floating data accessible from anywhere in the world. It’s a beautiful fantasy, but it remains just that: a fantasy. The cloud is actually a series of anonymous looking buildings in remote places, using vast quantities of electricity to maintain the fantasy of an immaterial culture. People want to have everything in the world, they just don’t want to have it cluttering their increasingly small living spaces.

There is in this fantasy something that is connected to the idea that the body of the photograph is inessential compared to the image. There is a sense that the body of the photograph is just garbage that we should be free of, and the image is the important thing—scan your images and upload them to the cloud, then throw them away.\textsuperscript{14} This is related to the fantasy that we live out every day

\textsuperscript{14} It doesn’t need to be the cloud. Even the transferal from one format to another is enough to slough off the old body. Having worked for a time at digitizing peoples’ home movies from Super 8mm film to video, it was not infrequent that people, once having a digital copy of their movies, would throw away or
when we put things that we no longer want around us into a trash can—use
what you want, disappear the rest. We fantasize that by placing these things into
the trash can, and later into a bin that is left on the street and emptied out for us,
that the garbage goes away, that we are rid of it. But these items are still with us,
they’re just somewhere else. We haven’t gotten rid of anything, except from our
immediate vicinity. Meditating on the body of the photograph is a way for me to
focus on demystifying this fantasy that permeates our lives: that things can
simply be gotten rid of.\footnote{The irony of making more things which, in all likelihood, will eventually be thrown away, doesn’t escape me. I try not to think too much about all these chemicals which I pour down the drain, which kill living things—which are probably killing me. I feel at least the direct connection between my actions and their toxic residue, something that is lost when I deliver a pile of dead cell phones I’ve been accumulating in a drawer to an e-waste recycling location, only to read that such things end up in a dump in India set on fire so everything burns away but the copper and other metals, poisoning someone else’s environment. But here we are.}

I think of Dunya Mikhael, writing in \textit{Diary of a Wave Outside of the Sea},
about her experience of the American war in Iraq. She writes: “O... where does
the world live? Certainly not in memory.” 

She’s asking about a world that is beyond the seemingly physical world: the world of culture, of history, and the relationship that individuals have with a group. One that is nevertheless embodied. She has lived through a world destroyed, and she asks where does the world live. She recognizes that the world, even at its seemingly most immaterial—the social world, a world of shared culture, customs, language—lives only so long as it is embodied in the physical world. The escape from the material is a fantasy, like living in memory. This is an experience that is shared by any member of a diaspora community, and one particularly acute in those who come from a place that has disappeared. It’s a major theme running through numerous of Etel Adnan’s books, who has spent her life traveling between Lebanon, Paris, and the San Francisco Bay Area, and likewise Edward Said writes in Out of Place about a series of worlds disappearing for him and his family as they leave first Palestine, then Lebanon, then Egypt, each time leaving behind a dead world. You can try to hold onto certain customs, speak a language when you have the chance, but immersed in a different material world, the one

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16 Mikhael, Dunya. Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea, 6.
17 This is transition between places, and being preoccupied with the goings-on of other places, some of which no longer exist, is a particular theme of Adnan’s novel Paris, When It’s Naked.
that lives primarily as a memory and not through physical enactment eventually passes away, either vanishing completely or merging to form a new world.

It is also worth pointing out the irony in the experience of all this dematerialized stuff as being embodied in things that we experience only through our hands. That people can spend significant portions of their days manipulating an object in their hand and claim that it is a triumph of dematerialization is beyond me. That it gives access to something which seems removed from the hand, that there is no clear or at least no recognizable connection between the information/images/sounds that are being manipulated and the object through which they are manipulated doesn’t mean that they are being conjured up from out of nowhere (the cloud). Even if no information were stored on the devices you held, which isn’t hard to imagine as this is a description of television or radio, the information is stored in some definite place and being relayed through objects that take up space—broadcast towers, cables, satellites. A whole network of material objects which collectively work together to maintain an illusion of immateriality. It’s out of sight, out of mind.

Also, a cloud is a bad metaphor. Clouds are themselves material objects. They are made of water, like the ocean. Clouds have a history of being abused thematically in photography too: think of Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalents*. Writing
in *The New York Times*, Andy Grunberg says the works are a “demonstration of faith in the existence of a reality behind and beyond that offered by the world of appearances … Emotion resides solely in form, they assert, not in the specifics of time and place.”

An uncredited writer describing the work for The Metropolitan Museum’s website writes: “Stieglitz’s choice of intangible vapors as his ostensible subject was telling, for the vagueness of transcendental meaning is not easily sustained by material objects”. Somehow a material object that changes and can’t be held in the hand qualifies as non-material. In part, I understand this. How do you hold onto an image, when images circulate so easily through technology, seemingly free of any body? And yet, it’s just sitting there in the palm of my hand.

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Two images of “the cloud”. Both buildings are located in Sweden.


No. 15: Alfred Stieglitz *Equivalent* (1926)

Speaking of the Ocean, or a Meditation on Percival Bartlebooth

In George Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual*, the character named Percival Bartlebooth has a single project, around which he organizes his whole life: “an arbitrarily constrained programme with no purpose outside its own completion … a series of events which when concatenated nullify each other: starting from nothing, passing through precise operations on finished objects, Bartlebooth would end up with nothing.”\(^{20}\) Specifically, he plans to spend ten years becoming passably competent at making watercolors, then twenty years traveling around the world to five hundred ports, spending two weeks per port traveling to, observing, and making sketches. On his last day, he executes a watercolor, which he sends back home to Paris. Being received there, the watercolor is then mounted onto a wood board, which is then cut into a puzzle and placed inside of a box, labeled with the name of the port and the date of execution. After his travels are complete, Bartlebooth returns to Paris, where he intends to spend the next twenty years reassembling the puzzles (two weeks per puzzle). Upon completing a puzzle, it is handed over to an assistant, whose job it is to rejoin the cut seams of the paper through a specially developed process, and to then soak the watercolor in a solvent until the image is removed. The paper appears to have never been used.

Bartlebooth doesn’t succeed in finishing this, and in the end he has a film made attempting to destroy the puzzle (which is never actually realized).\(^{21}\) He doesn’t actually complete this senseless task.

I happened to read this while creating a series of photographs which I have come to title *Possible Reconstructions (of the movement of shadows) parts one & two (one: wind through forests then light through plastic; two: the shadows of our body fixed in charcoal and silver)*. I will quickly describe the process that resulted in the works comprising *part two* of this project. I laid white paper down on the floor, and had my partner make a series of shots on Super 8 film, each one containing a single gesture. The gesture in each shot was a variation of me dragging the body of Katouche (the name we call the cat who lives with us in our apartment) across the surface of the paper. I then projected this film back on to a sheet of paper the same size as the one that had been filmed. While the film was being projected, I used several pieces of vine charcoal which I held in one hand to attempt to make marks where Katouche’s paws touched the paper. I also used the forearm of my other arm to rub the surface of the paper when she would fall to her side or back,

\(^{21}\) In fact, none of this “happens” in the book, since the time of the book takes place in a single moment. The novel is like reading a narration of someone flipping through photographs that are supposed to have been made all at the same moment, which are then used as jumping off points for telling stories about other times and places related to what is seen in the photographs.
tracing her movements. I then tore up the drawing into pieces of random size and shape. Katouche and I together held the pieces of torn drawing in place on the floor as I photographed them. These photographs were then printed onto torn pieces of silver gelatin paper of various shapes and sizes, which Katouche and I then attempted to put back together again, holding them in place on the floor as I photographed them.

I describe the process of making these photographs because I was interested in the nonsensical and self-destructive aspects of my own process, which made the Perec novel resonate with me. Here is how Perec describes Bartlebooth’s aesthetic principle: “the plan would be useless, since gratuitousness was the sole guarantor of its rigor, and would destroy itself as it proceeded.”22 My own project was concerned with a circularity of images of shadows—which all photographs are anyways. I wanted a process baroque enough to mask any sense of its beginning or end, but which would nevertheless present itself as being wound up in some kind of process. If in other works I’ve wanted to focus on a specific aspect of what photographs do, this was more a project pursuing how photographs come into being: a series of steps going back and forth between positive and negative—light becomes shadow, and vice versa.

22 Ibid. 134
A transitional level which takes place entirely behind the scenes, and which leaves no trace. In this project, however, the residue of the process is manifest in marks made by hand, which are inscribed onto the surface of the paper via the machinery of the camera and the enlarger. Not to belabor any comparison beyond reason, since the Perec novel didn’t influence this work, but was rather resonating with things I was thinking about, I do want to point out that Perec’s goal for Bartlebooth was to “do nothing”. In other words, his whole project was a way of pursuing a task that results in nothing—a blank page returned to a blank page. In my work I was rather interested in the excess of the beginning/end: a beginning that is already full, returned to an end that is full, through a process which has effaced itself through its enactment.
No. 16: Possible Reconstructions (of the movements of shadows) parts one: wind through forests then light through plastic & Possible Reconstructions (of the movements of shadows) part two: the movement of our body fixed in silver then charcoal then silver (2016)

Eighteen framed silver gelatin prints, each approx. 8x10”
Not a Representation, Not a Reproduction

A major influence for me has been structural film, a genre invented by P. Adams Sitney that has been widely contested—including by the very artists Sitney cites as having made the defining works of the genre—23—as well as a counter-argument in the form of a genre outlined by Peter Gidal under the name Structural/Materialist film. To put it very simply, artists pursuing these two schools of film practice were committed to making as explicit content of their work the structural supports of filmmaking. Structural films (for instance works by Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Morgan Fisher, or Paul Sharits), foreground elements like the camera itself, the selection of film stock, or the individual frame, making these more or less the subject of the work in place of any kind of narrative story. The work was developed in the 1960’s and 70’s, and there was a crossover both socially as well as aesthetically with minimalist visual art and music. Structural/Materialist film was more concerned with a process of

23 See P. Adams Sitney’s Visionary Film, where Sitney develops his idea of Structural Film, as well as the second issue of Millennium Film Journal which includes a number of articles expanding / arguing with Sitney’s ideas.

24 As only one concrete example, the second photograph to appear in Hollis Frampton’s film Nostalgia is a portrait of Carl Andre that, as Hampton narrates in the film, he made in January of 1959, in the apartment that he and Andre shared. (Frampton, Hollis. “(nostalgia): Voice-Over Narration for a Film of That Name.”
“demystification or attempted demystification of the film process”, which for Gidal came about by making “each film ... a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making.” Gidal was critical of structural film which, to paraphrase, he accused of fetishizing the discovery of shape or system, which he saw as only a novel form of narrative (which Structural Film was in stated opposition to). Instead, his focus was on something he called demystification—his project was overtly Marxist.

To be perfectly honest I have never understood the relationship between Gidal’s ideas and the films he made. But then again, his films—like all independent and especially so-called avant garde films—are extremely difficult to actually see. Gidal describes his work Room Film (1973), which I have seen, as being “not a translation of anything, it is not a representation of anything, not even of consciousness”. It is an approximately 50 minute film consisting primarily of close-up and blurry shots of things in a room, and of the room itself.

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26 Ibid, 38.
I guess it may eventually show the entirety of a room. It’s not a particularly interesting film to watch, and the excitement of ideas that I get from reading his writings does not have a corollary in watching his films.

The legacy of Structural Film lives on in two streams of artist-film production. One stream being a play with the material support and potential failure of either analog or digital media.\(^{27}\) The other stream is a kind of play-off-forms, which tends to revel in its playfulness and makes direct reference to the more austere antecedents from the 60’s and 70’s.\(^{28}\) While I enjoy many of the so-

\(^{27}\) I think of the Lossless series by Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin as being a particularly strong example of this stream of work. For the series they program their own software to process video files ripped from the Internet of classics of avant-garde and Hollywood films. Each project pays homage to qualities of the original, which they reference in an analogous way using digital technology. For instance in Lossless #2, they wrote software that would write to file data pulled from torrent sites while downloading copies of Maya Deren’s Meshes of the Afternoon, which they then edited. Since torrent streams download data out of order, the files created show different parts of the film simultaneously within the frame. This directly references the way that Deren played with confusing the experience of linear time in her original film. This account is based on a discussion with the artists.

\(^{28}\) I think here of Jodie Mack as being particularly exemplary of the best of this stream of contemporary film practice. In her work, Mack references the flicker films of Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, and others. In Mack’s films, however, the flicker is created not by using industrially produced leader, but instead by photographing endless amounts and varieties of fabrics, interiors of security envelopes, foil gift bags, lace, etc. The work then brings in layers of content about
called structural films that Gidal criticized, I agree with him that the fetish of playing with shape and structure leads to a new form of narrative. Not being much interested in storytelling, I find the idea of aspiring to make work which would “record” its own coming-into-being, and be neither representational nor a reproduction, something that is worth pursuing. I feel this way because it’s an interesting problem to figure out, and one I think Gidal was correct in diagnosing that Structural film had failed at, but at which I also think Gidal’s own films failed.

consumer culture, disposability, craft, and labor, which are not present in the more formally austere work she is referencing.

29 Failure may not be the right word to use since it is not clear that this was ever really a goal for the filmmakers themselves, and I think it is certainly not the goal for many of the Structural-inspired filmmakers of the more recent past.
No. 18: Image of 16mm film strips of Oaxacan fabrics, from an unnamed film by Jodie Mack.

Necessary, but Contingent

The work, being a visual work, must have visual content. But what is that content to be? At 500 Capp St., a visitor is confronted with all manner of objects. Things that were bought, things that were found, things that were made, things that aren’t even things but are actually just light reflecting off the surface of the wall and filling the space with a glow. Ireland’s work was a meditation on accepting all things as art, and inside his home he has created an atmosphere in which a visitor is forced to consider everything encountered as art. My work is a meditation on photography, and more generally on the materiality of the seemingly immaterial. How do I make photographs that avoid merely representing or reproducing, but also record their intrinsic fluctuation between being and representing? I have tried to do this by focusing the representational aspect of the work on the process that brought it into being. The work represents and reproduces, because photographs always do that, but the representation and the reproduction are clearly contingent to the process, which it also records. “It’s making a picture of something in order to see it, which is different from simply making a picture. It is between being and becoming, so that it is already there.
That’s objects as history.” Leslie Scalapino here is talking about something else—certainly not my photographs! —and yet this is what I hope for in my work. I’m making a picture of photography as a process, in order to see it. I’m making a picture of the materiality of the seemingly immaterial, in order to see this materiality. The fluctuation in a photograph is between its being and its representation, which is seemingly not its own being but the being of some other thing (the thing photographed). I am making work that attempts to be between these two things, so that the “it” that is “already there” is the “it” that is immateriality. This isn’t a magic act, making manifest something that isn’t normally there, but is just a drawing of attention to the thing that is always there, but which is ignored: a face that is a mask, a thing that is necessary but contingent, a thing that is experienced as immaterial even though you hold it in your hands.

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30 Scalapino, 34-35.
No. 19: *Follies for Percival Bartlebooth* (2017) (installation view)
Inkjet prints, plastic trays, water, wood, lights, fan, magnets. Dimensions variable.

No. 20: *Follies for Percival Bartlebooth* (2017) (detail)
Inkjet prints, plastic trays, water, wood, lights, fan, magnets. Dimensions variable.
An Ending: Frantically Grasping at Time

Photography always has a relationship to time. In fact, it always has a relationship to multiple times: the time of the past of the things represented in the mask of the photograph, and the time of the present as experienced by a viewer encountering the body of the photograph. Much like the invisibility of the mirror/window aspect of the photograph, the time that is almost invariably thought of as experienced by a viewer to the exclusion of the other is the time of the past during which the photographic image was made. This is how Barthes can say, when looking at a photograph of his mother as a child: “She is going to die: I shudder… over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”

For Barthes, the photograph is always about the past, even if that past has yet to occur. His whole experience of photography is one of grief, of mourning. Photography is a trigger for nostalgia—even if it’s a nostalgia for something that is happening while being photographed. Think of your own (my own) feelings of a need to photograph a beautiful place, which I am already mourning having left

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31 This chapter was originally going to be called Writing about Judith Butler writing about Michel Foucault writing about Jean Hypolite writing about Alexandre Kojève writing about Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel writing about…

while I am still there experiencing it. This experience reminds me again of Dunya Mikhail’s answer to her own question: the world certainly does not live in memory. David Ireland’s work is about not memory or ideas, but about an experience of the present—of what is present—as art. Photography, always pointing to something else, to somewhere else, at another time, seems opposed to this experience of what is present in the present. It is how the photograph hides behind the mask that is its face.

In her book Subjects of Desire, Judith Butler traces a lineage of ideas that comes from Hegel through generations of French philosophy and theory. At one point she writes “For Hegel, such an actor who, through his acts, lifts himself out of time, is a lifeless being, a being turned against life. Hegel emphasizes that intrinsic to life is the dissolution of form as well as its reconstitution.”33 Her writing is an act of interpretation made in a present time (now the past), that reads through interpretations of interpretations. I’m interested in her tracing the life of these ideas through time, which in this passage are themselves about time, and life. Perhaps the experience of the photograph as a solid, fully formed entity is one of the ways in which it always points to the past, and is in that case pulling

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33 Butler, Judith. Subjects of Desire, 83.
itself out of the present. It lives in the past, in memory: which is to say, it does not live.

I probably don’t understand what Butler is talking about, since I read everything as if it were poetry. But it seems related to my attempt to make work that is fixed and inert act as if it is not. This is perhaps most obviously the case in the video and sound installation work *Concert Diary (what’s a life?)*. Recordings made on film, video, and cassette tape with/of musicians or of things experienced as music by myself and by Katouche are played back simultaneously from many sources. The experience of a piece of music which has fixed boundaries, but which is nevertheless permeated by things from outside of it (ie: from life), are here staged so that they are interpenetrated by one another. The boundaries between works as finished work, and material that is just material or not-yet-work, and things that are just sounds-in-the-world are not divided from one another. A sense of access to the present-of-the-recording is kept at least partially at bay by re-recording and re-presenting the already recorded materials. These new recordings house a recording of a performance or a sound inside the reliquary of a screen or a tape player, which itself is permeated by new sounds, new interactions. These new interactions, which are

34 The cat who lives with me.
themselves recorded, mirror within the screen those which are, in the space of the installation, taking place between the screens/mp3 players, the viewers, and the world both inside and outside of the museum. Even though the work consists entirely of pre-recorded material which is doing nothing but being played back, I am attempting nevertheless to make a work which only comes into being within the experience of a viewer, who senses sounds and images occurring around them simultaneously as being connected. Because the sounds and images are all on loops of different lengths, it’s almost impossible that a viewer would ever experience the same simultaneous occurrence of material more than once. The work, though fixed, is not, even though it is.

No.’s 21–23: Concert / Diary (what’s a life?) (2017) (installation views)
Three-channel video & five channel-audio installation, dimensions and duration variable.
Works Cited


