Transcriber's note: Numbers are from transcription program; no time code on audio files. This session is recorded as part two of the audio file that session one was on, so numbers on this transcript do not start at zero. The last number on transcript of session one was 01:06:11:00.

01:08:26:00 WILLSDON: I should announce that there isn't an intermission. I think we were waiting for Trevor Paglen, who is now here. So we're going to go straight into the second half of this. And Erin's going to introduce the speakers.

01:08:42:00 ERIN O'TOOLE: And just for the speakers, we are hearing that the folks who are in the simulcast can't really hear very well unless you're speaking right into the microphone. So if we can— [inaudible voice] Oh, you can't hear back there? Okay, sorry about that. We will work on it.

01:08:58:00 Okay, I'll introduce this panel. Starting at the far end here is Trevor Paglen, who's an artist and a geographer. He's written four books, exhibits his work internationally, and is a researcher in the department of geography, here at UC Berkeley.

01:09:16:00 Next to him is George Baker, who is a professor of art history at UCLA and an editor of the journal *October*. He's written many books and essays, including a forthcoming book about photography, to be entitled *Lateness and Longing: On the Afterlife of Photography*.

01:09:33:00 Next to him here is Walead Beshty, who is an artist and a writer. His most recent solo exhibitions were at the Thomas Dane Gallery in London and at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. He's also an associate professor of fine art at the Art Center College of Design, in Los Angeles.

01:09:52:00 O'TOOLE (Cont.): Next to me is Jennifer Blessing, who's a curator of photography at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 2009, she organized the exhibition Catherine Opie, an American Photographer; and she was co-curator of the exhibition *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video and Performance*, which is now on view at the Guggenheim.

01:10:14:00 To the far end here is Geoff Dyer, who writes both fiction and nonfiction. His fourth novel, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, was published in 2009; and his nonfiction book on photography entitled *The Ongoing Moment* won the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award for writing on photography, in 2006.

01:10:33:00 And last but not least we have Charlotte Cotton, who is the creative director for the proposed London space of the United Kingdom's National Media Museum. Previously she was curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert; and then head of programming at The Photographers Gallery; and then head of the department of photographs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

01:10:56:00 And I think we should probably begin by giving this panel a chance to respond to some of the things that were talked about in the first panel. So does anybody want to start on that? [pause; laughter] Or is it just too much to bite off?

01:11:14:00 GEOFF DYER: I feel I wish we'd gone first, when the bar was a bit lower, actually. [laughter] I mean, it's already kind of way over my head. But actually, I could start off with just a bit of sort of light relief, really. [laughter] It's funny, because I know a number of people on the panel didn't like the title. I think it's a superb title, actually. And weirdly, though, it put me in mind of something that the photographer Alex Webb told me when—

01:11:52:00 DYER (Cont.): He'd been in Spain talking to a curator, who was telling him about the way that in Spain in the 1930s, they used pigs for everything. You know, you would eat the pig; you'd eat all sort of different bits of it. Then you'd use the skin to make handbags and you'd— I don't know, you'd use the hoofs or whatever, the trotters. They just really used it. And the curator said to Alex, "And now photography is the pig." [laughter] And this seems actually very, very relevant to what we're talking about today. So in a way, for me, the title of this conference was what Alex Webb said; is the pig over? What's happened to the pig?

01:12:33:00 And then weirdly, that became associated in my mind with— For some reason, I've got this animal thing going on. And you know, we're familiar, of course, with this thing of over fishing. You know, because we've eaten too much fish and there's not enough left. So perhaps there's this interesting idea of sort of over photographing. And my wife, who works in the art world, she came back from one of these art things that she goes to, and it was— There was loads of photography there. And she said, "You know, I really—" She came back stunned, as I'm sure a lot of— I mean, a lot curators see a lot of photographs. But she said, "You know, I really think they should have a moratorium on photography. Nobody should be allowed to take a photograph for the next year." [laughter]

01:13:21:00 And of course, it's a rather— I mean, in terms of preserving fish stock, it really would be a good idea. And it just made me think, God, maybe that's not such a bad idea. I mean, obviously, it's not going to happen; I'm not *that* stupid. But it seemed to me if we did have this kind of rationing—and of course, I come from a country which is sort of predisposed to the idea of rationing—[laughter] then it's quite interesting to think what you'd let go of first.

01:13:50:00 DYER (Cont.): And so I thought, just as a way of getting things going, speaking from completely within my own, you know, probably rather foolish things, what would I let go first, in terms of photography? What could I live without for a year? And it didn't take me long to realize that actually, I could do without the art stuff, probably. I'd let that go first. [smattering of applause] And then next, sort of advertising. Well, the world would be less shiny, but I could still get the stuff, even if I couldn't see the photographs of it.

01:14:25:00 Then maybe fashion. Well, God, I like looking at photographs of women in dresses; but then you know, as Garry Winogrand said, you know, women are beautiful and I can look at them on the street. So then it started to really bite. And then actually, I started thinking of sports photography. God, I really— that's really starting to hurt me. [laughter] And sports photography is, of course, a kind of subset of news and stuff. And it seems to me, actually, we really wouldn't want to go without that. So if we sort of, you know, really—

01:14:56:00 Let's suppose— I mean, what would be the last thing we'd let go? It'd probably be— You in America, you would get rid of almost everything else before you let go of the Zapruder footage, wouldn't you? And in terms of a still image, that picture of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald, this— So in a weird way, I think that sort of mad idea of my wife's—I've got this terrible thing; I blame everything on her—really, it really focused my mind on what was, for me— you know, what I most valued in photography. Anyway, that's just something for you to mull over.

O'TOOLE: Charlotte, you spoke quite a bit in your piece about things that you'd be willing to let go of, too.

01:15:39:00 CHARLOTTE COTTON: You know, you realize when you're sitting on panels or— actually, the writing was done completely blind. But then when you sit on a panel, it was like, Oh, that's why you invited me. [laughter] Because I am so up for it. It's congenital with me. Like somebody gives me the word over and I go, Oh! Well, that could be over, that could be over. So you're over. And that's kind of what I did, really.

O'TOOLE: Could you, just for those in the audience who [inaudible voices] didn't read what she thought was over, perhaps you could elaborate a little bit on those various things.

01:16:13:00 COTTON: You're going to make me read it out?

O'TOOLE: It might be worth doing. [inaudible voice]

COTTON: I mean, I had sort of already defined it in my own head that the question I was answering was really about photography within cultural institutions, so particularly around the issues of what you collect and show. And are you still showing *the* history of photography in the gallery which is the corridor on the way to the restrooms? [laughter] And those kinds of questions. But in terms of what I thought or hoped would be over, it was about art photography, and it was in the relation to museums photo collections.

01:16:57:00 And I said that what I hoped was over, I guess, or at least the reason why I thought certain amateur practice and photographic industry sort of occasionally leak into those *the* histories of photography, is just to bolster up things that have got very tired, like road trips, street poetry, illustrations of political and social issues, lightweight conceptual art, the inoffensively and classically stylish, the outputs of the persistent and charming, the cheap stuff that contemporary art curators and collectors aren't interested in, and the downright overproduced.

01:17:35:00 COTTON: And I guess I kind of would stand by that, in the sense that probably as early as about 2000, I began to have difficulties with having actually only been, in adult life, a curator in an encyclopedic museum, working in the photography collection. And what was interesting to me, or what I felt impacted on the notion of what that could be was almost impossible to collect, unless it's about adding to the history, the platonic definition of photography within art institutions.

O'TOOLE: And so what would you like to see happen? And have you seen any examples of exhibitions or treatments of photography that break out of those molds that you think are rather tired?

01:18:23:00 COTTON: Yeah, sure. I do. I think there're some really fantastic curators around. I tend to prefer propositions, not the idea of us the institution offer you the public the well rounded and fully formed and hermetically sealed answer to something. Because I think we're increasingly, with photography, unable to understand what the questions are, let alone what the answers are.

01:18:50:00 I guess it's why I took my current job, which I took about six months ago. Made what was actually a real heart-wrenching decision to move back from the States; I hope I come back. I'm sure I will because I'm sure we won't raise all the money needed to do this project. [laughs]

O'TOOLE: Oh, no.

01:19:04:00 COTTON: The prospect was, is to open within the science museums in London, rather than within an arts institution, a set of narratives which are about media, dealing with the National Media Museum's collection—so film, photography, television, the web, radio. And it just struck me as a really interesting idea of doing that right now within a science museum, which isn't up its own ass and does actually— You

COTTON (Cont.): go into a science museum not expecting to know the answers, not even know what questions are, but to have something experiential. That appealed to me.

01:19:40:00 And then the other thing that appealed to me is, is that I think that photography's not alone in asking itself some pretty existential questions at the moment. Which may be triggered by digital technologies, but are really about the fact that who makes it, how it gets produced and how it's disseminated is all up for grabs, whether you're talking about film, television, photography.

01:20:01:00 O'TOOLE: And I think this question of media or the various media is something that pervades in these texts. And I think Walead spoke quite a bit about that in his text. And I thought maybe you could talk a little bit about that and the idea that some of these ideas about separate media is breaking down.

01:20:27:00 WALEAD BESHTY: I mean, I wouldn't go so far as to say it was necessarily breaking down. I mean, I kind of want to follow— [inaudible voices] Oh. I want to follow up on something that Peter brought up, which I think was a pretty important point; that when speaking with these kinds of generalizations or not[?] in umbrella terms like photography and art, that it's really important to sort of contextualize from what position one is speaking. And I think that's part of the problem with this topic, in some sense, is that photography is sort of brought to the table as though this is a very stable and understandable kind of category.

01:21:03:00 And I think that it's really particular to, you know, how it's sited and how it's being constructed. And I think on an institutional level—and that's sort of the direction— I mean, my interpretation of this panel in general was to address an institutional anxiety, one that had more to do with kind of the lingering departmental divisions and, like I said, sort of funding lines, intellectual fiefdoms—things that sort of generate from how slow institutions are at adaptation. And that's part of their role

01:21:33:00 BESHTY (Cont.): But as an artist, I don't really find too much— I mean, I would avoid the term photography, because I don't even think— I don't know that many people can agree on what they mean. And I think when talking about continuity versus discontinuity, it's extremely important to start situating from what position is that being staged? If you want to exclude things, or if you want to say, I don't like art photography or, there's a rupture between contemporary practice and historical practice, it's important to situate what that definition actually comes to mean.

01:22:09:00 I mean, it's almost the equivalent of saying— I mean, I've never heard anybody saying, I don't like art painting, but I like painting. [laughter] And I think that term gets bandied about as though— I don't know. And that's the frustrating part, because I think it becomes a platform for gibberish, essentially, you know? That was my initial frustration with the question. And that was also what I knew it would elicit, in some sense is, How do you parse this? And how do you actually contextualize how you're talking about this term?

O'TOOLE: Well, what would be another way of framing a question about the field from this perspective, from the perspective of a museum that shows photography and has a photography department?

01:22:57:00 BESHTY: Address it in terms of the history of art collecting institutions and the beginning of collecting photography, the shift from it being like an aspect of material culture to something that's considered on par with or subsumed within an art dialog, and accessible in the same ways. I mean, I think it's a case-to-case basis. But I think that one way is to historically draw the line through institutional discourse. And then talk about what sort of the obsession with those categorical delimiters are at this point, what people really feel like is being lost. Not just romantic notions of loss or something like that, but what really is materially at stake if you start abandoning terms in certain venues and not others?

01:23:52:00 BESHTY (Cont.): Because I think in terms of practices, it's all defined radically differently, depending on who's producing. And then from a technological standpoint, I mean, the technology has shifted from its very inception and many technologies sort of came and went, and we have no problem drawing a throughline there. And if it's just picture making, that predates any of the things that someone might be referring to as photographic, so I sort of— I mean, that's kind of where I stand in relationship to [inaudible].

O'TOOLE: Well, I wonder, Jenny, you wrote a little bit about how the Guggenheim approaches photography, which is different from some of the other museums that are represented here—MoMA— And actually, MoMA has a— The way their department functions is different from ours, say. And so could you speak a little bit about the ideas that were in your text, that you were talking about, about how photography is conceived there?

01:24:54:00 JENNIFER BLESSING: Yes, sure. I just wanted to go back to what Corey said for a moment, and maybe expand a little bit on what Walead was saying. Corey said something about history of photography textbooks. And I think if you look at history of photography textbooks, they're generally pretty dissatisfying. And because of the many areas of our lives that photography has an impact on, it seems like there's too many different kinds of discourses and too many uses of photography that are trying to be, you know, historicized.

01:25:40:00 And then when they get to contemporary art, there's always a kind of a greater confusion, unless the book is dedicated specifically [laughs] to contemporary photography. So I guess what I would say is that we've never really had a good narrative. We don't have one now; we never did. That's the nature of photography. So maybe we have to ask a different question. I think the why questions become the more interesting ones. Like why are we invested in photography specifically? [inaudible

BLESSING (Cont.): voice] Why are invested in photography, and specifically, how do we see a throughline, if we do?

01:26:27:00 I think in terms of the Guggenheim Museum, the Guggenheim Museum was founded as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, in the thirties. It was dedicated to abstract painting. No sculpture. Sculpture was considered too materialist. It wasn't until 1959 that the museum started collecting sculpture. And it wasn't until 1992 that we started to collect photography. And we had a very kind of specific mandate at that point. We were not going to have— we were never going to be an encyclopedic collection. We never had departments of design and architecture and other kinds of applied fields. We were always an art museum, and a contemporary art museum.

01:27:20:00 And so we focused on art that uses photography, I guess you could say. It's art that generally has— or photography that generally has a conceptual kind of bend. So in fact, I am lucky, in a way, that I have this kind of micro-niche that I don't have to ask some of these questions. I think one of the things— And this is kind of veering off on another topic, but I was thinking about the internet and the way that through social networking and so on, that there're all these micro-communities. Especially for music nowadays, that seems to be the way that people experience music, and the self-identify and connect to certain kinds of music.

01:28:09:00 And I feel very much like the photography world is one that's filled with micro-niches and I just fill one of those. The Guggenheim Museum fills one of those. And I think, as you were saying, we have to identify exactly what niche we're talking about, if I understood you correctly, when we're talking about photography.

01:28:38:00 WILLSDON: It seemed to me there was a sense in the texts that some people on this panel wrote to do with what might be gained by thinking of photography as such less; that there was almost the sense that photography had been in some struggles, in some wars. There was actually Geoff talking about almost the victories[?] of photography. And those of you who feel that we're at a point where we can talk less about photography and more about imaging techniques, the term that Trevor used; more about just the whole range of production of images; that it's no longer specific to something called photography—

01:29:30:00 One thing that interests me and I would want to ask you is, what's to be gained by doing that? What's to be gained by using the concept, the category of photography less?

BAKER: Photography what?

WILLSDON: Less.

BAKER: To use it less often?

WILLSDON: Yes. Yes. Actually, George, on the other hand—but this is not unrelated—you're almost using it more, for some things that are not typically seen as being photographs.

01:29:58:00 GEORGE BAKER: Why would you want to use the term less? I can understand wanting to get rid of some of the glut—

WILLSDON: Apply the concept less.

BAKER: I think we need to apply the concept more. We need to know more about—that's why we're here, I think—I mean, what this concept means today and what it's meant. So I don't think the term photography is a problem. I like the term a lot. Light writing is a great term. And I like medium terms a lot, too. Although I'm, like Joel Snyder, an unreconstructed modernist. I was thinking when I was listening to the first panel that I'm—you know, it's not a term people use anymore, but—unreconstructed postmodernist [laughter] for[?] my relationship to the questions we're talking about today, and photography specifically.

01:30:46:00 And so one of the key terms of the first panel being art photography, as I heard the discussion— I mean, that was one of the enemies at the moment of the rise of postmodernism, say, in the seventies and into the eighties. To jettison that tradition was the point for a sort of moment in the art use of photography. And that's led to a lot of the questions that I find myself grappling with as an historian, as a theorist today, which I want to talk more about. But I first wanted to go back to Walead, if I could, and ask him about something he said. So if I heard you right, Walead, you said that you would be in the camp of being an artist who doesn't use the term photography or doesn't claim the term photography. But you also teach in an institution of art, where I assume you teach photography—and maybe I'm wrong. So do you teach photography but you do art? I'm just wondering about dividing up these— [laughter; inaudible voice]

01:31:45:00 BESHTY: I've taught in photography departments, but I teach art. But I mean, nobody— I think that photography departments are usually couched within art departments or art parts of schools, anyway. So the assumption is—just like the assumption, because we're having this discussion in a museum—is that art is the end result. I mean, I'm not also arguing for a rejection of the term photography; but I do think that it's rather problematic when people start to try to construct some kind of ontological argument about the identity.

01:32:21:00 BESHTY (Cont.): And I think it's a problem on either side of that sort of seventies fight. And when I think about what you were saying about postmodern practices or, say pictures' generation or the conceptual art and those origins and, say the distance between someone like Lewis Baltz and, say Dan Graham or Ed Ruscha, that from a practical perspective, there's not much of one. Or even, some aspects of, I would say, Robert Adams is similarly so. That there was a way that that work all fit into a kind of discussion about aesthetics, about pictorialism, that had a lot of resonance for me and didn't seem like very divided camps.

01:33:14:00 And it seems to me that this kind of divide was largely one produced by historians and critics, not so much produced by practitioners. Stephen Shore was in Warhol's Factory. Baltz showed at Castelli. There was a kind of porousness—except when you got into a fight about, say accepting the neo[?] avant-gardes and a sort of very sort of antagonistic relationship between MoMA's photography department and the sort of rise of credible theory and the sort of— So I don't— That's all fun to watch and I enjoy reading that stuff and that kind of passionate fight, but I don't think that there is much fragmentation or opposition within those camps.

01:34:05:00 I think you need to look really specifically at, like individual practices. And those construct a negotiation with both convention and histories that are produced from particular bodies of work, and work far more poorly when the terms are generalized.

01:34:22:00 BAKER: But as I understand you, one of the differences between the two camps that I think we're talking about was, do you call yourself a photographer or do you call yourself just an artist?

01:34:33:00 BESHTY: I always thought it was really silly.

BAKER: That moment is an historical one, when that shift happens.

BESHTY: I suppose so, although I can't pretend to know what was at stake then. I do kind of know what's at stake now, in the sense that people who—and I apologize, P.L.—but people who go out of their way to assert photographer tend to not— it tends to be— What do I find? It tends to close off a set of conversations, more than it opens them up.

01:35:06:00 And I had some close friends who always claimed this photography thing as being like, I'm identified as a photographer. But I mean, is Martin Puryear a carpenter? [laughter] I mean, I don't understand what that really— It seems, like all sort of arbitrary in its ways of short— Like just the way that I think that this conference, in some sense, addresses a kind of institutional wound. And I think it's important to—

MAN: A wound?

01:35:32:00 BESHTY: Yeah, a wound. In the sense of a fear of relevance, a fear of what happens when these categories define the structure of an institution, and yet we find that these categories are somewhat untenable, because when we try to say exactly what they mean, we don't know and we disagree. And so it becomes displaced to issue with practitioners. But I think that most practitioners— I mean, I have a hard time caring about whether or not— I think that there's something that the term artist does, which says that I look at lots of different kinds of aesthetics.

01:36:12:00 And I don't just look at photographs. And I think it also means that there's a different kind of engagement with history that I have as a practitioner. It signifies the kind of people I find myself in dialog with. But I mean, it's not ideological more than I feel like it's sort of— I also produce objects, you know, that are distinctly not photographic. So I mean, that's part of it, as well. It's kind of like people talk about

BESHTY (Cont.): William Christenberry as a photographer, but he also makes objects and sculptures, whatever. I mean, I think it's just tricky to draw that line. I guess that's—

WILLSDON: Trevor, how's it seem to you?

01:36:54:00 PAGLEN: Yeah, I mean, I completely agree, as someone who identifies as an artist, more than a photographer. I mean, I think a lot of it has to do with the kind of mindset that you're in, first of all. I feel like as someone who identifies as an artist, if I'm going to do something with photography, I have to justify it in terms of, Why is this specific media[sic] the thing that I'm going to use to talk about whatever it is that I'm talking about, rather than a sculpture, rather that a painting? And I mean, I just don't assume it as a kind of default neutral form at all. So it's more akin to thinking the way that a sculptor might think about the materials that they use.

01:37:37:00 But also, I guess, as someone who kind of works using photography or imaging or whatever, I don't find the word photography particularly useful because there's so many different kinds of practices that involved photons and something that's going to pick them up, and making images. You know, for example, something's very— a simple example is when you run the negatives through the x-rays, your photos of those, Walead, is that— I guess that's photography. I guess to me, that's not interesting, that kind of question, [the] kind of ontological assumptions behind it.

01:38:16:00 But another way that I think about what imaging is or what photography is has much more to do with how do we see the world and what are the machines and technologies that we use to see the world? And how do we use that both to produce art, but I think also having a conversation about what is photograph or is photography over, really, I mean, does kind of assume something about art, and I think ignores a huge

PAGLEN (Cont.): number of photographic or imaging traditions that have been tremendously important to the history of the world.

01:38:55:00 For example, spy satellite imagery; or for example, stroboscopic photography that was then altered to trigger nuclear weapons. And these kinds of things, I think, are very much also a part of that tradition. Predator drones, surveillance cameras, this kind of thing. So we live in a landscape in which photography is all around us all the time, being used for all kinds of different purposes, and you can't readily divorce it from power. And I guess to me, as an artist, those are the kinds of questions that I'm very, very interested in. And by kind of asking a more narrowly defined question about oh, institutions and how they treat photography, is kind of a different question than the one I'm interested in, I guess.

01:39:50:00 COTTON: But they are informed by each other, because I mean, if we take it that the war is over and photography is an art form, then one could— You know, that you can look back at the history of how the history of photography has been represented as one which was really heavily weighted to legitimizing it as an expressive, transcendental art form, when one would say that there were always lots of different versions of photography going on. And what's particular to this era is contemporary art photography is a locus, probably *the* locus. It's like the sexiest part of photographic production.

01:40:28:00 But that can now be more openly talked about as in relation to the other ways in which photography forms who we are, the way we see, and the languages that go on within contemporary art photography. I mean, this idea of the unreconstructed modernist or postmodernist, actually, it feels very comfortable within a museum to think about those things because a photographic print is not the default form. So you can imagine that most of your visitors aren't looking at a picture as a window onto a real moment in time. They're thinking, God, fucking hell, it's been six weeks since I

COTTON (Cont.): saw a gelatin silver print, or five years since I saw a gel— [inaudible voice] I mean, it really is a modernist phenomenon.

01:41:12:00 And your point about music and it being— you know, that having— the digitization having a massive impact on music. It's more than that. Which is, you know, the price and the amount of live music has gone up exponentially. Vinyl records, production of, has gone up exponentially in the last few years. And so it's not a question of either/or; it's a question of either/and. And I think that's precisely what happened to photography. And the notion that museums are actually dealing with coming up with good enough reasons to come together and congregate, rather than to do that somewhere else on your own with a screen. Hence, I imagine, why you were over-subscribed for something like this, because it's a really great reason to come together in a museum.

01:41:59:00 DYER: Yeah. And again, it's— And the title, it just seems to me, raises so many things. Especially if you slightly re-punctuate or rephrase it. So it's like all the time that we're speaking now, there's this sense of the extent to which photography is in dialog with other things. So even as we're speaking tonight, I'm thinking, Oh, well, actually, what the title was is sort of, actually, Is photography? Over. You know, that kind of thing you have on a two-way radio. [laughter]

01:42:30:00 And it just lends it— It seems to me it's very difficult for photography ever to build walls around itself. It's always in communication. And it was, just to give— I was really touched, by the way, on the first panel, that our Tate Modern got a mention. And it's kind of ironic, really, that there's this debate about is photography over, when we've only just— The curator of photography has just been appointed. [laughter] It's like, You've got the job; here's the bad news; you've got your notice, as well.

01:43:07:00 DYER (Cont.): And the other— I mean, actually since that first show, Cruel and Tender, we've had another one. And it was called Street and Studio. So you can see that we're locked into this kind of thing of antinomies there. And you think, Oh, the next is going to be, I don't know, Little and Large: From Kertesz to Gursky. [laughter] And I know that this— I thought that was a superb point, that we don't say we don't like art painting. But I think that last show, Street and Studio at Tate Modern, was really quite interesting because of course, Britain—

01:43:45:00 You know, there's been this whole YBA thing. You know, some of the most famous artists of the last ten years have come out of Britain. And in that show, you could see that it— you almost felt that some sort of directive had come down from somewhere that we had to have some of these young British artists in it, so that the goal posts of this photography show had to be shifted. So we had this sort of strange thing, really, whereby a certain amount of space was given up to these people— Gillian Wearing and Wolfgang Tillmans. Really important artists, internationally famous artists; but—and I'm not just saying this to suck up to the American audience—I get the impression they're kind of rather irrelevant, both in the history of photography and, in fact, in terms of— they're just footnotes, in terms of what's happening in contemporary photography. So I think it's really interesting, this— There's no getting away from this dialog between—

01:44:47:00 BESHTY: So what is relevant in contemporary photography then? I mean, I just don't understand the distinction?

DYER: Well, it seemed to me that actually, you were having to— that there was an opportunity— there's always an opportunity cost, isn't there, for including anyone. So by including people like that, whose photographs, to me, didn't seem terribly interesting— There was a weird kind of paradox, in a way, that the price was being paid by photographers. By, let's say, a photographer like, I don't know, Trent Parke, let's

DYER (Cont.): say, someone who seems to me a *very* representative figure, in that he's a member of Magnum, so he is, I suppose, in a broad definition of the term, a photojournalist. But of course, he sells his stuff in galleries, too. I feel I should hand it over to other people now. So over and out. [laughter]

01:45:42:00 O'TOOLE: I was just thinking that in your text, you talked about people being a little elegy prone. And I think that kind of fits nicely with what George was saying about this idea the even if there isn't a crisis, the perception of there being a crisis is really interesting. And you talked about this idea that you were interested in end games and what that meant; whether or not there really was something ending mattered less than the sense that something was ending, and what that meant.

01:46:15:00 BAKER: Yeah, I love elegies. And I'm not a good unreconstructed postmodernist, because I also really do like ontological questions. And so I do think, you know, both there's a use to thinking of this as a kind of narrative of something ending; that raises certain questions that this is a kind of narrative we rely on in human culture all the time. But there are larger questions. The first panel brought up some things for me that I might want to talk about before we run out of time, that do seem to have come to some kind of end point. And it's just about modernist traditions of photography or art photography and the like.

01:46:55:00 No one used the term index in the first panel—probably for good reason—[laughter] and veered away from trying to talk about technology issues, too, for good reason. But I mean, I do think those kind of big questions about a kind of image that's about time or temporality in a specific way has changed today. Or a kind of image that was about light and illumination in a specific way has changed in a variety of ways today. And those are questions—

01:47:21:00 BAKER (Cont.): I mean, my problem with ontology in photography is that I start to see it everywhere. Like, I look everywhere and I see photographs. I mean, that's my ontological mania. So my recent one is, you know, Walter Benjamin's essay, "Little History on Photography," I got stuck on the ending, where he talks about the photographer as the descendant of the augers and the haruspices, the people who read the flight of birds and those who read, you know, the entrails of sacrificed animals.

01:47:47:00 So I haven't been killing any animals, but every bird that flies into my windows is, you know, a kind of photographic event, suddenly, to me. But I mean, this is where, for me, an ontological question either gets ridiculous or really interesting. That there's a kind of desire for photography. There's certain experiences, life experiences, that the photograph intersected with. And so to bring one other point onto the table, that came up for me in the first panel, the denigration of nostalgia that came up.

01:48:21:00 And for me, nostalgia's actually kind of a good word. Or can be a good word. [inaudible voice] And it's specifically often a kind of photographic value for me. So loss, death, Roland Barthes' whole notion of the photograph. I feel really attached to that and I don't want to let that go, even though I feel like the culture's letting it go. So you know, my mom. So my mother and photography. I mean, Barthes' whole notion that somehow the photograph can be thought around his relationship to the loss of his mother. Yeah, that's something I think is important to talk about in relationship to what's happened to the photograph today.

01:48:58:00 BESHTY: And there's something really elegant about camera lucida and also Barthes' argument. But at the same time, I think it begins to obscure what's at stake about photographic practice and how it affects people's lives, because there's not a clear— You know, that route tends to isolate it as a kind of phenomenon that transcends the object itself, when the object actually has to do with very specific

BESHTY (Cont.): relationships between— of power, of enunciation, of context, and of politics, in the end; of about how the public is addressed; what it means to put a photograph on a billboard, versus a magazine, versus in your shoebox. That they're not the same thing.

01:49:47:00 But sweeping away those distinctions, through this kind of, you know, essentializing a photograph as being about what's absent, what's lost, tends to avoid the possibility of even getting to questions about what's at stake in the production of images, in the production of aesthetics, and how this is a kind of— how this affects the way that we conduct our lives and understand the world around us. And that's what I think that those thought experiments about it— And I love a lot of that writing, and I enjoy it quite a bit. But in the end, for me, you know, I make stuff, you know? And I make things. And I don't deal in the abstraction of death when either I press a shutter on a camera or I'm in the darkroom, or I'm doing any number of things.

01:50:32:00 That these things have to do with, you know, the quotidian, about negotiations in daily life. And that's what I think is— Again, it's moving towards these points of generality that I get very— I worry a lot about that kind of conversation, that it can meander into [inaudible]—

01:50:53:00 BAKER: But Walead, that's why you're after the death. I mean, you're after the over. And you know, some people might—

DYER: That's next year's symposium. [laughter; inaudible voices] You're post-over.

BESHTY: I'm over-over.

DYER: Sorry. I shouldn't joke. I mean, your point was serious. But I mean, photography— it's weird, this thing of— given that it's— You would think photography would be much more elegy prone than it is, given that it's— And I mean, this is something I was hoping to learn in the course of this weekend, really. Because you know, this little thing I wrote on the internet, I started off with this— you know, mentioning Raymond Williams' great book, which I'm sure many of you have read, *The Country and The City*, when he's reading an account, in the 1970s, I think, lamenting the sort of death of the English countryside; and then he remembers that actually, he'd read something like that in the 1930s.

01:51:53:00 And then, of course, he traces it all the way back to, you know, the elegy in a country churchyard. And by increments, we go right back, of course, to the Garden of Eden and that sort of expulsion. And well, all the people on the panel know a lot more about the history of photography than I do, but I was really hard pressed to come across many kind of laments like that of people saying, Oh, photography's over now. So it seemed to me, actually, it was incredibly forward looking. It's always been a forward looking medium. And then, just after, in that irritating way, after I'd handed in my piece, I came across this comment of Chuck Close's, in which he said, "Photography never got any better than it was in 1840." [laughter]

01:52:40:00 And I thought, Wow, he hadn't bothered nibbling his way back to the Garden Eden, in the way that Williams notions[?]; he's just vaulted straight over there. But actually, in some weird way, it seemed to me that— I can't remember now who it was on the first panel talking about the Turin Shroud thing. It seemed to me that actually this was, rather than being any kind of lament, it was a statement of the incredible sort of miracle of photography, that it still seemed now, all these years later, it seemed as amazing to Chuck Close that there was this thing of photography as it did to Fox Talbot.

01:53:17:00 DYER: But also, actually, that comment of Chuck Close's is rather more complicated than it might first appear, because the tense is rather odd. "Photography never got any better than it was in 1840." And it just seemed to me it was a beautiful comment in this, because strictly grammatically, he should've said, photography has never got— blah, blah, blah. But it's like he's saying that it is over with. And in some weird way, in some *brilliant* way, he's sort of encapsulating exactly what Roland Barthes said was the tense of photography. You know, it's dead and it's going to die.

01:53:55:00 It seemed to me this was one of the few sort of expressions of elegy that I came across, but which was also— It was, I suppose like all the best elegies, it was something rather triumphant and celebratory about it, as well.

O'TOOLE: And Jenny, you sort of suggested that it's died many times over and it will again, and that it's sort the cycle of life.

01:54:22:00 BLESSING: I was one of those people who kept thinking this panel was Is Photography Dead? It's in my Outlook calendar, Is Photography Dead? I'm going to be there [laughter] for the wake. I was thinking about when I was coming here, I was thinking, Now, why is it that I want that to be the question? What is it? Why? Is there some anxiety there? And for some reason, I was thinking about when I was in high school. We were given these aptitude exams. We were to answer batteries of questions, and then they would tell you what you should be, based on people who had answered similarly, in different fields. And mine was funeral home director. [laughter] And I thought, This is it. This is why I like photography. It's entirely about that. [inaudible voice]

O'TOOLE: Because you can keep burying it over and over again?

01:55:19:00 BLESSING: I'm comfortable with it, it being something that's dead. And I think we have to, if we're going to define what photography is, and if it transcends technology or materiality— And in my case, I find so many artists, contemporary artists are using— whether it's video or film, they're projecting images. What is the photograph? Is it the image? And the definition is going to be conceptual. And Roland Barthes and people who have talked about this issue of death— Bazin talks about it being embalming, mummification.

01:56:02:00 That notion of indexicality or the specific kind of temporality, or our faith and belief in it—because in fact, it isn't literal, it's an effect that we believe in—that seems to be a logic. And maybe that's something that we can discuss. And I think it's interesting to me that this question, this anxiety, is photography over, is coming after 9/11. And 9/11 was a moment where there was a *lot of talk about photography*, a lot of panels about photography. And a lot of people were struck about experiencing the thing and the vastness of images and why they were needed. Here is New York; then we have Abu Ghraib. We have Daniel Pearl. And we have so many instances of photography's impact on our life that's connected to—

01:56:58:00 COTTON: But how does that relate, then, to your more specific experience, both your nature and working as a contemporary art curator charged with collecting photography?

01:57:11:00 BLESSING: I think seeing it as an object with a history, [inaudible] living in the present.

COTTON: But related to history outside of—

BLESSING: I'm sorry?

01:57:23:00 COTTON: But you're talking about examples which had a profound impact on the value of photography in our social lives. And I'm unclear about what relationship that has to the history of contemporary art photography that you represent at the Guggenheim.

01:57:41:00 BLESSING: To me, I see it playing out in work that I see, that I've seen then. I think that I do see younger artists who are looking back at the past, who are looking at technologies that are disappearing and trying to hold on them, and seem invested in holding onto these technologies that are disappearing—which is a kind of metaphor, I think.

01:58:07:00 COTTON: Well, maybe a metaphor for being an artist…

BLESSING: [over Cotton] The elusiveness of the [inaudible].

COTTON: …because I guess that's been going on, what, since the early seventies? The idea of using no longer the latest technologies.

01:58:18:00 O'TOOLE: I think, you know, maybe we should try now to think a little bit about what our question or our issue that we want to bring away from this would be. I think we've kind of talked around some ideas. Does anyone have a proposition?

BAKER: No. [laughter] I've got no clue[?].

DYER: I guess going on from what Jennifer said about here is New York and the 9/11 pictures, I was really struck by something I read in George Packer's new collection of essays, *Interesting Times*. And he said, "Iraq has not been a photographer's war." And I thought, Really? I could think of all sorts of terrific pictures. But then of course, he's not saying it's not been photography's war; he's saying it's not been a *photographer's*

war. So I mean, that's maybe something we could talk about. Because certainly, really, I get the impression there's no real need now in sort of war photography. You don't need one of those great visual novelists like Eugene Smith or Larry Burrows or Capa. Basically, if you think of some of the most remarkable pictures to have come out of that part of the world recently, there's the John Moore picture— You know, John Moore got the picture of the assassination of Bhutto. And he just held up the camera, pressed the auto wind. He just happened to be there.

01:59:52:00 And in a sense, now, in that kind of combat or war photography, I mean, the photographer is just anybody who has a free hand and some sort of gadget. So I mean, as a sort of subset, not so much is photography over, but maybe is the photographer becoming a little bit, you know— Yeah, is maybe the *photographer* getting pushed out of a job?

02:00:20:00 WILLSDON: Well, that, the question of jobs, might be something we can take forward here, because my sense is that this second panel is generally more relaxed about [laughter] the overness of photography—in quite different ways. Which is, I think, super-interesting to me. But you know, the idea that photography's just many things, it's hugely dispersed across a whole number of galleries and screens and so many things. But jobs in photography remain, you know, whether they're curatorial jobs or jobs as photographers or— Well, this is the thing, right? But I guess what I'm saying is, what remains—and I think there's no reason why this shouldn't persist for a good while yet—is a professional structure, kind of an institutional infrastructure around photography. And so in this sort of strange aftermath of photography, what can that apparatus be used for?

02:01:32:00 COTTON: I'd like to do that. There's an essay that was written in the late nineties by an academic in the UK called Julian Stallabrass. It's called *Sixty Billion Sunsets*. And he has a really nice diagram in that essay, which is a wheel, it's a circle.

COTTON (Cont.): And four points is[?] amateur, professional, snapper, and artist. And he talks about how those terms kind of come closer together or disperse and move to the top at different moments in history. And it's one of those essays that I reread and go, Com on, man, just rewrite it. Because the axis has really shifted. So I would love to discuss that more.

02:02:11:00 BAKER: And I feel like I'm going to— what I said before was a little bit facetious because I thought we talked about so many things it's hard to formulate an overarching question. But I do feel like Walead and I have repeated a little bit tonight kind of a debate that we've had in print in Charlotte's *Words Without Pictures* thing from LACMA last year. So there's kind of like, on my side, this sort of subset of ontological questions about photography; and if I'm not going to state Walead's point wrong, a set of functionalist questions or institutional, socially defined questions around how we're looking at photography.

02:02:43:00 I just wanted to lay down an historical question around the side of the point that I think I've been trying to explore. Which is if— One of the things I heard Walead say is that, you know, sometimes it's historians and critics who invented these kinds of distinctions betweens artists and photographers. Or what is photography, as a question, is kind of theoretical abstraction. I do think historically, that was a question that was really important to modernist art photographers. And that what we see happening with some of the practices I was starting to bring into the conversation, coming into their moment in the seventies and eighties around postmodernism, what actually didn't happen was that the question of what is photography became irrelevant for the notion of just art in general.

02:03:30:00 BAKER (Cont.): What actually, I think, happened, and very interestingly, in a lot of our practices is that the question of what is photography turned into a generalized question about the photographic. What is the photographic? How expandable[?] is this concept. So to go back to these earlier comments about the concept of photography. That, I think, is really important. And that can be defined in ontological or functional, social or institutional ways. And that's part of the practice that I think as a critic, I've felt that it's been really important to try to unravel in the present.

02:04:02:00 WILLSDON: Is it like, I guess, a becoming abstract[?] of photography?

BAKER: Well, that's what Walead and I have been trying to figure [inaudible] abstractions.

02:04:12:00 COTTON: I'd go for that, definitely. I mean, I'm finding I'm getting slightly embarrassed about using the idea of lens-based media. And I thought that was going to get me through a few years. [laughter] So I would love to have that discussion.

WILLSDON: Okay, so we're going to go away and formulate a couple of topics here. And just to remind you, we're going to be back here tomorrow at two p.m. And almost everybody who reserved for this evening also reserved for tomorrow evening, so we're looking forward to seeing you again. And meanwhile, we're going to go away in private and sort some of these issues out. But thank you very much for this evening. [applause; inaudible voices; END]