

SFMOMA
Is Photography Over? – Unedited Transcript
Day Two, Part Two, Friday, April 23, 2010

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 Part One was on, so numbers on this transcript do not start at zero. The last number on transcript of session one was 00:59:03:00.

O'TOOLE: Okay, next question.

00:59:52:00 QUESTION: I have a couple of quick comments, and then a question for the panel.

O'TOOLE: Could you speak up just a little bit? Thank you.

QUESTION: I said I have a couple of comments and a question. And one comment is that most of what I heard last night and what I've been hearing this afternoon is really about art photography, which is a very, very small subset of photography. But that's okay; we're in an art museum. That's just one comment. And the other thing, in terms of photographic practice or photography now, aside from art photography or commercial photography or photojournalism, if you go out on the street and take a look at and talk to eighteen-year-olds, twenty-year-olds, twenty-five-year-olds, they're taking pictures all the time. And then they're dumping them.

01:00:47:00 They're not even posting them to Facebook or YouTube or whatever. They're just taking them, showing them to some friends, maybe emailing them or digitally sending them off, and then they dump them. So yes, there are many, many, many more millions of photographs being made—and dumped. And I think that that's the practice. How long it will continue—When those people have children, they might change their practice and save a few pictures. But okay.

01:01:18:00 Anyway, two questions I have. One is I'm curious, given the variety of things that the panelists have said, I'm curious what each one of you would give as the year—or it doesn't have to be precisely the year—but when contemporary starts. I've heard the word contemporary thrown out. I've also heard nostalgia for Postmodernism. That's really kind of interesting to me. [laughter] I mean, I'm a Modernist, so— I mean, that there's already a nostalgia for Postmodernism— It's one thing I'll never suffer from. [laughter] And the other question I have

QUESTION (Cont.): is— And I can't remember the exact quote; I'm sure a lot of people in the room know it. And that's Walker Evans' comment about photography being the most literary of visual media. Is that still relevant? Does that still mean anything in contemporary practice?

O'TOOLE: So does anyone want to answer the question about contemporary? Anyone? Anybody? [inaudible voice]

01:02:38:00 GALASSI: My view is that in mainstream Western culture—now, that's mainstream Western culture; I'm not talking about the whole world—there was a dominant tradition that goes from the European Renaissance up through Matisse, Picasso, probably Jackson Pollock, certainly de Kooning. And you know, the institution I work for, the painting collection starts in 1880 because from the viewpoint of the 1920s, it looked like there was a big break there. And there was a big break. But it was a big break that started the last great chapter of what we think of as the Old Master tradition.

01:03:24:00 Something else began to happen in the sixties. Andy Warhol is the poster boy for whatever that something is. And we're in that now. Now, of course, photography has a different history that touches on both of these things. But in terms of my operative framework of how you relate things that are happening now, that's it. [inaudible] growth[?]; that's just my—

01:03:57:00 DICORCIA I don't know why, I think the literary question just made me think of something. And I guess I'm a member of the audience now, asking the panel. Do you think there's any relationship between the quality of twentieth century photography and depression?

SNYDER?: Clinical depression? [laughter]

DICORCIA: *Depression*. No, it's not— It's depressionist. No, I'm serious. Because I think there probably is, in relationship to literature; and he brought that up. And when I think of the most affective photographers—and I put that at the beginning of my alphabet—they all seem to be kind of downers. [laughter]

01:05:00:00 DYER: Well, should I say something about that P.L. This is sort of linking with both questions. I saw that big Edward Burtynsky book *Oil*; and I know there was a show in Washington, as well. And it seemed there was some sort of connection there between the moment of peak oil, maybe, and the moment of peak photography. And that sort of begs the question of what's going to come afterwards, and this kind of question of is photography over. I mean, I'll say one other thing, as well; that when these technologies— when we hear that a given kind of film is going out of— they're not making it anymore, people always stash it away, don't they, so that they can keep using that. That's just a bit of background.

01:05:46:00 Anyway, of course, in terms of sort of depression and literature, I think we'd all agree that one of the most depressing, bleak books to have come out in the last five years or whatever would be *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. And funnily enough, last night after the session, I started to think of this world, this thing of is photography over, and I realized that if I had the skill, I would do one of those YouTube things, where I would actually kind of remake the film of *The Road*, but instead of having that actor in it, I'd have— It would have, I don't know, like Lee Friedlander in this bleak world where there's nothing much to photograph, and there's no sort of film stock left. [laughter]

01:06:33:00 So I just had this lovely vision of these photographers trundling their trolleys around this bleak, unphotographable world, looking for film. [laughter] And of course, as you know, in the book and in the film of *The Road*— I just had this lovely idea. Let's say it's Lee and Maria Friedlander, and they come across this sort of— You remember in the film— they come across this stash of stuff. So I imagine them getting in there. And of course, it's great because suddenly he's got some film again. And so he'll maybe say to Maria, Hey, come on, take your clothes off; I'm going to do some more of them nudes that I used to do. And then he might decide to do a sort of conceptual piece, whereby he's going to take photographs of all this stock of film, as a kind of comment on—

01:07:25:00 But of course, it wouldn't be long, really, before, just as in the film, they decide they have to leave; they can't stay in this lovely sort of larder of— And it's not just because

DYER (Cont.): they're worried that, I don't know, Joel Sternfeld and Alec Soth are going to come along [laughter] and eat them. I think the reason that someone like Lee Friedlander worked [inaudible] is because however bleak and miserable looking the world was, it was still more interesting to go out there and document it than it would be to do this kind of art photography of stacks of film. [laughter] So I see them trundling off again, you know, leaving the sanctuary, taking a lot of film with them, of course. But crucially, they wouldn't take it all. Because however late you come in the tradition, however over you might think things are, there's always somebody coming along after. So I love this idea of them— They trundle off and then later on somebody else comes along, and this thing which seems completely exhausted is once again kind of rehabilitated. So that's my— or reborn. So that's my little sort of parabolic answer to that question. [applause]

01:08:51:00 COTTON: That's difficult to follow. [laughter] But I did enjoy the last comments there. I mean, I think you can have it all ways. Like the poetry of photography, if you see it as a literary form, can continue. But I think it means something different to do it than it did even five years ago or ten years ago. And I mean, with some of your characters in your film, of course there's an issue of having a voice through a certain physical part of the medium and wanting to stay with that. It's a bit more tricky when it's a twenty-six-year-old stashing four-by-five film, isn't it? I mean, that's a peculiar sort of bent or sort of kind of approach to photography and what you think it is, as a young practitioner.

01:09:44:00 I mean, I do worry that if it does continue to be sort of a self-referencing discussion within contemporary art photography, either, as you say, pictures about making pictures at the time that analog becomes no longer default and everyone can see it; or indeed, wanting just to be deeply reactionary and continue with the road trips and the jazz of the street and all of that. I mean, one would hope that the impact of the way that we look and the fact that there is this plethora of image production, not necessarily for art— But that does shift, surely. It does shift in a positive way, potentially, within the confines of contemporary art. I mean, I worry about collections, in terms of what does a collection like SFMOMA collect as contemporary;

COTTON (Cont.): whether they're defining contemporary as post-1965 or in the last ten years. I mean, what is it reflecting, in terms of photography as a discreet discipline?

01:10:56:00 KELLER: One of the things I think we've tried to do here—I don't know how successful we've been—is to complicate sort of *the* history of photography as best we can. You know, and that's an ever-changing complication. You know, we've always sort of looked at our collecting practice as, We tell this history; we fill the gaps. And those gaps change, actually, as we learn more. I mean, like we might not have been collecting scientific photography twenty years ago, but now we're realizing that is a gap so we go back and fill it. And contemporary, as well. And one of the things about the difference between reacting to history and reacting to the contemporary period is you have to kind of be nimble and go back and forth and realize that we'll make mistakes and leave gaps for someone else to fill in the future.

01:11:46:00 But you know, we're very interested—I know you said before about all these different kinds of contemporary practices. And it's very slippery. So we're out there sort of grasping at these slippery things the best we can. But I think it's important to complicate that story.

WILLSDON: Could I ask you something about that? I mean, collecting is a kind of history writing. And history is typically written according to the concerns of the present. So I mean, do you have a sense in your department of the concerns of the present that lead you to attempt to construct the kind of history that you do?

01:12:26:00 KELLER: I hope— [inaudible voice]

WILLSDON: Put it another way. How does something become a gap? How does something suddenly seem like a gap?

KELLER: Well, sometimes you don't grasp the significance of something in its moment. I mean, I can't think of a good example off the top of my head that would make sense. But you try

KELLER (Cont.): to pay attention to what's important. Some things that seem important now, in five years we're going to say, I cannot believe we thought that was important; now it seems totally unimportant. And some things are slowly simmering under the surface, and in ten years we're going to look back and say, Wow, we really didn't pick up on how really game changing that was.

01:13:05:00 Some things are only important in retrospect. So we sort of have to try to be as sensitive as we can to what's happening in our own moment, recognizing that we're human barometers, and to try to recognize and hope that history will correct for our mistakes.

WILLSDON: Would you say—just one more thing—that the motivating factors that lead you to kind of decide to collect in a certain area, would you say these are mainly factors that are sort of internal to photography? Or are you responding to interests that might lie outside photography?

01:13:45:00 KELLER: Well, as a photo historian, I bring my own set of judgments to photography. So trying to get outside my own head, or our own heads, as a department, that's a difficult exercise. We do try to cast the net more broadly. I mean, things that interest me are works that engage with the history of photography; but not exclusively. We were talking a little bit before about Walead's work, which we've just acquired for the collection. And one of the things that made me get really excited about that work was listening to how he talked about it. And for me, it evoked all this language of the 1920s. I don't know if he'd agree with me at all. But he was talking about how he uses these games of chance and sort of these experiments in the darkroom. And to me, that sounded like Rodchenko and the Constructivists. And then talking about sort of the colors and the way light is made up and how we perceive light.

01:14:43:00 And to me, it was like Moholy-Nagy would be *beside* himself, I think, to see what Walead had done there. And so then you start to think about, well, what does it mean to do that kind of practice in 2010? And that's the kind of question that gets me really excited. But you know, we're admittedly a very strange group of people and strange things get me excited. [chuckles] So that, for me, was one of the reasons why it made Walead's work so important. I

KELLER (Cont.): think another person would recognize the work as important, but probably for a completely different set of criteria.

01:15:17:00 NICKEL: I think it's perhaps a little misleading to reduce the museum's mission to collecting practices, as well. I mean, it seems clear that one of the things that we're working around is a kind of crisis around the object. Those gazillion pictures being made on cell phones every day live in a kind of virtual, non-object status, through systems of exchange or deletion or whatever it might be. So the larger culture is thinking about lens-based imagery in new ways because of what's going on right now. It puts any museum in a position where it has to rethink what its investment in those material objects are then. So as Corey pointed out earlier, the old-fashioned snapshot print takes on a kind of totemic quality, actually.

01:16:09:00 People don't like destroying those things. They're valuable, no matter how bad they are as pictures. They seem to— that that's where the miracle comes in, that object can hold something from the past. Which isn't what people believe about cell phone pictures anymore, I don't think. So in terms of thinking what the museum's posture towards collecting objects or— I would suggest that forward-thinking institutions need to begin to redefine themselves as sites where certain kinds of conversations are had about these issues, like this conversation is happening. One of things I think SFMOMA's done particularly well is to take those critical challenges that were posed about the museum, rather tangentially, in the eighties and nineties about why the vernacular photograph doesn't belong in a museum, and say, Why don't we take that statement and turn it into a question?

01:17:08:00 What does it mean for a museum to address the vernacular? It's very messy and problematic, and maybe it makes us look bad, but let's put it up and ask some questions about it. Just putting it up is not asking a question; it's only half of what the museum's responsibility is. But I think that increasingly, as the larger cultural issues around objects only snowball, that the museum's role as a site for discussion is going to be increasingly important.

O'TOOLE: Charlotte, I know that this is a subject near and dear to your heart. Do you have some things you want to say on that?

01:17:48:00 COTTON: Well, I mean, I'm in total agreement with Doug. I think that the site of the museum does shift, in terms of—I mean, I mentioned it last night—our reasons to congregate, our reasons to come together. And I think that they're enhanced unreconstructed Modernist reasons, like to be with the thing, the aura of the thing itself. That's a good reason to come to a museum. But I also think you're right; it's about the discussion that can be held in an institution like this that deals with the uncertainty of the moment. And I mean, I don't feel particularly nostalgic about it; I just think it is one of those moments where it's very difficult for an institution to continue its traditional role with photography, to offer a history or the history, a received wisdom supplied to its public, when in fact, the jury is out.

01:18:40:00 And you know, if you ask any of us sitting here about our uses of new technologies, it's probably profoundly less—even if some of you have kids, it's profoundly less—than many of your visitors who are coming into the museum. And therefore, I think there is potentially a more discursive atmosphere in a museum, and a greater potential for an institution to work out these sensitive and tricky and nuanced issues with its what used to be called public, or what we've been calling audience. But clearly, the balance is quite different from normal[?].

MAN: [inaudible]—

O'TOOLE: You had said last night— Sorry. You had said last night that you thought asking questions rather than just supplying answers was sort of what you were looking for. Or allowing it to be a little bit more provisional.

01:19:32:00 COTTON: Well, that was definitely in the spirit of a project we did at LACMA called *Words Without Pictures*, which was about— I mean, Walead and George wrote about it, wrote for that project. Which was, hopefully, about having a forum for saying something before

COTTON (Cont.): it becomes received wisdom. So if you're an academic, not having to qualify it in the way that you would with, you know, the regular formulas. Or if you're an artist who doesn't normally write but had a supportive structure to express a point of view which wasn't necessarily about their own work, but feelings of the climate. And I mean, I think it was probably the most rewarding thing that I did when I was at LACMA. I mean, because it really was that thoughtful. I mean, people were really earnest and thoughtful about it, rather than dogmatic or taking positions. Because it just feels— you know, it feels like not the moment to take a position, because we're halfway through something.

O'TOOLE: I think we'll take another question. There've been two people waiting very patiently back there. Thank you.

01:20:33:00 AUDIENCE: I'm interested in, because photos clearly have so much power, what [is] the sort of psychological and social impact of the lack of agency in photography and the sort of removal of responsibility. And it came up a little bit last night, with how it's the photograph of the event as opposed to the person that takes the photograph; it's whoever has the cell phone camera at a momentous event. And we see this also, the lack of agency that I'm thinking about, with people taking a lot of pictures without asking permission. Like, the ethics in photography are changing. And also with the surveillance of ourselves. Like, there's so many pictures of us floating around the internet at any given time. And if you look at a news image that's been pulled from Flickr or from YouTube, there won't be the person's name who took the picture, it'll just say Flickr or YouTube, or even Reuters.

01:21:38:00 Just it often doesn't use the photographer's name, it'll just say Reuters, just a company's name as the person who took it. And this, to me, has an eerie resemblance to like, if I would go to an art museum and see a daguerreotype on the wall and that daguerreotype would just say anonymous photographer because we don't know who took that daguerreotype. But now, you know, what about those really important photographs where the photographer wasn't important? Or how are they going to be appearing in museums? What's the wall text going to be?

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O'TOOLE: Does anyone want to tackle that one? [laughter] Oh, come on!

01:22:26:00 AUDIENCE: It doesn't need an answer, either. [inaudible].

O'TOOLE: Okay.

JOEL SNYDER: I'm curious. When you talk about the lack of agency, what do you mean by that? I mean, I lift[?] my Canon, not my Lumix 300 ZDF or whatever it is, and I—

O'TOOLE: Joel, will you put the microphone closer? [inaudible] That's better.

SNYDER: Oh, my God, is this— Can you hear me now?

O'TOOLE: Well, perhaps it's the lack of agency—

01:23:00:00 SNYDER: No, no, but hold it a second. I make the photograph. Click. Have I left something out in terms of agency? Is there more?

AUDIENCE: Well, a photograph inherently is a danger in agency, because each context it appears in, it's going to shift. And it's going to be remade. And I also think, you know, you can experience an event— you don't have to take a picture of something; you can just look at a picture. Like, I don't think you need to even take pictures, necessarily, if there's such a bounty of photographs of things you can just receive them. Like, the lack of agency, like the photos on the internet are just— They're there for the taking.

01:23:43:00 SNYDER: I'm missing something important.

NICKEL: I think she means editorial control, actually, not agency.

WOMAN: [inaudible]

SNYDER: I mean, but editorial control over which pictures are going to show and which pictures are not going to show? That's one kind of agency, usually, the photographer doesn't exercise.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, [inaudible]—

01:24:00:00 AUDIENCE: Authorship. Or let's say a photograph has a really big effect on people's conscious, like the Abu Ghraib photographs. So we don't really think about who took those pictures; we think about the pictures themselves. So maybe the responsibility associated with a photograph [inaudible].

SNYDER: I'm afraid that part of the problem with the Abu Ghraib photographs is that we *do* think of who took those pictures, and we know that they're soldiers, and we know that they're *our* soldiers. Any specific soldier? No. But we do know precisely that. So I mean, I think you mean authorship, rather than agency. And I'm not sure I understand what the problem with authorship or agency is with photography, if, it seems to me, the brilliance of the whole scheme is you go click and it's your picture.

01:24:54:00 AUDIENCE: But I guess what I was thinking about is the responsibility for owning pictures. So if I could revise, perhaps the agency was not the right word. Because it was more relating to the afterlife of the photographs, which is maybe a few questions in one. But the responsibility of a photograph, yeah.

01:25:15:00 BESHTY: The accountability of the producer of a particular image.

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

COTTON: Maybe we'll replace anonymous with citizen. [laughter]

KELLER: We actually don't say anonymous, we say unknown. And that's sort of a distinction, actually. I mean, I think anonymous implies a kind of will to be unidentified. And we say unknown because it's just the fact.

01:25:38:00 SNYDER: Well, and there, you know, have always been famous, especially news photographs, that are kind of never— We never think of the author; we think of the picture. That famous picture of the woman being executed. [inaudible voice] And most of these things don't immediately bring an author to mind; they bring a picture to mind. Lots of the pictures taken at 9/11. News photos don't always have an author involved; they have an impact. But there's a difference between that and other kinds of photos. So I think you just have to make a distinction.

O'TOOLE: I think we'll take another from over here. David?

01:26:29:00 AUDIENCE: Well, I think there's been somebody waiting a little bit longer over here.

O'TOOLE: Oh, there's one— Okay. Alright. That's very generous of you.

01:26:33:00 AUDIENCE: Thank you. This is sort of in response to, George, what you mentioned earlier about have we glossed over something here in not discussing this, I think what is a gaping hole in the conversation thus far, about digital versus chemical. And one of the ways that I think it was— You know, I understand the point that sometimes it can be a red herring. And that was brought up yesterday, as well. But it also seemed to me that in last night's discussion, it was simply couched using different terminology. And that terminology was the difference between photography and art photography, both in the context of contemporary photo making. And one of the differences was a photography that is self-aware about its own legacy within the history of photography, and artists who use photography as one idiom within a larger type of construction.

01:27:27:00 AUDIENCE (Cont.): And in thinking about that, I went through the galleries here at SFMOMA today, and was really amazed by the fact that two of the artists who you're highlighting right now, both of whom we think of traditionally as painters—Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter—are among the most interesting thinkers, I think, about photography as a medium and photography as a set of possibilities. And I wondered if you could speak more about that. Both of them, obviously, are referring to chemical photography in their work. But to my mind, they qualify as neither photographers or art photographers, per se. So I wondered what the panelists thought about that.

01:28:10:00 DICORCIA: This art and whatever—journalism and— you know, the different categories— I think there's one thing that never seems to get discussed, which is always discussed in literature and often discussed in conversations about art, are its uses, which are non-literal. They're not depictions of torture, anonymous or not. They use the standard workhorses of criticism: metaphor, allusion, you name 'em. You all know what they are. And that it's easy to comment on photography when you don't actually have to make the image. As I think, well, a lot of people here, but— [laughter]

01:29:13:00 AUDIENCE: But both Polke and Richter do.

DICORCIA: But Gerhard Richter, probably. I think he did take the picture of his daughter.

AUDIENCE: He did. And there are Polke—

DICORCIA: And maybe even the candle.

AUDIENCE: There are actually Polke photographs upstairs.

DICORCIA: But if that was a photograph, you wouldn't look at it twice. I'm just saying that, you know, one gaping hole here is that the discussion seems to leave out a whole level of potential within any form of imagery. And I don't know, it just dawned on me, I guess.

BAKER: What do you mean by potential?

01:29:49:00 DICORCIA: I mean, we talk about photography as if it's somehow, well, distinct from photographs. And its impact as having— I mean, we've already had the affective discussion; we had that one last night. But in terms of what photographs deliver, it seems that the best of them are never literal. I mean, it's an internal contradiction within photography. It's a literal medium most of the time; but it always alludes to something, in its best expressions. And I find these conversations a little bit displaced, because I can— I don't want to go into who's the top ten photographers, but I'm sure everybody has an idea of at least one. And they never ever operate on merely a level of depiction.

01:30:57:00 And it seems to me that one of the problems with all of this discussion about the internet and digital is that literalness, depiction, and agency and all that stuff, whether it's stock agency or photographer agency, is— It supersedes what I think we should all be discussing. Because you know, the subject is way too vast. We cannot discuss cell phone photographs and art photographs, and do a good job of it in one session. So I'm just bringing up the fact that I don't think anybody has really gotten to the point of where's the delivery system that supersedes front brain thinking? You know? It's all about front brain thinking. And I think good art often supersedes it. Or circumvents it, short-circuits it. And I don't know. That's my piece.

O'TOOLE: Does anyone else want to address her question? [inaudible voice] George?

01:32:06:00 MAN: I'm confused.

O'TOOLE: You're confused?

DICORCIA: Top ten? Well, I'll just— Who's up on the wall here? [laughter] I mean, come on. I mean—

MAN: Illustrate your argument.

01:32:17:00 DICORCIA: How about Diane Arbus? She's on the wall. And everybody can go look.

BAKER: Vote by applause. [laughter]

01:32:19:00 NICKEL: Well, I think this picks up a point that was made earlier, which is that it's photographers who make photographs and not cameras that make photographs. Again, I'm beating up this issue about fixating on the technology or the conditions of production or something. But to give another one of these challenging examples, one can— Say we borrow Nick Nixon's eight-by-ten camera and set it up in front of some very evenly lit, no seam, white background paper, and focus it carefully and expose the negative carefully, process it properly in the darkroom, make a print of that image. If it's framed in such a way that you don't see anything but white background paper, the net result is going to be a white piece of photographic paper. That'll be the photographic image that you've created.

01:33:21:00 If, at the same time you're in the darkroom, if you take another piece of photographic paper and just stick it in the fixer and wash it and put it next to your photographic image, you'll have an object that's identical. They're both— We would say that one was made by a photographic process, lenses, focus, chemistry, exposure—everything that makes a photograph; the other one was not made— Neither has an image in them. So I mean, the idea that we know what a photograph is, I think is not at all stable, actually. We don't know what— What would we say? Are they both photographs? See, we think they have images in them; but they don't have to have images to be photographs.

01:34:02:00 GALASSI: Yeah, Doug, but I think the point that P.L. was trying to make was that yeah, that's cool. Right? It's an interesting thought experiment and all the rest of that. [laughter] But we actually have a lot of photographs that are not just pieces of white paper, that have things in them, and that those are interesting to look at and talk about. And I actually think that if— You can speak for yourself; you're extremely articulate. But I think—

DICORCIA: Are you going to disagree or agree?

01:34:31:00 GALASSI: Agree. [laughter]

DICORCIA: Go ahead.

GALASSI: The way I read what you were saying was a little bit of frustration at— There was this whole tradition of image making that kind of went from unknown to passé and irrelevant, with a little window in between. Could that be a correct—

DICORCIA: I'm not going to stop you. [laughter] Keep going. [laughs]

01:35:08:00 KELLER: You know, the other thing is that I would also say that there're a whole lot of photographs that were not made by a photographer, that are really interesting to look at. John Szarkowski said that even an ATM machine sometimes takes a really interesting photograph. And my tastes may bear a little more catholic, but I'm really interested in photography in all those forms.

NICKEL: Except it's not made without human intention behind it.

KELLER: That is true. Yeah, that's true. I guess that's true. But I mean—

NICKEL: We don't care what machines do, it's what human beings do with machines that matters to us.

01:35:40:00 STIMSON: Well, you know, back in the day, there was this argument about the death of the author, right, that got lots of play. And it was thought to be valuable and meaningful. And it was all about perhaps moving away from some notion of individualized authorship. And as such, it was perhaps suggesting a movement towards some notion of something like distributed authorship. And one of the kind of concrete art world results we have from this— I

STIMSON (Cont.): mean, there are many things we could talk about, but one of them is the recent rise of different kinds of collectivist art practices, and a lot of them that do so in a kind of anonymous way; in a way that by intention, does not identify the individual actors in these anonymous art practices. And this is thought to have a value, in part because it—

BESHTY: Like what?

STIMSON: Like what? What am I talking about[?]?

BESHTY: What are these anonymous collectivist practices? I'm just trying to situate—

01:36:46:00 GALASSI: Like the Bruce High Quality Foundation or something, you know?

STIMSON: Yeah, the Bruce High Quality Foundation. You could talk about anything that falls under the category of tactical media basically falls into that. The Yes Men, for example, the best known probably of the group. Or their previous name, RTMark, right? Which was all about anonymity, and all about the idea that there's a whole bunch— there's a big amorphous group of people involved with this, and people come and go, and it doesn't really matter who the author is. So it seems that photography, one of its great technical attributes is that it's something that to some degree, anybody can produce an image. And this then produces the technical conditions, the technological conditions for a certain kind of anonymity that's not there with more craft-dependent media like painting, where you're much more readily able to see a signature style in it, and therefore identify it with a particular author.

01:37:51:00 STIMSON (Cont.): So I worry a little bit about going too far in this sort of humanist direction or this individualist direction, where we locate the value of the photograph in intention, in individual intention or individual agency.

BESHTY: I don't see why that's a problem.

01:38:05:00 STIMSON: Well, only insofar as it leaves out the—

SNYDER: Anonymity is a plus? [laughter]

STIMSON: Well—

SNYDER: I don't see that.

STIMSON: Yeah, back in the day. I mean, you know— Or it is in the context of the contemporary art world. So something like Bruce High Quality or—

SNYDER: Well, that's open to discussion, obviously. But I don't see why that authorship is something to be neglected or negated or seen as less important.

01:38:37:0 BESHTY: That's also not what that essay was about. I mean, that's not what Barthes was talking about. I mean, it's the death of the author, the birth of the reader, contextualization of these means of meaning, and an emphasis on that. I mean, it doesn't necessarily lead to— I'm just a little nervous about associating a particular thinker with a certain kind of practice that we can really safely put at a kinds of arms length distance and oppose what we're doing, or sort of conventionalized art practices are doing.

01:39:14:00 O'TOOLE: But I think we might sort of be getting a little too shoppy with this talk for our audience.

BESHTY: Shoppy?

O'TOOLE: Shop talky. [smattering of applause] Just because we may lose people if we go down the Barthes road a little too far.

BAKER: Can I— sorry. [laughs]

BAKER: Can I say something, though? This is not about Roland Barthes.

O'TOOLE: Sure. Okay.

01:39:33:00 BAKER: But it is about this point. And what it brought up for me was something I was thinking about, silently listening to the same kinds of points about the person behind the camera and this kind of stuff that we've been talking about over the last hour or so. And it's just that, I mean, one of the things, it seems to me, different between old models of photography, chemical photography, and the digital is how much control you have over your image. That that is— it's a technical aspect, but it's actually a conceptual one. I mean, who makes a photograph? Does the photographer make it? Does the world make it? Does the process make it? How much control do you have over its appearance? You're shaking your head.

01:40:10:00 [inaudible voice]

WILLSDON: We'll repeat [inaudible].

[inaudible voice]

WOMAN: Speak up!

WILLSDON: We're going to—

01:40:27:00 WILLSDON: Who is shaking his head, a photographer? [inaudible voice]

WILLSDON: Yeah, we'll restate it, yeah. Try to.

[inaudible voice]

01:40:50:00 WILLSDON: So the gentleman's saying that from the point of view of a photographer, what George is saying, it's a non-issue.

BAKER: And I can respond to that from the point of view, actually, I'm an art historian who doesn't call himself a photograph historian. I'm like artists who don't call themselves photographers. And I make photographs, but they're shitty. I can respond to what you're saying by saying that you're talking about a certain model of how people make photographs, how artists who call themselves photographers, or photographers, make photographs. There are other models. There are other ideas of people who use cameras, in that they want to prioritize their decision-making composition control; that they want to give some of that up. And that was possible in certain ways in the past; that is less possible, it seems to me, when you're digitally manipulating the image.

01:41:34:00 AUDIENCE: But most of the pictures that we want to look at follow the model he's talking about. That is, a man or woman goes out and takes a thousand pictures and picks the one that captures what they wanted [inaudible].

BAKER: [over other] No, actually, I find myself wanting to look at Atget more than that kind of photograph. And what I look for at in an Atget—

AUDIENCE: [inaudible] every picture that Atget ever took?

BAKER: I'll look at any one that you show me.

AUDIENCE: [inaudible]

BAKER: And I'm not going to look for Atget's authorial control over his image.

01:41:59:00 GALASSI: Wait a minute. I can't understand what you're— you're saying that now people have less control over what—

BAKER: Now they have more. And one of the wonders of photography—

GALASSI: Why do they have more?

BAKER: One of the things I love about photography was[?] the less control. More chance, more accident, more mistakes, more things that enter the frame that you didn't put there or want there, more things that people can see, that the author didn't want them to see.

GALASSI: But if you want to have a real conversation— I mean, Atget, let me tell you, he was in control of what he was doing.

BAKER: We're not going to do this today.

GALASSI: I mean, he was *really* in control.

01:42:36:00 BAKER: We're not going to do this today. I mean, I'm not going to do it.
[laughter]

GALASSI: Well, I don't know. [laughter; inaudible]

BAKER: This is an old MoMA fight that I'm not going to take part in.

WILLSDON: Hold on, hold on, yeah. [laughter]

GALASSI: Sorry.

01:42:46:00 AUDIENCE: [inaudible] example, contrary to what you're saying, five years ago I had an exhibition at an art school in Philadelphia. I showed sixteen-by-twenty black and white silver gelatin prints. I got an email from the gallery director saying there was a group of students— This is at an art school; they're all working on their BFAs and MFAs. And they were having a conversation about my photographs, and they couldn't decide whether the prints were gelatin silver or ink jet. And they finally collectively decided they were ink jet. I was kind of annoyed by that, until an older colleague—I still have older colleagues—pointed out to me that

AUDIENCE (Cont.): these students had not seen silver gelatin prints that were so evenly[?] made. So they assumed they had to have been made by an ink jet printer.

BAKER: I think you're making my point, though. [inaudible]

01:43:48:00 BAKER: I mean, I like bad prints. I like prints that have lots of mistakes in them. And I like—

O'TOOLE: Can I just repeat quickly what he said? He said that he showed gelatin silver prints at a gallery at an art school, and that a bunch of young students came and they looked at the silver prints, and they had a discussion amongst themselves whether they were silver prints or they were ink jet prints. And you were feeling very annoyed about that, until somebody told you that the fact of the matter was that they had never seen really good gelatin silver prints that were properly printed, and so they had nothing to compare them to. So that was the point.

01:44:26:00 DICORCIA: I'd rather talk about Roland Barthes. [laughter]

O'TOOLE: Alright, we're going to take another question. How about that? David.

BLESSING: Could I just say, first of all, plug Roland Barthes. If you haven't read Roland Barthes, it's a great book. And maybe we can't rehash it. But what I wanted to say is when I walked through the gallery I saw Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan's evidence photographs on the wall. I was riveted. I went to see those photographs. I thought it was interesting that they were photographs on the all in frames, because I thought it was a book. But that's a process. And I think those were photographs not taken by them. And yet, I think that there's— The act of making a photograph is taking something that's readymade and framing it. If you make a photograph or you take a photograph that's already made and you frame it, you put it into another context. And I think that, you know, this is maybe a problematic that we have to add to the mix.

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O'TOOLE: David?

01:45:39:00 AUDIENCE: Thank you. So I want to ask a question that's definitely, I think, going to take us away from the plumber's convention kind of talk, if that's okay. [applause] Last night and today, there's been many, many frames put around this question of is photography over. We've had philosophical, we've had artistic, we've had social, we've had political, we've had spiritual, et cetera. One was missing. And we did talk last night about the miracles and things being miraculous. And you may not have caught it, but there was a miracle last night. Despite the presence of the University of Chicago professor on this panel, the *only* panelist who made any comment whatsoever last night around the economic frame actually teaches at Brown. *That* is a miracle. [laughter] So what I'd like to touch on is— You know, and we've talked a lot about it. Peter, if you're right about chemical-based or whatever we're calling that kind of photography being dead, it's very obvious why.

01:46:42:00 Because all of the artistic uses of that medium ever were only just a tiny, little piece of foam on the top of an ocean of all of us amateurs using it. And as soon as the amateur ocean got drained, the foam is not sustainable. So an economic analysis says we don't need to argue about that at all because we know where it's going. If you put an economic frame around this question and think for a second about photography being over— Charlotte, you made a great comment, and you repeated it today, that it's a huge economic question, which is: what's the role of a museum going forward, where we want to try to get people to experience things physically, have a physical experience with objects? That's what art museums do.

COTTON: Totally, yeah.

01:47:28:00 AUDIENCE: You know, talk about things possibly being over that we should worry about, that sounds like something we should worry about. And I'd love to hear the panel address that.

COTTON: Should I go first? You know, about fifteen years ago, I started doing shows around what was called commercial photography. Mainly about fashion photography, some advertising. And I was told at the time it was absolute career suicide as a curator to deal with these bad worlds. But actually, what happened by the mid-nineties was, of course, you couldn't really say that contemporary art photography wasn't commercial and that you were dealing with this production which was geared towards markets, even in places that don't have a particularly strong market. And I suppose I sort of didn't feel that there was anyone who wanted to talk about that on the panel in our closed session, about the economics of it. Because we are talking about technologies that were developed for commercial markets, whether that's for amateur use or for the industries. And I mean, I don't think we— The jury is out on things like what happens now that something like *National Geographic* or style magazines go entire online?

01:48:41:00 And they now have their clammy hands on the iPad. And actually, it's about the layering of visual imagery and the haptic nature of it and being able to turn an object that you might buy or want to discover. So really, you've got what you might want to take ownership of as photographic language being inherently reshaped, technologically, by the commercial industries of photography. So I mean, I do find that really interesting. And it just isn't something that we've really talked about.

01:49:14:00 GALASSI: I couldn't agree with you more. But that's always been the case. The tiny, little foam of people who wanted to use photography to make works of art have always had to use the materials that were created for, as you say, commercial interests, and then, since 1888, a huge amateur market. You're absolutely right. It's *always* been that way.

01:49:39:00 COTTON: But now we know that analog— Like, gelatin silver papers aren't going to totally disappear. They're going to be boutique. They're just going to be super expensive, i.e. catering to the market, which is artists. What does it mean for a museum? Do you go on collecting that niche and just fess up to that? Or do you actually have a responsibility to be in discourse with the haptic experience of photography, even if artists aren't doing it yet?

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01:50:09:00 GALASSI: Well, museums are actually very young. They're only a little more than 200 years old. You know, when you killed the king, you ended up with the king's pictures, that then belong to the people.

COTTON: Yeah, I kind of know that, but what's your point? [laughter]

GALASSI: Well, no, I know. It's just a repository for stuff that is owned collectively. Right? But when you're talking about do art museums that deal with photography deal with photographs that were not made as works of art? Yes, of course. It's a huge part of the history of photography.

01:50:51:00 COTTON: So how are you narrating that within—

GALASSI: What do you mean?

COTTON: Within you're *a* history of photography, how do you narrate this moment?

GALASSI: I'm sorry, I still didn't— [inaudible voice] Narrate this moment? Well, the— You know, it's up for grabs.

MAN: Ah-ha[?].

GALASSI: No, I mean, it's not like— When you say “this moment—” Museums only deal with the past, even if the past is last week. So as Corey said, you try to respond to what you think is interesting. And by definition, the response is imperfect.

01:51:35:00 WILLSDON: Photography curators in museums are not yet so much showing photographs on screens. Are they? [inaudible voices over each other] Wouldn't that be a way of responding to how photography is?

GALASSI: The people who define the future of photography or anything else are the people who make it. And the museum is always following along behind, imperfectly.

WILLSDON: But in its representation of what today is vernacular photography, I mean, most of that is for the screen.

01:52:11:00 GALASSI: Yeah, it's a— I mean, the museum, any museum, can define what it thinks its mission is for itself, and people can applaud or boo or whatever. Or they go to their congressman and say, we want to put this museum out of business. Or however you want to put it. It's not like there's a dictator who says, this is what all museums have to do. And then it's a question of judgment. When you say photographic imagery not made to be works of art is part and parcel of the entire history of photography— But it doesn't mean that everything that is being made is of equal interest.

01:53:00:00 COTTON: No, absolutely. So I was asking you about your decision making.

DICORCIA: Doesn't it seem like—

GALASSI: As I say, it's up for grabs. You make a new decision every day.

DICORCIA: I don't think it can be overlooked that one of the criteria for museums is to get people to pay twenty bucks to get in. And that you know, a bunch of students are going to be happy with a projection or a room full of seagulls or whatever you want. And photography, I think kind of weirdly, lags behind in that. And maybe that's why photography winds up, as Charlotte said, usually being exhibited somewhere near the bathroom. But you know, it's been given for a long time, what was considered to be secondary space, after thoughts.

01:53:56:00 I mean, even at MoMA, I think that you can't compare the kinds of spaces that have been devoted, even in the new museum. And I think that there's something quite weird about that. And if photography, in its new iteration as digital, is going to wind up like a lot of

DICORCIA (Cont.): other digital mediums, projecting itself on the walls and stuff like that, it seems to me the same reason that that's going to be is to dumb it down for an audience that really is going to museums to be entertained.

01:54:34:00 ALETTI: Well, I guess I'm wondering, is there some real anxiety that we're not dealing with cell phone photos? I mean, that they should be shown or collected or dealt with? I don't understand.

WILLSDON: Well, for example, in— There could be a whole—I'm sorry, [inaudible]—a whole panel discussion about what's happening in film, right? I mean, you could talk about some of the same things. And film festivals do have, in their experimental section, films made on cell phones, and look at alternative platforms or whatever it might be called. And I was wondering about the place of that in photography, if there was one.

01:55:18:00 BESHTY: Well, but these are also not anonymous makers or not people who are just sort of like popping photos with their cell phones. I mean, there's— Like Rob Pruitt had a show called iPhone, and it was sold in a commercial gallery; it was at Gavin Brown's.

WILLSDON: Sure.

BESHTY: And then Andrea Zittel did a kind of— like, there was a moving photo-slide-digital piece on a flatscreen. There's several examples of people using it in a specific way. I sort of don't understand— I don't understand what the question is about presenting on screens or whether or not there needs to be—

01:55:51:00 WILLSDON: No, I would agree that it ought to be artist led, if it wasn't for the fact that the museum already shows vernacular photography in the past.

KELLER: Maybe the question is whether museums can be responsive to the changes in how photographs are used in the world? And I mean, I think we've done— Nan Goldin's *Ballad of*

KELLER (Cont.): *Sexual Dependency* would be perhaps one example. I mean, I don't think that any of us are wedded to the idea that a photograph has to be something on a piece of paper, necessarily. We showed a piece, actually, by Lucas Samaras a number of years ago. I can't remember what the thing is called, but it's essentially a computer terminal on which you get to navigate around his desktop and look at his pictures and look at his little film clips. And what was interesting was—it was a very generational thing, actually—a lot of the sort of people more accustomed to traditional work were completely perplexed by the work; and the younger people spent all their time deleting the things off of the computer, so that we had to reboot it every night. [laughter] We had, of course, a backup. But it was a pretty interesting dialogue.

01:56:55:00 COTTON: But can I also suggest, in terms of our defining of museums and the way it collects—I mean, coming from Victoria and Albert Museum, it was the library, in 1904 to 1906, who collected the 400 Atgets from Atget and put them in filing cabinets, where they were completely ignored until the seventies, and then reframed. And I think there is an element of what about the libraries within art institutions and how they archive. Like the British Library's amazing project of taking these kind of like daily grabs of the behavior and the content of the web; or a project we're working on, which is doing a sort of bequest scheme, where you can donate your virtual life to the museum, as this kind of record and the alternative to the family album. And there are other ways of doing it.

01:57:47:00 AUDIENCE: Hi. My question was actually starting with Vince, but then opening up to everyone. I was thinking about the last two triennials at the International Center of Photography in New York. And I think one of the reasons why they were quite challenging and productive exhibitions was by virtue of the fact that they both incorporated a lot of media that weren't specifically photography in the sense that we've been talking about it, per se. There's a lot of sculpture, there's a lot of installation, there are vitrine-based works, there's projections. I think it speaks to this common thread right now. But I was wondering, Vince, if you could talk to how you worked with that specifically within the triennial, and then open it up to the panel from there.

01:58:20:00 ALETTI: Oh. That's difficult for me to do that because Carol Squiers and I were involved with every show that year, last year. And while the triennial was being planned, we were putting together the Avedon show. So we had less involvement with that than the other curators, Christopher Phillips and Kristen Lubben. But we did see all the videos. And from the beginning, ICP, the idea of the triennial was that it would include video, as well as photo. And I think that's always been kind of a challenge to make that work, to find a way to put it into the space, to make the spaces lively, and make each piece useful and visible without conflicting with everything else nearby. And I think for us, all being a little—or maybe I should maybe just characterize myself—somewhat resistant to video in galleries—it's usually the thing that I walk past quickly and try to get past—we really wanted to get material that stopped us, that made us want to stop and look and spend time with it, and hope that the audience would have the same reaction.

01:59:49:00 And our theme was very generally, very broadly, fashion. But it ended up being much more the sense of the way people present themselves in the very broadest sense, the way people dress themselves. So we did find, I think, a number of videos that really addressed that in a kind of vague way, but that I think also were attention getting and not just kind of ideas. I think we all were looking at video from a very photographic point of view, and looking at things that would make us stop and spend time. I think that in the end, that was what we really leaned toward. And hopefully, it worked.

02:00:48:00 DYER: Maybe since you asked about the triennial, maybe it would be not entirely irrelevant if I mentioned something about the biennale in Venice, my experience of the photography there. And I'm going to do that vulgar thing of quoting myself. And this is what the protagonist in my novel *Jeff in Venice*— this is his experience of [laughter] the photographs there. “Needless to say, these pictures, like all the other photographs on offer, were the size of the *Raft of the Medusa*. [laughter] So what if they were just snaps of someone jerking off in a leather armchair in an apartment in Zurich. So what if it was just a half-eaten, pre-packaged egg and cress sandwich abandoned on the seat of a bus shelter in Stockholm. So what if it was a portrait of the artist's sour-face grandmother pushing her shopping trolley around a poorly

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DYER (Cont.): stocked supermarket in Barnsley. Blow them up big enough and they looked—
Well, they looked like shit, frankly. But they look like art, too.” [laughter; applause]