

Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth

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Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth

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This thesis situates the return to camera-less imagery, a current trend in contemporary art, as a valuable way to connect a photograph's meaning and appearance with its technique and subject matter. The work questions what a photograph can be by examining how we consciously experience its tactile qualities and how we interact with and have subjective responses to an image's materiality. By outlining philosophical and theoretical interpretations that can be applied to photographic experience, this thesis makes two main assertions: that representational conventions in imagery can restrict artistic truths, and that photography, as a performative practice, can open up new relations between us and the world. Here, images created in and of the landscape offer a raw, primal, and rooted aesthetic experience of place.

Keywords: camera-less, materiality, landscape, place, non-representational, earth, Heidegger.

Introduction

Photography has the ability to disclose that which is not immediately available to the conscious eye. It renders the ruffling, the tiny details, the half-hidden movements of the moment, and can give voice to a silent experience. The photographic exhibition *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* presents non-representational images from such experiences with and within nature. These images come into being in concert with the act of touching, by bringing light sensitive materials into direct physical contact with natural matter such as plants, soil, or water. Each photograph is an indexical anchor of a time and place, yet its visuals stand apart from traditional methods of representation. The resulting photographs mark the space and movement between the Earth's matter and the silver gelatin photographic paper.

In the making and interpretations of images, the question of representation is a central, almost quotidian debate in contemporary art theory and practice. Representational imagery is not an issue in itself but rather its domination over contemporary practice and thought. The idea that a photographic image is a cultural construct is readily accepted, however this notion applies to the conception of representation as a whole. To break down the term 'to represent' to its etymological root we can understand it as 'to exhibit' or 'to bring before', and 'representation' as 'image' or 'likeness'. At its core explication, representationalism is not denotive of any hierarchic way of seeing. And yet, modern aesthetics fixes representationalism as "a mode of thought that prescribes all that is known, ordering the world and

predetermining what can be thought.”¹ This body of work, by contrast, situates camera-less photographic processes as a rich mode of connecting a physical place with the representation of it.

Martin Heidegger offered such a critique of representation in his philosophical and ontological musings on the work of art. For Heidegger, representationalism in its modern essence is the objectification of what *is* by man.² In other words, it is the taking from and ordering of the world – the incessant naming of things – that has structured a hegemonic interpretation of images. While the term ‘representation’ has multiple, associated meanings, most denote the re-presenting – presenting anew or again – or the copying of the world as a substitution for the real. In this relation, man has ordered the world *a priori* as a standing reserve, a picture, or a landscape. Critic and social activist, Ariella Azoulay spoke against this violent action of taking from the world in an attempt to potentialize the history of photography.³ For both Azoulay and Heidegger, an unfortunate loss is incurred in such hegemonic views as man thus closes himself off to the world in his attempt to order it.

This thesis situates the return to camera-less imagery – a current trend in contemporary art – as a valuable way to connect a photograph’s meaning and appearance with its technique and subject matter. It urges the viewer to reexamine traditional representational expectations, and to consider the photographic index as a form of relation to the environment rather than a mimetic object. *Transcriptions:*

¹ Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2004), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ Ariella Azoulay, *Aim Deüelle Lüski and Horizontal Photography*, (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2014).

Indices from the Earth questions what a photograph can be by examining how we consciously experience its tactile qualities and how we interact with and have subjective responses to an image's materiality. By outlining philosophical and theoretical interpretations that can be applied to photographic experience, this thesis makes two main assertions: that representational conventions in imagery can restrict artistic truths, and that photography, as a performative practice, can open up new relations between us and the world.

This thesis argues for an expanded form of representationalism that encompasses the non-representational imagery within this body of work. This project engages the phenomenology of the photograph and prioritizes the event of its making. A close reading of select images examines the process these images go through in order to explain how and why each photographic transcription can offer an expanded vision of the world to which they refer.

Expanding Representationalism

Representation posits a particular way of thinking about the world. Through analysis of the origin of the term 'to represent,' an expanded consideration of representation can be conceived. Heidegger spoke on the representation of truth in artworks not as that which is re-presented or rendered correctly, but as the 'non-concealment' of a whole.⁴ For him, the work of art gives truth in its "setting up of a world" and "setting forth of the earth."⁵ The work is not a fixed and stable thing, but rather a happening of experience. To allow the work of art to set up a world, and set

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

forth new relations, one must look past preconceptions.

When Heidegger refers to the setting up of a world, he is not denoting the tangible space of the physical world, nor is he referring to our preconception of the world as a global civilization. Heidegger argues that the world cannot be circumscribed by our representational framework. Rather it entails an opening up or an awareness of the world in which “the scope and limits of Being are experienced.”⁶ In the setting up of a world, the earth is set forth. The world rests on earth and uses its earthy, raw materials. According to Heidegger, earth is revealed as earth by the world just as a temple reveals the rock on which it rests, the storm that buffets it, and the stone of which it is made.⁷ Herein lies the essence or the ‘truth’ of art — in its opening up of what *is*.

Barbara Bolt speaks of this expanded concept of representation in her book *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. In using Heidegger as a basis for her argument she explains, “Heidegger wants us to be open to the particular possibility that the image can be thought and experienced in quite a different way, as open-ness.”⁸ If we are open to the work of art, if we relinquish mastery over the world as subject, then we may hear the work of art speak and unconceal its being.

Heidegger ascribes the term *techne* to denote a bringing forth or presenting of being out of concealedness and into the unconcealedness of their appearance. This

⁶ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 113.

⁷ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 22-21.

⁸ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 104.

Greek term refers to the bringing forth or the revealing of truth by artists.⁹

Technology (*technikon*) also fits within this linguistic classification as that which belongs to *techne*. Yet the modern usage of technology as a mode of framing and ordering is not revealing in the Heideggerian sense of truth. Rather, truth in the work of art cannot be made or structured but brought forth through a relationship of care and responsibility in union with technology and the world.¹⁰ The artist then does not create but enables the work of art to come into being through a collaboration between artist's hand, world, and earth. With this consideration, the world is not to be read representationally as a subject or object, or as a means to an end.

In the introductory essay for her book titled *Aïm Deüelle Lüski and Horizontal Photography*, Ariella Azoulay attempts to set forth or reconfigure a different politics of practice for photography. She references the artist Aïm Deüelle Lüski and the creating of his unique, handmade pinhole cameras as a significant point in a new potential history for the photographic medium. For Azoulay, the absence of traditionally representational subject matter offers the opportunity to install a different relation between us and the world — one that preserves photography as a space for civil transformation.¹¹ The cameras created by Deüelle Lüski prevent the spectator from perceiving automatically their encounter with the world. The images

⁹ Koray Degirmenci, "Photography as Unconcealment: Revisiting the Idea of Photographic Transparency," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34, no.2 (2015): 262, doi: 10.1080/02580136.20151046210.

¹⁰ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 72-73.

¹¹ Ariella Azoulay, *Aïm Deüelle Lüski and Horizontal Photography*, 46.

created by them do not yield to readymade denotative categories of X, Y, or Z.¹² With Deüelle Lüschi's *Ball Camera* and its corresponding image, (figures 1a and 1b) the single-focus gaze and stabilized picture plane is eliminated. The *Ball Camera* enables concurrent recording from multiple apertures and multiple directions at once.



Figure 1a: Aïm Deüelle Lüschi, *Ball Camera*, 2004.
<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue23/aimExhibit/index.html>
(accessed May 21, 2017)

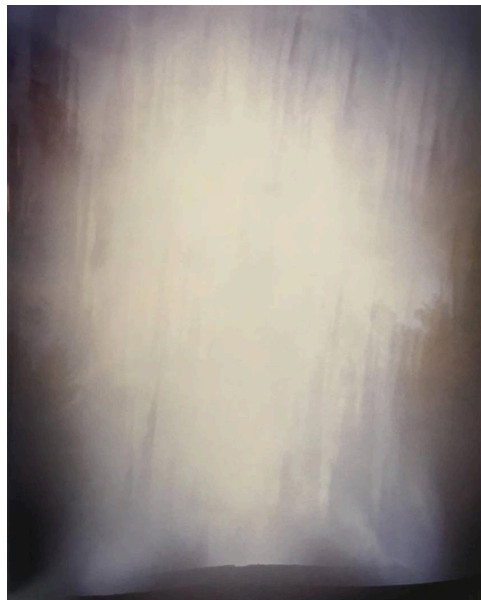


Figure 1b: Aïm Deüelle Lüschi, *Bauhaus Jerusalem #2*, 2010.
<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue23/aimExhibit/index.html>
(accessed May 21, 2017)

¹² Ariella Azoulay, *Aïm Deüelle Lüschi and Horizontal Photography*, 162.

In my own installation piece titled *Everywhere, All at Once* (2014) (figure 2), a comparable Event is set to work. Indexical, archival inkjet prints depicting color fields of blue, yellow, green, and orange hues are suspended in an undulated gridded formation. The bow of the installation prints, and their fluctuating orientation, simulates the moment of the birth of each image within *Spherical Pinhole Camera* (figure 3) and situates the viewer as active participant. Similar to Deüelle Lüski's *Ball Camera*, four apertures located at the top, bottom, and on each side of the camera body facilitate the recording of light from multiple angles simultaneously. The 4x5" negative or 35mm roll film is placed within the body of the camera in a concave position, and by a means that gives way to chance. The writing of light through the multiple apertures then happens as an open Event wherein a unique combination of space and time is inscribed as a trace on the film. The resulting photographs from this camera cannot be identified as legible representations of a person, place, or thing; however, they still bear traces from the environment, the moment, and the materials from which they were created.



Figure 2: Kyra Schmidt, *Everywhere, All at Once*, installation, Archival inkjet prints on wood, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Kyra Schmidt, *Spherical Pinhole Camera*, polyamide, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

The images resulting from *Spherical Pinhole Camera* are uncontrollable and unpredictable. In the installation *Everywhere, All at Once*, the index manifests as a solid color field of blue and, in some images, a streak of light burnt into the surface of the film (figure 4). The rays of light engraved onto the surface of the film assemble not as a mimetic object but as a sort of primal language — a transcription from nature. Indeed, this inherent indexicality within the medium is responsible for

photography being regarded as an illusionary or magical process during its nascent stages. In the mid-19th century William Henry Fox Talbot named one of the first books of photographs *The Pencil of Nature*, referring to this writing of light, and copying of nature, on a light-sensitive support (figure 5). The images presented in the exhibition *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* can be linked back to this early conception of the sun print in their direct access to such invisible forces, however they are not substitutions, signs, or representations of something other than themselves.

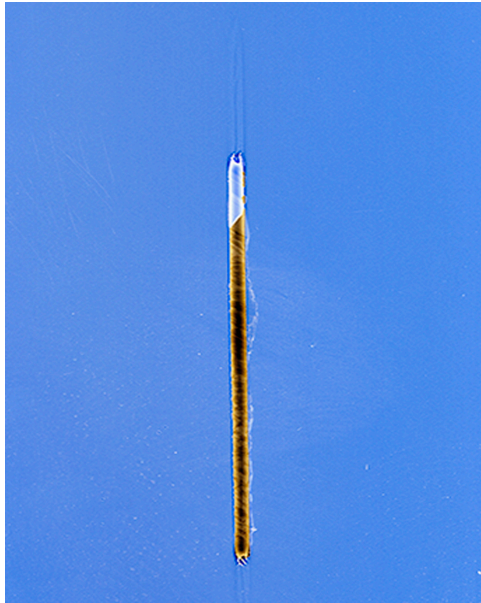


Figure 4: Kyra Schmidt, *Everywhere, All at Once*, Archival inkjet print on wood, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5: William Henry Fox Talbot, *Wild Fennel*, Salted paper print, 18.7 x 22.7cm, 1841-42.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/285922>
 (accessed May 28, 2017)

While Susan Sontag asserted that the photographic image is something directly stenciled off the real, Andre Bazin further defined the photograph as a separate object, as an “extension” of the presence of an object rather than merely a “mirror of reality.”¹³ The piece *Tybee Island, Georgia #1* (2017) (figure 6a) does not depict a ‘realistic’ representation of Tybee Island nor does it depict a framed vista of the ocean. The lack of resemblance to an identifiable thing does not make such an image any less genuine or truthful than a one-to-one mimesis. Rather the ‘truth’ in *Transcriptions* is in their setting forth the earth through their literal contact with its *thingness*. Upon a detailed inspection of *Tybee Island, Georgia #1* (figure 6b) tiny granules of sand remain fixed to the paper, dancing at its edges. At this moment of revealing, a movement happens within the work as the earth is set forth. It is through the process of bringing the light sensitive paper into immediate physical

¹³ Degirmenci, “Photography as Unconcealment: Revisiting the Idea of Photographic Transparency,” 255.

contact with sand and salt water that the work of art is set into motion to take us to an unexpected place.



Figure 6a: Kyra Schmidt, *Tybee Island, Georgia #1 (Exposed over 14 hours)*, Gelatin silver prints, sand, salt, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

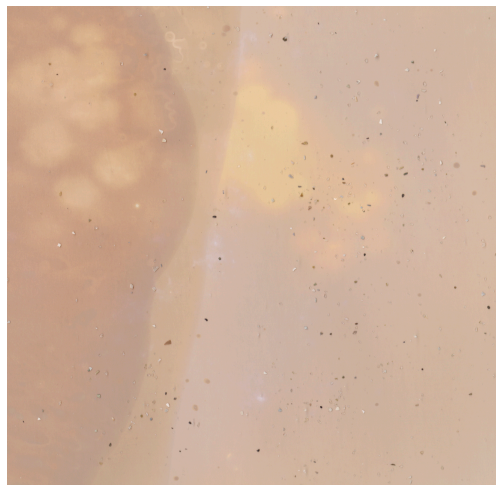


Figure 6b: Kyra Schmidt, *Tybee Island, Georgia #1 (detail)*, Gelatin silver prints, sand, salt, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Photographic Phenomenology: Index and Materiality

Since the invention of photography, photographs have been popularly viewed as a specific kind of image; they are an image that is “purely contingent” as

described by the French semiotician Roland Barthes.¹⁴ Barthes posited that photography is a realistic medium but one that is simultaneously paradoxical and mad. In *Camera Lucida*, he famously described the photograph as a “transparent envelope” with the ability to point to objects, places, and people that-have-been. Barthes said, “In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid in its indefatigable expression.”¹⁵ To contravene his earlier statement, Barthes additionally noted that photography offers us a truth-to-presence even if not a truth-to-appearance. In its mechanical reproducibility, the photograph *is* relentlessly indexical to its referent, yet this fact does not guarantee its transparency or its tautological being.

What can be said then of the camera-less photograph? In the essay *Photogenics*, critic Geoffrey Batchen speaks to the nature of the contact print through the example of 19th century botanist Anna Atkins and her collection of cyanotypes. Atkins used the photographic process as a means for the representation and scientific ordering of plants in her book titled *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*. By calling her plant photograms ‘impressions’, Atkins was referencing the direct indexical relationship between the plant matter and its representation.¹⁶ While the term ‘contact’ in ‘contact print’ linguistically references the proximity of an object to the photographic surface, Batchen states that the

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Batchen, *Photogenics*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 235.

photogram more accurately marks a spacing, or a temporal movement of a touching then a setting aside. The photogram, referred to as a 'trace', therefore concurrently (and paradoxically) designates "both a mark and the act of marking, both a path and its traversal."¹⁷

W.J.T. Mitchell argues that the aesthetic object does not 'represent' something but 'is' something — "a scripting resulting from the activity of matter itself."¹⁸ In *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* this 'scripting' of activity occurs through both human and non-human intervention.¹⁹ The term 'work' in 'artwork' indicates the process that the photographic paper undergoes in the bringing forth of the photographic image. This process takes place as a happening of truth between myself (as artist and mediator), the earth (soil, sand, water, or plant matter), and the light-sensitive photographic paper. Bolt outlines such a materialist ontology for the work of art in *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. This 'productive materiality' of the artwork is described as an interaction between artist, materiality of medium, and materiality of earth matter.²⁰ Rather than being prescribed by language, in this way of becoming, the images take on their own being; they become a language.²¹

Bolt talks about this persistence of materiality as the "stutter which disrupts visual language and visual narrative," and as a result disrupts traditional modes of

¹⁷ Geoffrey Batchen, *Photogenics*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 236.

¹⁸ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 170.

¹⁹ Meghann Riepenhoff is a contemporary artist working in this manner with camera-less photographic processes. Her series titled *Littoral Drift* (2013-present) is comprised of cyanotypes made in collaboration with the tide of the ocean and the sediments of Earth that wash over the paper. The resulting images are a 'trace' or a 'scripting' that happens when paper, artist, and Earth come together.

²⁰ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 162.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 149

interpretation.²² The material performativity in the case of the work of art is a collaboration between human and non-human bodies. As such a performativity takes place, the artist is transformed into a passageway that sets forth an “openness to the essence of art.”²³ A detail of *Algae, The Landings, Georgia #5* (2017) (figures 7a and 7b) illustrates this collaboration between artist, earth, and photographic material. This transcription carries traces of plant matter, referencing its physical contact with the earth at a point in time. The index in this case has real material affects, leaving not just a trace of itself but its actual matter behind. It allows the spectator to witness the force of materialization and consider the trace of both human and non-human actors.²⁴



Figure 7a: Kyra Schmidt, *Algae, The Landings, Georgia #5 (Exposed over 5 days)*, Gelatin silver prints, plant matter, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

²² Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 162.

²³ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.



Figure 7b: Kyra Schmidt, *Algae, The Landings, Georgia #5 (detail)* Gelatin silver prints, plant matter, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

The persistence of the material further asserts itself with the physical bend and curl of the photographic paper. *Algae, Skidadway Island, Georgia*, thus acts as a deictic marker that links us back to the making and thingness of the work by shifting the materiality of the photographic paper to the fore. Grounded by this criterion, the images in *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* are not transparent but opaque. Kendall Walton argued that it is possible to see both the photograph and the object in his transparency thesis.²⁵ This notion of the ‘opaque image’ entails the persistence of the medium, hence the use of the term *representation* over *presentation*. By virtue of dominant contemporary approaches to representation, it is easy for the reception of artworks to be limited by modes of thinking that favor meaning and signification over the deictic mark. While *Algae, Skidaway Island, Georgia* presents an alternative vision of the algae, and attempts to transport us to a different place, the materiality of the medium repeatedly persists. The color and shape of the resulting lumen print is contingent on the time and place of exposure,

²⁵ Degirmenci, “Photography as Unconcealment: Revisiting the Idea of Photographic Transparency,” 285.

the artist's hand *and* the silver gelatin photographic paper. Both Heidegger and Bolt argue toward such a co-responsibility in the creation of artworks that emerge as an interplay between forces. The setting up of the world and setting forth of the earth happens as a constant renewal. Matter plays an important role in this coming into being of the work of art, and as a result, "the work of art does not cause material to disappear, but rather allows it to emerge for the very first time."²⁶

In the photo-sculptural piece titled *Log (Rejects)* (2017) (figure 8), the materiality of the earth and the photographic material emerge through such a coaction between forces. In this piece, the metaphor of touch presented throughout the body of work is made physical. Photographic lumen prints, collected over the course of two years, are embedded into scored slits on a log relic from the environment. The individual prints accumulate into a free-flowing archive of indices from the earth. Their orientation across the surface of the log mimics the log's organic form and references the degree of chance involved in the creation of each transcription. The term 'log' refers not only to a section of a tree but also to a record or, more precisely, a captain's 'logbook'. Its etymological origins can be traced back to the 17th century. The log was used as an apparatus for determining the speed of a ship and the captain's log was a record of these observations. The contemporary use of the term 'log' has evolved from this notion of the logbook to be defined as a record of events. To 'log on' is to stay connected, or up-to-date with information. Photographing is used in a similar way; as a means to record moments, to accumulate data, and to stay linked.

²⁶ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 24.



Figure 8: Kyra Schmidt, *Log (Rejects)*, Gelatin silver prints embedded in wood log, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

To return to photography's historical roots, Talbot equivalently used the photograph as a metaphor and symbol for the photographic medium itself. His early conception of the "Philosophical Window" shows us an image *of* a window – a frame, and light – rather than a view *through* the window. *The Oriel Window, Lacock Abbey, seen from the inside* (1835) (figure 9) articulates photography not as a transparent envelope but as a "complex form of palimpsest."²⁷ In response to this image, Batchen posits "Nature, camera, image, and photographer are all present even when absent from the picture, as if photography represents a perverse dynamic in which each of these components is continually being inscribed by the place already occupied by its neighbor."²⁸ This illustrates the medium's complex contingency. While it is a marker that points to "there," "there" is only meaningful within a larger, deictic context and an established position of "here."

²⁷ Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, "Desiring Production," (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

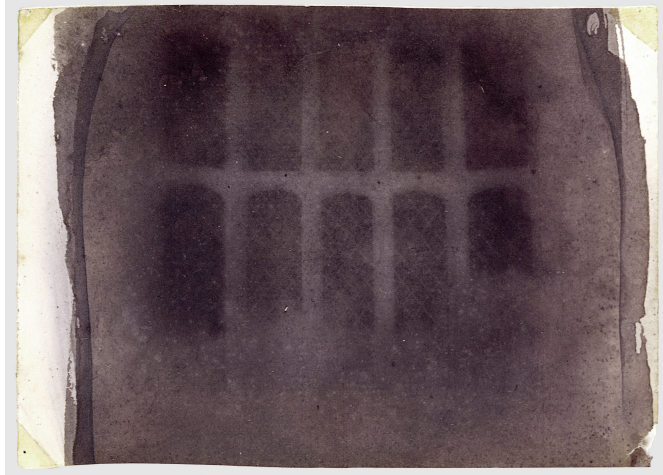


Figure 9: William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Oriel Window, Lacock Abbey, seen from the inside*, 1835. Photogenic drawing negative. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1997.382.1/>
 (accessed May 28, 2017)

The log functions as an allegory for photography in several ways; the rings of the tree, like photographs, accumulate and store information over time. The tree comes into being by moving upward toward the sky, processing sunlight in order to emerge and manifest. If we look further at the roots of the term ‘photosynthesis’ we can understand ‘photo’ as ‘light’ and ‘synthesis’ as a ‘coming together’ of light. This very description of the coming together and taking in of light constitutes photographing of any kind. The photograph, like the tree and therefore the log, cannot come into being without light. Just as the tree recycles light and energy, so have the prints embedded in the log’s surface been recycled from a group of rejected prints — prints deemed unworthy to be framed, hung, or called *Art*. What, then, does it mean to be a “reject”? How and why do such aesthetic judgments come in to play?

The recycled use of the “rejected” prints comments on photography’s capitalist

enterprise and the institutionalization of art practices. Barbara Bolt speaks on this in her (and Heidegger's) quest to uncover the essence or ontology of the work of art. In response to institutionalized art business, Bolt says, "rather than enabling art to come to presence as Art, the white cube is replete with its own preconceptions which frame the work as 'art'."²⁹ As discussed and argued for in this thesis, such issues of representation limit artistic truths. Heidegger argued that the gallery obstructs access to the essence of the work of art by ordering it as an object. It is this attempt at mastery over the work of art that closes it off. The work of art cannot set up a world if it cannot speak. In conclusion, instilled preconceptions about what art is, should be, and can be, dictate aesthetic judgements. As the rejected lumen prints and the natural log come together in *Log (Rejects)*, they are re-equipmentalized. Here, an unconcealing happens wherein matter is set forward into openness.

The Performance and the Event

The material performativity of the work of art is a collaboration between human and non-human bodies, including the artist's hand, photographic material, and earth matter. The photographs presented in *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* give voice to a silent experience in nature. They are documents of a meditative experience, and of a phenomenon, wherein the light sensitive photographic paper is dipped into and through earth matter. These images bring forth a moment of time by making tangible this coaction between forces. The performance is the

²⁹ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 112.

collaboration between artist, medium, and earth, and the Event is a happening of truth.

Performance as documented by the photograph has a long-standing history in contemporary art practice. However, more recently artists have begun to use the photograph in or as performance rather than as a mere tool for documentation.

Artist Mariah Robertson transcends the bounds of photographic representationalism and the frame with her scroll-like abstract photographs (figure 10). She manipulates chemicals and materials to create handmade colored prints that document an event of a different kind. The performance here happens as an open event between Robertson, the chemicals, and the photographic paper that welcomes chance and sets forth truth.³⁰ To return to Barbara Bolt's concept of materialist performativity, she posits that the material practice of art can transcend its structure as representation and produce ontological effects.³¹ In her unconventional use and installation of the roll paper, Robertson sets up an Event as the unfolding of a new form of representation.

³⁰ American photographer Matthew Brandt uses a similar process that welcomes chance, except through a collaboration with the environment. In his most famous series *Lakes and Reservoirs* (2011) Brandt soaks his photographs of lakes or reservoirs in the specific water that they represent.

³¹ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 186.



Figure 10: Mariah Robertson, Installation shot, unique chromogenic print on RA-4 paper. Baltic Center for Contemporary Art, UK, 2011
http://www.mbart.com/m/artists/141-mariah-robertson/installation_shots/
 (accessed May 28, 2017)

A similar Event takes place in my image *Algae, The Landings, Georgia #3* (2017) (figure 11). Performativity is distilled into a single meditation on time. Time as movement is captured in a back-and-forth motion between the plant matter and the intermingling of crisp and blurred imprints left behind by the plant matter. The blurring of forces acts as a metaphor for the fading of time from absence to presence, and presence to absence. Each lumen print marks a collapse between original and representation by presenting both simultaneously. The presence of the plant matter exemplifies the spacing (presence-absence) that takes place between the environment and artist's hand, to the gallery wall. Once again, the performance here happens as an open Event between artist, material, earth, and chance. The disappearing and emerging of the earth breathes life and truth into the work of art. *Algae, The Landings, Georgia #3* becomes a deictic marker of the happening of the performance in the land, and of the Event as the happening of truth.



Figure 11: Kyra Schmidt, *Algae, The Landings, Georgia #3 (Pulled through algae)*, Gelatin silver prints, plant matter, dirt, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

In the video installation piece titled *Algae, The Landings, Georgia (process)* (2017) (figure 12) the process of the lumen print's origin in the landscape is made visible. A video recording of the photographic paper shifting colors, as algae and water swirl above it, is projected upward onto a portion of frosted glass. This upward projection mimics the movement of natural elements as they grow and erect themselves up toward light. The frosted plexiglas disperses light in the same fashion as the sun. The emanating light and the gradual, whimsical churning of algae is the embodiment of such meditative, silent events in nature. The artist's hand is not directly depicted within the video but exists in the disclosed presence of the projector. By making the equipment visible, the materiality or the thingness of the work is foregrounded and sets forth a material performativity that is echoed in the natural curl of the lumen prints.



Figure 12: Kyra Schmidt, *Algae, The Landings, Georgia (Process)*, video installation, Plexiglas, Oglethorpe Gallery, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Heidegger conceived the happening of truth as the Event (becoming) of both the artist and of the work of art. He likened the artist to a passageway through which the work of art can be set up, not as an object but as total openness. By relinquishing order and preconceptions, unconcealment can happen as an Event that moves us out of the day-to-day world and into a different opening.³²

Expanding Vision

The coming into Being of the work of art, its unconcealment and truth, is a process that involves illumination. In Heidegger's essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the unconcealment of art involves light. Photography comes into being through the writing of light wherein form and content are revealed through the falling of

³² Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 109.

light onto objects. This form-matter-light structure in Western art is predominantly responsible for representationalist thinking. Vision, as made possible by light, is a dominating sense that can enclose, construct, and order. By freeing the space of vision from the camera's view finder, the transcriptions in this body of work present a movement of space and time left open. They enable the spectator to think of vision in terms of what has been, but also in potential terms about that which could be.

In Bolt's argument for a performative artistic practice she outlines Heidegger's concept of *Schein* in relation to the transfigurative power of light. *Schein* is a 'radiant appearance' that is a characteristic of the illumination of artworks. This radiance is conceived of in terms of refulgence, or a shining forth, versus mere illusion. Illusion, for Heidegger, is in the realm of mere semblance — a way of seeing everyday life.³³ A prime example of the difference between refulgence and illusion, representation and truth, is presented in Roland Barthes' influential introspection on the Winter Garden photograph of his beloved mother when she was five years old. His quest was to find a single photograph of his late mother's face that would invoke her essence. For Barthes, it was the Winter Garden photograph that achieved what he called "the impossible science of the unique being."³⁴ Barthes didn't just find the identity of his mother or her illusion, he found her *truth* in refulgence, as the ascertainment of a transcendental realm. Yet such truths are merely *a* truth and not *the* truth — the origin of truth in the work of art belongs to both the creators and the preservers.³⁵ According to Heidegger, refulgence as a shining toward and into

³³ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*, 133.

³⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 71.

³⁵ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 49.

the work is beautiful, as beauty is one way in which truth shines.³⁶

Refulgence in *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* happens in its setting forth of the earth into new light. The images in this series are “shifters” in that they are polysemous.³⁷ By freeing the space of mimetic representation, they lay themselves open to multiple meanings and interpretations. The individual pieces in *Gallatin River, Manhattan, Montana* (2017) (figure 13) accumulate into a large field of shifting color and form. The truth in this piece is not found in the identifiable imprint of a leaf in the top right panel, nor is it in the linguistic anchorage of the title. Rather its ‘impossible science of the unique being’ manifests in the disappearing and emerging of the earth. As panels begin to take the shape of a nebulous entity, the dirt on the prints’ surfaces emerges as an unconcealing force, while the natural bend of the photographic paper brings material to the fore.



Figure 13: Kyra Schmidt, *Gallatin River, Manhattan, Montana*, Gelatin silver prints, plant matter, dirt, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

³⁶ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

³⁷ Rosalind Krauss, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” *October* 31, (1984): 59.

Gallatin River, Manhattan, Montana was conceived by placing the silver gelatin paper in various spots within the frigid, streaming water of a river on a spring morning. The diffused radiance from the sun caused form to be fixed on the paper in the shape of shifting color and faint impressions of matter. Contemporary photographer Susan Derges uses a similar method in her camera-less photographic captures of riverbeds at night. She places photographic paper on the bottom bed of streaming bodies of water then fixes their image from above with an external flash (figure 14). While her imagery offers us poetic, intimate views of the landscape, they fail to offer a truth beyond their fixed representationalism. Her use of an external flash serves as a tool that controls light, enframes the earth, and closes us off to the world. The resulting images do not become their own language but are instead inscribed by language — fixed to traditional representationalist criteria.



Figure 14: Susan Derges, *Rowan Cloud*, Digital C type print, 2012
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/susan-derges-rowan-cloud-2>
(accessed May 28, 2017)

By contrast the making of *Gallatin River, Manhattan, Montana*, and the other transcriptions within this body of work, allow for a margin of chance. Artist and photographic material embodies a passageway through which earth can tower up and come forth. The earth is never frozen as a fixed moment but instead, it is arrested to show time and movement, as earth matter spills over or across the surface of the print. As such, each transcription presents an opening of space where a truth is at work and can come to presence. The photographs in *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* present occasions for seeing and traveling mentally — not a looking through but a looking *with*. In foregrounding material and setting up an open space they place emphasis on the material and imaginative basis of photographic experience.

Such an emphasis on chance and openness are key in the expanding of vision as an Event with the potential to fissure dominant representationalism. But what then is the significance of expanding vision? By eliminating the constraints of the aperture and shutter, reality is prevented from being frozen, ordered and made an object in its distinct typicality. Transcending conventional, representational expectations opens up the potential for the civil transformation of prevailing orders.

Conclusion:

The Event is a happening of truth in the work of art that transcends beyond representational practices. It is philosopher Alain Badiou's best-known concept and represents, in essence, his conception of revolution and social change in politics and

other domains. An Event declares that another world is possible and, in short, can destroy the dominant view. It can be argued that such an Event has come to the fore within contemporary art practice. In the flood of images in the digital era, there is an emergence of contemporary artists returning to the roots of photography. Photographers are turning away from the body of the camera in hopes of rediscovering photography's magic— its civil potential buried under a society of mass image production.

Lyle Rexer takes note of this trend in contemporary practice in his book titled *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. He notes that “artists are looking intently at every aspect of the process of photographic representation and putting many questions back on the table.”³⁸ According to Rexer, certain critics and photographers have suggested that the emptying out of a visible subject reflects the opacity of political, economic, and cultural structures that “control contemporary life.”³⁹ The major points outlined within this thesis paper, that subscribe to the philosophies and arguments of Martin Heidegger, Barbara Bolt, and Ariella Azoulay, emphasize an extension from such dominant structures.

In *Aïm Deüelle Lüschi and Horizontal Photography*, Azoulay asserts that the elimination of a sovereign point of view is a key element in the civil transformation of photography.⁴⁰ The photographs within *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* eradicate this sovereign view by way of their coming into being. They do not let the observer see through, but invite them to lose any stabilized external point of view.

³⁸ Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2013), 184.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴⁰ Azoulay, *Aïm Deüelle Lüschi and Horizontal Photography*, 51.

By placing emphasis on the importance of the performativity of artist and material as passageway, the work of art becomes an open space for the mind and eye to travel elsewhere. This Event is a happening wherein truth can come-to-pass through a relationship of care and responsibility that transpires between artist, material, and earth matter. The images in this body of work *work* to bring us to focus on the matter, or being of work of art. By making tangible artifacts from a silent experience with and within nature, they set up a world to create occasions for the recognition of beauty. Photography is contingent to a particular time and place, and can offer us a connection that extends free of mimetic representation. *Transcriptions: Indices from the Earth* asks the viewer to consider what can be learned from the world through direct physical contact with it, and what such a connection with the world may reveal about ourselves.

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