PAULIUS PETRAITIS

INTERMEDIALITY AND NETWORKED MEANING-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY BALTIC ART PHOTOGRAPHY

INTERMEDIALUMAS IR ĮTINKLINTŲ PRASMIŲ KŪRIMAS ŠIUOLAIKINĖJE BALTIJOS ŠALIŲ MENINĖJE FOTOGRAFIJOJE

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The dissertation is available at Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania and the libraries of Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuanian Culture Research Institute and Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre.

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Introduction

In many ways, images constitute attempts to make sense of the messy world we inhabit. They are representations of prevailing mind-sets, beliefs, fears, desires, and unspoken habits. The examination of images thus serves as a form of critical investigation into culture's sociotechnological aspects, and into cultural shifts and transformations. We increasingly find ourselves in complex real-world situations entangled in various (oftentimes competing) regimes of ambivalent meanings, and our world becomes progressively interconnected through multidimensional and often equivocally automated processes. The images that that represent these circumstances and our evolving world have, and continue to undergo, parallel evolutions. Amidst this muddle, we seek help. Grasping for some kind of clarity, we outsource meaning-making to various machinic interfaces: among others, algorithms play an ever-growing role in both determining how images are presented on our screens, and shaping their generative forms and operational models within networks. A significant portion of what we encounter online is partly predetermined by various quantifiable factors, including our past browsing activities and manifested "interests". Nevertheless, we persist in perceiving ourselves as users who exercise agency.

This seeming agency is often an illusion. When we browse, manipulate, or share images on screens, our apparent level of control over these processes often turns out significantly more limited than our initial assumptions would lead us to believe. Many of these operations have been preordained within the confines of software computations, thereby existing beyond transparent understanding, occupying the enigmatic realm of the black box. Technologies are seductive such that they promise control to us, yet contribute to the existential anxiety that envelops today's societies. Artificial intelligence revels in this promise: by trading our agency, we are outsourcing many of our decisions to seemingly more "objective" and "smart" artificial brains. As AI technologies are currently used in Gaza by the Israeli military to calculate the risk of damaging civilians in bombing raids, this mirage—a mirage which, this study will show, is centrally critical to photography itself—of supposedly bias-free techno-engineering plays out by offering control in a chaotic world, yet ultimately contributes to the surrounding chaos.

In a way, we embody and live within a future envisioned by the philosopher and media critic Vilém Flusser. In the 1980s, he presciently wrote about the forthcoming society "that synthesizes electronic images".[1] He foresaw this society as having the in-

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1   Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images,* trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3.

clination to be dangerously passive, choosing to watch and interact with images in lieu of real-world activities.[2] As predicted, digital images of all kinds—Flusser termed them "technical images", contrasting with "traditional images" of the past—hold a central place in our daily lives. They shape information sourcing, communications, and many of the habits that help us orient and navigate in an increasingly interconnected world. In fact, networked multidimensional images frame the very culture wherein we exist.

Today, the definitions of "image" and "photography" have taken on a fluid nature, given that AI-based software models can generate increasingly convincing images without apparent reliance on real-world counterparts. Photography, as particularly affected by technological transformations, suddenly (again) finds itself in a contested, mutable, and debatable territory. Some recognise that we are dealing with a new reality through forms of representation that are black-boxed and do not necessarily assume the form of the photo-image. This recognition is leading to calls for abolishing the notion of photography entirely in favour of not-yet-easily definable parameters.[3] I continue to believe, much like theorist Ben Burbridge has argued,[4] that maintaining the notion of "photography" is still practically valuable in many ways. This belief is grounded in photography's historical tradition; put differently, in photography's being a "historical form", to use Peter Osborne's phrase.[5] Yet, it is not merely historical: Joanna Zylinska recently noted that photography "has been actively involved in the shaping of our present onto-epistemological horizon".[6] It is crucial, however, to acknowledge contemporary photography's frequently contradictory and intricate nature.

The current state of photographic image-making is determined by a complex network of connected computers spanning a delicate global ecosystem. Diverse social and technological sectors are encompassed in this ongoing transformation, and the urgency of the moment for visual studies, and particularly the field of photography theory cannot be overstated. For Flusser, the transition into the universe of technical images represented a "cultural revolution" due to its profound implications and scope: "The structure of culture—and therefore existence itself—is undergoing a fundamental change".[7]

2   Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 145.
3   See the argument made by Andrew Dewdney, *Forget Photography* (London & Cambridge, MA: Goldsmiths Press, 2021).
4   See Ben Burbridge, "Post-Capitalist Photography", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 62.
5   Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 117.
6   Joanna Zylinska, *The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI* (Cambridge: MIT, 2023), 2.
7   Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 7.

This revolution impacts and reshapes the lives of all species and the planet as a whole.[8] The new networked ecosystem is supported by vast amounts of data linked to large server farms and data clouds, and this data is exchanged among countless devices.[9] Urgent and critical questions emerge in the midst of this dynamic environment: How can we continue to speak about photography as relevant to today's comprehension and not merely a technological relic of the past? How are art photographic practices influenced by and influencing these ongoing changes? How do photographic images manage to capture the intricacies and changes of today's social, cultural, and technological contexts? What defines contemporary art photography? The present dissertation takes up these questions as essential for gaining a deeper understanding of today's art photography on one level, and on another level as a means to shed light on distinctions between contemporary practices and those from earlier periods, such as the 2000s or even the early 2010s. While exhaustive answers to all these queries fall beyond the ambit of this thesis, what follows identifies and analyses two interrelated tendencies (what might also be described as phenomena or conditions) within contemporary art photography, in order to explore and illuminate these research questions. The first focal phenomenon under investigation encompasses *intermediality*, a discernible attribute characterizing much of present-day art photography. The second entails an *extension of meaning-making*, which increasingly unfolds across an evolving and expansive spectrum of cultural, imaginative, and partially factual signifiers.

This study gives a critical account of an expansion of the realm in which photography and its meaning-making processes operate. While symbolic, this augmentation is also markedly transformative, and it has happened (and is happening) both to and through photography. Whereas photography's intermediality ostensibly concerns more formal aspects in comparison to the extension of meaning-making, these two phenomena are analysed in what follows as deeply interconnected. Here, the case will be made that the visible diversification of photography's modes of physical presentation is intimately intertwined with a less conspicuous broadening of the horizons of its connotations. This thesis explores both these phenomena as originating from the digital revolution and flourishing within the parameters of the networked universe.

The present research is framed as a collection of case studies in what comprises a narrow subset of what Flusser termed technical images—namely, art photography in its most expanded sense—and their meaning-making. These case studies survey how

8   James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

9   Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis, "Introduction", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 1.

current art photography in the Baltic states is reflective of broader sociocultural dimensions and realities. This study takes as a point of departure the premise that artistic images are not impartial conveyors of mere aesthetic categories and sensibilities, but rather that they serve as conduits for the intricacies inherent in the cultural tapestry within which they are intricately woven.

The process of the *extension of meaning-making* with regards to art photography can be historically traced back to the advent of Postmodernism. As David Bate notes, during this period, the distinction between the mediatized realm and our own psyche became challenging to delineate.[10] A distinct characteristic of Postmodern art-philosophy was the rejection of the notion of "original" creation in favour of embracing "reference" and "quotation" as core concepts.[11] Referencing other existing works thus became a marked feature of Postmodernist photography. In the realm of contemporary photographic practices, this foundation continues to be built upon, although with discernible differences. A notable departure lies in the fact that the instances of art photography analysed here usually do not hold a specific position as texts that quote or reference other *particular* texts, as per the tradition of Postmodernism.[12] Despite this variance, their inherent meanings are constituted within an expanded cultural realm. The pivotal transition is the replacement of specificity with a realm of expansive cultural imagination.

Another crucial distinction between contemporary art photographs and those of Postmodernism as related to the extension of meaning, is that this process now also takes place in a context of markedly *intermedial* appearances. This implies that the expansion of invisible meaning is paralleled by the proliferation and integration of photography into various alternative forms. In the present context, the art photograph frequently assumes the role of just one component within a photographic exhibition; the exhibition, in turn, constitutes a framework that regularly incorporates elements of sculpture, performance, and other media. Consequently, the boundaries between these forms become doubly blurred. This thesis argues that both expansions within the realm of art photography serve as reflections of broader shifts in culture and the networked functions of photography. Both underscore the inherent and multifaceted complexities of a global networked world.

The fictive element has interwoven itself into ways of thinking about visual representation today. This integration has transpired in a manner considerably more

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10   David Bate, *Photography after Postmodernism: Barthes, Stieglitz and the Art of Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 24.
11   Bate, *Photography after Postmodernism*, 12.
12   Bate, *Photography after Postmodernism*, 12.

candid and transparent about its constructed nature, surpassing the level of openness that has characterized traditional photography over the past 150 years.[13] This stems from the complexities inherent in the operational functionality of present-day image-making, complexities which also impact photography's conventional credibility and veracity. Presently, artists are actively engaging with the realm of the fictitious to construct intricate narratives touching on various facets of contemporary life.

This introduction lays some of the contextual and conceptual groundwork for an in-depth exploratory study that unfolds across the ensuing chapters, and maps cases of contemporary Baltic art photography against issues of intermediality and networked image culture. By examining the dynamic relationship between technology, artistic practice, and meaning-making, this research seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the evolving role of photography in our interconnected world. In delving deeper into these concepts, subsequent chapters offer insights into the rich and diverse landscape of art photography in the Baltic states.

Subject of the Thesis

The doctoral dissertation *Intermediality and Networked Meaning-Making in Contemporary Baltic Art Photography* inflects an investigation of the dynamic and transformative realm of contemporary Baltic art photography in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia through questions of two interrelated phenomena: *intermediality* and the *extension of meaning-making*. This research is motivated by a profound recognition of the transformative impact of network technology on image creation, dissemination, and interpretation within our increasingly interconnected global environment. What follows considers ways in which images continue to play a crucial role in making sense of our complex milieux, representing cultural shifts and sociotechnological aspects. In an increasingly interconnected world shaped by intricate networked processes, images themselves have evolved in response. Artistic images are not mere conveyors of aesthetics; they intricately weave cultural complexities into their fabric.

This thesis surveys the significant number of Baltic artists who are engaging today with intermedial photography through their practices: among others Annemarija Gulbe, Paul Herbst, Ivars Grāvlejs, Cloe Jancis, Evy Jokhova, Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė, Geistė Marija Kinčinaitytė, Karel Koplimets, Paul Kuimet, Vytautas Kumža, Mari-Leen Kiipli, Reinis

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13   In this context, we might witness the fruition of Lev Manovich's once-speculative thesis. He contended that the regime of visual realism in 20th-century photography and cinema represented an exception – an "isolated accident" – within the history of animation, which aligns with the lineage of intentionally fashioned images. See "What is Digital Cinema?", *Lev Manovich*, 1995, http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/what-is-digital-cinema (accessed 9 May, 2023).

Lismanis, Ieva Maslinskaitė, Marge Monko, Visvaldas Morkevičius, Tanja Muravskaja, Robertas Narkus, Kristina Õllek, Rokas Pralgauskas, Līga Spunde, Indrė Šerpytytė, Diāna Tamane, Gedvilė Tamošiūnaitė, Ruudu Ulas, Anu Vahtra, Ivar Veermäe, Sigrid Viir, and Reimo Võsa-Tangsoo (in alphabetical order by family name). Analyses in subsequent chapters predominantly (though not exclusively) focus on works presented in exhibitions.

In order to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these artists' practices, this thesis traces some earlier axes of historical and sociotechnological development which have led to enable these practices to unfold in present-day culture. What follows considers aspects of the digital shift and the significant challenge these pose for the theoretical conception of photography, such that the medium has been cut from a narrow understanding of indexicality attached to it, allowing it to develop into the current networked functionality. Similarly, this research includes a theoretical discussion of some historical examples of intermediality (notably through exhibitions and artistic practices), and a detailed overview of media-related notions dealing with multiformity from the perspective of photography.

A Brief Overview of the Research Field

Internationally networked photography constitutes a distinct academic subfield, though elaborated relatively recently as such.[14] A large quantity of academic book-length studies have been published on the subject (*The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, 2023; *Forget Photography*, 2021; *Photography Off the Scale*, 2021; *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age*, 2020; *Photography Reframed*, 2018; *Nonhuman Photography*, 2017; *The Versatile Image*, 2013; *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 2013, among others). Dedicated conferences have been convened in this subfield within the last decade.[15] Much meagre theoretical attention has been afforded to the relationship between photography and intermediality. On this topic, of note is the edited volume *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism* (edited by Raphaël Pirenne & Alexander Streitberger, 2013), although its discussions its discussions are more focused on historical examples, and do not include more recent network image formations..

14   Pioneering articles by Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis were published in 2008 and 2013.
15   This includes "Photography in Virtual Culture" (University of Westminster and The Photographers' Gallery, upcoming in 2024), "Expanded Visualities: Photography And Emerging Technologies" (International Association of Photography & Theory, Nicosia, 2022), "Photography Off the Scale" (FAMU, Prague, 2018), "21st century photography: art, philosophy, technique" (Central Saint Martins, London, 2015), "Beyond Representation: Photography, Humans & Computers and others" (London South Bank University, 2012), and others.

It may be observed that in the Baltic context networked photography is still a relatively novel theoretical domain. As it remains yet somewhat sparsely mapped—especially in Lithuania and Latvia—important contributions are worth noting.[16] In a joint 2018 monograph *Atminties ir žvilgsnio trajektorijos: vaizdo kultūros refleksija* (*Trajectories of Memory and Glance: A Reflection on Visual Culture*), Odeta Žukauskienė and Žilvinė Gaižutytė-Filipavičienė have explored contemporary expressions of memory through visuality. Looking at "culture overwhelmed by images", the authors have delved into some of the aspects of network culture, specifically discussing image activism and the power of images for memory-formations. Some of the themes of this book were followed up in a collective 2021 monograph *Vaizd(ini)ai ir įvaizdžiai: kas ir kaip mus kuria?* (*Image(ry) and Visibility: What Creates Us and How?*).[17] This publication dedicates significant space to critically investigating the impact of the "algorithmic turn" in image-based environments. As the authors astutely point out, the image has evolved into an active participant in the global world. Importantly, this transformation implies that within the endless chains of image reproduction, "meanings become fluid, indefinite and changing".[18]

Agnė Narušytė has extensively contributed to the discourse on photography in the local context. She holds a unique position as a theorist who regularly reviews photography exhibitions, covering some of the contemporary instances analysed in this study. Her 2011 collection of essays *Lietuvos fotografija 1990 – 2010* (*Lithuanian photography 1990 – 2010)*, serves as a bridge within the Lithuanian phototheoretical discourse, covering a transitional period between the so-called "Aesthetics of Boredom" and the emerging culture of networked imaging. While the sociotechnological changes brought about by the digital shift may appear somewhat underexplored (and arguably, underappreciated), Narušytė's collection delves into crucial shifts in photographic meaning. Narušytė observes that art photography is transforming into a "conceptual image", highlighting the need to listen "to the author's explanations, otherwise the message of the work will remain hidden under visual by-products".[19] Importantly, this suggests that the visible image may not necessarily represent the actual content of the work.

16   It is essential to acknowledge that this overview does not encompass the extensive theoretical writings on Baltic photography, such as the Humanist school or practitioners of the so-called "Aesthetics of Boredom", where network elements do not play an active role.

17   Odeta Žukauskienė, Vytautas Rubavičius, Skaidra Trilupaitytė, Žilvinė Gaižutytė-Filipavičienė, Agnė Narušytė, *Vaizd(ini)ai ir įvaizdžiai: kas ir kaip mus kuria?* (Vilnius: LKTI, 2021).

18   Žukauskienė et al., *Vaizd(ini)ai ir įvaizdžiai*, 253-254.

19   Agnė Narušytė, *Lietuvos fotografija 1990 – 2010* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2011), 291, author's translation.

Within such local contexts, the complexities of networked photography have often been analysed as somewhat peripheral to other perspectives, conceptual fields, and narratives, such that the topic appears not as the primary focus of study, but as a related or secondary field. This is because, at least in Lithuania and Latvia, the intricacies of networked photographic culture have arguably not yet fully integrated into mainstream photography theory and thinking. Notably, no conference or book-length study has been dedicated to exploring photography's role within network culture. The reasons for this lack of critical attention are multifaceted, and while it falls outside the scope of this thesis to thoroughly discuss them, some are worth briefly mentioning, as they reflect the broader situation with photography. On one hand, institutional factors play a role. The Art Academy of Latvia (Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija) still lacks a dedicated photography department, and the nominally titled photography department at the Vilnius Art Academy (Vilniaus dailės akademija), recently renamed the Department of Photography, Animation, and Media Art, has primarily promoted contemporary art-like works with an emphasis on visuality rather than photography specifically.[20] This is in contrast to the photography department at the Estonian Academy of Arts (Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, or EKA), which seems to have more successfully maintained scholarly interest in the medium, as evidenced by its curriculum and certain practical decisions, for example retaining the photography darkroom despite limited space in the Academy's new building in Tallinn. EKA's department promotes a broad, critical, and conceptual approach to expanded notion of photography and the photographic.[21] While there appears to be comparatively less emphasis on archives within the Estonian contemporary photography milieu, the archival approach to photography is more evident in Lithuania and Latvia.[22] The comparative focus on the past, and the allocation of artistic and critical resources to explore gaps in the archive, may also mean that less energy is available for contemporary processes in the Latvian and Lithuanian contexts.

It is important to note that within this relative theoretical void concerning the integration of photography within networks, curators, artists, and various practitioners have taken the initiative to contribute to the regional discourse on photography within the ever-expanding network culture. In the Baltic region, Tallinn Photomonth

20 This is evident in the latest graduate exhibitions of the department, most of which lack any emphasis on the photographic component.

21 Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the photographic as a conceptual element. See, for instance, *Off Camera*, ed. Steven Humblet (Amsterdam: Roma, 2021).

22 As reflected by recent photography projects like *Foto Vēros Šleivytė* (eds. Milda Dainovskytė and Agnė Narušytė, 2020), *Glass Strenči* (ed. Anna Volkova, 2019), Georgs Avetisjans' *Homeland / Dzimtene* (2018), Maria Kapajeva's *You Can Call Him Another Man* (2018), Andrejs Strokins' *Palladium* (2017), and others.

has been particularly noteworthy for its contemporaneous and daring engagements with photography in this broader sense. Its various iterations and expanded programs have consistently pushed the boundaries of the medium, especially concerning its exhibiting aspects.

Public discussions have played a significant role in shaping the theoretical landscape as well: a series of lectures titled "Thinking Contemporary Art", organised by Inesa Pavlovskaitė-Brašiškė, has exerted notable influence on the local art theory discourse. The inaugural 2013 lecture series featured David Joselit's lecture "Multitude of Images", while the second series (2014) was noteworthy for its focus on contemporaneity within the context of technological shifts. In the same year, 2014, I co-organised (with Dovilė Tumpytė) "What is Not Photography?", a series of public lectures and discussions held in recognition of photography's changing functional and operational borders.[23] One of the moderated discussions, "The Flow of Images and Online Thinking" (with the participation of Pavlovskaitė-Brašiškė), centred on how "the internet sphere (blogs, image sharing and social media platforms) is becoming the new economy and site of meaning for images".[24] The 2016 symposium of the Riga Photography Biennial, titled "Image and Photography in the Post-Digital Era" (curated by Maija Rudovska), is also noteworthy for its exploration of the influence of images in the digital environment. I contributed to this symposium with the talk "Curating the Networked (Photographic) Image", which delved into how photographic exhibitions can formally and conceptually respond to the evolving landscape of the medium.

This latter topic interest was taken up in my artistic research "New Tools in Photography: From Google to Algorithm", which explored how software programmes, algorithms and AI technologies are used by artists to "shape and change the discourse of photography, challenging traditional boundaries of the medium".[25] It was presented in a special issue of *Fotografija* magazine and accompanying exhibitions at Nida Art Colony and Vilnius Photography Gallery in 2018.[26]

One of the writers contributing to "New Tools in Photography" was Latvian art and photography historian Alise Tīfentāle. She regularly writes on art photography

23   "Kas nėra fotografija?" took place at the National gallery of Arts in Vilnius, between 3-23 April, 2014.
24   The programme can be accessed: http://www.ndg.lt/media/57798/kas_nera_fotografija_programa2014.pdf.
25   Paul Paper, "New Tools in Photography: From Google to the Algorithm", *Fotografija* no. 1 (35), 2018, 101.
26   The special issue of *Fotografija* magazine featured works by Thomas Albdorf, James Bridle, Mantas Grigaitis, Aaron Hegert, Mishka Henner, Esther Hoovers, Zach Norman, Erin O'Keefe, Indrė Šerpytytė, and Penelope Umbrico. Accompanying essays were written by Alise Tīfentāle, Kate Palmer Albers, Ilaria Speri, Roksana Filipowska and Marijana Rayl.

from various sociotechnological perspectives, including an interest in how the Internet and social media are reshaping our sense of images and selves. In "Photography Without Images", Tīfentāle re-evaluates photography by shifting the focus away from images themselves and instead explores the medium as a tool of practice and social interaction, departing from traditional art-historical approaches, and investigating various uncharted aspects of photography such as NFT photography or ReFace app, with reference to the works by, among others, Grāvlejs and Alnis Stakle.[27]

This exploratory approach is also embraced by Estonian art historian and curator Anneli Porri. Her 2017 article "The Screen, Archive and Waiting Room in Recent Estonian Photography" makes some remarks on the expanding nature of contemporary Estonian photography in relation to meaning. Observing that "the photographic image increasingly pursues ways to intrude into [an exhibition] space" where "artists refer to the corpus of existing images", Porri importantly notes that this places some emphasis and demands not only on the artist but also on the viewer.[28]

The research field mapped out by this thesis encompasses a variety of authors, whose views are often explored in an expansive and interpretative manner, a manner akin to the workings of networked photography. What follows engages in a specific dialogue with several scholars. Of particular note are François Laruelle (author of *The Concept of Non-Photography* and *Photo-Fiction*, *a Non-Standard Aesthetics*), Andrew Dewdney (author of *Forget Photography* and co-editor with Katrina Sluis of *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*), and Ben Burbridge (author of *Photography After Capitalism* and co-editor with Annebella Pollen of *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture*). Vilém Flusser's innovative writing on photography, while not frequently cited directly here, has played a pivotal role in laying the critical foundation of my interest in photography.[29] The same goes for the multiple contributors to my visibly worn-out copy of *Words Without Pictures*, in particular George Baker, Charlotte Cotton, and Arthur Ou.[30] Their insights have made a significant contribution to the theoretical formation of this study. My understanding of Peirce's semiotic framework and indexicality as a complex yet inherently flexible notion

27   Alise Tīfentāle, "Photography Without Images", in *Latvian Photography 2022*, eds. Arnis Balčus and Alexey Murashko (Riga: Kultkom, 2022).

28   Anneli Porri, "The Screen, Archive and Waiting Room in Recent Estonian Photography", *Estonian Art*, no. 2 (2017): 59-60.

29   See also my photozine *Untaken Photographs* (Tokyo: Booklet Press, 2012), which has been shaped in particular dialogue with Flusser's writing.

30   *Words Without Pictures* (ed. Alex Klein, 2009) was conceived during the transitional period from digital to the networked photographic state, insightfully reflecting on much of what was only beginning to take shape.

owes much to T. L. Short, Christopher Hookway, and Hing Tsang. Christina Ljunberg's characterisations of intermediality are applied interpretatively into the photographic framework. Considerable credit is due to the artists themselves included in this study: they, as Jan Baetens rightfully suggests, are the true innovators of the photographic field.[31] They are at the forefront of pushing the boundaries of this somewhat conservative medium, and their work stands as a profound source of inspiration for this study.

Much has changed since 2010, when media and photography critic Skirmantas Valiulis still categorized practitioners using digital photography as amateurs, while also expressing the belief that it would take years for Lithuanian and Eastern European photography to be fully integrated within the broader field of European photography.[32] Although this viewpoint stood out as an isolated opinion, it does highlight a certain inertia within the local photographic field and the prevailing perceptions of photography practices in Lithuania at that time. We can now confidently assert that Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian photographers have not only become integral parts of the European photography context and communities, but have also achieved a remarkable level of international interconnectedness and recognition. The subsequent chapters examine photographic works produced by Baltic practitioners that reflect an aesthetic and conceptual vocabulary which is undeniably global. Many of these artists' significant works are created using digital tools, demonstrating a keen awareness of and sensitivity to the networked functionalities that shape their artistic practices.

Novelty of the Research

Much of the novelty of this research stems from its unique positioning and distinctive approach, analysing networked photography *in relation* to intermediality. Pirenne and Alexander Streitberger astutely observe in *Heterogeneous Objects* that "it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the relation between photography and intermediality" within theoretical contexts, describing this lacuna in the scholarship as a "striking lack".[33] While this deficiency has by now been somewhat addressed, an investigation of intermedial photography alone has significant potential

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31   Jan Baetens, "Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: The Question of 'Interdisciplinarity'", in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 65.

32   This view can be likened to the prevalent belief during the 1940s-1960s that colour photography was primarily the realm of amateurs. See Renata Bartusevičiūtė, "S. Valiulis: sprogimas fotografijoje tęsiasi!", *Fotografija*, no. 1 (2011), 11.

33   Raphaël Pirenne and Alexander Streitberger, "Introduction", in *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism*, eds. Raphaël Pirenne and Alexander Streitberger (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), xvii.

for making a novel contribution due to its relatively scant exploration. This research addresses that gap and goes further by coupling intermedial considerations with art photography from the Baltic states that is decidedly networked, conceptualising this shift towards the networked image through an understanding of evolving framework of *meaning-making schemes*.

This touches on yet another theoretical opening pertaining to the complexities of meaning-making operations of contemporary photographic works. In 2018, Lucy Soutter underscored that the present-day state "in which the ideas that circulate around art photography are both necessary for interpretation and yet frequently difficult to access" is "one of the most important and underexplored aspects of contemporary practice".[34] Not only aspects of meaning-making, but also some of the more practical features of art photography remain theoretically underexplored. In Lithuania, art photography from the last decade (from 2013-2014 onwards) remains comparably underrepresented on the academic map. While important but disparate discussions on individual authors and their projects have emerged (often in the form of articles or public engagements), a more substantial theoretical approach that encompasses authors, genres, and methods is conspicuously absent. Local discussions on intermediality, hybridity, or meaning-making with respect to contemporary art photography remain similarly rudimentary. Thus far, no academic article in Lithuania has delved into the multiformal relations of contemporary photography, or its meaning in light of networked functionality.

Most of the artists analysed here, with the exception of Šerpytytė and perhaps Monko, are not yet firmly entrenched in the local photo-theory discourse. By analysing the work of Õllek, Spunde, Morkevičius, Lismanis, Kumža, Jancis, Kiliulytė, Herbst and others, this dissertation aims to deepen the academic understanding of their practices. It discusses their work within an exhibition setting that is understood as a system. Moreover, this thesis undertakes to provide a theoretical framework engaging with the shift in *meaning-making paradigms* and *intermedial relations* that could be adapted in future research to enable analyses of the work of different practitioners in different contexts.

This research articulates a framework for investigating shifts in meaning-making paradigms within contemporary art photography. What follows introduces two expanded definitions: firstly, the classical meaning-making scheme, which prioritizes distinct boundaries and direct representation; and secondly, the networked scheme, characterized by interconnected and multi-layered meanings that transcend conven-

34   Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

tional boundaries, readily evoking cultural fields and fictional entities. These definitions and their explications cumulatively enable the succinct and effective apprehension of the intricate paradigms of classical and networked meaning-making in photography, thereby providing a valuable analytical approach for future or parallel discussions of contemporary photographic works.

Today's global photographic discourse encourages writers to approach the recounting of photography histories in "more open, multi-layered, complex" ways.[35] This includes expanding their field of references, seeking new authors, and avoiding the feeling of being "overburdened by the weight of the photographic canon".[36] Furthermore, there are calls "to unlearn" some of the more common theories and histories of photography[37], encouraging writers to embrace greater adventurousness and daring in their perspectives. These movements stem from an acknowledgment that "thinking on photography now is undergoing a paradigm shift", coupled with a simultaneous recognition of the inadequacy of conventional discourse to "provide the conceptual and attitudinal resources that are needed".[38] Some take the issue still further, arguing that, in fact, "the established language, thinking, meanings and values of photography now stand as an obstacle to grasping the new [networked] condition".[39] Taken together, these circumstances constitute a significant postulation within the shifting global photo-theory milieu. The Lithuanian scholarly community engaged with photography theory may discover itself still inadequately equipped or unready to engage effectively with this proposition.

It has been observed that the theoretical field of photography is a particularly inert one. It's not an exaggeration to state that the trio of Barthes, Sontag, and Berger (and to an extent Bazin) has been particularly (over)used in Lithuanian photographic discourse. This becomes especially evident (and potentially problematic) when their

35 Steffen Siegel, "Collaborations", part of the texts series "Future Histories", on *Still Searching*, *Fotomuseum Winterthur*, 2020 07 15, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2020/07/15/collaborations/ (accessed 22 June, 2023).

36 Ronnie Close, Catherine Grant, Sarah E. James and Sandra Plummer, "Closing Reflections", in *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture,* eds. Ben Burbridge and Annebella Pollen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 236.

37 See Ariella Azoulay's series of texts "Unlearning Decisive Moments of Photography", on *Still Searching*, *Fotomuseum Winterthur*, 2018, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/series/unlearning-decisive-moments-of-photography/ (accessed 22 June, 2023).

38 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, "Seeing the public image anew: Photography exhibitions and civic spectatorship", in *The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory*, eds. Mark Durden and Jane Tormey (London: Routledge, 2020), 159.

39 Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 3.

theoretical insights, formulated in different times with regard to different photographic processes, are applied exclusively in discussions of contemporary image phenomena. This thesis aims to address the present conditions of photography from a complex and dynamic perspective that is decidedly contemporary, drawing on the work of an array of authors who are relatively underutilized in the local discourse, and whose ideas could enrich regional discussions around photographic practices.

More specifically, this study introduces François Laruelle's concept of "photo-fiction" as a means to address the fictiveness of contemporary photography projects. This notion has thus far seen remarkably limited use in Lithuanian specifically and Baltic visual studies more generally. In what follows, it furnishes a useful conceptual device that not only informs discussion of how (and for what reasons) invented elements infringe into ostensibly purely photographic projects, but also in enables explanation of the overall condition of images operating in what could be defined as an interrelated operational network. Within this network, images link back to each other, mutually drawing on and generating meanings. Whether photographic or not, images do not exist in isolation today; rather they often involuntarily become part of a vast register of cultural points of references. There is nothing pure about photographic images today: each new iteration is not only part of a unimaginable scale of photographs we consume daily,[40] but also immediately reminds us of other (mental or material) similar images.

An additional aspect of the novelty of this research project proceeds from the fact that the thesis itself is itself authored by an alternative voice. In the introduction to the Riga Photography Biennial symposium in 2018, Estonian art critic Indrek Grigor observed that due to the compactness of our countries, certain authorial monopolies tend to develop in the writing of Baltic art narratives.[41] The discourse on Lithuanian photography, indeed, occupies a rather insular territory, which, hopefully, will benefit from the inclusion of this and other future voices, thereby forming a more authentically polyphonic account.

Historical and Geographical Scope

This dissertation does not aspire to present an exhaustive (historical) survey of contemporary Baltic photography. Instead, through a collection of case studies, what follows maps through specific illustrative instances of photographic practices a broader exploration of the interrelated material and immaterial expansion inherent in contempo-

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40   See *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, eds. Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

41   Indrek Grigor, "Now Memories: Symposium", in *Riga Photography Biennial 2018* catalogue, ed. Santa Mičule-Hirša (Riga: 2018), 47.

rary art photography. The temporal scope in focus spans the decade from 2013 to 2023, with occasional references to antecedent works and processes, which are interlinked and deliberated upon. This time frame was selected for two primary reasons. The first is that this contemporary period has thus far attracted only limited academic attention among photography theorists in the Baltic states. It remains only a sparsely charted territory, with fragmented insights that are yet to be connected into a comprehensive theoretical viewpoint. This fragmentariness is something this thesis aims to address. The second relates to cultural and sociotechnological factors. The latter part of the 2000s witnessed a shift from the theoretical and practical emphasis on issues related to digital manipulation, which were particularly significant during the 1990s and early 2000s. In a joint article from 2008, Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis introduced the term "networked image" while observing a "growing cultural shift" caused by the Internet, impacting the functionality of photography.[42] This development took time to mature and became more fully-fledged around 2010-2014. Amongst a wide array of important sociotechnological innovations implemented during this short period that enabled new methods for image production, utilization, and distribution, the most significant included the adoption of 4G mobile technology in the Baltic countries, the release of the first iPad and the fourth iPhone with a new front-facing camera, and the launch of platforms like Google Image Search, Instagram, and Snapchat. As the quantity of shared, stored, captured, and disseminated images exponentially increased, photography evolved into a "ubiquitous" and "networked" aspect of everyday culture.[43]

The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were chosen as the geographical locale of this research for several reasons.[44] The initial rationale is pragmatic: as a practitioner I am deeply embedded within the artistic and curatorial networks of this region. In Estonia, I have participated in the Tallinn Photomonth on two occasions, launching my personal photobook *Smoke Screen* in 2015,[45] followed by an edited publication *Too*

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42 Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "A life more photographic: Mapping the networked image", *Photographies*, no. 1 (2008): 9.

43 Here I am referring to several important theoretical expositions of photography's shift from the period: *Ubiquitous Photography* by Martin Hand, Andrew Dewdney's "Curating the photographic image in networked culture", and Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis' "Notes on the margins of metadata: Concerning the undecidability of the digital image".

44 Throughout this dissertation, "Baltic states" and "Baltic countries" are used interchangeably to refer to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The popular shortened version "Baltics" is avoided, as it was referred to as a "lazy shorthand" modelled after "the Balkans" (Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), viii).

45 "Book Launch in Four Acts" took place at the EKKM Tallinn on October 17, 2015, in conversation with Estonian artist Anu Vahtra.

Good to be Photographed in 2017.[46] At EKA I have led photography-related workshops for students in 2018, 2020, and 2022, and participated in public discussions on various occasions.[47] The extent of my collaborations in Latvia are comparable: my ongoing professional cooperation with the Riga Photography Biennial began in 2016, resulting in two curated exhibitions (a third, scheduled for 2024, is currently in production), my personal show in Riga in 2022, and numerous other experiences within the local photography and image-making ambits. Besides the Biennial, another node of connection within the Latvian photographic community has been *Self Publish Riga,* an international biannual event dedicated to artists' books with a focus on photography. I have curated sections of Lithuanian photobooks for their main exhibition in 2014 and 2021, participating also in 2016. My involvement in the Lithuanian photography scene within an institutional setting began in 2004 and continues to this day.

This longstanding personal and professional involvement in the milieu (a number of these collaborations have concurred with the time of this research) is complemented by the fact that the Baltic states collectively form a group of countries that share similarities in size, geopolitical positioning, and demographics. They are also comparable from historical and cultural standpoints.[48] These shared characteristics provide a ground to compare and contrast art photography practices between current-day Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. It is important to highlight that such comparative analyses have been so far infrequent. Lithuanian classical photography—particularly its esteemed 20th-century period that engendered a distinctive humanist school of photography—has often been discussed as an autonomous and distinct field. Comparisons between the Baltic states were rarely made.[49] Although more recent years have witnessed the emergence of opportunities for closer collaboration among the photographic communities of the Baltic countries, such initiatives remain limited and often constrained to smaller-scale events. One noteworthy exception was the 2011 project "Generation of the Place: Image, Memory and Fiction in the Baltics", organised and curated by

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46   *Too Good to be Photographed* launched with a panel discussion (featuring writer Rye Dag Holmboe, artists Hanna Putz and Kristina Õllek, and myself) as part of Estonian Photographic Art Fair within Tallinn Photomonth programme on September 30, 2017.

47   I participated in a public roundtable discussion as part of "EKA Foto 20 klubi" at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, organized on the 20th anniversary of the photography department at the Estonian Academy of the Arts on October 23, 2018. I also gave an artist talk at the Academy on October 25, 2022.

48   Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, ix.

49   Also noted by Kęstutis Šapoka in relation to ideologisation of photography, "Photographic Research in Lithuania: Between Reflection and Restoration", *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi (Studies on Art and Architecture)*, vol. 21, no. 3/4 (2012).

Vytautas Michelkevičius.[50] "Generation of the Place" presented photographic work by a generation Baltic artists (born 1975-1985), and was specifically centred on the notion of place and place-making through mnemonic and fictional techniques. While its focused approach seemingly veered away from more contemporary subjects and forms of photographic practices,[51] "Generation of the Place" significantly highlighted the potential for collaboration among photographers from the Baltic countries.

While the notion of a self-contained photographic community might have been plausible during the Soviet era due to constrained international connections, the present landscape of local photographic processes is deeply enmeshed in a state of global interdependence. Contemporary practitioners are intricately linked through personal and professional ties, often maintaining awareness of each other's practices, thereby forming a loosely connected network of photography-focused professionals.[52] An examination of art photography practices within the Baltic states as interconnected and interrelated has remained largely absent from the academic discourse, a precise gap this dissertation seeks to address. Beyond these considerations, another factor motivating the selection of the Baltic countries as the research's geographical focus is my firm conviction that the ongoing regional developments in the expansive realm of photography and image creation hold profound cultural significance. These developments not only offer insights from a sociotechnological standpoint, but also reflect broader shifts within the field of art photography on a global scale.

I have undertaken and conducted this research as an active participant deeply engaged within the field. In essence, this thesis project is predicated on observations arising from an immersive situatedness in the field, as opposed to a detached outsider's perspective. This can be considered a methodological aspect and specificity: a certain writing-from-within. As mentioned earlier, my involvement in photography-based and photography-related practices has encompassed diverse collaborations with in-

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50   Group exhibition "Generation of the Place: Image, Memory and Fiction in the Baltics", produced by Vytautas Michelkevičius with the Estonian Union of Photography Artists, initially took place in Tallinn Art Hall in the framework of the Tallinn Photomonth, 2011. It was expanded by a catalogue-publication (Vilnius: Mene, 2011) and subsequent exhibition in Kaunas Photography Gallery in 2012.

51   For a critical view of the project's nostalgic focus on memory-making, see Danutė Gambickaitė and Jolanta Marcišauskyte-Jurašienė, "Pašnekesys apie parodą „Vietos karta" Kauno fotografijos galerijoje", *Artnews*, 2012 03 20, https://artnews.lt/pasnekesys-apie-paroda-vietos-karta-kau-no-fotografijos-galerijoje-14823 (accessed 22 March, 2023).

52   Regionally, this is supported by joint funding possibilities, such as those offered by the newly formed Baltic Culture Fond, or travel grant opportunities within the larger framework of Nordic-Baltic Mobility Programme for Culture.

stitutions and practitioners located in all three Baltic countries. As a curator, I have conducted projects with (among other institutions) the Lithuanian Photographers Union (*New Tools in Photography: From Google to Algorithm*, 2018);[53] Rupert (*Like There's No Tomorrow*, 2013);[54] the Latvian National Museum of Art (*On Photographic Beings*, 2020);[55] and Tallinn Photomonth (*Too Good to be Photographed*, 2017)[56]. Since 2019, I am a collaborating curator at the Riga Photography Biennial, working on a project-basis. My interactions have spanned collaborations with over a dozen Baltic artists. Furthermore, as a practicing artist myself, I have participated in numerous exhibitions, and presented my artistic endeavours and research within a variety of institutional and independent frameworks. This dual role has afforded me the opportunity to gauge the proverbial pulse (so to speak) of the research environment in this work to an extent that a purely desk-bound study would be unable to deliver.

I consider both the curatorial and artistic dimensions of my practice to be intricately entwined elements that engage with and explore the dynamics of images within broader sociocultural and technological frameworks. Of particular significance is the fact that this interconnected practice imparts a certain subjectivity to my position in relation to this research, a subjectivity that I willingly and openly acknowledge. To put it differently, no segment of this research endeavours to present an overtly objective standpoint, or exemplify "seeing everything from nowhere", to use Donna Haraway's expression.[57] Rather, it embodies a situated and subjectively-formed understanding throughout its entirety.

Both my own positioning as an individual researcher and that of the study itself can be situated. This PhD research can be located within what networked image

53 *New Tools in Photography: From Google to Algorithm* was a project consisting of an exhibition and eponymous issue of "Fotografija" magazine (issue no 35, 2018). It presented works by Thomas Albdorf, James Bridle, Mantas Grigaitis, Aaron Hegert, Mishka Henner, Esther Hoovers, Zach Norman, Erin O'Keefe, Indrė Šerpytytė, and Penelope Umbrico; a selection of which was exhibited at Vilnius Photography Gallery and Nida Art Colony in 2018.

54 *Like There's No Tomorrow* (*Tarsi nebūtų rytojaus*) is a collection of young Lithuanian photography, co-edited with Justė Jonutytė, and published by Rupert in 2013.

55 *On Photographic Beings* was a site-responsive expanded photography group exhibition, organised in the framework of Riga Photography Biennial 2020, which presented works from Evy Jokhova, Ode de Kort, and Tom Lovelace. I have also given a talk "Framing Photography: #object #process #everyday" that was part of Reinis Lismanis solo exhibition public programme at the Arsenals exhibition hall of the Latvian National Museum of Art in 2018.

56 *Too Good to be Photographed*, a curatorial publication project exploring the relationship between photography and failure through the work of 40 artist, was launched and presented as part of Tallinn Photomonth programme in 2017. It was published by Estonian art publisher "Lugemik".

57 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

researchers Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis have recently characterised as "an emergent field in which the visual and its relationship to technology are subjected to transdisciplinary study".[58] This description aptly captures the essence of this research, as it comprehends the (networked) photographic image as inherently linked with the sociotechnical circumstances that facilitate its creation, dissemination, and reproduction across various levels. Intermediality not only serves as the central theme of this dissertation but also shapes its methodology. The critical analysis conducted in what follows encompasses a broad array of sources from photography theory, media and visual studies, artistic practice, cultural and technology studies, and, to a lesser extent, philosophy and semiotics. These sources are supported by interviews conducted and email conversations held with practitioners on several occasions.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this doctoral thesis is to map aspects of the multifaceted landscape of contemporary art photography within the conceptual context of intermediality and networked image culture, framed as a series of case studies focused on the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. This study is driven by the profound impact of digital technology on the creation, distribution, and interpretation of images in our increasingly interconnected world. The project's overarching objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the medium of photography has transformed in response to these technological and cultural shifts. The thesis undertakes to contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of *the ways in which photography intersects and co-operates with various other media forms to shape and convey meaning in the networked age*. In doing so, the dissertation addresses the existing gap in academic scholarship concerning the contemporary period in Baltic photography, and offers valuable insights into its sociotechnological evolution. Additionally, this research's broader objective is to establish a novel theoretical framework that can be applied to the analysis of art photography within the contemporary networked culture, with particular emphasis on the present-day intermedial practices observed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. By accomplishing these objectives, what follows intends to contribute to a more diverse and polyphonic narrative within the regional field of photography.

I have formulated the following objectives:

1) Establish the socio-technological context in which intermedial art photography operates, with a focus on tracing two major shifts in the history of the photographic medium: the digital break and networked transformation. In relation to this, to trace

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58   Dewdney and Sluis, "Introduction", 4.

the historical underpinnings of photographic intermediality within the Baltic states, identifying its evolution and influences.

2) Explore and scrutinize the theoretical framework of intermediality, particularly its application and relevance in the field of photography studies. Applying the revised theoretical framework of intermediality to analyse and interpret present-day art photography practices within the Baltic states will shed light on their unique characteristics and contributions to the medium.

3) Conduct a comprehensive empirical investigation of contemporary art photography in the Baltic states 2013-2023, examining and documenting contemporary intermedial practices, with particular emphasis on photographic projects presented in exhibition settings.

4) Introduce and integrate new authors and innovative concepts, such as "photo-fiction," into the regional photographic theoretical discourse. Specifically apply the concept of "photo-fiction" in the empirical analysis, examining its role in the artistic exploration of personal identity and identity formations within the contemporary Baltic art photography context.

5) Introduce "networked meaning-making" as a conceptual framework to discuss present-day intermedial art photography, facilitating a comparison with the traditional "classical" regime of meaning-making.

6) Define key terminology, including networked meaning-making, networked photography, and expanded photography, providing a clear and comprehensive theoretical foundation for the study.

7) Address the complexities of viewer engagement that occur when encountering intermedial and networked works operating within the expanded regime of meaning, shedding light on the interactive and participatory aspects of contemporary art photography.

By achieving these objectives, this doctoral thesis undertakes to deepen the understanding of contemporary Baltic art photography, elucidate its intricate intermedial and networked dynamics, and contribute to the ongoing discourse in the field of photography studies. It aims to offer a comprehensive and holistic perspective on the transformations that photography as a medium has undergone in response to the challenges and opportunities of the networked age.

Research Methods

The research methodology of this thesis fundamentally issues from the theoretical development and application of the notions of networked meaning-making *in relation to* intermedial photography with regards to contemporary art photographic practices.

This research unfolds against the dynamic and evolving intersection of these two phenomena, within an interstitial zone where they productively clash, thereby informing its methods in multiple ways.

The research conducted in this doctoral dissertation is designed to comprehensively investigate the multifaceted landscape of contemporary art photography within the context of intermediality and networked image culture. To achieve its objectives, the research employs a combination of qualitative, historical, and theoretical research methods. This multi-method approach was employed to gather diverse data sources, including qualitative interviews, case studies, content analysis, archival research, and critical discourse analysis.

1) *Critical discourse (historical context) analysis:* the thesis begins with a historical analysis of the socio-technological context in which intermedial art photography operates. This historical context frames the significant shifts brought about by digital and networked technology, concentrating on developments in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Through historical analysis, it explores how these technological advancements have influenced image creation, dissemination, and interpretation. This study mobilizes critical discourse analysis to explore the socio-technological circumstances of the photographic landscape from 1990s to the 2010s, with attention to the digital and network shifts and their impact on both theory and practice of photography.

2) *Empirical research and content analysis (case studies):* a crucial aspect of the research involves the empirical investigation of contemporary art photography in the Baltic states from 2013 to 2023. This empirical analysis focuses on works presented in exhibitions, although this focus is not exclusive. It involves the close examination of specific artworks and their intermedial elements. Multiple case studies were selected to provide detailed insights into contemporary intermedial photography projects in the Baltic states. The cases were chosen based on their relevance and significance within the field. Each case study involves a comprehensive analysis of artworks, artist statements, exhibition catalogues, and interviews with involved practitioners. Furthermore, what follows mobilizes content analysis to systematically examine visual and textual content related to art photography projects. This method enables the analysis of artistic expressions, narratives, sensitivities, and thematic trends in the region's contemporary intermedial photography.

3) *Literature review and comparative analysis*: this study conducts a comprehensive literature review to elucidate various media-related concepts—including intermediality, expanded photography, and photo-fiction—spanning both global and regional perspectives. Additionally, the thesis marshals comparative analyses to juxtapose developments in the Baltic states with broader international trends in con-

temporary art photography and networked image culture. This approach facilitates the identification of commonalities and unique regional characteristics.

4) ***Interviews and email correspondence***: within the scope of this research, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with artists, photographers, curators, and other stakeholders within the Baltic art photography milieu. A total of 7 interviews were conducted to gather insights into their experiences and perspectives on contemporary intermedial photography. In 2019, two exploratory interviews informed the scope and direction of the thesis.[59] During the main dissertation phase, five additional interviews were conducted, and one served a validatory purpose to confirm the thesis conclusions. Additionally, the author engaged in email correspondences exchanging multiple messages. These emails were used to pose inquiries, clarify specific details or information gaps, and coordinate the transfer of visual materials in a digitized format.

It is important to acknowledge that the doctoral dissertation is subject to certain limitations. Attention is focused mostly on two prominent characteristics of contemporary art photography: intermediality and expanded regime of meaning-making. This means that the cases analysed here are mostly of exhibitions, while photography books—a traditional public platform for photographers to present their work—receive only brief mentions. While exhibitions have emerged as the primary avenue for contemporary art photographers to present their work (further discussed in Chapter 4), it is worth noting that the photobook remains a viable platform and could be examined in future studies.

Terminology: Key Definitions

Networked photography: refers to a transformative evolution in the world of photography that emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s due to significant technological and social changes. This phenomenon has reshaped how photographic images are created, shared, and consumed. Key sociotechnological developments contributing to networked photography include the adoption of 4G mobile network technologies, advancements in cell phone cameras, the introduction of social media, and the launch of platforms such as Instagram and Google image search.

Networked photography is intricately intertwined with the broader concept of networked culture, characterized by dynamic interconnections facilitated by immense data clouds, mobile networks and handheld computer technologies. This shift has given rise to new questions and inquiries in visual and photography theories. The

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59   One was conducted with then-directors of Tallinn Photomonth Laura Toots and Kadri Laas, while the other with artist Marge Monko. Both interviews are available on echogonewrong.com.

networked photographic image has also given rise to new artistic and curatorial inquiries. It specifically affects the expanding field of meaning-making operations, which are explored by artists through intermedial interactions rooted in images, networks, and global issues. Networked photography is a critical reflection of the dynamic and interconnected nature of contemporary visual culture.

Intermediality: describes a complex and dynamic concept that has evolved over time and is culturally conditioned. It encompasses a wide range of meanings and approaches. Initially, it was associated with describing one medium through another, often linked with literary descriptions of visual art. However, contemporary intermediality has expanded to encompass a multidimensional field of relations between different media, focusing on questions of materiality, meaning-making, and social functions.

Intermediality, as is understood in the context of the present study, is not simply a mixing of two established art forms or media. Rather, it encompasses a wide field of meanings and relations. That is, intermediality is not limited to interactions between established media, but extends to the surrounding culture and the social and technological fabric that enable these interactions. It allows for the exploration of why certain media interact, how these interactions are formed, and what is communicated through specific combinations. Importantly, intermediality gives rise to novel possibilities and can disrupt established social constructions. It involves *radical performativity*, *strong self-reflexivity*, and *effective communication*, enabling the generation of something new and unique, as well as critical reflections on the mode of production and specificity of intermedial works.

The concept of intermediality has a historical foundation, (re)emerging in response to societal and technological changes, particularly the proliferation of digital networks, as detailed in Chapter 2. It has been embraced by artists and scholars as a strategic response to navigate the changing cultural landscape, explore new network-enabled functionalities, and address interdisciplinary challenges. In the context of contemporary art photography, intermediality provides a framework to examine the evolving relationships between different media forms and their roles in exhibiting spaces.

Meaning-making: in contemporary art photography, this term refers to a multifaceted and evolving process that encapsulates the ways in which viewers interpret and attribute significance to photographic images. Meaning-making signifies a profound shift from traditional paradigms rooted in the concept of indexicality to a networked scheme characterized by interconnected, multi-layered, and fluid meanings that transcend conventional boundaries. This new approach to meaning-making operates within a dynamic and interconnected realm, profoundly influenced by the digital revolution and the networked culture in which it thrives.

In the classical meaning-making scheme, meaning is predominantly derived from the content contained within the photographic frame. A well-defined border exists between what is depicted in the photograph (the source of meaningfulness) and everything external to the frame, which is often considered less meaningful or devoid of meaning. The meaning is automatically attributed based on the content within the frame, and it remains relatively stable and self-contained. This regime is characterized by clear boundaries and direct representation.

In contrast, the networked meaning-making scheme is defined by its emphasis on relationality and interconnectedness. Photographs operating within this framework establish connections with broader, seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena and processes. The viewer's attention is directed not solely to the depicted subject but to a web of associations and meanings that transcend the visual content of the image. This scheme allows for the construction of meanings that are fluid, fluctuating, and often open to interpretation. Meanings are not solely contained within the frame but extend to broader cultural fields and fictional entities, reflecting the complexities of our global and networked world.

The shift in meaning-making paradigms within contemporary art photography is intrinsically linked to the networked culture and the digital revolution. The proliferation of networked capabilities in photography has given rise to a new functionality for the medium, impacting the way images are created, shared, and distributed. It has opened up new possibilities for artists to explore innovative approaches that blur the lines between reality and imagination, truth and fiction. Contemporary art photography operating within the networked meaning-making scheme is often characterized by intermediality, where photographs are integrated with various alternative forms such as sculpture, performance, video, installation, and written word. The boundaries between these forms become blurred, emphasizing the fluid and adaptable nature of contemporary photography. Artists actively engage viewers, challenging them to decode images within a broader cultural context and transcending traditional boundaries.

Medium: within the purview of this dissertation, the notion of a medium is inherently a mediating force. A medium is never transparent or neutral; it always contextualizes, translates, and even distorts information, thereby mediating it. This is particularly relevant in the ambit of photography, which has historically been associated with the idea of a transparent representation the world as it is. However, photography, like all media, operates as a filter between information and its recipient, resulting in various forms of filtering, cropping, distortion, and mediation.

A medium is a theoretical construct, and its definition is contingent on historical, discursive, technological, and cultural contexts. It is crucial to recognize that no

medium possesses a pure, singular essence. Media are, in essence, mixed and interwoven. Therefore, the concept of a "medium" is essential for understanding intermediality and transmediality.[60] Furthermore, a medium is always encountered in practice, never in isolation as an abstract category. It is through specific works or instances that we engage with a medium.

While recognizing the constructed nature of media categories, this study proceeds according to the position that it is still possible and relevant to discuss the relative boundaries of different media. These boundaries remain fluid, and media continue to interact within a diverse range of forms. This perspective acknowledges both the specificity and differences of media, along with their interplay in various cultural and artistic contexts. In practical terms, media boundaries continue to hold significance in cultural and social spheres, as evidenced by institutions, events, and designations related to specific media. For instance, the persistence of photography-related organizations, galleries, journals, and museums underscores the ongoing recognition of photography as a distinct medium, even in a landscape characterized by intermediality.

Index / indexicality: the loaded concept of "indexicality" in the context of photography has evolved over time. Originally rooted in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, the photographic index was not limited to direct causality or material continuity, but it also embraced the power of imagination.[61] However, in the second half of the 20th century, a more restrictive understanding of indexicality emerged in photography and film theory, one which emphasized direct physical connection and causality (explored in Chapter 1). This shift led to the belief that photographic indexicality was an inherent, self-contained quality of the medium, independent of cultural influences.

The digital revolution brought about a significant change in this perception. While debates and discussions emerged about the impact of digital technologies on photography, it became evident that the clear break occurred in the established understanding of indexicality as a strictly causal-material feature of photography. This notion, prevalent from the late 1960s to the 1990s, gave way to a more flexible and complex understanding of the index, aligning more closely with Peirce's original concept, which engenders the exploration of contemporary photography and consideration of the roles of "collateral knowledge" and imagination in shaping the indexical nature of photographic images.

60   Lars Elleström, "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 13.

61   See Hing Tsang, *Semiotics and Documentary Film: The Living Sign in the Cinema* (Berlin: Gruyter, 2013).

Expanded photography: "expanded photography" is a term that has gained significance in the discourse surrounding photography's evolving nature and its interaction with other art forms. It has a strong historical root, emerging from George Baker's influential essay "Photography's Expanded Field" (2005). This essay challenged the then-conventional view of photography as a fixed medium and suggested that digital transformation and changing artistic practices have expanded photography's boundaries. Importantly, rather than seeing the digital shift as a threat to traditional photography, Baker argued that it presents an opportunity for photography to form new, previously unimaginable relationships with other art forms. This dissertation adapts Baker's view, going further to suggest that this (ongoing) expansion of photography's borders signals an ongoing transformation of the medium. What follows considers that even in this context, where boundaries are blurred and various intermedial interactions are fostered, the photographic element remains discernible and significant.

In the Baltic context, Baker's ideas have found particular resonance in Estonia, where the photography department at EKA has embraced an inclusive approach to contemporary art. As detailed in Chapter 2, under the leadership of multidisciplinary artist Marko Laimre, the department encouraged students to experiment with various media, resulting in a generation of artists (some of whom, e.g. Kristina Õllek, are extensively discussed in this thesis) who use photography as a central element in their work, but are not limited by its boundaries. In the Estonian context, particularly in education and artistic practice, photography remains a central but adaptable element in contemporary art creation.

Structure

This thesis is practically structured according to four chapters. The opening chapter, "Technology Matters: Digital Break, Networked Photography, and Algorithms", establishes and delineates the technological context for the broader research by addressing two pivotal sociotechnological shifts: the advent of the digital and the emergence of networked systems. In line with Dewdney's and Sluis' observations that "the network remains in many of its practices an uncharted territory" and that "the nature and complexity of the networked image is best and maybe only graspable through its practices",[62] I chart these complex breaks (as succinctly as a single chapter allows) to set up a certain baseline, as it were, from which unfolds the following exploration of contemporary Baltic art photography, as an amalgamation of practices that are not only embedded in the network post-digital culture, but also at times borrow certain

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62   Dewdney and Sluis, "Introduction", 3.

parameters, tools, and features specifically native to it. Without addressing the computational technologies whose logic now permeates cultural expression, and photographic field in particular, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand certain instances of today's photographic expression.[63] In its turn, analysing photographic practices can shed further light on the advanced technological developments linked to fragile ecosystems of power and capital that partially order our world today.

"The Intermediality of Photography", the second chapter, analyses different media-related notions in relation to art photography. Unpacking the concept of the medium as "standing in-between" and thus always-already mediating, this chapter discusses the notions of intermediality (and its predecessor "intermedia"), hybridity, and transmediality. It also addresses the concept of "expanded photography" and its practical and conceptual differences within the Lithuanian and Estonian contexts. While all of these concepts are context-specific, with rich conceptual histories and some limitations, this study identifies intermediality as the most suitable for its analytical purposes, due to its more concretely defined radical parameters, comparably narrower focus, and more specific approach. In particular, this chapter mobilizes three characteristics of intermedial operations in relation to art, as defined by Christina Ljunberg: *radical performativity*, *strong self-reflexivity*, and *effective communication*. The chapter concludes by way of a consideration and analysis of intermedial photographic instances in the Baltics: from precursors to contemporary illustrative cases.

The third chapter, "Networked Meaning-Making", delves into the intricate realm of photographic meaning. It makes a conceptual proposition that current-day art photographic works operate in a meaning-making regime that is fundamentally distinct from the parameters that characterised classical photography. In essence, there is a radical opening up of the domain in which the meaning-making of art photography functions. This shift is related to the sociocultural and technological positioning of photography within the interconnected networked environment. Despite the historical fact that the medium was ideologically aligned such that indexical veracity was understood as its ontological basis, there were instances that challenged this view and opened up for more experimental side of photography. This chapter charts the employment of photography by American conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, and notable group exhibitions "Photography into Sculpture" (1970) and "The Extended Document" (1975), which have disputed the traditional conventions of the photographic medium. Finally, by arguing that the nature of photographic meaning

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63   Dewdney underscores the "principal importance" of digital for all subsequent technological developments in relation to photography, including those pertaining the network (*Forget Photography*, 150).

has transitioned from a predominantly straightforward and self-contained state to a regime that is notably more networked, relational, multi-layered, and dispersed, this chapter asserts that meaning-making is not inherently self-evident. Instead, it positions meaning-making as an active discourse in its own right, one that involves an active and imaginative viewer.

The fourth and the final chapter, "Baltic Contemporary Art Photography", provides an in-depth empirical exploration into present-day photographic practices of the region. It discusses several photographic projects whose functioning is characteristic of intermediality and networked meaning-making. Among others, these cases include "Powered by" (Kristina Õllek); "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" (Liga Spunde); "Trial and Error" (Reinis Lismanis); "Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds" (Marge Monko); "Looking Forward to Meet Me" (Visvaldas Morkevičius). Many of these projects and similar unfold in a dynamic exhibition setting. It is within an exhibition space that art photography projects emerge as networked and intermedial systems, wherein different and disparate elements combine in a presentation of an artistic vision or inquiry. This kind of presentation also tasks the viewer by actively engaging them. Knowledge and imagination are often required in order to activate the artworks on display and be attuned to their multiplicities of meanings. This is related with the fictitious element that is at play in contemporary art photography projects. The concept of photo-fiction is employed to deepen analysis. There is also a link between fiction and identity-formation, which is an interest that links Baltic practitioners with their global peers.

The Appendices complement the dissertation with transcriptions of five interviews, featuring Kristina Õllek, Liga Spunde, Vytautas Kumža, Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė, and Visvaldas Morkevičius. These materials provide additional insights and perspectives from key practitioners in the field that may, in turn, furnish fertile sources for future research.

1. Technology Matters:
The Digital Break, Networked Photography, and Algorithms

1.1 Break or Shift? Digital as Paradigmatic Transformation

This chapter considers two consequential sociotechnical shifts in photography—first, the digital break, and second, the networked turn with an attending algorithmic agency—and positions them in relation to some of the characteristics manifest in present-day Baltic art photography. The first comprises a series of technological and sociocultural changes, triggering the transition of the vast majority of consumer and specialist photography from analogue-based to digital support-based. This has opened doors to a number of transformations and new features of photography, one of them being networked capabilities. The second, the networked turn, is a subsequent development that allowed photographic images to be transmitted on and via networks, thereby expanding their potential viewership and circulation. It is widely accepted that both of these changes have radically transitioned and transformed photography.[64] This happened not solely on a technological level, but across and throughout cultural and social spheres. These shifts are, therefore, important for the present study, not only insofar as they crucially inform recent historical background. They also elicit a rich contextual field that enables a more nuanced understanding of many of the changes that, in turn, gave rise to conditions that formed, and continue to form, artistic practices. Furthermore, I will argue that some of the features of today's art photography—namely, its functioning as part of a "cloud" of already-existing images—was directly influenced by networked photography, and therefore the network is conducive for its very operational logic.

In light of these considerations, this chapter provides context, together with some historical background, to set the stage for a more insightful analysis of the current processes of contemporary Baltic art photography. In addition, what follows characterizes how these processes in some ways extend from the critical and theoretical axes leading directly to the digital and networked turns.

If, as I attempt to argue in and with this research, photography is a sociotechnical phenomenon that has certain cultural capital—that is to say, that we invested, and

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64   See Ben Burbridge and Annebella Pollen (eds.), *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); Martin Lister (ed.), *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013); Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art* (London: Verso, 2017), 176-178.

continue to invest, specific social meanings in and attribute values and ascribe roles to photography—this relationship with the medium is by no means static. It develops, changes, fractures and modifies. The digital and the network offer ways to rethink both photography's cultural capital and our societal investments within this relationship. In other words, if photography may be understood as a (sociotechnical) story that weaves itself into the fabric of everyday culture, then digital and network constitute breaks and inflection points in this narrative. They are worth parsing not only so as to better understand the nearly-constantly shifting nature of the medium and the historical locales of its various currents, but also to better situate works of art that use photography within the wider spectrum of these changes.

Why start with the digital, and not the more-recent (and less studied) network? While a lot of ink has been spilled debating various aspects of the former, I believe not everything has yet been said about how the digital enabled certain *categories of thinking*, particularly in relation to meaning-making and contributions to new relations within artistic work. Some of the works analysed here, for instance Indrė Šerpytytė's "2 Seconds of Colour", would not have been possible without the practical affordances stemming from digital networks, yet many more examples are less directly but significantly indebted to these transformations.

In recent critical expositions of photography, the digital is seen as *the* defining major step towards contemporary image-making conditions. Considering the transition to and advancement of the networked image, Andrew Dewdney states: "Of principal importance to all subsequent developments is the original technical development of the digital image".[65] In another instance, Dewdney and Katrina Sluis reflect that the current situation of the networked and computational image cannot be explained without acknowledging prior formations that led to it.[66] Thus, the reflection of the digital is pertinent to the consideration of how photographic images are distributed and produced today (which, in turn, is important to understanding some of their intricacies of meaning). It is precisely what the digital technology enabled that allowed imaging to be enmeshed with computational systems and be distributed among networked social media platforms.[67] Digital conversion of continuous analogue signals into electric values proved decisive for the development of much of the image culture that exists within everyday culture today.

It is not merely with regards to the technical where the digital broke from established traditions and patterns. This chapter argues that the digital has slowly eroded

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65   Andrew Dewdney, *Forget Photography* (London & Cambridge, MA: Goldsmiths Press, 2021), 150.
66   Dewdney and Sluis, "Introduction", 7.
67   Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 151.

traditional and primarily culturally instituted beliefs surrounding photography, thereby laying the foundations for the social milieu in which it functions today. Therefore, looking at this consequential turn in more depth will allow a clearer view of the present situation. Subsequently, Chapters 3 and 4, exploring contemporary photographic works from the Baltic states, discuss how art photography practices today largely operate within a field of cultural references. That is, meaning-making is not confined to the visible reality of subject-matter, which was key to traditional photography throughout the 20th century, but is rooted in an expanded domain. This referential turn—from being anchored in the coordinates of the physical world to the more abstract cultural field of references—emerged in the digital break, and became more fully formed with the rise of networked capabilities.

During the past three decades, photography, as a specific social imaging technology endowed with historical capital and social trust regarding its services, was developing into something else. This newer version is much like a re-skin of a creature: same but different. Now much more malleable and portable, conditions key to the medium's networked functioning and new rich plateau in Internet and social media. What we have today is entirely *like* photography, yet it is also something else. The social repository of trust towards photography was vanishing and is still further eroding in the age of mass disinformation, information wars, and so-called "fake news". The digital technological resituating and social reimagining of photography constituted the fundament that enabled photography to shift towards its current use. The analogue photographic image's ostensible simplicity (though photography was never actually simple or straightforward) changed dramatically with the possibility to decode it into ones and zeroes. This was more of a break with an established social tradition than it was simply a technological shift.

Photography as an established stable social tradition with its enshrined rituals and cultural codes ruptured and broke with the digital. Although this naturally did not happen overnight, the second section of this chapter on theoretical responses to the digital demonstrates that there was a clear sense of something very significant taking place. This realization occurred even as the discourse was sometimes outpaced by rapid proliferating developments. Dewdney's recent *Forget Photography* (2021) is critical of the academic tendency to look for continuities within the digital shift:

> [Today's] post-photographic discourse, rather than exploring what came after photography, ultimately maintains the historical continuity of pho-tography. Post-photography retains the photographic image as the default of representation. […] Post-photographic thinking endeavours to suture the

analogue, digital and networked into a continuous image tradition in which the photographic process and language remain entailed in digital technological systems. In doing this the stance and interests of post-photography perpetuate a discourse which is radically out of step with the new conditions of the image as well as what has happened to photography.[68]

Subsequent discussion in this study evinces that not all theoretical responses, even those made during the digital moment, were focused solely on identifying continuities, or were done so uncritically. Yet Dewdney's account is persuasive for its overarching thought-provoking idea: what was photography is all but ended, yet we continue to speak about contemporary image practices with the tools and ideas that were designed for a different practice. Here, I attempt to follow his advice that to engage with today's photographic practices, it is "necessary to discount any straightforward position of continuity".[69] What follows strives to consciously and critically question accepted linear relationships between technologies, photographic practitioners, textual canons, the rich analogue photography tradition, and latter-day digital photographic practices.[70]

Photography is not only a technology, it is a cultural formation. Or, to be more precise, it is a technological practice embedded in social and cultural usage. A change on a technological plane does not necessarily effect an equal, or equally contingent, shift in the cultural register. These two may not correspond. Dewdney posits that the clear technological rupture (brought about by the digital) to photography is so drastic that we should indeed *forget* photography, at least the classical understanding of it, in order to grasp the present state. However, he also postulated a delayed cultural reaction in these circumstances. While cultural usage of photography is not monolithic, and has adapted fairly well to the new possibilities afforded by the digital and networked technologies, in general the cultural and academic fields have lagged behind with respect to the potential of these new possibilities. According to Dewdney, academic circles in particular prefer to speak of photography of and in the classical mould, prolonging its zombie-like present state. This outmoded discourse perpetuates a situation wherein the practical application of photographic imaging differs from that

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68   Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 43.
69   Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 38.
70   It can be noted that Dewdney's *Forget Photography*, despite its emphasis on criticality towards continuities, occasionally seemingly falls into the same line of thinking. For example, discussing post-photography, the author states: "Interest in investigating the digital condition of the image after photography eventually led to the current state of thinking about computational vision, the automation of the image, the application of AI and the datafication of value" (49).

of its theoretical apparatus, and at the same time misses the opportunity to assess the new image culture's full impact.

1.1.1 Continuities and Ruptures: A Brief Historical Account of the Camera's Digital Turn

In the latter half of the 20th century, a gradual but significant transformation occurred in the transition from photochemical support to digital technology. This development encompassed various interrelated elements, each contributing to a broader change: the evolution of camera technology, the advancement of communication systems (especially the Internet and personal computers), and a change in the cultural reception of photographic images. Here I will trace an outline of the technological evolution of photography along a historical axis. Photography's digital becoming represents a significant breakthrough in many regards, not least its radical impact on photography's cultural positioning, its use, circulation, and the understanding of coded photographic images. This section does not aim to offer an exhaustive survey of digital technological developments, but rather provides a selective account of the key elements of change. The camera serves as a central point of focus in mapping these developments, as its evolution significantly influenced photography as a whole.[71] Additionally, an investigation of communication systems is crucial to understanding how they empowered the photographic image. The second part of this section is dedicated to transforming cultural perceptions of the medium in the wake of emergent digital technologies, examining theoretical responses to the rapidly transmuting field and reflections of its more problematic aspects.

Each new technology borrows from previous ones. In 1999, at the peak of digital debates, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media* was published. They noted that, at that time, traditional media and new digital media were engaged in a unique dynamic. Traditional forms of media were striving to maintain their cultural relevance as digital media challenged their status.[72] Digital

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71   David Bate has emphasised the camera's central role (partly as a metaphor of vision) in the development of photography: "The mobile phone camera has extended the old analogy of photographic vision from the modern era of photography of the 1920s: the camera as a human eye" ("The Digital Condition of Photography: Cameras, Computers and Display", in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture: Second Edition*, ed. Martin Lister (London & New York: Routledge, 2013) 81).

72   Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 5.

media borrowed from earlier forms while simultaneously challenging their cultural positions. Bolter and Grusin introduced the concept of "remediation", a double logic operating within the transition to a new medium. This double logic aims to be both "transparent" and emphasizes its newness, creating a paradox whereby a medium's novelty is highlighted, while it simultaneously appears as a continuation of culturally accepted practices. This is significant, as digital photography and imaging in general continue to employ and cling to the discourse of classical analogue photography.[73]

Figure 1. The first digitized photograph. Russell Kirsch et al, 1957. Public domain image.

The duality of remediation is evident throughout the technological development of digital photography. In 1957, computer scientist Russell Kirsch achieved a major breakthrough in digital imaging by inventing a rotating mechanical drum that facilitated the scanning and computer viewing of images. This innovation allowed for the conversion of analogue images into digital data. To test this new equipment, Kirsch used a 5 by 5 centimetre photograph of his newborn son, Walden Kirsch. The resulting image (Fig. 1) displayed after scanning is characterized by a haunting expression in the infant's (almost-dark) eyes, as if they are peering directly at the viewer, prompting reflection on the significance of the moment of creating this coded image. This historic moment marked the creation of the first digitised photograph, although its resolution was notably low (just 176 by 176 pixels) due to the limited memory capacity of SEAC.[74]

Kirsch's image symbolically represents digital photography's possible inception point,[75] signifying hope for progress beyond the past. It operates within established

73 According to Dewdney, this is critical in prolonging the lack of critical recognition of the complexities related with the new photographic mode of being (See *Forget Photography*).

74 SEAC, short for Standard Eastern Automatic Computer, was a significant first-generation computer located at the U.S. National Bureau of Standards, where Kirsch worked as an engineer. Constructed in 1950, the computer remained operational until 1964.

75 Notably, Kirsch also played a role in establishing pixel as the standard basic element of the digital image. Since the first digitized photograph, the basis of digital imagery is a square-shaped pixel.

traditions, embodying the double logic highlighted by Bolter and Grusin. The distinctly pixelated low-resolution image suggests newness while claiming immediacy surpassing its analogue predecessor. Simultaneously, it borrows (quite literally) from previous technology by incorporating a photochemical image into its operation. The first digitised image metaphorically signifies the potential of digital technology and digital photography, seemingly heralding a radical departure from photography's analogue domain.

The development of the charge-coupled device (CCD) was a subsequent crucial technological advancement. In 1969, George Smith and Willard Boyle, working for Bell Laboratories, successfully demonstrated the first CCD image sensor, a pivotal technology for the evolution of digital cameras. The significance of the CCD lies in its capability to convert light into quantized data by counting the photons that strike a surface of light-sensitive squares, or picture elements. Each picture element corresponds to an individual pixel in the final image. The output (voltage) of each picture element is determined by the intensity of the light photons it receives and is subsequently converted into a digital signal. The "product" is a serial numeric count that can be interpreted by a computer. In other words, light, coming into a sensor, leaves it as a series of computable numbers.

While Kirsch's scanner necessitated a material input, a printed image, to convert it into digital information, the CCD eliminated this requirement. It facilitated the capture of what could be considered a "pure" digital photograph, as opposed to the conversion of a photochemical image into a digital one. The process of translating light into electrical signals, inherent to the CCD, represents a momentous development not only from a technological standpoint but also from theoretical and cultural perspectives. It held particular significance for debates surrounding the indexical nature of photography that would emerge in the 1990s and 2000s. The argument that digital photography erodes indexicality is contingent on the understanding that incoming light is no longer inscribed onto a physical strip of film but is instead transcribed into a virtual numerical code. This process abstracts the information (the virtual code consists of the binary sequence of zeroes and ones) and appears to dematerialize it. The precise material (in the sense that you can see what was in front of a camera on a strip of film) and existential connection between an object and its photographic image—cornerstones of the traditional understanding of photography's ontology—were considered irretrievably lost in this translation. Consequently, the continuity between an object and its photographic rendition was purportedly severed.

It must be noted, however, that we are speaking largely metaphorical of a "continuity" (especially of a material kind) between an object and its light, shadow, or itself appearing in a photochemical print. There is nothing continuous, in the sense of a simple and straightforward causal process. Rather, the idea of material continuity between

analogue photograph and its object is overwhelmingly a cultural construct. The process of converting light coming through a lens into a photochemical print is no less "coded" and cultural than digitizing it by CCD or other technological means. As early as 1985, Flusser presciently noted that both photochemical and digital image-making share the same structural quality. They are, in his words, merely "different ways of structuring particles".[76] It is also a matter of speech that we consider analogue photographs material and digital immaterial. These distinctions seem to be largely governed by our present understanding of materiality and immateriality *per se*, and the notion of that physicality is undergoing a change. As Janne Seppänen has recently convincingly argued, "The whole digital imaging chain […] is not 'abstract', but material to the core".[77]

The CCD, developed at Bell Laboratories, was not available to the public. The first commercial CCD imager became accessible in 1973, produced by Fairchild Semiconductor. This CCD201ADC model featured a sensor comprising 10,000 pixels organized in a 100 x 100 grid. In 1975, engineer Steven Sasson at Eastman Kodak used Fairchild's CCD to create what was claimed to be the world's first digital camera, although recently this claim has been disputed.[78] Sasson's camera had a resolution of 0.01 megapixels and could store 30 black and white images on a cassette tape. Interestingly, the decision to limit the number of images stored on a tape to 30 was not strictly based on technological limitations, but was influenced by the designer's wish to align the device with conventional film cameras of the time,[79] which typically had exposures of 36, 24, or 12 frames (thus keeping the arbitrary multiplication of 6, and aiming towards the higher image-counts). The camera was not intended for mass production. That Eastman Kodak, a dominant player in the photography market, failed to recognize the value of Sasson's work contributed to the company's demise.[80] The decision to limit

76 Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 33.

77 Janne Seppänen, "Unruly Representation: Materiality, indexicality and agency of the photographic trace", *Photographies* 10, no. 1 (2017): 117. For an early argument regarding digital image's materiality also see Laura U. Marks, "How Electrons Remember", *Millenium Film Journal* no. 34 (1999).

78 See, for example, Roger N. Clark, "The First Digital Camera: 1971", *Clark Vision,* http://www.clarkvision.com/articles/first.digital.camera (accessed 21 November, 2020).

79 Iddo Gennuth, "Steven Sasson – The Dawn of Digital Photography", *MegaPixel*, http://www.megapixel.co.il/english/archive/35884 (accessed 25 November, 2020).

80 Kodak began marketing its first mass-produced digital camera in 1995. However, a more comprehensive embrace of the digital business had to wait until 2001, which was relatively late in comparison to other major players like Sony and Canon. In the same year, Sasson was also retroactively honoured with the Kodak Innovation Award, symbolizing the company's belated acknowledgment and acceptance of the emerging digital era. See also Ben Burbridge, *Photography after Capitalism* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020), 101.

the frames on a digital cassette, in an attempt to mimic the analogue camera (further exemplifying the double logic of remediation), in retrospect, appears partly nostalgic and indicative of the company's inability to foresee the winds of technological change.[81]

In 1981, Sony introduced the Mavica camera, which marked a significant shift away from film. Unlike earlier scientific and experimental innovations, like Sasson's camera or the digital camera developed in 1977 by the ASI Science Team at the University of Calgary,[82] Mavica was an electronic still video camera and not a digital camera. Yet it had no film. Mavica stored up to 50 images on a magnetic video disk, and its slim design made it resemble traditional analogue cameras. Similarly to Kodak's Sasson, Sony wanted to position the camera firmly within the field of traditional photographic cameras. One of the very first publicity images emphasized that "Mavica is about size of a standard 35-mm SLR" and that it was light weight. This comparison was enabled by the fact that many earlier digital cameras, whose function was mostly scientific or experimental, were bulky and unwieldy. Yet this also betrayed the double logic of remediation formulated by Bolter and Grusin: Mavica underlined both its novelty (filmlessness) and its continuity (physical similarity to "a standard 35mm SLR"). Sony identified the mass consumer as the future user of the filmless camera and went to rather great lengths to accentuate the new model's continuation of its line of 35 mm cameras, if not in image support, then at least in appearance.

What is significant with Mavica is its distinct transition from film. Film is a key element both for the cultural status of photography and its perceived indexical quality. By moving beyond film while clearly placing the camera within the heritage of photochemical photography, Sony suggested that a film-less camera could be seen as a natural continuation in the ongoing evolution of photographic technology. One of the later Mavica cameras was boldly advertised with a standard 3.5-inch floppy disk, proclaiming, "this is your film" (see Fig. 2). Jochen Runde observed that describing electronic storage as "digital film" was a strategic move that allowed early digital camera manufacturers to emphasize continuities between analogue and digital photographic processes.[83] This strategy contributed to the cultural adoption of digital photography. Mavica's historical significance is highlighted

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81   Daniel Palmer noted that Kodak "mistakenly believed that film sales would continue to flourish simply because celluloid produced a superior image" (Daniel Palmer, "The rhetoric of the JPEG", in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture: Second edition*, ed. Martin Lister (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 154).

82   The All-Sky Imager Science Team of the University of Calgary constructed a digital photographing (monitoring) system in 1977. The system's main aim was to photograph auroras.

83   Jochen Runde et al, "On technological objects and the adoption of technological product innovations: rules, routines and the transition from analogue photography to digital imaging", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* vol. 33 no. 1, 2009: 15.

Figure 2. "So now, sending images is just as easy as taking them". Advertisement for Sony Digital Mavica camera with a 3,5 inch floppy disk storage, 1998.

by the fact that the original 1981 model is sometimes mistakenly referred to as a digital camera by the popular press,[84] perhaps because the same name was later for a line of digital cameras by Sony.[85] Its impact is also evident in academic discourse, as seen in Kamal A. Munir's influential article, which locates the introduction of digital imaging technology in 1981, the same year that the first Mavica model was introduced.[86]

84 For example, a history of imaging technology section at www.videopreservation.conserva-tion-us.org erroneously states: "The first commercial digital camera was Sony's Mavica B&W camera (1981) with its 0.79 MP sensor." http://videopreservation.conservation-us.org/BHoIT.pdf (accessed 10 February, 2015).

85 After producing Mavica electronic still video cameras, Sony introduced digital camera series variously utilizing the name of "Mavica" ("Digital Mavica", "FD Mavica", and "CD Mavica").

86 Kamal A. Munir, "The Social Construction of Events: A Study of Institutional Change in the Photographic Field", *Organization Studies* 26, no. 1 (2005): 94.

The emergence of digital photographic technologies during the latter half of the 20th century gradually transformed photographic cameras and their capabilities. In line with Bolter and Grusin's concept of the double logic of remediation, these developments reshaped photography, while continuing to emphasize continuity and the presence of established technocultural models. The invention of the CCD represented a more profound departure from tradition, as it enabled the quantification of light into digital data. As light is fundamental to photographic processes, the transformation had far-reaching implications, particularly for the debates on photography's indexical character that would surface in the 1990s and 2000s. The development of digital cameras occurred incrementally, introducing CCD and film-less technology, enabling the creation of coded digital images while maintaining the camera's position within the cultural heritage of photographic tradition and technology. However, the digital technology, symbolically represented by Kirsch's iconic first digital image, contained radical potential. The theoretical response, explored in the subsequent section of this chapter, argued that the digital was not only transforming photography, but also destabilizing the medium's ontological and cultural foundations. This instability, discussed later in this chapter, provides a valuable contextual framework for exploring the works in the following chapters.

1.1.2 Developments in Communication Systems

A crucial shift towards digital technology took place within the realm of communication. Munir highlights that "The development of the PC, the Internet and digital cameras were three distinct events. Yet, the first two were critical in establishing a demand for the last".[87] He further underscores that "the rapid penetration of the PC and the Internet completely transformed the significance, scope and relevance of digital imaging technology".[88] The spheres of communications and digital photography were to symbolically converge in 1997, when the first photograph was shared on a public mobile network. This historic image (Fig. 3), taken with a cell-phone camera by Philippe Kahn, was of his newborn daughter, mirroring the newness and novelty symbolic of Kirsch's iconic digitized image from 40 years earlier. These two photographs of newborn children stand among the most significant images in the sociotechnological evolution of digital imaging in the 20th century.

87   Munir, "The Social Construction of Events: A Study of Institutional Change in the Photographic Field", 102.
88   Munir, "The Social Construction of Events: A Study of Institutional Change in the Photographic Field", 102.

In general, the advancement of digital communication systems revolutionized the possibilities for digital photographic images, especially in terms of their distribution and functionality in networked environments. Photography became more accessible for distribution and sharing on the Internet, thereby aligning with our contemporary culture with its emphasis on the exchange of information.

Figure 3. The first publicly known photograph transmitted via a mobile network. Philippe Kahn, 1997.

The technological developments that led to Kahn's 1997 groundbreaking photograph transmission merit consideration. Today, the Internet and social media are largely given, and seemingly teleologically inevitable, thereby realigning past technological events so as to apparently, inexorably culminate in our networked present. Yet, there were alternatives routes to the Internet. One of such was the Minitel service, launched regionally in France in 1978 and nationally in 1982.[89] Minitel was an important predecessor to the Internet, enabling users to perform operations now associated with the Internet, such as

Figure 4. Precursor to Internet: Minitel service terminal, Alcatel, 1993. The Science Museum, London. Author's photograph.

chatting, using mailboxes, making online purchases, and reserving train tickets.[90] Minitel used computer terminals with text-only monochrome screens that could display rudimentary graphics using a set of predefined block graphics characters (see Fig. 4).[91]

89 Minitel was an online service and a notable experiment in telecommunication. Its adoption received backing from the French government due to the perceived advantages of Minitel in terms of national and economic security, particularly in relation to the United States. This official support led to the rapid growth in the system's popularity, reaching its zenith during the 1990s. By 1994, there were approximately six and a half million Minitel terminals in use across France, serving roughly 20 million users. See also Amy L. Fletcher, "France Enters the Information Age: A Political History of Minitel", *History and Technology* 18, no. 2 (2002).

90 In her autobiography, French writer Annie Ernaux remembered: "On the Minitel, we checked phone listings and train schedules, horoscopes and erotic pages" (*The Years*, tr. Alison L. Strayer (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022), 140).

91 While units with coloured screens became available later, they remained seldom used.

1920

1957

1961

1969

1975

1981

1990

1987

1964

1960's

1973

1980

1986

1988
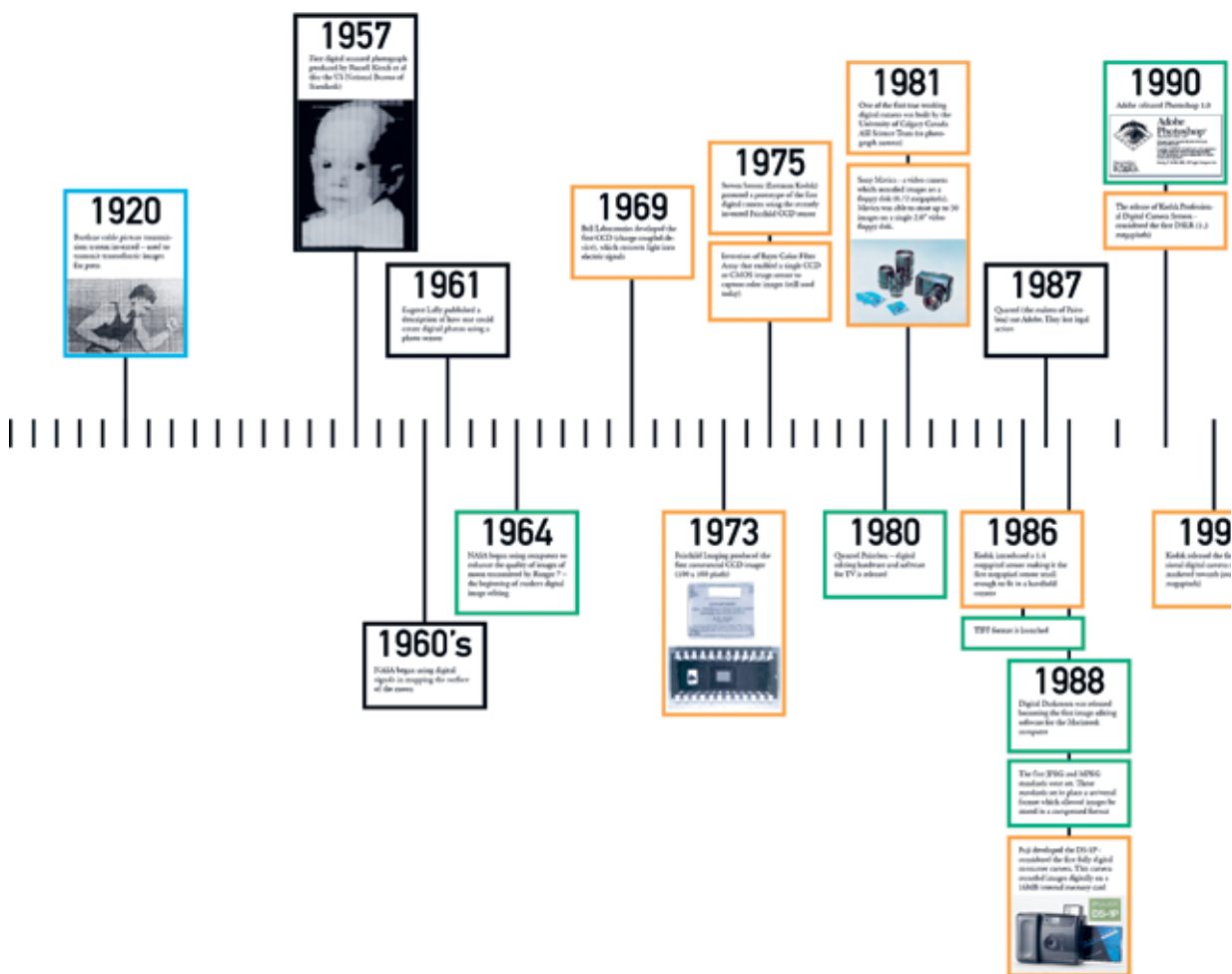
The Internet's advantage was its graphical capability,[92] which was introduced in 1993 with the NCSA Mosaic browser, marked the beginning of the online boom. Before Mosaic's release, there were only 26 websites in 1992. However, the World Wide Web rapidly expanded to over 30,000 sites by November 1995 and millions by 1998,[93] with the ability to view, edit, and share images being a crucial aspect of its appeal.

92   Palmer, "The rhetoric of the JPEG", 154.

93   "January 2015 Web Server Survey", *Netcraft,* http://news.netcraft.com/archives/category/web-server-survey (accessed 11 February 2015).
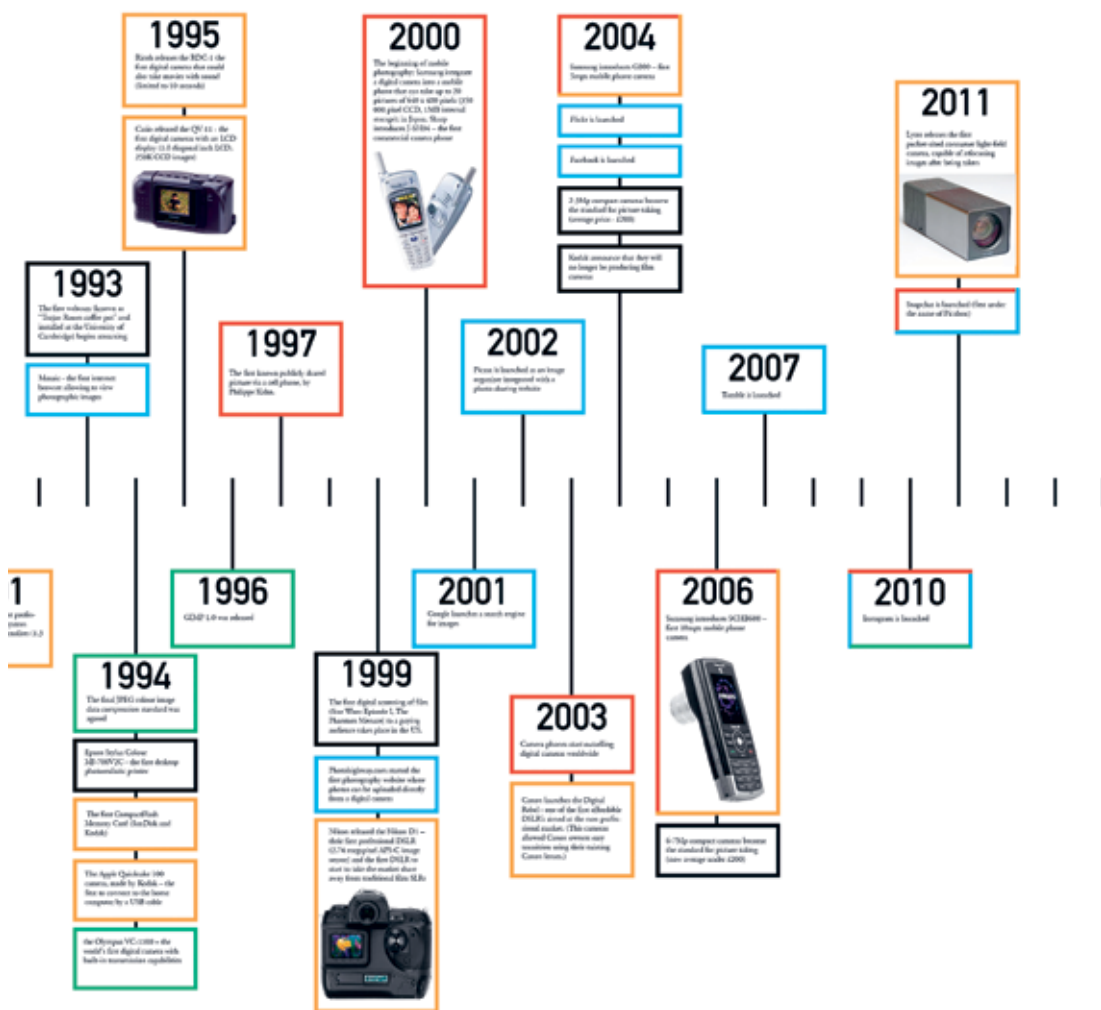
Figure 5. A technological timeline of the convergence between digital photography and the field of communications. Author's diagram.

From the late 1990s, the development of online image-sharing entered a new phase, with notable technological innovations occurring rapidly. In 1999, the website Photohighway.com became the first platform where photographs could be directly uploaded from a digital camera. By 2000, two key milestones were reached: the consumer digital camera market began to take off, and mobile photography emerged.[94] In 2001, Google

94   In 2000, Samsung integrated digital camera into a mobile phone that could take up to 20 pictures of 640 × 480 pixels (350 000 pixel CCD, 1MB internal storage), while Sharp introduced the first commercial camera-phone, the J-SH04.

launched its image search engine capability, reinforcing the pivotal role of images in the networked communication sphere. In 2003, camera phones outsold digital cameras globally, with the adoption of multimedia messaging service (MMS) playing a role in this surge.[95] Simultaneously, digital consumer camera prices started to decline rapidly.[96] This swift decline prompted Jonas Valatkevičius's 2005 observation in the Lithuanian context regarding digital photocameras: "Prices are plummeting, guaranteeing that these nifty and sometimes very small gadgets will soon be in every home".[97]

The incorporation of digital technologies into the realm of photography was a gradual process (see timeline in Fig. 5), resulting from a combination of inventions and developments in camera technology, communication systems, and the cultural repositioning of photography. The evolution of the Internet and communications allowed photographs to actively participate in the networked sphere. Additionally, the transition from historical photographic techniques to binary-coded digital images created theoretical opportunities, openings, and uncertainties. The adoption of new technologies introduced disruptions that created a sense of ambiguity, as explored in the following section, especially by photography and visual culture theorists. The period of the gradual adoption of digital image technologies from the 1990s to the early 2000s marked a time of significant theoretical exploration, with numerous texts dedicated to examining the cultural, social, and technological implications of this transition.

1.2 Digital and the 'End' of Photography:
"How to generate a useful critique of this moment?"[98]

These rapid changes in the technological landscape and their broad impact created a pressing sense of theoretical urgency. This urgency is palpable when examining the extensive body of theoretical literature from this period addressing digital technologies. One of the imperatives to discuss the given moment was a challenge posed to the accepted notions of realism and documentation in photography. Media theorists, photography and cinema scholars responded to the rapid changes with many studies

95   Damian Sutton, "Nokia Moments", *Source: The Photographic Review*, no. 43 (2005): 44.
96   Susan Murray, "New media and vernacular photography", in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture: Second edition*, ed. Martin Lister (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 171.
97   Jonas Valatkevičius, "Žmogus ir fotoaparatas", 2005, https://jonasvalatkevicius.lt/zmo-gus-ir-fotoaparatas/, author's translation (accessed 5 March, 2024).
98   This question was raised by Allucquére Rosanne Stone, "Preface", in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 8.

influenced by the adoption of digital technology.[99] The digital transformation not only necessitated an evaluation of the present moment and predictions for the future, but also a reevaluation of the past. Photography, as the foundation of cinema both materially and historically,[100] was often the centre of theorists' attention. It was seen as the medium par excellence wherein the digital change within visual media would manifest itself.

To my knowledge, the earliest systemic academic attempts to come to theoretical grips with the emerging digital technologies date to 1990.[101] In an article for a special issue of the *Leonardo* journal, which accompanied the SIGGRAPH 1990 conference,[102] Diana Emery Hulick drew parallels between the dawn of digital photography and the early days of analogue photography in the 19th century. She acknowledged that "writing about digital photography at this time in its history is like writing about the development of analog [sic] photography in 1845".[103] Her statement underscores the speculative nature that any theoretical analysis of digital photography invariably had at this time. The technologies were new, most of them undeveloped or yet to be developed. Few at the beginning of the 1990s could have predicted the avalanche of changes brought about by the social media, or the rise of citizen photojournalism and mobile photography (among other phenomena). Although various alpha versions had been circulating for over a year, 1990 was also the year when Adobe officially released Photoshop, the second image-editing program available for Macintosh computers.[104]

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99 See edited volumes: *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (eds. Hubertus V. Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, and Florian Rötzer), *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (ed. Martin Lister), *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation* (ed. Timothy Druckrey), *Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age* (ed. Mark Haworth-Booth), *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* (eds. Damian Sutton, Susan Brind, and Ray McKenzie). Monographs: William J. Mitchell's *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*, Nicholas Mirzoeff's *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Fred Ritchin's *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* and *After Photography*, Kevin Robin's *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*, David Rodowick's *The Virtual Life of Film*, and others.

100 C.f. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*.

101 Much of Flusser's writings on virtuality and digital predate this.

102 Hulick's article that appeared in the aforementioned 1990 issue of *Leonardo* is an adoption from a paper presented at "Photography: The Second Revolution" symposium at the Ohio State University, Columbus in 1988.

103 Diana Emery Hulick, "The Transcendental Machine? A Comparison of Digital Photography and Nineteenth-Century Modes of Photographic Representation", *Leonardo* 23, no. 4 (1990): 419.

104 The first image editing software for the Macintosh computer was Digital Darkroom, released in 1988.

The version number "1.0" underlined uncertainty surrounding the future possibilities of this editing software, which has since become a household name. Hulick also emphasised that "we can only conjecture the future direction of the medium, and […] we are prisoners of our own biases as we attempt to understand a developing medium based on our connoisseurship of traditional photography".[105] Therefore, theoretical analyses of digital photography need to be understood by anchoring them in the time when they were written.

1.2.1 A Note on the Terminology *Analogue Photography*

I would like to briefly digress and bracket out another point related to Hulick's 1990 article and the broader digital discussion. Written in 1990, her text notably introduced the term "analog[ue] photography" in the sense we currently use it. Analogue photography refers to photochemical and film-based photographic practices, and is primarily understood today in contrast to "digital photography". These terms are intrinsically linked; without digital photography, there would be little need to define analogue photography, and vice versa.

One of the earliest discussions and uses of the terms "analogue" and "digital" in relation to photographic images was made by Henri Van Lier in 1981. In *Philosophie de la photographie*, which wasn't available in English until 2007, Van Lier explored the relationship and apparent opposition between digital and analogical (his term for analogue). For Van Lier, these terms are not mutually exclusive; instead, they encompass each other's qualities. In relation to the photochemical photographic print, he noted:

> In the dark and light stains of a figurative photograph, one can recognize forms that share proportions (analogies) with those of an outside spectacle indirectly signalized by the imprinted photos: therefore, these stains are analogical […] at the same time, they are obtained through the conversion of each silver haloid grain governed by the choice between darkened/non-darkened, that is to say, a choice between yes or no, 0/1: therefore photographs are also digital (calculable).[106]

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105 Hulick, "The Transcendental Machine? A Comparison of Digital Photography and Nineteenth-Century Modes of Photographic Representation", 419.

106 Henri Van Lier, *Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Aarnoud Rommens (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 16.

In this passage, Van Lier not only established a connection between these seemingly distinct theoretical concepts but also revealed how the analogue photograph's nature is inherently digital. The smallest particle of an analogue photographic print, the silver halide (comparable to the digital pixel), is not, as habitually understood, truly analogous. It consists of only two states: affected by the light (turned "on"), and unaffected by the light (turned "off", by virtue of not being activated by light). These two states represent binary choices, mirroring the same choices faced by a digital bit between the numbers zero and one. Contrary to what our eyes may suggest when looking at a negative or photographic print, there are no intermediate states for the smallest elements of photochemical photographs. The illusion of smooth, analogue gradients arises from various combinations of activated and non-activated halide particles.

More recently, Yanai Toister has advanced the discussion about the binary character of analogue photography. He noted the largely unfounded opposition between the terms analogue and digital in relation to the photographic medium. "In a certain way photography has always been digital", Toister emphasises, reiterating that the silver halide particle "can only turn black or remain unchanged".[107] Therefore the opposition seems not only somewhat unfounded, but also confusing.[108] According to Toister, what we commonly mean by analogue photography can be more accurately described as "traditional" photographic practices.

Notably, the very term digital has engendered and sanctioned the notion of analogue. Before the emergence of the digital, there was hardly a need to talk about photography as precisely analogue, since there was no need to make a distinction (to put it perhaps a bit simplistically, all photography was analogue). The introduction of digital technology transformed photography, both providing new technological tools for image creation, and introducing new terminology and establishing a significant cultural break. This break has split the medium, offering two seemingly distinct photographic traditions: analogue and digital. However, the writings by Van Lier and Toister, among others, complicate the frequent claim that the former was truly analogous, and challenge any simplistic assumptions of digital and analogue as non-overlapping domains.[109]

107   Yanai Toister, "Why be a photographic image?", *Philosophy of Photography* 5, no. 2 (2014): 165.
108   Gottfried Jäger has also argued that the distinction between digital and analogue photography is problematic, as the transmission of light onto a digital sensor is an a analogous process in itself (Gottfried Jäger, "Analogue and Digital Photography: The Technical Picture", in *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, transl. Libby Fink, ed. Hubertus v. Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut and Florian Rötzer (OPA: Amsterdam, 1996).
109   Flusser was another theorist who made important early theoretical observations regarding the overlap between analogue and digital imaging processes (see *Into the Universe of Technical Images*).

1.2.2 The Speed and Strands of the Digital Debate

"How to generate a useful critique of this moment?"[110] Media theorist Allucquére Rosanne Stone formulated the question in the preface of *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, a collection of diverse texts published in response to the digital in 1996. The speed with which technological novelties in imaging and computing systems proliferated, and the overwhelming array of spheres of life affected, made any attempts to meaningfully assess the changes from a theoretical perspective both tempting and challenging.

Despite the challenges that came during the time of widespread digital adaptation which spanned from the 1990s to the early 2000s, theorists grappled with the transformative shift brought about by digital technologies. This period was marked by both excitement and intrigue, as well as a deep sense of urgency to understand the implications of these profound changes. It offered openings for scholars to contribute knowledge to a newly developing (or, mutating old, depending on a point of view) field. Turbulences with regard to the traditional underlying ethical dimensions of the photographic image and its traditional documentary function were further incentives for critical analysis. The momentum was huge, and the break with established practices and ways to analyse the photographic image was significant.

This context gave rise to a large corpus of theoretical work, which is here interchangeably referred to as the "digital debate" or "digital discussion". Most of these studies focused on how the digital break had affected photography's status and its relationship with reality. When analysing the theoretical discussions of this era, several key points stand out. Firstly, there was a pervasive sense that an exceptional transformation was underway, and many writings from this period convey a sense of urgency. The word "revolution" was frequently invoked,[111] reflecting the belief that something significant was being lost. The victim, at least so far as visual theory was concerned, was photography itself, or, more exactly, its privileged relationship with reality. The digital had a profound impact, as Sylvia Wolf put it, "as a challenge to photography's documentary nature".[112]

One of the pioneers to address the changing nature of the photographic image in this context was William J. Mitchell. His 1992 book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* is regarded as one the first accounts to introduce the term

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110   Stone, "Preface", 8.
111   See Ritchin (1990) 3 and (2009) 20, Binkley (1997) 108, Manovich (2001) 19, Geuens (2002) 16, Savedoff (1997) 213, Clayssen (1996) 73, Prince (1996) 34.
112   Sylvia Wolf, *The Digital Eye: Photographic Art in the Electronic Age* (Munich, Berlin, London & New York: Prestel, 2010), 23.

"post-photography" in relation to emergent digital practices.[113] Mitchell's book set the stage for a recurring narrative in the digital debates: the assertion that traditional photography, as it had been known, had come to an end, making way for something new. He wrote, "From the moment of its sesquicentennial in 1989 photography was dead – or, more precisely, radically and permanently displaced – as was painting 150 years before."[114] Mitchell further cautioned against seeing the digital as merely another guise of the analogue:

> We might […] choose to regard the digitally encoded, computer-processable image as simply a new, nonchemical form of photograph or as single-frame video, just as the automobile was initially seen as a horseless carriage […]. Although a digital image may look just like a photograph when it is published in a newspaper, it actually differs as profoundly from a traditional photograph as does a photograph from a painting.[115]

The narrative of the end of traditional photography proposed by *The Reconfigured Eye* was widely influential, although not everyone was quick to embrace Mitchell's sceptical dismissal of (analogue) photography.[116] It was, however, clear that the change was seismic with far-reaching implications.

Written in 2009 at the end of the period of digital discussion, when scholarly interests within photography have already begun to shift, Fred Ritchin's *After Photography* summarised the theoretical concerns of the time. It not only declared that photography was transitioning into an "after" state, but also reflected the anxieties and fragilities related with the digital shift. According to Ritchin, photography is nothing less than a visual perspective on the real and thus important changes to it are subsequently changes to our worldview and way of life:

> We have entered the digital age. And the digital age has entered us. We are no longer the same people we once were [...] It is inevitable. The changes

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113   Vered Maimon noted that the term "post-photography" itself suggests an obsoleteness of analogue photography ("On the Singularity of Early Photography: William Henry Fox Talbot's Botanical Images", *Art History* 34, no. 5 (2011): 959).

114   William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992), 20.

115   Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era,* 4.

116   In a book's review in *Aperture* magazine, Michael Sand wrote: "In a quest of the quotable phrase, Mitchell is undeniably too quick to pronounce the death of the medium as we know it. Photography is not dead…" ("The Digital Truth", *Aperture* no. 130 (1993): 74-75).

in media, especially media as pervasive as the digital, require that we live differently, with shifting perceptions and expectations. Our cosmos is different, as is our sense of time. Our sense of community is different, as is our sense of ourselves. Rendered virtual, we have become the stuff of our own dreams. If the world is mediated differently, then the world is different.[117]

In 2009, Ritchin was well-positioned to assess the impact of digital changes, as much of photography had already gone digital. Interestingly, he employed the same automotive metaphor Mitchell used in the above quoted passage from 1992. "We should be suspicious," Ritchin urged, "of the easy melding of photography into digital photography, focusing on initial similarities. In a sense, it is somewhat like continuing to think of the automobile as a horseless carriage".[118] These two scholarly studies, written in 1992 and 2009 respectively, mark symbolically the beginning and end of an intense and prolific theoretical period focused on exploring the challenges and ontological and epistemic implications of the digital reinvention of photography.[119]

1.2.3 Anxiety and the "End of Photography"

In *After Photography*, Ritchin made a significant point that because photography has traditionally played a vital role in culturally shaping our perception of reality, it also serves as the medium through which the transition to digital can be observed and exposed.[120] This suggested that photography and photography theory were worthy of careful critical attention and study. On the one hand, the medium was changing to something else, bringing attending impacts on our worldview. On the other hand, it was simultaneously the place wherein the digital transition *revealed* itself.

This double importance was not lost on scholars of the time. The period (1990s-late 2000s) was marked by a renewed interest in photography's ontology, and a number of studies dedicated to what the digital actually brought for the medium's status. These

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117 Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 9.

118 Ritchin, *After Photography*, 20.

119 If Mitchell's book marked the beginnings of the theoretical interest focused specifically on the digital reconfiguration of photography, Ritchin's 2009 publication came out when this interest was already on the decline. A shift in focus towards network culture and its impact on the photographic image – characterized by its omnipresence (as explored by scholars like Martin Hand, Rubinstein, and Sluis) and the prevalence of screen-based culture (as discussed by Dewdney) – has gradually taken centre stage in the field.

120 *After Photography*, 11.

theoretical studies, especially from today's perspective, may appear tinged with nostalgia for photography's analogue past, and perhaps over-reactive to the emergent digital. For example, Ritchin wrote: "Once the images begin to replace the world, photography loses much of its reason for being".[121] David Rodowick claimed the ontological "unbecoming of photography".[122] Wim Wenders stated: "The digitized picture has broken the relationship between picture and reality once and for all [...] Soon they [digital images] will really end up making us blind".[123] Nicholas Mirzoeff argued: "The claim of photography to represent the real has gone"; "after a century and a half of recording and memorializing death, photography met its own death some time in the 1980s at the hands of computer imaging".[124] Stone, in the aforementioned article, reminds us to consider these claims in context, and see them as a tendency, on the part of theorists, to get caught up in the whirl of the moment.[125] Many of these claims, I would add, point to the characteristic fears and hopes of their time.

Yet the rather pervasive narrative of an end of photography is instructive, and worthy of further inspection. Georges Didi-Huberman, in his book *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, has critically examined declarations of an end to a certain art field. According to him, the desire for an end can be seen as an urge for conclusion; by declaring a field of art finished, it is subsequently fit to analyse. Didi-Huberman phrases it thusly: "Art is over, everything is visible. Everything is finally visible because art is over".[126] The self-declared end not only makes a certain field of art seemingly finished (thus visible and analysable to a greater extent than before), but also sacred. While it was painting that was mostly explored in Didi-Huberman's analysis, the proposed line of thinking can shed light for the discussions of photography (and film) during the digital shift as well.

It begs the question if the desire to call the end of photography be related to a desire to bracket it for analytical purposes and enshrine it, thereby elevating theorists of (analogue) photography and film to disciples of a sacred art. What is clear is that photography was undergoing a transformation at the hands of the digital makeover and

121   Ritchin, *After Photography*, 23.
122   Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 124.
123   Wim Wenders quoted in Jacques Clayssen, "Digital (R)evolution", in *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, transl. Gila Walker, ed. Hubertus v. Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut and Florian Rötzer (OPA: Amsterdam, 1996), 75.
124   Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 65 and 98, respectively.
125   Stone, "Preface", 7.
126   Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning The Ends Of A Certain History Of Art* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 42.

this created widespread anxiety. The anxiety, in the pages of studies from 1990s-2000s, is almost always directed towards what could be described as the "loss of photography". This perceived loss might be framed as the break of the indexical bond in photography, or expressed as a more general feeling of uncertainty over the trust in the photographic image. In any case, the culprit was digital technologies (the aforementioned CCD being a special offender). Thus the digital was not only an exciting development, but, for the theorists of the digital break at least, also a rather existential threat to the norms that were already established in the field.

Peter Osborne has termed this uncertainty an "anxiety about abstraction".[127] Despite the fact that the digital was "blamed" for photography's seemingly reduced documentary role, the technologies that allowed encoding light into bits of data were, perhaps, more of a symptom than a cause. Both Osborne and George Baker have written insightfully about the more general social abstraction, of which the digital abstraction perhaps is only a constitutive part. "The basic source of such anxiety has nothing to do with photography itself", Osborne commented in regards to the theorists' concern. "Rather, I would speculate, it has to do with the nature of *the abstraction of social relations*".[128] For George Baker, much of what is important in today's society is concealed or abstracted, for example financial capital.[129] While previously many of its foundations were visible (at least to some extent), now fluctuations remain abstract and inaccessible.[130] Chapters 2 and 4 below address a crucial implication of Baker's essay: namely, that this complexity of operations demands an equally sophisticated photography of the present day.

It can be further noted that photography has always been a technology of essential abstraction, even in its analogue form. It freezes a moment from a continuum of time (temporal abstraction) and it cuts a scene from its surroundings (a contextual abstraction). The image may additionally be in black and white or have a colour filter applied to it (colour abstraction), and is a result of technological variables such as length, width and quality of lenses, which are yet further distortions made to the "reality" of the view. As John Tagg states regarding analogue photography, "we have to see that *every*

127 Peter Osborne, "Infinite exchange: The social ontology of the photographic image", in *Philosophy of Photography*, 1:1, 2010: 63.

128 Osborne, "Infinite exchange: The social ontology of the photographic image", 64 [original emphasis].

129 George Baker, "Photography and Abstraction", in *Words Without Images,* ed. Alex Klein (Los Angeles: Lacma, 2009), 369.

130 In 1995, Jean Baudrillard noted that in hyperreality the circulation of money and information, among other circulations, is an "abstract circulation, inaccessible to most people". Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out* (London: Verso, 2014), 136.

photograph is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions".[131] As a technology to "structure particles", to repeat Flusser's phrase, photography alters, cuts, takes out of context. As an image which often needs a label or a commentary to be read "correctly", a photograph can further be mislabelled, misinterpreted, or used for certain means. Our acceptance that photography even in its traditional analogue form has always had a substantially complex (at the very least) relationship with reality elicits two notable outcomes. First, it impacts and modifies the proclamations of an end of photography pronounced by some digital theorists. Second, it forecloses on any perception of change as a simple shift in the axis of photography's documentary prowess.

During the digital debates, there were also voices of caution and scepticism about the idea of a "revolution". In *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (1996), Kevin Robins urged for a broader and more critical examination of the ongoing shift, emphasizing the need to avoid oversimplified technological determinism. He argued that revolutionary or utopian rhetoric often conceals conservative forces, and called for a more extensive exploration of contemporary social and political transformations alongside technological changes: "We must remove the discussion of contemporary image culture away from the narrow preoccupations of the techno-culture, and…we must re-locate it in the broader perspective of contemporary social and political transformation".[132] *Into the Image* was a notable theoretical account at a rather early stage in digital adoption that rejected reducing the ongoing shift to merely technological terms. Yet the overall discourse betrayed a sense of instability and anxiety, not least due to new ways emerging to digitally alter and manipulate photographs.

1.2.4 An Emerging Narrative: Altering Photographs by Digital Means

Another prominent theme in the digital debate revolved around the mutability of the photographic image. The digital opened up an arena that had previously belonged almost exclusively to small groups of professionals. The alteration of photographs, which previously required considerable skill and effort,[133] now appeared easier, faster, and more seamless through digital means.[134] As Bolter and Grusin have put it: "We

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131   John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1988), 2 [original emphasis].

132   Kevin Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (London: Routledge, 1996), 7.

133   Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film,* 56.

134   While in the 1990s achieving professional-looking digital manipulation also required consid-

are disturbed because we must acknowledge that *any* photograph might be digitally altered".[135] This perceived ease of mutability challenged the traditional view regarding photography's ontological relationship with the physical world, complicating the ethical dimension of the image, and calling into question established assumptions regarding photographic documentation.

In a pioneering book from the period discussed here, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (published in 1990, six years prior to *After Photography*), Ritchin explored concerns about photography's diminishing trustworthiness. The study established the overall importance of photography for our culture and social environment: "One hundred fifty years after its invention, photography is [...] informing virtually every arena of human existence, comparable to the printing press in its impact on the ways in which we view the world".[136] Therefore, it is nothing less than our worldview that is being challenged and transformed with the digital. "It is this juncture," Ritchin explained, "with its enormous implications for world communications and knowledge, that is the subject of this book".[137] At the heart of this fundamental cultural intersection was the changing nature of photography and photographic image:

> There is a revolution in image-making underway that is beginning to remove the accepted certainties of the photograph and to *make the world newly malleable* [...] The computer is increasingly being used to *manipulate* the elements of photographs and quickly and seamlessly rearrange them. People or things can be added or deleted, colors modified, and images extended. The computer's retouching capabilities are more efficient, subtle, reliable, and undetectable than ever before (emphasis added).[138]

Ritchin's critique, which exemplifies rather well early approaches to the emergent digital technology, conveys an entrenched belief in the traditional documentary function of photography. His statements point to the ethical dimension of the problem of mutability in light of computer-assisted retouching, especially for the field of pho-

erable skill, it should be noted that in contrast to analogue photographic manipulation, digital manipulation is confined to a number of selected pixel units. What this enables is editing any part of a photograph without having an effect on the surrounding area.

135 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 110 [original emphasis].
136 Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 1.
137 Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography*, 7.
138 Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography,* 3-4.

tojournalism. What will happen if digitally manipulated or even faked photographs become indiscernible from unmanipulated photographs? For Ritchin, the anxiety of the digital was largely related to this threat ultimately posed to photography's social and cultural credibility.

A few year later, the narrative of altering of photographs was prominent in the seminal edited volume *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (1996). The presented discourse here was arguably more nuanced. One of its editors Florian Rötzer wrote:

> Through its amalgamation with digital technology, photography is no longer what it—perhaps—once was: the agent of an image which shows a piece of unadulterated reality. [...] But with hindsight, that was ideology. What was in front of the lens could always have been staged to appear as desired, was always dependent on the framing, the aperture, the speed, the film material. Light, nature, does not just copy something. Nothing is unmediated, everything is broken, a matter of interface.[139]

The idea that analogue photographs have actually *never* been truthful was another strand of theoretical thought that emerged in the digital debates. This awareness always formed somewhat of a part of photography theory, but the digital enabled a more thorough understanding and in-depth look at the constructedness of historical photography.[140]

The subjects of digital manipulation and easy mutability were frequently revisited in the pages of *Photography after Photography*. In comparison with earlier approaches like that of Ritchin, it seems more balanced, due to a more nuanced take on the overall constructedness of the veracity of photographic images. Rötzer asked

> What were the origins of that strange belief, or better ideology, still haunting us today, that photography is an objective or truthful representation of something in front of the lens, although from the very start the photographic

139 Florian Rötzer, "Re:Photography", in *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, trans. Pauline Cumbers, eds. Hubertus v. Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, and Florian Rötzer (Amsterdam: OPA, 1996), 21.

140 This renewed interest resulted in a major exhibition and accompanying book *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop* (2012). It was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, 11 October 2012 - 27 January 2013, and was hailed as the "first major exhibition devoted to history of manipulated photography before digital".

image altered perception and the motif looked different according to the technique used?[141]

In "Digitisation and the Living Death of Photography" (1990), Anne-Marie Willis stressed that manipulability is a key feature of the digitised photographic image.[142] She acknowledged that this "advantage" raises "major areas of critical concern".[143] This concern could be understood in terms of a challenge to the status of photographic veracity and an ability of a photograph to function as truthful document. "If it can be assumed that the credibility of photography has rested traditionally on a knowledge of its mechanical rather than manual mode of operation", Willis asked, "what will be the 'truth' status of images that look convincingly photographic but have actually been constituted from multiple digitised elements and subjected to re-workings by an operator?"[144] In a way, this question sums up the concerns over the trustworthiness of photography that was a major theme during the digital debates in the West throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

These concerns were also evident in the regional context. However, there seems to have been a gap in their emergence: few were expressed in the 1990s, a decade when the Baltic countries were still largely focused on analogue photography. It was only towards the end of the decade, and more noticeably in the early 2000s, that discussions around digital mutability began to take shape. Writing in 2005, Valatkevičius observed that in digital photography, "the act of taking the photograph is often forgotten altogether, as it is completely overshadowed by the stages of image post-production." More significantly, the prevalence of post-production means that "today, it is possible to give any image any meaning—even a meaning that did not exist at the starting point. Today, when you see an unusual photographic image, you have no doubt—a photomontage!"[145]

The alteration of photographs through digital means was a prominent topic in the debates surrounding photography's technological transition. This discourse was characterized by a strongly articulated ethical dimension, i.e. concerns regarding the implications of easily accessible editing for photography. What impact would this have on the trust vested in the medium and its cultural significance as a guarantor of

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141 Rötzer, "Re:Photography", 15.

142 Anne-Marie Willis, "Digitisation and the Living Death of Photography", in *Culture, Technology and Creativity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Philip Hayward (London: John Libbey and Company, 1990), 200.

143 Willis, "Digitisation and the Living Death of Photography", 200.

144 Willis, "Digitisation and the Living Death of Photography", 200.

145 Jonas Valatkevičius, "Tarpkiai", 2005, https://jonasvalatkevicius.lt/tarpkiai/, author's translation (accessed 5 March, 2024).

reality? The notion of the index as a theoretically established ontological characteristic of the photograph played a significant role in these debates. The first victim of the technological makeover of photography appeared to be its indexical quality.

1.2.5 The Problem of Indexicality

In an introduction to the "Digital Dialogues" issue (1991) of *Ten.8* photographic magazine, subtitled "Photography in the Age of Cyberspace", one of its editors, Andy Cameron, explained the underlying questions and reasons behind the publication: "The issue is one of meaning—the meaning of technology. How will computers change photography? Will it be a good or a bad thing?"[146] Cameron went on to delineate what he understood as "the first casualty" of the digital makeover:

> A digital photograph encodes the message without a code, articulating the very stuff of the photographic message into bits of light and colour and hue. It is incompatible with the notion that a photograph has a simple indexical relation with what it portrays, a relation which is beyond code, or before code—an analogue relation.[147]

This passage bears an early iteration of a sentiment that was to become one of the central themes running through discussions of photography's digital metamorphosis: *a narrative of the loss of indexicality*. Despite its pioneering time, the version of the message advanced by Cameron is subtly nuanced: the word "simple" is key in the sentence which proclaims that breaking the image into digital bits is "incompatible with the notion that a photograph has a simple indexical relation with what it portrays." Cameron's article further underscored the relativity inherent in photochemical photography. He rightfully noted that what we believe in photographs depends not only on objective factors (such as an ability to recognise certain objects and persons), but also on a range of subjective and psychologically-charged values: "what we *want* to believe, what we *already* believe, what we believe is *likely*".[148]

In the 1990s, media theorist Timothy Binkley authored a series of articles on digital technology and virtual reality. Binkley perceived a radical divergence between analogue and digital media, with this fundamental difference being central

146 Andy Cameron, "Digital Dialogues: An Introduction", *Ten.8* 2, no. 2 (1991): 4.
147 Cameron, "Digital Dialogues: An Introduction", 4.
148 Cameron, "Digital Dialogues: An Introduction", 4 [original emphasis].

to his discussions. He characterized analogue media as having the ability for direct information transfer, involving transcribing information onto a mediating surface through a physical imprint. In a 1997 text, he held up photochemical photography as a prime example of such direct transfer, "as it uses light to trace shapes of objects instantly onto film".[149] This description, emphasizing causality and material continuity, aligns with the established (narrowed-down) notion of photographic indexicality in photography and film theory.

However, Binkley argued that this quality of direct transfer is lost in the case of digital photographic imaging: "Digital representations, on the other hand, take measurements rather than impressions of what they represent […] they convert information from material into numerical entities rather than transcribing it from one physical substance into another".[150] He illustrated this contrast with an example: "analog [sic] video transcribes light into electric current, while digital video converts light into pure numbers dissociated from any physical unit".[151] This way, by converting light into numbers, digital media dispose of physical continuity so essential to the transcriptions of analogue media. From this we can gather that indexicality—which, in the classic reading of photography theory, is strongly associated with the kind of material continuity Binkley discussed—is not present in digital mediation. As he wrote in an earlier 1993 iteration of a similar argument, "when a digital video system converts light into numbers, it strips the structure of a physical event away from its underlying substance and turns the incoming signal into a pure abstraction".[152]

Binkley's analysis is directly enabled by the invention of the CCD, which converted light and wrote it as an invisible serial count of zeroes and ones, thus making the transcription abstracted and virtual. As a result, indexicality appeared to cease, due to digital media dealing with conceptualized and abstract structures (numbers) instead of transcribed material forms. Concentrating on the technical aspects of transcription, Binkley constructed an argument that fundamentally differs from the view proposed by Van Lier. Instead of accepting cultural similarities between analogue and digital transcriptions, Binkley concentrated on establishing their technical differences. Thus, in digital media, information becomes abstracted and disassociated with any specific material support. This is tantamount to a loss of indexicality. As explained by Mirzoeff:

149 Timothy Binkley, "The Vitality of Digital Creation", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* vol. 55, no. 2 (1997): 109.
150 Binkley, "The Vitality of Digital Creation", 109.
151 Binkley, "The Vitality of Digital Creation", 109.
152 Timothy Binkley, "Refiguring Culture", in *Future Visions: New Technologies of the Screen*, eds. Philip Hayward and Tana Wollen (London: British Film Institute Publications, 1993), 98.

"The point is that the photograph is no longer an index of reality. It is virtual, like its fellow postmodern visual media, from the television to the computer".[153]

The understanding that the digital break effectively ended the indexical character of photography, and thereby disrupted the medium's *ontological* development, is still relatively common today. For instance, in a 2015 historical account of photography, Kaja Silverman claimed: "Digital images, on the other hand, are generally assumed to be non-referential and non-indexical, and therefore discontinuous with the camera obscura and chemical photography".[154] This narrative was successfully established during the digital debates. Writing in 2005, Joan Fontcuberta contended that in digital culture, photography "undergoes a process of 'de-indexing'", such that "the digital image no longer shares the essential functions of a photography committed to authenticating experience […]".[155] The photochemical image is perceived as indexical and fit for the traditional documentary function, while the digital was then a new territory. This *terra incognita* seemingly promises uncertainty and fiction, and breaks from the historical development line of photography.

This view institutes digital as the breaking point in the historical development of photography on the *ontological axis*. It was is if, as Jean-Pierre Geuens proposed, there was "the radical discontinuity at the core of the digital revolution".[156] This theoretically conceived break not only instituted the terms "analogue" and "digital", but also helped establish their seemingly "natural" narratives. Whereas analogue photography was generally indexical, causal, and trustworthy, the digital image, on the other hand, was malleable and lacking both trust and indexicality. In a 2015 book accompanying a major photography exhibition, Sarah Greenough wrote: "The invention of digital photography, however, forever shattered the medium's hold on truth, undermined its supposed objectivity, and decimated its evidentiary status, for now nothing in a photograph need be real; everything could be fabricated".[157] This kind of statement summed up in popular terms the theory of a digital break, and is a direct inheritor of these debates. It posits (analogue) photography as mechanical-objective means to

153   Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 98-99.

154   Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 37.

155   Joan Fontcuberta, "I Knew the Spice Girls", in *Pandora's Camera: Photogr@phy after Photography* (London: Mack, 2014), 61.

156   Jean-Pierre Geuens, "The Digital World Picture", *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2002): 16.

157   The exhibition "The Memory of Time" took place at the National Gallery of Art, Washington on May 3rd-September 13th 2015. See Sarah Greenough "The Memory of Time: Introduction", in *The Memory of Time: Contemporary Photographs at the National Gallery of Art*, eds. Sarah Greenough & Andrea Nelson (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 1.

produce trustworthy images while considering the digital as a supposed (and regretful) end to this tradition.[158]

This imagined historical line of photographic development began perhaps with the camera obscura and François Arago's scientific rhetoric, continuing through the twentieth century till the "breaking" point of the digital CCD. Yet it is maybe nothing else but a compelling fiction in of itself. We cannot unproblematically in retrospect attribute to photography certain characteristics (e.g. its supposedly indexical ontology or evidentiary status) as the "true" qualities that define the medium—qualities, moreover, that the medium should retain in order to endure. The index was equated with both causality and André Bazin's formulation of photographic ontology. The fact that the notion of the index was firmly entrenched in photography and film theory was at least partly motivated by a wish to define the medium, to establish its boundaries by instituting what it supposedly is in itself. This instituted and largely fictionalised version of the photographic medium changed with the digital, thereby effecting the ostensible erosion of the very basis of photography. The disappearance of a notion of the index, constructed as stable ontological feature as the stable basis of photography theory resulted in overreactions that proclaimed the "death of photography". Yet photography was not dying. Rather, what was being witnessed was the death of a specific discourse which constructed photography as a loyal ally to indexical documentary veracity. Photography's cultural functions continue, albeit in modified states and beings that keep changing and evolving.

What can thus be concluded is that the digital break was a complex and significant event, signifying both a technological and cultural rupture, while providing a rich framework for academic theorists. Yet contrary to the theoretically established belief during the ensuing debates, it did not affect photography—that is, photography as a specific and wide-ranging cultural and social practice—in a way that would cause its "death". The digital break marks an inflection point with threads to the past. What did in fact break was the established understanding of indexicality as an ontological feature of photography that is strictly and rigidly causal-material, a specific understanding that emerged in the late 1960s and faltered in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the original Peircean conception of the index, inherently flexible, complex, and related with imagination, remained intact.

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158   C.f. Scott Walden, who argued that the adoption of digital should be resisted due to its challenge to photography's objectivity: "Given that digital-imaging techniques can easily be used to subvert the objectivity that subtends such confidence [in the photochemical image], it is in our collective interest to resist the implementation of such techniques, at least in certain contexts." ("Truth in Photography", in *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature*, ed. by Scott Walden (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 109.)

1.2.6 Peirce's Index

Here I will briefly address some of the complexities inherent in Peirce's conception of the index, and argue that many of its nuances are habitually lost when it is adapted and applied to the theoretical field of photography. Common in the discourse claiming a loss of photography's indexicality at the hands of its digital doppelgänger is an assumption that the index inherent to the photographic image is a self-enclosed entity, an object by and in itself. Indexicality is not typically conceived as a specific cultural construct (which it is), but rather as a quality that is seemingly natural and inherent for the photographic medium. It is essentially regarded as its ontological feature. It is seen as an intrinsic aspect of the medium's operations, only secondarily related to the culture that enables it to function. This perspective helps explain the discursive construction of photography's demise with the proliferation of digital technologies. If we define indexicality as the quality that fundamentally constitutes and defines the medium, losing something so essential may indeed signify photography's end.

Peirce's original conception of the index is quite different from this understanding of photographic indexicality, conventionally espoused in photography and film studies. It is not confined to direct causality or material continuity, which are commonly attributed to the index in photography and film theory. Instead, it is fluidly referential and significantly empowered by imagination.[159] These aspects make it relevant for networked and dynamic meaning-making in contemporary photographic practices.

The index became a specific and self-contained concept in the fields of photography and film theory throughout the latter half of the 20th century. The discourse routinely paid homage to Peirce and his semiotic framework. Quotations in this literature routinely cited the same select passages from Peirce describing the "original moment" of photographic indexicality. These quotations usually did not consider this passage context; Peirce seemingly functions as a support for the causal-material interpretation of the index. For example, consider the following well-known quote:

> Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to

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159 The case of the importance of imagination for the conception of indexicality is argued in Tsang, *Semiotics and Documentary Film*.

correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.[160]

What often remains unaddressed, however, is the crucial indicative aspect and the roles of "collateral knowledge" and imagination. There are compelling reasons to believe that for Peirce the indicative feature of the indexical sign is its essential characteristic, rather than any kind of narrow causality or material contiguity. For instance, Peirce emphasized that both the pointing finger and the words "this" and "that" are the most representative examples of how indexical signs work. In "New Elements" (held by Peirce scholar Max H. Fisch to be the best statement of his semiotic theory),[161] he wrote: "A pure index simply forces attention to the object with which it reacts".[162] This was reiterated in other writings: "A sign which denotes a thing by forcing it upon the attention is called an index".[163] In "On the Algebra of Logic", Peirce made an emphatic point: "The index asserts nothing; it only says 'There!'"[164]

Index for Peirce was indicative of its object. It is referential. The referential quality is further underscored by Peirce's alternative naming of indices as "indications". Notably, Peirce never seemed to explicitly use the term "causal" when discussing indexical signs. This contrasts with the characterization of photographic images in theoretical literature, where indexicality is typically described in strict causal terms. For instance, in *Reading Photographs*, Richard Salkeld argued rather characteristically: "Photographs function as indexical signifiers in that they are produced by the effects of light on a light-sensitive material. The image in a photograph has a direct causal link with the scene that existed in front of the camera at the moment of exposure".[165] This view was likewise present in *Rethinking Photography*, by Peter Smith and Carolyn Lefley, where indices were plainly defined as signs "which have a causal relation with their objects".[166]

In the traditional debate on the concept of the index in photography theory, many of Peirce's original nuances and the flexibility of the term often remained overlooked.

160 Charles Peirce, *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*, eds. Nathan Houser et al. 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992-1998), 2: 5-6.

161 Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 2: 300.

162 Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 2: 306.

163 Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. Paul Weiss & Charles Hartshorne. 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), 3: 434.

164 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 3: 361.

165 Richard Salkeld, *Reading Photographs: An Introduction to the Theory and Meaning of Images* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 52.

166 Peter Smith and Carolyn Lefley, *Rethinking Photography: Histories, Theories and Education* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 175.

This debate not infrequently categorized photography into the binary opposition of "indexical photography" and "non-indexical" photography, a distinction that became particularly pronounced during discussions about the impact of digital technology. This tendency to categorize leaves behind the nuances, contextuality, and developmental aspects that are crucial features of Peirce's semiotics. Furthermore, this essentialist view inherent in the debate over indexical versus non-indexical photography contradicts Peirce's philosophy, which is inherently flexible. As he wrote, "It would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of indexical quality." Consequently, signs, including analogue or digital photographs, rarely (if ever) fit neatly into purely indexical or non-indexical categories.

Another issue within the use of the concept of the index in photography studies pertains to the evolving nature of Peirce's philosophy. It seldom, if ever, is acknowledged in photography or film theory. The indexical signification and Peircean semiotics are habitually presented as fixed entities. However, an examination of Peirce's philosophical studies and his extensive writings suggests the opposite. Peirce's ideas underwent significant rethinking and re-modelling. Early Peirce is quite different from, and sometimes even refuted by the late Peirce. Many Peirce scholars in the field of philosophy therefore distinguish his mature semiotics is from his early semiotics. For instance, Christopher Hookway argues that "bifurcation into 'early and late' Peirce is the most important chronological division for the understanding of his thought."[167] Philosopher T. L. Short goes even further. While agreeing that Peirce's "mature semeiotic is different in conception from his early semeiotic", Short contends that "prevailing interpretations of Peirce's semeiotic have resulted from inattention to, or in some cases from heroic denial of, contradictions among writings of different dates".[168] Thus an analysis of indexicality would benefit from clearer and more specific reference to which Peircean index is being discussed; for, as Hookway and Short rightly note, early semiotics are in some important aspects different from late semiotics.[169] Indeed, some well-known critiques of Peirce's thought—including expositions by Jacques Derrida and Umberto Eco written in 1960s and 70s and still widely read today—appear primarily engaged with Peirce's early views, which he later revised considerably.

Yet another aspect often overlooked when simplifying Peirce's semiotic theory for application in visual theory studies is the role of "collateral knowledge". Consider the

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167   Christopher Hookway, *Peirce* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985).
168   T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27.
169   Both Hookway and, particularly, Short argue that in his later writings, composed between 1895 and 1908, Peirce presented the most refined version of his sign theory. During these later years, he introduced adjustments and novel insights into his semiotic framework.

above well-known quote once again. Peirce asserts that photographs are instructive *because* of our prior knowledge of how they are created, where they were "physically forced" to correspond to the objects they depict. It is this awareness of the photographic process that leads us to consider them within the triad of semiotic signs. A deeper examination of Peirce's extensive body of work reveals his keen awareness of the role of cultural contexts in shaping our understanding of signs, including photographic images. He also emphasised the value of experiences (in such contexts) for conceiving signs as indexical or otherwise. As Tsang rightfully points out, Peirce's semiotics should be understood as "thoroughly embodied because it is experiential and experimental". That is, "meaning is connected to *lived experience* rather than through a recourse to some kind of invisible abstract code" (emphasis added).[170]

Peirce's point was that not only our knowledge—which encompasses both the objects depicted in photographs and the mechanical processes behind photography—contributes to the contextual interpretation of photographs as indexical signs. This interpretation is also compounded by the messiness of real-world encounters and situations. Informed by his specific personal experience with photometric research and measurements,[171] Peirce did not view scientific instruments (including the photographic camera) as infallible; nor did he hold the photographic medium to be transparent. Peirce perceived the camera as a thoroughly conditional apparatus operating within a society that reads and interprets its outcomes.[172] By emphasizing that instruments are not neutral carriers of information and the importance of prior knowledge, Peirce shifted some of the emphasis from photography itself to the reception of it, making interpreters and the act of interpretation significant in understanding the documenting power of photography. He wrote at a time when the theoretical understanding of photography was still evolving. While many of his contemporaries saw photographs as, first and foremost, automatic documentation, Peirce distinguished them from being just a "mirror with a memory" (as Oliver Wendell Holmes had famously put it).[173] Instead, he underscored the conditions that enable photographs to occasionally

170   Tsang, *Semiotics and Documentary Film*, 13.

171   Between 1872 and 1875, while at the Harvard Observatory, Peirce conducted extensive calculations on the luminosity of distant stars. This work led to the publication of his only book during his lifetime, titled *Photometric Researches*, in 1878.

172   See Aud Sissel Hoel, "Measuring the Heavens: Charles S. Peirce and Astronomical Photography", *History of Photography* 40, no. 1 (2016), 64-65.

173   Oliver Wendell Holmes, interestingly, was a member of the inner circle of friends of Peirce's father Benjamin Peirce and knew Charles. Also see "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" (1859), in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 74.

serve as such. What Peirce suggested is that the nature of knowledge-forming within formalized and systematic practices such as photography is complex and dynamic, with prior knowledge playing a crucial role in how photographic images are received.

As this brief discussion illustrates, Peirce's concept of the index is inherently complex and flexible. His understanding was neither rigid nor monolithic, but evolved over time. Taken in its final form and with considerable care for its nuances, it offers a capable conceptual tool for exploring present day photography. It involves the activation of imagination, recognition of "collateral knowledge" and embodied lived-experiences, all of which are actively relied upon in the operation of contemporary photography, especially regarding meaning-making, as discussions in the following chapters will illustrate. These aspects can be mobilized in discussions of cultural conditionalities and specificities of networked image making.

1.3 Networked Photography and Algorithmic Computation

1.3.1 From Digital towards Networked

In the second part of the 2000s and the early 2010s, important technological and social developments took place that have radically altered ways photographic images circulate, function, and are viewed. The adoption of 4G mobile network technologies globally and in the Baltic states, ongoing development of cell phone cameras, and the emergence of various platforms (e.g. Tumblr, Instagram, and Snapchat, as well as Google image search) profoundly impacted the photographic landscape. Networked culture is a milieu where everyday communication is inter-connected via mobile networks and supported by handheld computer technologies; it affords significant attention to the lives of images and their functioning. Photography-in-the-network has established itself as an integral part of individual and collective contemporary human life—forming our cultural identities, marking our daily interactions, supporting or even making the news-cycles. In this, yet another transformation of photography, network technologies play a pivotal role, providing new channels for viewing, circulating, receiving, and sharing photographic content.

This watershed has further challenged vestiges of analogue photography that still endure in our culture: namely, the belief in the straightforwardly objective character of the photographic image, and emphasis on its referentiality and the originary moment of its inception. Today, photography is merely one possible technological vantage point for image-making, a connected node in the shifting ocean of

networked data. Even though this circumstance may be conceived as the medium's loss of a certain traditional privileged position, the new situation has opened at least as many doors as it closed, and proved fruitful both for artistic, curatorial, and research-theoretical interests. New inquiries seem to have emerged in visual and photography theories that have replaced the emphasis on photographic malleability and untrustworthiness that have so vividly characterised the digital debates. Today photography-as-practice comes to the fore, functioning in complex and multidimensional ways that suggest a new set of questions to replace the ontological and epistemic worries prevalent in the 1990s.

Given the ongoing dynamic relevance of photographic culture and the ability of its practitioners to continually and meaningfully reflect within their practice the changing social and cultural landscapes from multiple angles, it can be concluded that photography has not undergone a "death" (contrary to scepticism expressed in the digital break). Rather, it has undergone a transformation: photography is not the same as it was through much of the 20th century, and it continues to evolve. What the term "photography" can encompass today is radically enlarged compared to two decades ago, a transformation than can be attributed to the emergence and the social and cultural prominence of the network. Empowered by various technologies, photography today functions as part of an enlarged and ever-enlarging social and cultural sphere, including day-to-day communications in which almost all of us take part. Contemporary photography can be hardly discussed in a vacuum, without recourse to sociotechnical protocols that have impacted its existence throughout the last 20-or-so years.

This study undertakes to shed light through critical analysis on particular tendencies—specifically, the expansion of meaning-making and intermedial inclinations—which are directly related to the developments of photography-in-the-network, or, networked photography. Both of the components under consideration—photography in its many guises and forms, and the network in its complexity—should be analysed in dialogue with each other, perhaps even polyphonically. Certainly, traditional photography-making still has a place in today's plural world, yet particular characteristics are evident in present-day photographic work that are themselves part of the larger structures of contemporaneity. In addition to the two major tendencies of the networked expansion of meaning-making and intermediality, two additional specific propensities can be noted in relation to contemporary art photography. The first is a conscious relationship between a practitioner and informational networked technologies. This entails some reaction towards conditions of image circulation, usually resulting in some reflection of technological protocols and the image's networked state

within a given work.[174] The second is a certain "distancing" from the theoretical issues and problems that were prominent in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus current photography is created (often as part of larger "systems", on which see more below in Chapter 4) without any real doubt with respect to its right to exist. It is employed rather practically, as one tool to raise questions and explore them artistically. Works are made in essence believing in the initial significance and worthiness of creativity, with less interest in the medium's specific theoretical problematics.

1.3.2 Contemplating Abundance: The Medium of the Everyday

Today photography is omnipresent in everyday life. The digital has opened axes through which networked-enabled photography has entered into our quotidian lives to a significantly greater extent than its analogue counterpart. While analogue means of visual reproduction were an important node of mass media communications (e.g. newsprints, TV, films) and personal memory archive-building (e.g. personal photographic albums), through social media today photography operates as a foundational part of our day-to-day interpersonal communication, be it for professional or personal activities. The networked photographic image, and its establishment as an integral part of the everyday, constitute a by-product of a historical convergence between two technologies: (portable) personal computers with network capacity, and the digital image.[175] The network has radically enhanced the digital image's communicative potential. Whereas in the 1990s and beginning of 2000s the sharing of digital files (photographs included) with a slow (e.g. dial-up) Internet connection and a small file size capacity was rather time-consuming and tedious, today it seems comparatively almost effortless from a technological and social perspective. We all too easily communicate in images today: posting photographs, reacting to them with filters, emojis, emoticons, words, or other images has become a mundane habit.

Since 2010, there has been a growing critical consensus that the developing sociotechnical assemblages are leading towards a novel situation, where an avalanche of images are being circulated consumed and used each day. This new condition has been described as ubiquitous photography.[176] This interest in the quantitative

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174 For instance, Šerpytytė's work "2 Seconds of Colour" (2015) hinges on a technological specificity that affects its meaning: algorithmic protocols regulating the loading of images on Google image search.

175 See Nancy A. Van House, "Personal photography, digital technologies and the uses of the visual", *Visual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2011).

176 Also see Sarah Kember, "Ambient Intelligent Photography", in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture: Second edition,* ed. Martin Lister (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

change of image-production and consumption within the sphere of the everyday runs parallel to, and compliments the theoretical study of, photography-in-the-network as a broad cultural, sociotechnical, and aesthetic phenomenon. One of the key early theoretical attempts to understand and conceptualise the abundance and proliferation is Martin Hand's *Ubiquitous Photography* (2012). As Hand pointed out, a significant cultural shift occurred when a bulk of photographic practices transitioned from a domain of preservation (archiving) to communication. This is not merely a quantitative step, but also qualitatively new stage in the development of the medium. Photography, Hand noted, operates mainly within the field of everyday interexchange. This was enabled by a series of technological breakthroughs, some of which have been recounted above.

> Alongside the convergence of the camera and the computer, there is an emerging interplay between the digital camera and the phone, smartphone and cameraphones […]. These devices in turn enable and are enabled by new visual rhetorics and techniques, all of which are producing a novel landscape of screens and images. […] [D]igital imaging has shifted from a professional or specialized process to a routine and unavoidable aspect of everyday life.[177]

This "novel landscape of screens and images" has itself become a thematic focus of artistic interest, globally and on a more regional level.[178] This interest is partly driven by the recognition of changes to photography's status and its sphere of functionality. As theorist Mette Sandbye noted in 2012: "Today photography is much more a social everyday activity than a memory-embalming activity, creating presence, relational situations, and communication as well as new affective involvements between bodies and the new photographic, media-convergent technologies such as the mobile phone".[179] These "new affective involvements" created a fertile ground for artistic interpretation and curatorial inquiries, including my own.[180]

177 Martin Hand, *Ubiquitous Photography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 3.
178 Kristina Õllek's work, in particular "Distorted Hands" (2017) and "Exhibit Onscroll" (together with Kert Viiart, 2017), Annija Muižule's "Joyful Businessmen Having Fun in the Office" (2019), and Reinis Lismanis' "Trial and Error" (2017), amongst others, are worth mentioning in this respect. My own photographic project and publication *Smoke Screen* (2015) has explored what I termed "the conditions of digital screenship".
179 Mette Sandbye, "It has not been – it *is*. The signaletic transformation of photography", *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 4 (2012): 2.
180 "This is It/Now", a group exhibition I co-curated with Max Marshall in 2015, took place exclusively via Snapchat mobile application with a curatorial interest to both extend boundaries of

Photography's ubiquity also meant that it has been employed in various contexts in large numbers. Networked situations are particularly noteworthy for their endless potential for re-embeddability: various blogs in the 2010s, like Tumblr, have offered easy ways for users to upload and share images as part of their curated "streams", but also, equally accessibly, to re-post and reuse an image uploaded by someone else.[181] This has emphasised an increasingly chaotic circulation of photographs online, while the nearly constant reshuffling of viewing contexts (in the form of various developing streams an image may appear on at the same time) and situations (being increasingly viewed on peripatetic mobile devices) meant photographs were less stable or anchored by their initial range of meaning. The potential for hybrid and intermedial instances involving photography was also reflected in the expanded field of studies which analysed photography's transformation in the 2010s. A number of these studies did not issue from photography departments or fields of traditional photography theory. For instance, Hand worked in a sociology department focusing on cultural sociology, while Nancy A. Van House's main area of research was information management and systems. Although photography theory has regularly been taken up in studies by scholars from various disciplines, this relatively recent interest, seems to be directly related to the concern for networked image protocols, and further suggest that the networked image has a particular relevance for intermedial crossovers and inter- and transdisciplinary research. These interdisciplinary engagements represent noteworthy efforts to contribute to the reformulation of the cultural-theoretical positioning of photography: transitioning it from a relatively fixed medium of mechanically reproducible (objective) images to one increasingly operating within a networked sphere of relations and interactions.

Social media itself—its current operation inseparable from the networked image—has afforded photography new functional possibilities. Social media supports certain logic that privileges sharing of (a constructed) self through imagery. As Nathan Jurgenson writes: "Life is experienced as increasingly documentable, and perhaps also experienced in *the service of* its documentation, always with the newly

exhibiting spaces and reflect on that change, as well as touch on the dynamic definitions of the networked image more broadly. It ran for 6 weeks, featuring a different artist each week. Per the restrictions of Snapchat then, the images posted, both still and moving, were viewable by the followers of "This is It/Now" account for 24 hours.

181 In 2013-2014, I co-curated, again with Max Marshall, two iterations of "Blog Re-blog" – a photographic exhibition involving 200 artists that specifically reflected the post-curatorial mode of online image distribution. The first was presented at Austin Center for Photography, while the second took place at Signal gallery, NY.

accessible audience in mind".[182] This trend has been memorably exploited by Argentinian artist Amalia Ulman, whose 2014 project "Excellences & Perfections" took place on Instagram and Facebook as a specific construction of a female identity-to-be-viewed. Her scripted online semi-fictional performance, which took place over several months, was followed by a live audience. The performance was believable precisely because the photos Ulman posted were like so many other images daily uploaded on social media. Hers were amateur-style snapshots of a life full of aspiration and existential struggle. The abundance of such photography masked Ulman's artistic infiltration, providing a camouflage-like backdrop to play with the logic of photography on social media.

More regionally, Estonian photographic artist Reimo Võsa-Tangsoo (b. 1976) has explored the recognisability of certain image-types from a different angle in his exhibition "Immediate Gratification" (2017). Four well-known media images (some recognisable only in the local context, such as a documentary photograph from the Estonian presidential inauguration) were exhibited. The exhibition format was atypical: there were no visual images as such in the show. Instead, the viewer encountered four grey speakers suspended from the ceiling above their head. From each speaker issued an oral description of the contents of one of these images, in the tradition of ekphrasis. The installation conveyed the point that despite the continuing visual onslaught, certain stand-out images can be recognised without being seen *per se*. In another sense, however, the artist's choices seemed to gesture to the superfluousness of yet more copies of images in an already visually over-polluted environment, when descriptions suffice. The work simultaneously pointed to the multitude of images and the continuing hold of certain specific examples on our collective imagination.

On the theoretical front, the ever-increasing abundance of the photographic image has been further scrutinized in a volume *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image* (2021), edited by Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka. Recognizing that "ours is an age of image excess",[183] the editors argue that the surge in image production and editing, including advancements in AI, challenges traditional notions of photography. In an essay within the volume, Michelle Henning argues that the very social (media) environments wherein art photographs also function today,

182   Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 12, original emphasis.

183   Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka, "Introduction: On the Scale, Quantity and Measure of Images", in *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, eds. Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 11.

can themselves be considered hybrid, as they contain written word, sounds, picture language (emoji), and images of all kinds.[184] She contends that the interaction with images in this mediated environment can be sensual not in a straightforward way, and even emotional, concluding that "photography is flourishing as part of the rich and complex practices of human sociability".[185] While her argument does not extend to specific art environments, one could see how that would be applicable as well, as viewers today often interact with photography presented as part of an exhibition "system", where this encounter can be, and sometimes is encouraged to be, vividly sensual and bodily.

1.3.3 Where We are Now: Complexities of the Networked Photographic Image

Currently, the digital photographic image, as it was recognized in the 1990s and early 2000s, has largely evolved into its networked counterpart. This new iteration could be seen as an augmented mutation, leveraging digital code and capabilities to harness multidimensional, dynamic networked potentials. As noted by Ingrid Hoelzl and Remi Marie in 2015, "the photographic paradigm is augmented with hitherto unprecedented possibilities of multi-vision, tele-vision, navigability and real-time adaptivity".[186] These advancements, alongside broader sociotechnological progress in network culture, have significantly reshaped the landscape for image creation and dissemination compared to just two decades ago. The network also introduces a set of philosophical inquiries, aesthetic terminology, and practical concepts distinct from those associated with the digital image. Dewdney elaborates on this transition:

> In the first period of digitisation, across the late 1980s and 1990s, the digital image was initially understood in the analogue mode, as a static electronic version of the photographic image. But over the last two decades, through increased capacity of computing and scale of data, the new default of the image is its position in the processual relays of the network of networked computers. This change from digital to networked image has occurred because

184 Michelle Henning, "Feeling Photos: Photography, Picture Language and Mood Capture", in *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, eds. Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 84.

185 Henning, "Feeling Photos", 92.

186 Ingrid Hoelzl and Remi Marie, *Softimage: Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2015), 96.

[…] the backend of computing, the illegible computer layer, has developed an infrastructure on an industrial scale, serving an information economy.[187]

Sluis recently summarized this change, stating: "Today the networked image … has become the dominant paradigm of photographic culture".[188] This "paradigm shift" adds layers of complexity to discussions about the photographic image.[189] On one hand, photographs continue to act as representations of the visible world. We immediately recognize what we see when presented with documentary photographs or news footage. This seeming continuation with the past links present-day imaging processes with a historical lineage of mechanical image technologies. Yet, as widely recognized by photography theorists today, this supposed transparency hides photography's manifold complexities.

Perhaps the most significant departure lies in the fact that the vast majority of photographs we encounter (on laptops, TV screens, mobile phones, or tablets) are certain actualizations of data. Put differently, data assumes a specific configuration for us to process it. However, much data bypasses this visualization process entirely, and is instead transmitted by machines to be interpreted by other machines. And machines, as artist Harun Farocki put it, do not really need to *see* the images they process: "For the computer, the image in the computer is enough".[190] This means that while photographs are made visible *for us* following protocols of visibility that are historically enshrined and human-centric, there are plenty of images in data streams that achieve their desired function without ever being made visible. A security camera, for example, may transmit its data to be verified and read by an AI-empowered computer, yet it is never made into a visual as we understand it. It is an image without ever being an image. More precisely, it is an image-*potentiality* without ever becoming an image-*actuality*.

This crucial paradox underpins all attempts to engage critically with the status of networked photography. It also presents significant challenges in distinguishing new media functionalities from those of their antecedents. Old cultural forms (cinema, television, radio, etc.) are still experienced as such, but they are often *simulated* through a programmable interface, no longer relying on their mechanical analogue origins.

187 Andrew Dewdney, "The Politics of the Networked Image: Representation and Reproduction", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 23.

188 Katrina Sluis, "The Networked Image after Web 2.0: Flicks and the 'Real-World' Photography of the Dataset", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 42.

189 Dewdney, "The Politics of the Networked Image", 30.

190 Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images", trans. Brian Poole, *Public*, no. 29 (2004): 21.

Screenings of old films or videos in their original format, or an insistence by artists to show their moving artworks by certain means only, as, for instance, Estonian visual artist Paul Kuimet does with his 16mm film projections, are rightfully celebrated,[191] but partly this celebrations derives from the fact that this is a rarity today. Most re-creations of historical media are simulations enacted in a networked interface.

This and other functionalities afforded by the recent advancements situate images for a novel role. According to Hoelzl and Marie:

> The image is no longer a passive and fixed representational form, but is active and multiplatform, endowed with a signaletic temporality that is not only the result of digital screening (and compression),   but also of transfer across digital networks […] It is no longer a stable representation of the world, but a programmable view of a database that is updated in real-time. It no longer functions as a (political and iconic) representation, but plays a vital role in synchronic data-to-data relationships. The image is not only part of a programme, but also contains its own 'operation code': it is a programme in itself.[192]

This shift also means that part of the complexity in understanding and discussing photography today relates to the question of how to unpack critically the processing part, or the "operation code", of the data-to-image transformation. Since "images are data, and all imaging is, knowingly or not, an act of data processing",[193] this operation is crucial to today's photography. Yet the computational part of image functionality is not readily accessible, masked behind user-friendly interfaces that conceal the black-box intricate nature of its inner dealings. As Toister explains: "If, on a superficial level, the façade of the image seems to materialize as it always did, on a deeper, still black-boxed,

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191   One of such instances was an accompanying screening programme of a centenary exhibition dedicated to Jonas Mekas' life and work, "Jonas Mekas and the New York Avant-Garde" (curated by Inesa Pavlovskaitė-Brašiškė and Lukas Brašiškis, at the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, 2021 11 20 - 2022 02 26), which contained a rare screening of *Galaxie* (1966) – a film by American experimental filmmaker Gregory Markopoulos that can only be shown in its original, non-digitized, form – a fact that was readily publicized (Monika Bertašiūtė-Čiužienė, "Vilniuje – kol kas didžiausia J.Meko retrospektyva Lietuvoje: ją atidarė sūnus, atvykęs iš Niujorko", *15min*, 2021 11 26, https://www.15min.lt/kultura/naujiena/kinas/vilniuje-kol-kas-didziausia-j-meko-retros-pektyva-lietuvoje-ja-atidare-sunus-atvykes-is-niujorko-4-1604174 (accessed 15 March, 2023).
192   Hoelzl and Remi Marie, *Softimage*, 4.
193   Dewdney, "The Politics of the Networked Image", 29.

level images partake in new operations".[194] This is echoed by Sluis: "When materialised in the web browser, the networked image adopts the comforting rhetoric and reassuring continuity of photographic representation, whilst generating new topologies via its computational back end".[195] This contradiction is further augmented and complicated by AI-empowered algorithms.

1.3.4 Algorithmic Functionality: A Brief Consideration

Here I would like to briefly consider the most recent applications of algorithmic programming to image-making. Algorithmic functionality has been a rapidly developing phenomenon lately, applied across a wide range of fields and applications, including those of image-making, processing and editing. While its acceleration and internal complexity certainly doesn't curtail being employed by artists, curators, or curious users (as evidenced, for instance, by a widespread usage of Dall-E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion generative programs), a comprehensive theory dealing with algorithmic functionality from the perspective of visual studies is so far lacking.[196] Today algorithmic photography largely remains a critically uncharted territory. This situation is compounded by the fact that, as Toister has noted, "many imaging processes nowadays do not yield artworks in any traditional sense, and rarely leave behind any material artefact".[197] This means that the tools traditionally offered by a field like photography theory does not fully apply in many of such instances. Yet, there are still some key characteristics that can be noted with regards to algorithmic functionality and some developing thoughts to be made on its artistic potential with respect to photography as a tool to engage critically with the world.

Firstly, it can be said that if we understand the algorithm as a set of rules that need to be followed in solving a certain problem (as the Oxford Dictionary defines it),[198] then it may be reasonably argued that it is not entirely a new process for photography. There are some historical antecedents of algorithmic or algorithmic-like sequences developed to solve certain problems that were historically attached to the medium.

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194 Yanai Toister, "Latent Digital", *Journal of Visual Practice*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2020), 133.

195 Sluis, "The Networked Image after Web 2.0", 41.

196 Yanai Toister, "Programming the beautiful", *Digital Creativity*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2020), 223.

197 Toister, "Programming the beautiful", 223.

198 Algorithm is "a set of rules that must be followed when solving a particular problem". *Oxford Learners Dictionaries*, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/algorithm (accessed 15 March, 2023).

Toister considers the well-known motion studies by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, or the "Zone System", a darkroom instruction-based procedure practiced by Ansel Adams, to be part of this legacy.[199]

Yet, the algorithmic functionalities we apply to images today are also decidedly different in many respects. They are inherently tied to networks, and the ever-developing data-sets on which they are trained. The algorithms are not, as was the case of Adam's "Zone System" or Marey's or Muybridge's experiments, carried out by the users themselves in such a way that every step is defined and carefully executed. Today most users just click the button as the solution to the problem they define, while the exact execution and the "set of rules" are obscured by the algorithms. Which leads to the second point, that the current crop of AI-empowered algorithms are part of the black-boxing of networked data processing. A processing which also includes images in networks, as was already mentioned, and which further intensifies the paradox describe above: the tension between the front-end visual part of the image (which seems conventional) and the back-end system that supports it (which is nothing but conventional).

Thirdly, while front-end systems often provides an illusion of a large degree of control, operations are increasingly relegated to software algorithms unbeknownst to users. As Hoelzl remarked: "an image on a screen maintains the optical illusion of the user's control, agency, oversight and sovereignty – while these have been delegated … to software agents ranging from simple autocomplete functions in webforms to more complex digital assistants."[200] This contradictive state has been especially acute for photography, where, for instance, cell phone images are algorithmically enhanced to appear better on-screens.[201] Screens are increasingly programmed in a way that automatically portrays images in vivid colours and sharp display, thus often causing a disappointment for users who decide to print these them in any larger format. This feature only further attunes today's images to the networked milieu. This is but one way how agency today is shifted from photography users to the software they use.[202]

Fourthly and lastly, as has been well articulated since at least John Berger, no "way of seeing" the world is a fully transparent act.[203] Indeed, as Sze Tsung Leong states,

199 Toister, "Latent Digital", 132.
200 Ingrid Hoelzl, "Image-Transaction", *Parallax*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2020), 25.
201 I discussed this aspect with Reinis Lismanis in preparation for a text analysing his work. It is touched upon in "The Creative Resistance of Everyday" in Lismanis, *Trial and Error* (Riga: Skinnerboox, 2019).
202 Image editing and enhancement tools enriched with algorithmic functionality as well as apps offering "automatic curation" for one's feed or database are other examples.
203 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972).

"vision is made up not only of individuals viewing, but also of societies and cultures looking and forming how and what we see".[204] Likewise, there is an underlying logic in how algorithmic AI models are trained to "see" the world and recreate its images. As Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen write: "Despite the common mythos that AI and the data it draws on are objectively and scientifically classifying the world, everywhere there is politics, ideology, prejudices, and all of the subjective stuff of history".[205] Choices are made in the very process of training an AI algorithm, such as which images to include or not include in certain datasets, how to label them, which classificators to use, how to react to errors, etc. These choices are not neutral, in fact they involve subjective judgments and can even contain or reveal prejudices. It would be one thing if major companies developing AI would be willing to disclose these or at least acknowledge the arbitrary decisions involved in their technologies. Unfortunately, as the following section details, these acknowledgements usually arrive after a fact – in the wake of damage-control of a certain situation when an AI application has failed.

1.3.5 Subjectivities in Machine Learning and Computer Vision

While PR teams, tasked with public image-formation and attracting private or governmental funding, regularly imbue AI with an air of all-encompassing objectivity, machine learning and computer vision are inherently subjective. This subjectivity is rooted in the intrinsically human character of the datasets with which they are trained. One manifestation of this is when an algorithm gives a different solution to the same problem. This may occur because the algorithm has further developed, or the set of data it uses has expanded. This kind of subjectivity was acutely experienced personally, through the making of my own artistic project "A man with dark hair and the sunset in the background" (2017-2020), which employed AI-empowered visual recognition software Azure, developed by Microsoft, to recognize and provide captions for personal photographs.[206] Whilst re-running the tests with the same images a year or two later, I noticed that in many instances the results were different, the difference varying from

204 Sze Tsung Leong, "A Picture You Already Know", in *Words Without Pictures*, ed. Alex Klein (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2009), 261.

205 Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, "Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets", *Excavating AI*, 2019 09 19, https://excavating.ai/ (accessed 17 March, 2023).

206 For more on the project, see Duncan Wooldridge "Paulius Petraitis: 'A man with dark hair and a sunset in the background'", *Blok magazine*, 2021 01 12, https://blokmagazine.com/paulius-petraitis-a-man-with-dark-hair-and-a-sunset-in-the-background/ (accessed 16 March, 2023).

a slight change in wording or the confidence number (a mathematical expression of the confidence with which the program assigns the reading to a specific image) to a completely different result in some cases.[207] For instance, "a teddy bear sitting on a rock" (confidence: 0.246483684) became "a pile of rocks" (confidence: 0.925247252); or "a cat sitting on top of a building" (confidence: 0.342401266) turned into "a motorcycle parked on the side of a building" (confidence: 0.327546149). It was notable that despite the temporal advancement of the algorithm, the results were hardly any more accurate. Lewis Bush, reviewing the project's book, pointed out that while the expectation would be of "advancements and improvement, both in the system's estimation of what the image shows, and also in its 'confidence' in its own judgement", the changes "prove[d] to be uneven, and in some cases even a backwards step".[208]

My project was specifically focused on addressing the disparities between the visual content (as recognisable by us) and its interpretation by machines. Yet even such a relatively small-scale art project can attest to and point to larger issues at stake with the rise of AI software. Despite their rapid and seemingly unstoppable integration into our daily existence, AI applications are themselves problematic, even as they are promoted as convenient and all-encompassing solutions "to solve today's challenges and create the future".[209] Expressing subjectivity through variable interpretations is much less of an issue, as the poetic and slightly frivolous nature of my project can attest, than when it manifests through certain social prejudices. Perhaps most poignantly, it is the "perpetuation of racist and sexist stereotypes", which are done "through problematic systems of classification and data curation".[210]

A well-known example involves Google Photos, an application that automatically tags images using Google's own artificial intelligence software. In 2015, it labelled a selfie photograph of a black couple as "gorillas" (Fig. 6). The subsequent scandal forced the company to issue a public apology. However, as James Bridle has rightly emphasized, "Technology companies and others dabbling in AI are quick to retract their claims whenever they produce ethical conflicts, despite their own responsibility for inflating

207 Both versions of the captions can be seen in the project's publication *A man with dark hair and a sunset in the background* (Vilnius: Lugemik and Six chairs books, 2020).

208 Lewis Bush, "Through a Network Darkly: Paulius Petraitis's *A man with dark hair and a sunset in the background*", *C4 journal*, 2021 03 23, https://c4journal.com/through-a-network-darkly-paulius-petraitiss-a-man-with-dark-hair-and-a-sunset-in-the-background/ (accessed 17 March, 2023).

209 Taken from Microsoft Azure description. Similar discourse is present in the presentation of other commercial AI, such as IBM's Watson.

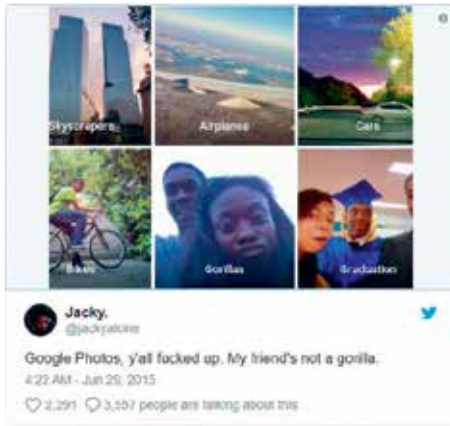210 Sluis, "The Networked Image after Web 2.0", 42.

Figure 6. Google Photos app mistakenly labelling black couple as "Gorrilas", screenshot, 2015.

expectations".[211] Even more significantly, the "solution" Google implemented was not to train the algorithm to prevent similar errors in the future, but rather to remove the tags "gorillas", "chimp", "chimpanzee", and "monkey" altogether as possible denominators its software could use. Thus, instead of finding a sustainable solution to improve its algorithm, Google simply forcefully blocked it from repeating the same mistake again.[212]This is just one example whose its high-profile nature is largely due to the publicity it received, but one that is symptomatic of the highly subjective nature of all AIs. As Geoff Cox has stated in relation to computer vision, "forms of privilege are reproduced and naturalised through new ways of seeing".[213] As machine intelligence models continue to favour ever-expanding data sets, which themselves are arbitrary and non-representative, as shown in Sluis' research,[214] this situation does not seem likely to change in the near future, despite the inflated future-oriented rhetoric from major companies marketing these technologies.

The mis-recognition by the AI software that tags Google Photos eventually points to its dataset. While not all datasets are transparent for public analysis, it can be reasonably assumed that a certain racial bias was inherent in the images with which the software was trained.[215] The AI needed to "learn" what a human is, which was done by feeding it tens if not hundreds of thousands of photos labelled as such. If the majority of these photos featured white males from a specific age group, the tool became much better at recognizing this group as humans, compared to various minorities whose images are underrepresented in the training data. The company's response to restrict

211 James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018), 141.
212 This, despite the fact that Google is considered by many a forerunner in commercial AI based on the basis of its long-standing interest and scale of investment. For more on Google's championing of the field of AI, see Chapter 6 in Bridle, *New Dark Age*.
213 Geoff Cox, "Ways of Machine Seeing as a Problem of Invisual Literacy", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 111.
214 See Sluis, "The Networked Image after Web 2.0".
215 For a discussion how computational machines reveal systematic inequalities within today's technological workforce, see Bridle, *New Dark Age*.

the algorithm by barring it from certain tags altogether seems like a quick cover-up to address its lack of inclusivity in setting up its data.

While major companies marketing commercial AI software have promised convenience, work optimization, and creative problem-solving, there is a growing awareness that AI models need to evolve beyond quick fixes like the one employed by Google. Artist and technologist James Bridle, who has extensively engaged with machine learning and visual recognition through his interdisciplinary practice, has been critical of the prevailing discourse surrounding AI capabilities. For him, the subjectivities of AI not only make it fallible but also potentially dangerous to our collective imagination. In a recent article, Bridle cited experiments with ChatGPT, introduced in 2022 by OpenAI, which is structured as a chatbot but expands on its format. He has warned against taking its generated output as meaningful knowledge, as this "risks poisoning the well of collective thought, and of our ability to think at all".[216] This threat to knowledge-formations is in addition to very real and practical reshuffling of work practices in various industries, including those working in already precarious positions within creative media industries or knowledge-producing academia.[217] As AI continues to evolve, with Safiya Umoja Noble suggesting that it "will become a major human rights issue in the twenty-first century",[218] further research on the subject may contribute to the establishment of agreed-upon regulations concerning AI roles, datasets, models, and their future applications.

1.3.6 Undecided Meaning

One important aspect left to consider is the effect networked computation had on photographic meaning. In a pioneering set of articles that shifted theoretical focus from digital discussions to those pertaining to networks, thus helping instigate the "networked image" as the new condition and centre of critical inquiry, Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis identified "undecidability" as the networked image's core feature. This is in contrast to mutability or immateriality, two characteristics that were

216 James Bridle, "The stupidity of AI", *The Guardian*, 2023 03 16, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/16/the-stupidity-of-ai-artificial-intelligence-dall-e-chatgpt (accessed 16 March, 2023).

217 See Alan Warburton, "Soft Subject: Hybrid Labour in Media Software", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).

218 Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU, 2018, 1.

routinely highlighted during the digital debates, as established earlier in this chapter. Rubinstein and Sluis's theoretical proposition not only marked a departure from digital aesthetics and discussions towards a less charted territory of the networked image, but also had potential implications in relation to photographic meaning. The meaning of a networked photographic image remains undecided as it evolves through its usage. It undergoes a continuous accumulation of data that shapes its circulation, visibility, commercial value, and cultural significance. In other words, the constantly changing and developing data cloud can never be fixed, as it is a never-ending process, which additionally opens up some critical questions about photography's future orientation.[219]

As we are moving into a future where images rendered by AI programs appear indistinguishable from more traditional photographic images, the decision part of the image is even further emphasised. If a point will be reached, as current technologies are heading, that no outer World is required as an input to generate realistic images, then the already fragile link between photographic images and the real might fracture even further. On the other hand, as Hito Steyerl has recently noted, the field of reference for the future renderings is not so much the outer world, but the digital environment which it indexes and references.[220] So renders might appear to be real meta-images, born out of the networked sphere as true natives of its ever-expanding regime of (self) referencing. The operations of meaning-making in such scenarios are likely to be even more fluid, dynamic and multifaceted. So much so, that we might end up having a situation where likenesses and representations interact creating a "flexible image of a flexible world",[221] one never truly settled and evincing a shifting state of possibilities, where each new render is possibly loud yet says nothing (at least nothing concrete) at the same time.

1.4 Concluding Remarks

The era spanning from the 1990s to the late 2000s witnesses an intense "digital debate" in studies in photography theory, driven by the profound changes introduced by

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219 For a discussion of photography's future-orientedness, see Duncan Wooldridge, *To Be Determined: Photography and the Future* (London and Milan: SPBH Editions, 2021).

220 Kate Brown, "Hito Steyerl on Why NFTs and A.I. Image Generators Are Really Just 'Onboarding Tools' for Tech Conglomerates", *Artnet*, 2023 03 10, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/these-renderings-do-not-relate-to-reality-hito-steyerl-on-the-ideologies-embedded-in-a-i-image-generators-2264692 (accessed 30 March, 2023).

221 Ingrid Hoelz and Remi Marie quoted in Warburton, "Soft Subject", 122.

digital technologies. Notably, the transition from traditional to digital photography, symbolized by the advent of the CCD and software like Adobe Photoshop, provoked urgent inquiries into the medium's ontology and its relationship with reality. Scholars, including Mitchell and Ritchin, raised concerns about the loss of photography's documentary function and its unique bond with reality. While some proclaimed the end of photography, such assertions may have reflected a desire to enclose and sanctify the medium for comprehensive analysis. Ultimately, this era marks a pivotal moment in the medium's history, highlighting the intricate interplay between technology, culture, and social relations of the photographic image.

Willis's poignant question regarding the "truth" status of digitally constituted images encapsulates the essence of the debate on the reliability of photography, a debate that was fervently engaged with during the digital turn of the 1990s and 2000s. This period marked an intense scrutiny regarding photographs' indexicality, a core principle that had historically anchored the medium's claim to truth and its documentary authority. The emergence of digital technologies posed a challenge to this narrative, introducing a dichotomy between the photochemical (indexical) and digital (potentially non-indexical) images. However, this dichotomy stands in contrast to the fluid nature of Peirce's philosophy, whereby the index is not a rigid, fixed concept, but inherently complex and adaptable. This adaptability implies imaginative openness and an acknowledgment of "collateral knowledge", where photographs serve not merely as visual evidence but as connected nodes within a larger, intertwined network of social interactions, relations, and cultural theory. The ontological inflection from traditional photography to a networked, multidimensional sphere highlights the need to reformulate the cultural-theoretical positioning of photography in a world proliferated by social media and complex exhibition systems.

As we navigate the 21st century, the notion of photography as a fixed, objective, and stable medium is fading. Networked photography, in synergy with ever-advancing technologies such as AI software, data clouds, and image modelling, has become a pervasive part of our daily lives, fostering a shift from preservation to communication. As photographs continue to represent the visible world, their apparent transparency belies the intricate complexities of their production and existence. The ongoing digital transformation means that while photographs are rendered visible to us through historically established and human-centric protocols, there is a profusion of image data that fulfils its function within the network without ever being seen. This paradigm shift indicates a move away from the emphasis on the external world to the digital environment as the primary referent. In this new domain, images are not just mimetic reproductions, but are "meta-images", native to and emerging from the networked

sphere. In such a context, the future of photographic rendering and the operations of meaning-making are anticipated to be (even) more fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted, with photographs acting as indices not just of the world as we see it, but of the complex data processes that underlie our increasingly interconnected existence.

Images have become a ubiquitous language, supporting an "image-experienced" way of life. Within this ever-expanding sea of images, photography now operates within a diverse sociotechnical landscape that challenges traditional boundaries. It thrives on intermediality and the "new affective involvements" that images bring to our interconnected world. Art, theory, and everyday existence now reflect the complexity and dynamism of networked photographic practices, underscoring the resilience and adaptability of the medium. Photography has not ended; it has metamorphosed, expanding its cultural, social, and artistic significance in ways unimagined in the analogue era. It thrives within a networked world, inviting a broader dialogue between its multifaceted forms and the intricate dynamics of our contemporary image-saturated society.

2. The Intermediality of Photography

2.1 What Notion? The Medium, Intermediality, Transmediality, and Hybridity

When analysing the multiform hybridity of present-day photography, several concepts and conceptual frameworks offer themselves as readily available. Sifting through their overlapping theoretical terrains is necessary in order to assess their respective utilities for a particular project, and to consider and clarify their entangled coexisting meanings. This chapter briefly considers some of the theoretical and historical aspects and implications of a set of related notions: medium, intermediality, transmediality, hybridity, and expanded photography. What follows is by no means a thoroughgoing analysis of these frameworks, but rather an attempt to bind separate theoretical strands together and offer a cogent and critical groundwork for the purposes of this study. These media-related concepts are here mainly discussed in relation to my research and their applicability to the issues I attempt to explore here. In other words, the aim of this section, first and foremost, is practical. It will establish a useful theoretical base through the delineation of each of the aforementioned ideas, situating and considering their practicality, applicability, and functionality in relation to this project.

Each of the above-mentioned concepts constitutes a complex theory-laden subject area in its own right. This complexity is well demonstrated by diverse academic studies, often book-length. This focused attention in the literature is, however, not reflected in a clear critical consensus: the studies diverge and can sometimes be even contradictory in their definition and understanding of their subject matter. Indeed, as Valerie Robillard has rightfully noted with regards to the notion of intermediality: "the current plethora of perspectives on 'intermediality' not only demonstrates the slipperiness of the term but also suggests that there may be more than one theoretical inroad by which to fully understand the multiplicity of intermedial operations".[222] One aspect that is shared among most recent studies on media relations is an understanding and acceptance of the blurring of the clear boundaries of the very field under discussion. As people today engage with content via a wide spectrum of media channels and across multiple platforms, media is increasingly seen as always-already partly intersecting.[223] Recent literature indicates a growing field of literature specifically dealing with media

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222 Valerie Robillard, "Beyond Definition: A Pragmatic Approach to Intermediality", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 150.

223 Lars Elleström, "Introduction", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 4.

fluidities.[224] Some recent studies, such as Melody Jue's *Wild Blue Media* (Duke University Press, 2020), are not explicitly about inter- or transmediality, but rather explore the fluid nature of media from a relatively new perspective (in the case of Jue, that of oceanic studies), offering some new insights for photography theory as well. The discussion offered here does not aim to be exhaustive; while not exactly serving as a sort of literature review, what follows maps my own quite pragmatic understanding of the above notions against recent theoretical discussions and my empirical research into contemporary Baltic art photography.

Recent years have seen a growing consensus around the position that photography is not self-sufficient: it is neither technically nor culturally independent. Instead, as Ben Burbridge writes, it "is always enmeshed within practices, platforms, contexts and discourses other than itself".[225] Interconnectedness is a precondition for all photography. Today's photography is always "expanded photography" in one way or the other. This means that when we talk about photography we already include the multiplicity of its networked relations, actors and agents of support in these discussions, whether we do so more or less consciously. These multiple links and relations are worth studying in more depth in order to better grasp the conditions of image-making today, and to explore the full complexity of contemporary photography's artistic practices. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that media-related theoretical notions have currency, both deeply historical and in present cultural and social use. These definitions are helpful in laying out the common terms of discourse. The media-relation notions above not only reflect certain ingrained beliefs about visual culture and media, but can also illuminate contemporary discussions.

2.1.1 Medium

The notion of medium is the basis for intermediality and transmediality. Lars Elleström argues that the phenomena of intermediality and intermedial relations cannot be fully understood without grasping the fundamental conditions of the medium.[226] This

224 *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (ed. Lars Elleström, 2010); *Media Encounters and Media Theories* (ed. Jürgen E. Müller, 2008); *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (eds. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, 2020); and *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism* (eds. Raphaël Pirenne and Alexander Streitberger, 2014) are but a few examples.

225 Ben Burbridge, *Photography After Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020), 16.

226 Lars Elleström, "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 13.

overview therefore begins with the notion of medium, and the photographic medium in particular. This seemingly the most stable of the notions discussed here, especially in comparison to trans- and intermedia, is, in fact, anything but simple or fixed.[227]

I take as my point of departure the understanding that a medium is necessarily always already mediating. There is nothing inherently "transparent" about it, nor can it exist in some kind of fully "neutral" state. A medium always contextualizes, translates, even mutates—in other words, mediates—while the photographic medium additionally crops, distorts, and filters. This is relevant particularly in relation to photography and its largely historical conditioning (discussed in the previous chapter) as a medium of transparent information, which supposedly "shows the world as it is".[228] No media, photography included, is fully transparent or invisible; indeed, we can think of a medium as a filter that is added between information and receiver. There are various instances and a large range of possibilities of photographic filtering, but there is never a truly neutral form of representation offered by a photographic medium.

Likewise, it would be difficult today to conceive of any media as having either some kind of pure singular essence, or definite and fixed boundaries (as Clement Greenberg attempted to do for painting in the 1940s).[229] Greenberg's championing of a purity with regards to medium specificity can be considered as a particular historical project related with abstract painting and the discarding of its dependence on language, both in narrative forms and wider theoretical and cultural ideas. A predisposition towards maintaining firm borders and barriers (especially between the visual and linguistic fields), and a more general propensity for purer forms, were characteristic of modernist thought, something which exploded with postmodernism.[230] Today we generally accept that all media functions in reaction with various cultural, theoretical, and social formations, and are, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, "mixed media".[231] Talking about photography specifically, Mitchell sees it "so riddled typically with language, as theorists from Barthes to Victor Burgin have shown, that it is hard to imagine what

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227 It should be noted that in communication and media studies, the term "media", and especially "mass media", are usually used to refer to the classical mass media, such as newspapers, television, radio, and, more recently, started to include Internet and social media as well. Here I am using medium to refer to a single medium, and media simply to denote a plural – a more accepted formulation in visual studies.

228 See *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature* (2010), ed. Scott Walden.

229 Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1986).

230 W. J. T. Mitchell, "'Ut Pictura Theoria': Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language", *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 15, no. 2, (1989): 352.

231 W. J. T. Mitchell, "There are no Visual Media", *Journal of Visual Culture,* vol. 4, no. 2 (2005): 257.

it would mean to call it a purely visual medium".[232] Today, art photography functions not only in combination with language, but is frequently intermixed with sculptural and performative elements.

It is important to state that we never encounter any medium abstractedly by itself as a category. It is always through specific works or individual instances that a medium is present to us. That is, we always encounter media as *mediating something*—be it a film, a theatre play, TV, or a sheet of paper. Even if this sheet is empty, it mediates precisely this: that it is blank, as well as other material properties we can discern (the colour of the paper, size, form, condition, etc.). Thus a medium by itself is a theoretical entity. As Irina O. Rajewsky has stated, "to speak of 'a medium' or of 'individual media' ultimately refers to a theoretical construct".[233] Therefore we must acknowledge its constructedness, and be aware how it is time-, field-, and culture-contingent. There is no "the medium" in a natural sense.

> The questions of how a medium should be defined or delimited from other media is of course always dependent on the historical and discursive contexts and the observing subject or system, taking into account technological change and relations between media within the overall media landscape at a given point in time.[234]

Despite a medium always-already being intermediary and reactive, we can still talk about the relative boundaries of various media, and understand them as in constant relation and play within a multitude of their forms. To again quote Rajewsky:

> Neither the fact that we are always dealing only with specific individual medial configurations, nor the constructedness and historicity of media conceptions, should lead us to the conclusion that we ought to cease altogether to speak of (historically transformable) medial specificities and differences, of media borders and eventually of intermedial strategies and practices.[235]

This understanding, I think, can be helpful in the current cultural situation, where media forms are in constant relation and practical dialogue with each other, yet we can

232 Mitchell, "There are no Visual Media", 260.
233 Irina O. Rajewsky, "Border Talks: The Problematic Status of Media Borders in the Current Debate about Intermediality", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 54.
234 Rajewsky, "Border Talks", 54.
235 Rajewsky, "Border Talks", 54.

still ordinarily recognize different forms. For example, we recognize a video used in theatre, or distinguish a use of photography together with sculpture. The differentiation between media, which is based on some implicit and shared basic understanding of their borders, still functions widely in culture.[236] It is evident in continuing designations of social structures and exhibiting environments as "photographic". Examples abound: the ongoing functioning and legacy of the Lithuanian Photographers Association, its respective galleries in Vilnius ("Vilnius Photography Gallery") and Kaunas ("Kaunas Photography Gallery") and publication of a journal *Fotografija* ("Photography"); the annual editions *Lietuvos fotografija* ("Lithuanian Photography") and *Latvian Photography*; dedicated museums in Šiauliai ("Photography museum"), Riga ("Latvian museum of Photography"), and Tallinn ("Museum of Photography"); as well as larger umbrella events in the Baltic countries, such as "Tallinn Photomonth", "Riga Photomonth" or "Riga Photography Biennial". Even if the latter events are increasingly intermedial, and in the case of Tallinn Photomonth occasionally move away from photography almost entirely in some of its instances, they still cling to the name of photography as a practical denominator and a formal suggestion of both some of its historical legacy and today's continued focus of interest.

2.1.2 The Photographic Medium: Ontological Uniqueness and Mechanical Autonomy

The continued practical recognition of media borders (or of their vestiges) evidenced in the examples cited above, reflects the historical significance accorded to the idea of the medium as a unique separate entity. Photography is a good illustrative case in point. As Andrew Dewdney states, "historically the photographic image was formed by means of purification".[237] Photography as a specific entity and its borders were established through attempts to define what constitutes its apparent essence. One way to define and, subsequently, purify is through ontology. As discussed in Chapter 1, indexicality was used as a feature to define the supposed ontological uniqueness of the

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236 For example, as a mechanism for individual artistic and cultural funding applications, which require the applicant to choose a field. A long-standing division by the Lithuanian Council for Culture featured 14 fields: architecture, libraries, circus, painting, design, ethnic and folk art, photography, cultural heritage, literature, museum, music, dance, interdisciplinary art, and theatre. Each applicant was required to choose one. While interdisciplinary art was often chosen by artists and institutions working within a range of contemporary art practices, many of these fields could have been related to an individual medium and a shared understanding of their relative boundaries.

237 Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 196.

photographic medium. The notion of the index, in Diarmuid Costello's words, "is about the ontology of photography; it is a claim about what photography really is".[238] This is a claim about what photography is, and also an equal claim about what photography is not. In other words, the definition of the idea of the photographic medium always operated according to positive and negative definitions of likeness and difference. This difference was understood as a theoretical manoeuvre to delimit a functioning "format"; in order to be called "photography" or a "photographic image", any sample had to conform to that format. If a photographic image is indexical, it follows logically that something that is not indexical is not a photographic image. This is the main conundrum of the digital debates, when technological affordances to convert light into a virtual code has dispensed with the need for concrete material support—and which supposedly dispensed with indexicality altogether.

As detailed in Chapter 1, equating indexicality with a material or causal relation is based on an imprecise but widely popular reading of Peirce's semiotics. This interpretation limits an inherently flexible notion of Peirce's index to just one subset of its functions, ignoring the crucial indicative aspect. This is evident in film scholar David Rodowick's telling admission in *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007) published during the digital transformation period: "In C. S. Peirce's logic the index is determined by causal relations".[239] As discussed in the previous chapter, this reading is incomplete and can hardly be formed from a direct engagement with Peirce's texts. Yet it can be found abundantly in the literature taking up questions of the transformation of the notion of the index from semiotics into photography and film theory, which took place in the late 1960s-1980s.

The overall intention of the very serious theoretical efforts of the late 1960s-1980s can be understood precisely as an attempt at the "purification" of photography. The medium was singled out and specified not only in terms of its ontological uniqueness predicated on a limited reading of indexicality, but also its mechanical character and supposed autonomy from human subjectivity and agency. In a theoretical meditation on the specificity of photography from 1974, Rudolf Arnheim noted precisely this: "the fundamental peculiarity of the photographic medium: the physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light".[240] The belief in photography's autonomous and objectively mechanical character has a historical ori-

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238 As noted by Diarmuid Costello, "The Art Seminar," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 168.

239 David N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 115.

240 Rudolf Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography", *Critical Inquiry* 1, no 1 (1974): 155.

gin that is as old as the medium itself. Arnheim's formulation is by no means peculiar in photography theory and can be traced as far back as to the pioneering book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) by Henry Fox Talbot, one of photography's inventors. With regards to his own photographic images reproduced in his book, Talbot noted that they "have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone", without an aid of an artist. In other words, "the plates […] have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper".[241] Elsewhere, Talbot observed: "It is not the artist who makes the picture, but the picture which makes itself".[242] The very idea of photography as the autonomous "pencil of nature" emphasized a supposed self-determination and sovereignty of the photographic process.[243] Its cultural embrace and academic acceptance indicate that, as Wilco Versteeg suggests, "We once needed to *believe* in the objectivity of photographs".[244] This belief was reinforced by the strict, causal, and material understanding of the index. Hence, the theoretical project on photography's indexicality during the late 1960s to 1980s attempted to purify what already seemed to possess an ostensibly pure essence.

2.1.3 Intermediality

The concept of intermediality involves a wide range of mutually incompatible definitions. Jürgen E. Müller notes: "The variety of aspects of the concept of 'intermediality' makes it very difficult or almost impossible to present some sort of general overview with regard to all the options".[245] What this section attempts is by no means an exhaustive analysis of these options, but a brief overview of some of the main points with regards to the development of the notion, and an exploration of how intermediality is helpful to address the field analysed here. What can now be considered as the older understanding of intermediality, often linked with Peter Wagner, largely defines it as a

241 William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1844), 1.

242 Talbot quoted in Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy,* 10.

243 Samuel Morse echoed Fox Talbot writing with marvel on daguerreotypes: "Nature … has taken the pencil into her own hands." (*Samuel F. B. Morse: His Letters and Journals, Vol. 2,* ed. Edward Lind Morse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 144.

244 Wilco Versteeg, "Against Visual Storytelling", *Trigger: Uncertainty*, no. 2 (2020): 7, original emphasis.

245 Jürgen E. Müller, "Intermediality Revisited: Some Reflections about Basic Principles of this *Axe de pertinence*", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 237.

practice of describing one medium by means of another.[246] Wagner himself confined his analysis to the process of ekphrasis (literary description of a visual work of art). His definition of intermediality mirrors that of another definition, "intertextuality".[247] Wagner even used "intertextual/intermedial" directly co-joined, saying that intermediality is a "subdivision of intertextuality".[248] This is a rather narrow and specific (especially from our contemporary perspective) application of intermediality, as Wagner was mostly interested in works of literature, and in how visual matter enters it both in concrete sense and by way of allusion. While this confined view still occasionally appears in the scholarship,[249] the current debate on intermediality has largely moved on from a narrow focus on relations between word and image into a wide and multidimensional field of relations. Müller writes of this shift in intermedial research:

> The notion of intermediality had to overcome the restrictions of literary studies and to reorient the research axis towards interactions and interferences *between* different *audiovisual* and not only literary media. By doing this, it refocused on questions of materiality *and* the making of meaning, on traces of intermedial processes *and* social functions.[250]

This thesis employs this wide approach to the notion of intermediality, which includes meaning-making and involves constantly shifting re-negotiation of media boundaries as well as social and cultural functions. The involvement of these wide and varied dimensions is crucial. It may be tempting to see intermediality as mainly dealing with interactions between already established media (concerned with "in-between-ess"), but, as Eric Méchoulan points out, "it's important not to reduce intermediality to a simple intersection of mediums or media".[251] Intermediality involves much more than simply a fact of increasing relations between media. It includes links and critical

246 Peter Wagner, "Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality – the State(s) of the Art(s)", in *Icons – Texts – Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, ed. Peter Wagner (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1996), 10-11 and 17-18.

247 Intertextuality, in the words of Eric Méchoulan, "seeks to retrieve the text from its presumed autonomy and to read in it the *mise en oeuvre* of other, pre-existing texts." ("Intermediality: An Introduction to the Arts of Transmission", *SubStance,* vol. 44, no. 3 (2015): 3.)

248 Wagner, "Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality", 17.

249 See Geane Carvalho Alzamora, "A Semiotic Approach to Transmedia Storytelling", in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies,* eds. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2019), 440.

250 Müller, "Intermediality Revisited", 244 [original emphasis].

251 Méchoulan, "Intermediality", 3.

pointers towards surrounding culture and the very social and technological fabric that make such formations possible. In other words, intermediality allows the grasping of some of the conditions of the state of things, it is part of a pulse of time. As Méchoulan states, "intermediality is a method for making environments appear".[252] Why certain media interact with each other, but not with other media? How is this interaction formed? What is communicated through certain combinations?

Intermediality also refers to novel possibilities by ways of ideas and material shapes that are born through or out of these relations, as well as a potential unsettling of defined social constructions. Each instance of intermediality is a critical opening with radical potential. This can contain forms of unseen (or unforeseen) material shapes or a thought that disrupts personal and collective narratives, mythologies and knowledge-formations. To further delineate the understanding of intermedial processes taken up here, and its relation to contemporary art photography, I mobilize insights by theorist Christina Ljunberg. She defines three characteristics of intermedial operations in relation to art, each of which denotes a significant potential at the heart of such instances. These are:

- ► *Radical performativity* – "as we are confronted with hybrid forms that generate something new and unique";
- ► *Strong self-reflexivity* – intermedial instances "focus attention both on their own mode of production and on their own semiotic specificity";
- ► *Effective communication* – giving "readers, viewers and listeners access to different levels of meaning".[253]

Ljunberg's understanding of performativity draws from theorisations of the concept by theatre historian Erika Fischer-Lichte, who distinguished "weak" and "strong" instances from performativity from "radical" ones—the latter being defined by its ability to "create a new social reality". For Ljunberg, "Intermediality always entails performativity in the radical sense owing to its hybridity".[254] In other words, real intermedial instances in art not only involve analysis and interpretation but also confront the viewers with a new set of rules (new objects or new realities), as it were, through radical utterances. That is, "they bring something into being, not in accord with traditional forms of ritual, but as an attempt to establish what is not now recognized or authorized".[255] This understanding can be linked with Flusser's insistence

252 Méchoulan, "Intermediality", 5.
253 Christina Ljunberg, "Intermedial Strategies in Multimedia Art", in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality,* ed. Lars Elleström (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 83.
254 Ljunberg, "Intermedial Strategies in Multimedia Art", 85.
255 Ljunberg, "Intermedial Strategies in Multimedia Art", 85.

on the true artists being those who are able to confront the apparatus as a totalising (co-)producer of meaning. In other words, intermedial works can be seen as creative attempts to confront what could be seen as obvious or given. This ability is linked with the characteristic of intermedial instances to call "attention to various aspects of itself, above all to its sensuous qualities and formal structures, its actual materiality and its rhetorical strategies".[256] Additionally, intermedial instances delve into intricate layers of meaning, opening up various potential avenues and inviting re-negotiating of obvious patterns of thinking.

Ljunberg's framework is largely semiotic, drawing from Peirce's sign theory. While she does not provide a fully developed theory based on these characteristics of intermedial relations, but rather uses them in a practical discussion of intermedial works of art, hers is a useful approach to address the wider contemporary photography situation. Evolving from Ljunberg's discourse, my investigations refer to these features, while also making some new conceptual space to manoeuvre with regards to how I interpret them. The ideas of *radical performativity*, *strong self-reflexivity*, and *effective communication* will be applied interpretatively in analyses of intermedial relations across present-day Baltic art photography.

2.1.4 Intermedia(lity): Notes with Regards to Historicity

Intermediality is not entirely a new notion. It resurfaced in the 1980s,[257] emerging more prominently throughout the 1990s-2000s as a fitting concept to address and describe what was happening in different cultural domains at the time. This is the inception point for the notion of intermediality as it is mostly used today, as well as a point of departure for this dissertation. However, there were some notable earlier uses, and as the term is central here, some of its early discussions are worth briefly delineating, not least to get a better sense of a development and new meanings intermediality managed to acquire.

The notion of intermediality stems from "intermedium", a term coined by English poet and literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). It was used in his lectures in the 1810s in relation to narrative allegory.[258] This is usually taken as the etymological

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256 Ljunberg, "Intermedial Strategies in Multimedia Art", 88.

257 Jürgen E. Müller locates "the beginnings of the academic discussions of intermediality in the 1980s" (Müller, "Intermediality Revisited", 242).

258 Jürgen E. Müller, "Intermediality in the Age of Global Media Networks – Including Eleven Theses on its Provocative Power for the Concepts of 'Convergence,' 'Transmedia Storytelling' and 'Actor Network Theory', *SubStance*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2015): 19.

origin of intermediality, although the cultural idea of a fusion of disparate elements is much older. Jürgen E. Müller notes that "considerations of intermedia processes can be traced back to antique poetics".[259] Coleridge's notion was picked up and developed by art theorist and Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, who has written on "intermedia" in the 1960s. In a pioneering article from 1966 he noted that "much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media".[260] Higgins used the term to define artistic works "which fall conceptually between media that are already known".[261] In other words, intermedia open up a new set of possibilities within the field of art, as it refuses to uphold traditional boundaries of media, but rather encourages a conceptual mixing of multiple origins. Higgins understood intermedia in contrast to "mixed media", which he saw as a fundamentally different operation. For him, mixed media presents works where each individual media is clearly distinguishable ("one knows which is which"), while intermedial works are generated through a more conceptual and daring fusion.[262] In a 1999 interview, Higgins restated this distinction: "To me, the difference between intermedia and multimedia is that with intermedia there is a conceptual fusion, and you can't really separate out the different media in an integral way".[263] Whereas mixed media was a more conservative category for Higgins, his notion of intermedia was much more exploratory, and can be seen as already opening up to some of the radical potentialities as formulated by Christina Ljunberg. In particular, to the characteristic of *radical performativity*, which for Ljunberg stands for an ability to generate new and unique forms through intermedial combinations. While Higgins does not explicitly reflect on that, it is an implication one can reasonably get from engaging with his texts; while mixed media presents distinguishable forms of recognizable media, through intermedial fusion new configurations are entirely plausible. Thus, while not explicitly developed, the now-recognized ability of intermedial relations to generate novelties was already hinted at in Higgins' texts.

While Higgins did not invent "intermedia", he is sometimes credited with naming and defining the phenomenon in such "a way that created a framework for understanding and categorizing a set or group of like-minded activities".[264] Contemporary to Higgins's theorisations was a work by artist and educator Hans Breder. In 1968,

259 Müller, "Intermediality in the Age of Global Media Networks", 20.

260 Dick Higgins, "Intermedia", *Leonardo*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2001): 49.

261 Higgins, "Intermedia", 52.

262 Higgins, "Intermedia", 52.

263 Dick Higgins and Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Looking back", *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1999): 24.

264 Jack Ox and Jacques Mandelbrojt, "Intersenses/Intermedia: A Theoretical Perspective", *Leonardo,* vol. 34, no. 1 (2001): 47.

Breder established the first university program to offer a degree in intermedia at the University of Iowa. The program was designed to question the fixity of boundaries between media and encourage artistic experimentation. Artists Ana Mendieta and Charles Ray took part in the program, while others, like Vito Acconci, Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann, and also Higgins, were brought in as tutors. In a 2012 issue of *Artforum*, Breder remembered the foundations of the program and its relation vis a vis the term intermedia:

> My program conceived of intermedia not as interdisciplinary fusing of different fields into one, but as a constant collision of concepts and disciplines. It was performance-oriented, and video was an inherent aspect. Although initially used in a documentary mode, video almost immediately became an integral aspect of many student performances and was soon used as a medium in its own right[265].

While intermediality today is a wide term, here Breder sees it as primarily relating to performance and video work and their various convergences. However, Breder's description of a "collision" can be seen as echoing, and perhaps even taking a step further than Higgins insistence that intermedial fusion has potential to go beyond the recognizable borders of individual media. Furthermore, Breder's understanding of intermedia as precisely a "*constant* collision" points to a certain never-settled attitude as well as an educational licencing of experimentation.

This emphasis on open-endedness and exploratory approach has influenced, in particular, the work of Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985). While enrolled in the program in 1972–1977, Mendieta began making performances and documenting her work.[266] Her work often blurred the boundaries between documentation and performance, as well as those between photography and the rites of everyday life. The very process and specificity of mediation were of interest: it was not so much the (live) performance itself that appealed to her, but the ways in which it could be documented and mediated. As Stephanie Schwartz has noted: "In advance of those critics claiming that performance art must be live—and avoid mediation—Mendieta's performances investigated the way in which the media works to organise and homog-

265 Hans Breder, *Artforum,* 2012, https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201207/hans-breder-32003 (accessed 5 April, 2022).
266 Stephanie Schwartz, "Tania Bruguera: Between Histories", *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2012): 226-227.

Figure 7. Ana Mendieta, "People Looking at Blood, Moffitt", 35-mm colour slides, 1973.

enise publics".[267] This is evident in the photographic series "People Looking at Blood, Moffitt" (1973), in which the artist documented reactions of a random selection of passers-by to a pool of blood she has set up on a doorway to her apartment building in Iowa City (Fig. 7). The reactions range from almost not paying attention to stopping for a brief closer look. This investigation of (potentially gendered) violence remained a key impulse of Mendieta's short-lived career as an artist,[268] which was cut short by her tragic death in 1985. "People Looking at Blood, Moffitt" hinges not so much on the act of setting up fake blood and the bloodied rag as performative, nor is it simply an artistic intervention or even a mere documentation of the rather indifferent reactions from onlookers. It acquired meaning through a combination of these aspects on the condition that this staging of an encounter in a public space is photographed. That we can know of the work only through these mediated image documents (the work also exists in a filmic form) is a central tenet here.

Mendieta's body of work reflects early theorisations of intermedia (and Breder's insistence on performance and its documentation by a camera), insofar as it relies on technology for its making—specifically, analogue photography for "People Looking at Blood, Moffitt", occasionally a Super 8 camera. Yet, it does not depend on technological conditionality (the way technology allows, enables, and supports mental and material

267 Schwartz, "Tania Bruguera", 228.
268 Ara Osterweil, "Bodily Rites: The Films of Ana Mendieta", *Artforum,* 2015, https://www.artforum. com/print/201509/bodily-rites-the-films-of-ana-mendieta-55531 (accessed 6 April, 2022).

forms and structures); nor does it explore this conditionality to the same extent as some contemporary works (i.e. Indrė Šerpytytė's "2 seconds of silence"). While it can be seen as creating something new and is successful in operating between the gaps of information provided to the spectator and some absences, Mendieta's photographic series does not seem to be particularly self-reflective (another characteristic of inter-mediality suggested by Ljunberg). Contemporary intermedial works, as we will see, are not only successful in functioning within multiple layers of meaning, but also more readily occasion attention on their own mode of production and specificity.

Higgins's notion of intermedia is a significant early precursor to contemporary understandings of intermediality. Higgins's insistence that intermedia is a conceptual fusion where one can't really separate individual strands relates to, for example, the work of Ana Mendieta, which skilfully blends performance with photography, documentation with fictional elements. Intermedia as a concept manages to suggest some of the potentialities of intermediality, yet the latter appears more fully developed in theoretical terms, especially in relation to how medial border-crossings are both more self-reflexive and are able to create entirely novel formations. One additional aspect of intermediality that is yet to be taken up is the fact that it has developed largely parallel to the burgeoning of the digital.

2.1.5 Intermediality as a Culturally Conditioned Strategic Response

Like the notion of medium, intermediality, is constructed and culturally contingent; its range of meaning is dynamic and changes over time. The (re)emergence of the concept in the latter part of the 20th century was culturally conditioned. It took place in response to certain social and technological factors, namely the expansion and proliferation of digital networks, as well as an academic need to address the new situation. Rémy Besson writes that

> the success of the concept of intermediality can be accounted for, in equal measure, through favorable socio-cultural and technological conditions. Due to its contemporaneity with the development of the Web and the rise of social networks, intermediality has indeed benefited and contributed to the emergence of an environment that is conductive to a reflection on new technologies.[269]

269 Rémy Besson, "Intermediality: Axis of Relevance", *SubStance,* vol. 44, no. 3 (2015): 139.

Chapter 1 discussed how digital technologies displaced analogue photographic practices, and some of the challenges this process has caused for theorists specifically with regard to the notion of indexicality in relation to photography's ontology. The watershed was equally challenging to more general accepted views on the medium. In light of the crumbling of the established technological and cultural boundaries between different media, intermediality has claimed its significance as an approach that tendered a means to address this new condition, and to acknowledge the different merging of forms taking place. Intermediality as a notion is in some important ways contemporary to the digital break. In the landscape of networked digital mixing, where everything could be converted to the same digital code, it made little sense to cling on the distinguishing notions of media-specificities or focus on the purity of notions. The digital helped usher in new forms of intermedial relations and moulded the very notion we are using today.

The environment in which the notion of intermediality burgeoned and took on various forms also impacted practitioners working across various artistic fields. Writing for an introduction to a special "Intersenses/Intermedia" section in *Leonardo* in 2001, editors Jack Ox and Jacques Mandelbrojt noted the impact of digital technological transformation on enabling intermedial relations: "We have reached a period in time when it is not only much easier to perform intermedia, but our tools invite us to do so, owing to the natural capabilities of computers".[270] This empowerment came partly in form of digital tools, such as the then-novel program of Photoshop,[271] which enabled precise intermixing of various visual sources and a more advanced layering of materials. Artists took advantage of these capabilities to explore the ongoing digital transformation, and produce work that uncovered some of the underlying conditions of its technological makeup. Work by artists like Nancy Burson, Pedro Meyer, Esther Parada, Keith Cottingham, Aziz and Cucher, and Nancy Davenport (to name just a few), pioneeringly combined traditional photographic images with new digital tools. They and their colleagues explored not only what it meant to make work in the changing cultural landscape and offered some ways to respond to the challenges of digital transformation, but also pointed to some critical features of the new reality. While theorists were mostly wary of the potential the digital afforded for images—particularly the new capabilities for forging and manipulation—artistic work from the period is characterised by a more explorative attitude and value-neutral response to the new condition. If we accept Ljunberg's insight that intermedial formations (and

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270 Ox and Mandelbrojt, "Intersenses/Intermedia", 47.
271 Photoshop itself qualifies for the status of a medium, as it is a mean for transmitting information.

I maintain that works from the period by the mentioned artists are mostly interme-dial) are characterised by *strong self-reflexivity* and *radical performativity*; that is to say, they inherently possess qualities gesturing to their mode of operation, and are able to generate something completely new. We can then understand these works as a conscious exercise in performing digital being, a sort of probing of the new milieu.

This exploratory probing and reflexivity entered into academic discourse. Besson sees that "intermediality as an approach has helped fight against the hyper-specializa-tion of research in the humanities".[272] That is, intermediality, can also be understood as a strategy for research, and can be seen as a response to address the often rather narrow focus on specific problems and issues in academia. Intermedial approaches have opened new avenues of study and enabled scholars to address old topics in a new light. In this sense, intermediality is related to interdisciplinarity (and multidisciplinarity). Thus, Besson argues that as a concept intermediality "is not thought of as the property of specific objects, but as a shift in perspective on the part of scholars".[273] This shift in perspective, and the growing interest in the possibilities opened up by the notion of intermediality for theoretical enterprises, has largely taken hold parallel to the devel-opment of the Internet and digitally-enabled platforms and technologies. Not only theorists but also artists have taken up intermediality in a sort of strategic response to the changing world conditions. My view here is that "intermediality", understood in a wide sense and with a grasp on the radical potential it offers, is a suitable notion to also address relations occurring in present-day art photography, especially as it relates to the forms and shapes photography takes in exhibiting spaces.

2.1.6 Transmediality

If intermediality, in its contemporary meaning, was moulded in the context of the dig-ital transformation, the notion of transmediality is even more specifically tied with it. Historically, transmedia was reintroduced by media scholar Henry Jenkins to address some of the changes resulting from the digital break.[274] Jenkins's description envisioned transmedia storytelling as weaving together a narrative using elements from different media forms. His definition emphasised entertainment value of such mixed usage:

272 Besson, "Intermediality", 139.
273 Besson, "Intermediality", 139.
274 Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, "Introduction: Transmedia Studies – Where Now?", in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies,* eds. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.

"Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience".[275] In its emphasis on storytelling and entertainment, Jenkin's notion focused on multisensory audience engagement and big blockbuster-kind of media products (mostly American), such as the Marvel comics and popular television series from the period like *Lost*. Jenkin's approach was criticised for placing too much emphasis on the participatory potential of users and relying too naively on the democratic potential of entertainment product distribution, ignoring the plainly corporate logic of big media companies.[276]

Despite criticisms, during the digital turn, transmedia (storytelling) became a sort of umbrella term to distinguish multiple media employment in presenting information, especially in contexts of popular media entertainment. Elisabeth Evans, who analysed transmediality in the context of television, wrote in 2011: "Most explicitly theorised by Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling…has become central to the understanding of how emerging new media technologies are leading to the creation of new forms of narrative content and audience engagement".[277] Today transmediality remains a broad term, yet is anchored by its traditional focus on storytelling via the more popular means of entertainment, and an emphasis on consumer agency. Since the establishment of social media, transmediality has been more recently used to describe some sort of integration (and interaction) between online platforms and older forms of media, namely television, radio, video games, or comics. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato argue that "transmediality remains an important concept for understanding the fundamental shifts that digital media technologies have wrought on the media industries and their audiences".[278]

Transmedia scholar Kevin Moloney has examined photography from the perspective of transmediality studies. His interest is focused on ways a photograph can function as a narrative device. While acknowledging that photographic images are ever-incomplete stories, given their status as moments cut from a continuum of time and space, Moloney sees a potential to imply "a complex narrative of events though they are only frozen moments sliced from the otherwise unstoppable flow of time".[279] "Imply"

275 Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101", *The Official Blog of Henry Jenkins*, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html (accessed 25 March, 2022).
276 James Hay and Nick Couldry, "Rethinking Convergence/Culture: An Introduction", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4-5 (2011): 481.
277 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 19.
278 Freeman and Gambarato, "Introduction: Transmedia Studies – Where Now?", 2.
279 Kevin Moloney, "Transmedia Photography: Implicit Narrative from a Discrete Moment", in

is a key descriptor here: "the photograph is not in and of itself a narrative", Moloney admits, yet "through reading of the isolated and frozen moment one contextualizes, emotes, and intuits a fully fleshed narrative from the sparse hints contained therein".[280] This kind of language seems to suggest both a privileging of the visual information contained within an image, and a trust placed on a viewer's ability to read it (and to possess the cultural, historical, and social repository required to make assumptions, to "contextualize and intuit"). As such, this reading appears more suited to historical and photojournalistic photography, rather than contemporary art photography. The latter, rather than constructing an emergent narrative from within, expands the frame in multi-layered and often unforeseen ways (more on which below in Chapter 3).

This is further evidenced by the photographic material Moloney uses as illustrations: journalistic images, a photograph from American football match, Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Mother". Aside from Lange's historical photograph, these images do not have artistic aspirations. Their readings are arguably more factual and straightforward. The meaning-making is not as complex, networked and imagination-driven (compared to art photography). By virtue of a strong emphasis on narrativity and a focus on historical and journalistic imagery, Moloney follows Jenkins' legacy by situating transmediality as primarily a specific storytelling-mode. Moloney's analysis focuses on journalistic and historical photographic imagery, not offering much to contemporary artworks employing photography. The transmedial photographic conceptualisation advanced by Moloney fails to acknowledge the performative and self-reflexive potential applicable to art photography. Intermedial theory can be mobilized to access and disclose this potential.

Lauren Walden has investigated the phenomenon of photo-literature from the transmedial perspective. As Walden sees it, what is unique to transmediality is that "different forms are not simply juxtaposed with each other but work together to produce the same meaning instead of engendering a deliberate contrast".[281] This means that "the separate art forms do not symbiotically rely on each other for coherence; in fact, they are both comprehensible when distinct from each other".[282] This differs from conceptualisations of intermediality, aligning Walden's understanding of transmediality more closely to what Dick Higgins saw as "mixed media", where each individual medium is clearly dis-

The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies, eds. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2019), 173.

280 Moloney, "Transmedia Photography", 176.

281 Lauren Walden, "Transmediality in Symbolist and Surrealist Photo-Literature", *Open Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2017): 215.

282 Walden, "Transmediality in Symbolist and Surrealist Photo-Literature", 215.

tinguishable. Here again, similarly to Moloney's conception, we encounter transmedial photography as a rather conservative category of a relatively stable blending. This is in contrast to intermedial works which are generated through a more conceptual and daring fusion. As has been suggested by Ljunberg, this fusion can result in novel and unique forms, due the *radical performativity* intrinsic to intermedial relations.

2.1.7 Hybridity

Hybridity resembles the notion of intermediality in some ways, but also differs in its conceptual and historical connotations. If intermediality and transmediality deal with what results from different ways of crossing borders between media—and often largely maintain the bond with media at least as a starting point to explore wider re-lations—hybridity seems, at least at first glance, to ally more naturally with a broader and more heterogeneous mixing of elements. This is evident in its use, as the term finds wide employment in postmodern theory, post-colonial studies, pedagogy, natural sciences, biology, film theory, and media and cultural studies. For Müller the concept's overexposure points to its critical limitation. While some scholars use hybridity "in a more or less synonymous way for intermedial processes", the often unspecific han-dling of this term to refer to a plethora of different processes runs the risk of turning it into a "rather static catch-all" phrase.[283] "Given the fact that the notion of hybridity is nowadays applied to almost all social phenomena and characteristics of postmodern societies, it is in danger of losing its denotational loadings by offering general catch-all categories".[284] Jan Baetens and Heidi Peeters argue along the same lines, observing that "the systematic and a priori praise of hybridity seems to have encountered its own limits", specifically pointing out that "the excessive use of this semantic field has emptied it of all meaning".[285] Due to this lack of critical connotation and focus, Müller underscores the value of the concept of intermediality for research, as it "allows far more differentiated synchronic and diachronic studies of media interactions compared to the quite general category of hybridity".[286]

Not all theorists see the all-encompassing nature of hybridity as a clear critical and conceptual limitation. The term can be considered fitting for the contemporary

283   Müller, "Intermediality Revisited", 245.
284   Müller, "Intermediality Revisited", 246.
285   Jan Baetens and Heidi Peeters, "Hybridity: The reverse of photographic medium specificity?", *History of Photography*, vol. 31 no. 1 (2007): 6.
286   Müller, "Intermediality Revisited", 246.

environment of increasingly complex and multidimensional interrelations, a sort of zeitgeist notion. Marwan M. Kraidy writes:

> Hybridity is one of the emblematic notions of our era. It captures the spirit of the times with its obligatory celebration of cultural difference and fusion, and it resonates with the globalization mantra of unfettered economic exchanges and the supposedly inevitable transformation of all cultures.[287]

Yet Kraidy admits that, at the same time, it is a "controversial" and "risky notion".[288] One risk comes from the fact that hybridity is a very dense notion. One could write various and differing versions of a chapter about it, depending on the field of study and the relevant literature brought into the discussion. It is a daunting task to provide something even approaching an exhaustive overview of hybridity and its multiple features. With risk comes reward: this limitation can be equally turned into a helpful aspect. Indeed, hybridity is so pliable that it can be moulded to fit almost any artistic research or academic study. Yet, as Kraidy admits, "multiple and often antithetical uses have created a dispute over its meaning, implications, and usefulness".[289] This claim is echoed by Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong: "Because of its ambiguity, the term hybridity is bothersome. It threatens to dissolve difference into a pool of homogenization".[290] This creates a potential for confusing situations, where scholars can use hybridity with very different connotations even in the same field.

One example is the field of post-colonial research. In post-colonial studies, hybridity has been used as a term with historical emancipatory connotations. Especially in relation to individual and societal privilege as well as cultural domination, hybridity was often framed within a positive discourse of political resistance and emancipation.[291] The potential for the subversion of dominance has been expressed through hybridity in a celebratory angle. Yet, some postcolonial scholars have "accused their colleagues who write positively about cultural hybridity of being complicit with structures of inequal-

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287 Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 1.

288 Kraidy, *Hybridity*, vi and 2.

289 Kraidy, *Hybridity*, 2.

290 Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid", *The Journal of American Folklore,* vol. 112, no. 445 (1999): 240.

291 Boris Buden, "The Art of Being Guilty is the Politics of Resistance: Depoliticizing Transgression and Emancipatory Hybridization", in *Atlas of Transformation,* eds. Zbynek Baladran and Vit Havranek (Prague: Tranzit, 2010), 265-268.

ity".[292] This points to the politically charged and contradictory value of the term and its usage. In general, as noted by Kapchan and Strong, "untempered celebration of the (subversive) agency […] is perhaps the first critique to be directed against some theories of the hybrid".[293] This concern is shared by social anthropologist Pnina Werbner. She has concluded that cultural hybridity in postcolonial encounters is inherently context- and instance-specific, therefore each iteration should be carefully studied as a separate case, paying close attention to how it is received on the ground: "Whether cultural hybridity is generative and fertilizing depends on how its varied audiences interpret it".[294]

Another aspect of potential contention is what some view as hybridity's antagonistic relation to non-hybrid entities. For media and feminist theorist Jennifer Gonzalez, this is what makes the term controversial, for it assumes "by definition the existence of a nonhybrid state—pure state, a pure species, a pure race—with which it is contrasted."[295] Intermediality has an empirical advantage in this respect, as it is contrasted against media, which is always-already in a state of mediation and whose own theoretical affordances for some kind of purity are now largely a historical fantasy. As previously mentioned, a medium does not exist in a neutral or pure state; while hybridity, at least to some theoretical extent, presupposes a state of purity. Jan Nederveen Pieterse summarises this position:

> Hybridity as a point of view is meaningless *without* the prior assumption of difference, purity, fixed boundaries. Meaningless not in the sense that it would be inaccurate or untrue as a description, but that, without an existing regard for boundaries, it would not be a point worth making. Without reference to a prior cult of purity and boundaries, a pathos of hierarchy and gradient of difference, the point of hybridity would be moot.[296]

For Jay David Bolter, the desire for purity remains a natural impulse in culture, despite increasing propensity for hybrid practices. While our cultural environments

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292 Kraidy, *Hybridity*, 2.

293 Kapchan and Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid", 242.

294 Pnina Werbner, "The Limits of Cultural Hybridity: On Ritual Monsters, Poetic Licence and Contested

Postcolonial Purifications", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2001): 150.

295 Jennifer Gonzalez, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research", in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace,* ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 273.

296 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Hybridity, So What? The Anti-hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition", *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 18, no. 2-3 (2001): 226 [original emphasis].

are increasingly mediated and accepting of various mixed and hybrid forms, it remains entangled with a "desire for transparency".[297] This yearning for some kind of (imagined) uncontaminated natural state is part of a modern ethos. Indeed, in today's era of networked relations, it is easy to forget that the postmodern critical attention around hybridity and intermediality in the 1970s constituted an innovative movement in the scholarship, especially for its focus on "what was once considered 'contaminated', 'promiscuous', 'impure'".[298] Today an almost opposite state of affairs has taken hold: we are sceptical of calls that advocate for unmediated transparency, or a return to some kind of inherent purity. As our interconnected culture makes us multitask via various programs, apps, or even screens, hybrid being seems more natural than a thought with regards to any purity of state. Photography is extremely reflective of this change: once hailed as a medium that produces transparent works mirroring the world "without an aid of the artist", now it is enmeshed in increasingly complex set of ever-changing virtual nodes and data clusters that can operate in different context and regiments.

To conclude, hybridity is a more diverse term than intermediality, yet one that can be plagued by its generality and theoretical unspecificity, which result from varied usage across many theoretical fields. This can mean that hybridity is potentially prone to (mis)interpretation, and include sometimes incompatible connotations, such as a view shared by some theorists that hybridity presupposes a natural state. Hybridity has become a bit of a general "catch-all" category, and while it can be successfully and critically applied to a variety of recent phenomena, especially given it is clearly delineated in the process, intermediality seems a more effective term for the purposes of the present research, given the latter's comparably narrower focus and more specific approach.

2.2 Expanded Photography

It is worth looking more in-depth into the notion of "expanded photography". While not directly or narrowly media-related, the term significant impacted photographic discourse, and still holds currency in discussions on photography's multiformity. The notion takes its starting point from George Baker's influential essay "Photography's Expanded Field" (2005), with a somewhat lesser-known quasi-sequel "Photography and Abstraction" (2009). This section discusses the former and casts a brief look at the

297 Jay David Bolter, "The Desire for Transparency in an Era of Hybridity", *Leonardo,* vol. 39, no. 2 (2006): 110.
298 Victor Turner quoted in Kapchan and Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid", 239.

latter, before moving on to sketch some of the applications of the notion in relation to the Estonian context specifically and that of Baltic art photography more generally.

Taking his cue from Rosalind Krauss's seminal essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), Baker proposed looking at photography as an inherently expanded and flexible medium. Being of its time (the high point of digital transformation and its attending theoretical debates), "Photography's Expanded Field" also evinces an air of melancholy brought on by photography's shift characteristic of period discourse (analysed in depth in Chapter 1). In his turn, Baker found that "photography itself has been foreclosed, cashiered, abandoned—outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically".[299] Yet the overall critical argument as to what this *meant* for photography is where Baker rather decisively departed from other doomsday theory prophets of the digital shift. Photography's "displacement" by the digital for Baker did not simply result in a variation of an "end of photography as we knew it", as the mainline theoretical argument often chose to emphasize, but offered instead an opening, or an opportunity. That is, rather than spelling out an "unbecoming of photography", to use the phrase by Rodowick, the digital transformed photography into something new.

Baker's argument interestingly comingled its hint of melancholy with what could be seen as an expansionistic, and decidedly more positive, approach. Although it unfolded from the premise of a familiar narrative, rather than seeing the digital as an existential threat, Baker proposed this transformation as a way for photography to bridge to other forms, creating "new, formerly unimaginable relations to one another".[300] "[E]ven the most traditional of a younger generation of contemporary photographers", he wrote, "cannot now resist the impulse to deal the concerns of other mediums into their practice".[301] This embrace expanded photography's borders. Analyses of contemporary works from the Baltics (see below) will show that it did not mean an end of photographic practice, but rather an ongoing transformation of it, quite in line with Baker's analysis. To quote Baker at length:

> For it seems that while the medium of photography has been thoroughly transformed today, and while the object forms of traditional photography are no longer in evidence in much advanced artistic practice, something like a photographic effect still remains – survives, perhaps, in a new, altered form. And if we could resist the object-bound forms of critical judgment and description, as well as the announcement of a medium's sheer technological

299 George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", *October* vol. 114 (2005): 122.
300 Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", 136.
301 Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", 122.

demise, we might be able to imagine critically how the photographic object has been "reconstructed" in contemporary artistic practice – an act of critical imagination made necessary by the forms of contemporary art, and one that will answer to neither technological exegesis nor traditional formalist criteria.[302]

Baker largely concentrated on and confined his analyses of the notion of the expanded field to the merging of photography and cinema (taking the work of artist Nancy Davenport as a case study). Now, it is clear that this insightful analysis remains useful as a means to study other kinds of merging that photography is currently experiencing. Sculpture, installation, video, performance work are now all part of the "expanded field" of photography, functioning firmly within its operating playground.

 "Photography and Abstraction" revisited the discourse surrounding the expanded field of photography, focusing on the evolving relationship between abstraction and photography. Baker reflected on past attempts to rethink this relationship, and proposed a renewed examination in light of recent developments. He argued that photography had undergone a process of abstraction, not only in formal terms, but also as a social phenomenon intertwined with capitalist modernity.[303] Baker suggested that photography's representational status was increasingly uncertain, with images becoming abstract even in traditional documentary formats. This transformation, he claimed, mirrored broader societal shifts, and prompted a reassessment of photography's function in a landscape wherein political and symbolic representation was progressively abstracted.

Drawing parallels between photography and finance, Baker highlighted their shared experience of abstraction, divorced from tangible objects or meanings. A key implication of his argument is that in a contemporary landscape, where much of financial and social capital remains abstract and elusive, there is a pressing need for a sophisticated form of critical photography capable of engaging with this largely invisible complexity. Art photography operating in an expanded sense, following Baker, could answer this need, as it has the potential to reflect the prevailing systems of power and representation. It is a tool capable of navigating the complexities of this novel environment and engaging with the abstracting forces inherent in capitalism. This potentiality is further elucidated through Chapter 4's exploration of projects by Õllek and Monko, which underscore photography's dynamic capacity to interrogate dominant narratives in the contemporary socio-political landscape.

302 Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", 123.
303 Baker, "Photography and Abstraction", 359.

2.2.1 Expanded Photography in the Estonian Context

Before looking more in depth at artists' work, it is worth noting that while expanded photography has not been a particularly active or widely discussed term in Lithuanian or Latvian photography theory,[304] it has seen considerably more usage in Estonian discourse. A good example is a series of public roundtable discussions organized in 2018 on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the photography department at the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA).[305] The fourth and final panel took place at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia and was moderated by Kristel Raesaar, a former director of Tallinn Photomonth; its title, "Photography in the Expanded Field", directly referenced Baker's essay.[306] Despite Raesaar's partial criticism of Baker, the occasion signalled both the text's enduring relevance, and its significance for the local photographic discourse.

That "expanded photography" has been more discussed in the Estonian context is perhaps not a coincidence but rather symptomatic. EKA's Department (or Program) of Photography was established one year after the Department of Photography and Media Art at Vilnius Academy of Arts (VAA). Although the name suggested the Estonian program was more narrowly confined to the specific medium of photography in comparison to its Lithuanian counterpart, the opposite appears to have been true. From 2005 to 2017 the EKA department was headed by multidisciplinary contemporary artist Marko Laimre, whose wide and inclusive approach to art forms has significantly impacted students and future artists. The students were widely encouraged to experiment with other media, and an inclusive approach to producing work was welcomed. Kristina Õllek, who has studied at the department through BA and MA degrees, acknowledges:

> The photography department at the time was led by Marko Laimre,
> who is not a photographer himself. He was a leading artist in the Estonian

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304 In Lithuania the notion of expanded photography was, it seems, most systematically propagated and attempted to be launched into the local photographic discourse by Vytautas Michelkevičius. However, its integration remained limited, as curator Gytis Skudžinskas notes in 2017 edition of annual *Lithuanian Photography* with regards to the notion's usage in Lithuania and the local Postphotography movement – "the promise remains unfulfilled, [as] after minor quarrels we [i.e. Lithuanian art photography community] returned to a convenient everyday, a calm Humanistic drowse."

305 "EKA Foto 20 klubi" was organized by the Department of Photography at the Estonian Academy of the Arts and Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM). Four public discussion events took place at EKKM 2-23 October, 2018.

306 I was invited and participated in this public discussion together with Hirohisa Koike, Marge Monko, and Maija Rudovska.

contemporary art scene then. He was always telling us that it is not just a photography department, but a contemporary art department. Although we had all the technical courses, such as studio photography and documentation photography, the conceptual side and theory played an important part in our education. Altogether, this has led us, the students, to push the boundaries and think a bit wider in terms of how to use photography.[307]

This wide-ranging attitude to teaching photography is echoed by another former student, curator Laura Toots, who completed the MA degree in photography in 2011, and was the artistic director of Tallinn Photomonth 2017-2019. Toots notes that "Laimre […] has said that having 'photography' in the name was mainly to distinguish it from other departments in the academy, otherwise he would have called it 'Department of Contemporary Art.'"[308] She describes the overall education approach there as one of "interconnectedness". This reflects the inclusivity of the general attitude that was prevalent at the department, and which was encouraged even before Laimre's tenure.[309] Marge Monko, artist and current professor in the EKA Department of Photography, underlines some of the reasons behind the successful fostering of such an approach:

First of all, we don't have a strong tradition of photography here in Estonia. Of course, there have been some influential photographers, but we haven't had an institution with resources comparable to the Union of Lithuanian Art Photographers. So when the Department of Photography was established at the Estonian Academy of Art, it was very much shaped by its professors Peeter Linnap, Eve Kiiler, and later Marco Laimre. Their approach has been very focused on photography within contemporary art.[310]

307 Kristina Õllek, interview by author, Skype, 30 March, 2021. See also Appendix 1.

308 Paulius Petraitis, "'Everything is Photographic': Discussing the Complexities of Tallinn Photomonth with Laura Toots and Kadri Laas", *Echo gone wrong,* 2019 09 18, https://echog-onewrong.com/everything-photographic-discussing-complexities-tallinn-photomonth-lau-ra-toots-kadri-laas/ (accessed 23 March, 2022).

309 This inclusive approach towards photography was in some form present and functioning already before the beginning of Laimre's tenure in 2005 and even the establishment of a dedicated Photography department at the EKA.

310 Paulius Petraitis, "Making sense of images. Marge Monko in conversation with Paulius Petraitis", *Echo gone wrong,* 2019 03 21, https://echogonewrong.com/making-sense-images-marge-mon-ko-conversation-paulius-petraitis/ (accessed 23 March, 2022).

A comparative lack of a strong photography tradition seems to have contributed to the conditions that allowed a more open and inclusive attitude, wherein contemporary art was cultivated instead of being seen as an adversary.[311] In Estonia, the pursuit of photography— untethered from institutionalised and celebrated forms of the past—was encouraged in forms and ways that were more experimental, and less tied to ideas related to medium-specific purity.[312] The contemporary art scene, at the other end of the spectrum, was also seemingly more welcoming to the various guises of the "photographic" in Estonia, in contrast to Lithuania, where the two spheres were held at a distance, due largely to the strong humanist tradition of photography. Monko notes this flip side of photography's tradition in Lithuania with regards to contemporary art: humanist photography's longstanding dominance "is also the reason why the contemporary art field wants to separate, distancing itself from the medium of photography".[313] The lack of such tradition in Estonia also contributed to a different approach to photography at the educational level.

It can be noted that the Lithuanian photographic artists I interviewed for this research appear to validate Monko's assertions, commenting on their somewhat strained relationship with the strong national tradition of humanist photography (particularly its politically charged aspects), which persisted in defining the local photographic field well into the 2000s and early 2010s.[314] Visvaldas Morkevičius has noted a disconnect from the older generation of celebrated local photographers; this gap contributed to what he perceived as "a lack of acceptance for the younger generation's artistic

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311   Ironically, a well-established artist, Robertas Narkus, who received training in photography and utilises the medium, was not granted membership in the Lithuanian Photographers Association during the early stages of his artistic career. This example serves to illustrate how a field with deeply entrenched historical definitions, such as Lithuanian photography, can often be protective of its boundaries and subject to excessive regulation.

312   Already in 2003, overviewing Estonian art presentations in Lithuania and passingly mentioning its present-day photography exhibition at Vilnius Photography Gallery, Raminta Jurėnaitė noted that new Estonian photography "is radically different from ours", adding that "in Estonia colour photography, oriented towards new computer technologies and image manipulation, is dominant." (Raminta Jurėnaitė, "Estijos menas Vilniuje: Šiuolaikinės dailės kontekstai Baltijos šalių mene", *Dailė*, no. 1 (2003), 84 [author's translation].)

313   Petraitis, "Making sense of images."

314   As recently as 2021, Latvian curator Šelda Puķīte noted that the influence of the traditional humanist school continues "to dominate the Lithuanian photography scene today." While I think "dominate" is too strong a term for the present moment, especially considering the changed and expanded field of practices, this observation accurately highlights its longstanding influence and oversized importance. See Puķīte, "The Imaginary Portrait of Visvaldas Morkevičius or the Lesson of Narcissus", in *Riga Photography Biennial: Next 21* catalogue, ed. Evita Goze (Riga, 2021), 24.

endeavours".[315] This sentiment was echoed by Vytautas Kumža, who characterised his relationship with this ongoing legacy as "frustrating", resulting in a "love-hate relationship with photography" due to how narrowly the local field was defined during his formative years.[316] Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė mentioned similar frustrations, noting not only its "limiting" narrowness in terms of critical and conceptual scope, but also a certain disconnect from the field of contemporary art.

Kiliulytė remarked that in Lithuania, "the two strands that dominated photographic spaces (galleries, events, publications) […] were either documentary storytelling or analogue process-centred." Consequently, "the artists who would work with photography in an expanded field would then not be included in those purely photographic spaces or scenes", an attitude that in her view has shifted only relatively recently.[317] I authored a study in 2012 that discussed this paradoxical lack of inclusivity and Lithuanian photography's anachronistic tendency towards strategic-political representation at that time.[318] My article was critical of the comparative exclusion of young (and more experimental) practitioners in representations of Lithuanian photography, particularly its contemporary manifestations. While acknowledging that much has changed, one can observe that the period during which Lithuanian photography was politically defined via efforts to safeguard its previous legacy elicited a complex and somewhat sceptical response. This scepticism was evident not only among professionals in contemporary art, who often associated photography with anachronistic practices, but also among some young practitioners themselves, especially those aiming to experiment and expand the boundaries of photography. This inclination extended towards the esteemed humanist tradition and towards forging complex relationships with the term photography itself due to its cultural and historical baggage.[319]

This frustration stands in some contrast to photography's standing and relations within Estonia. While its educational context is not the sole reason, it is an important factor. Estonia has long favoured more conceptual and daring forms of photographic experimentation among its Baltic colleagues.[320] EKA's cultivating conceptual openness, inclusivity, and proclivity for forms of contemporary art, combined with theoretical

315 Visvaldas Morkevičius, interview with author, MS Teams, 13 February, 2024. See also Appendix 5.
316 Vytautas Kumža, interview with author, MS Teams, 17 January, 2024. See also Appendix 3.
317 Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė, interview with author, MS Teams, 18 January, 2024. See also Appendix 4.
318 See Paulius Petraitis, "XXI amžių reprezentuoja XX amžiaus vizija? Lietuvos fotografijos metraščiai", in *Fotografija*, no. 1 (2012), 28-31.
319 Their complicated relation with the terms "photography" and "photographer" was noted by both Morkevičius, Kumža, and Kiliulytė.
320 This can be seen in the works and curatorial projects made in the 1990s by Peter Linapp, for instance.

and practical knowledge of photography, resulted in a successful fostering of artistic relations between photography and other media forms. The result was something not unlike what Baker termed "new, formerly unimaginable relations to one another". This pedagogical approach stands somewhat in contrast to VAA's Photography and Media Art Department, which produced student work throughout the 2000s and early 2010s that arguably gravitated more towards either adhering to photography in a narrower sense, or foregoing it out altogether (for contemporary art, video, or something else).

This is not to say that the VAA department had a narrow understanding of photography, or sought to focus only on its more practical applications.[321] Convergences between photography and other media took place in a seemingly systemic fashion to train "contemporary artists able to use photography, videoart and other media", in the words of Vytautas Michelkevičius.[322] Yet perhaps partly because of the local contemporary art scene's rather cold interest in photography at the time, the VAA department was seemingly less successful than their Estonian counterpart in convincing students to label themselves as "photographers". It can be said that if one graduated from photography and wished to be fully embraced within the contemporary art milieu in Lithuania in the 2000s, they had to symbolically "denounce", as it were, their own medium, and to show that they are able to operate within contemporary art with a set of other tools.[323]

As the opposition between the two scenes of art photography and contemporary art in Lithuania was quite clearly demarcated, for many this verged on necessity.[324] In contrast, photography graduates in Estonia could keep the label of "photography" and still operate much more integrally within the sphere of contemporary art. This state of affairs reflected a more open attitude towards photography. My observation

321 See, for example, Vytautas Michelkevičius's overview of photography education at the VAA written in 2010: "Keletas pastabų apie fotografijos edukaciją Lietuvoje", in *Fotografija*, no. 2 (2010), 26-27.

322 Michelkevičius was describing the objective of the Photography and Media Art department in 2010. See Michelkevičius, "Keletas pastabų", 26.

323 Julija Fomina, in a 2008 conversation with curator Valentinas Klimašauskas, observed that contemporary artists in Lithuania are reluctant to associate themselves with photography ("Kai vaizdas tampa pokalbiu: Julijos Fominos ir Valentino Klimašausko pokalbis", *ŠMC Interviu*, no. 11/12 (2008), 38.

324 Somewhat ironically, through the late 2000s and early 2010, emerging Lithuanian photographers who rejected the Humanist tradition in favour of an exploration of new themes and motives were not prioritised for representation and exposure by the Lithuanian Photographers Association, which was a dominant social-political nexus of the local photography scene. On this, see my text on the politics of representation of Lithuanian photography annuals, published by the Association – "XXI amžių reprezentuoja XX amžiaus vizija?".

is that whereas Estonian discourse has devoted conscious and critical appraisal of the notion of expanded photography, this notion is lacking (even missing) by comparison in Lithuanian (and Latvian) discourse.[325] This difference is not accidental, but rather represents a symptom of deeper underlying structural and cultural differences that point to overall different position of photography in the northern-most Baltic state versus its southern neighbours.

It appears that in the Estonian context, the expansion of photography (as understood in reference to Baker's critical argument) has occurred with a greater degree of self-awareness and proactive engagement. This has engendered closer collaboration between the fields of contemporary art and photography. This is notably evident in the realm of education, with a cohort of young photography-educated artists like the aforementioned Õllek, Mari-Leen Kiipli, Cloe Jancis, Sigrid Viir, Ivar Veermae, Hedi Jansoo, and others. All of these artists have completed at least a Bachelor's degree in photography at EKA under Laimre's guidance, and they continue to identify themselves with photography, while working across a diverse range of artistic media and formats.

In contrast, amongst a number of notable former students from the Photography and Media Art program at VAA who have now established successful careers in contemporary art, some appear to have left photography entirely (e.g. Ugnius Gelguda, who now works in duet with Neringa Černiauskaitė as Pakui Hardware).[326] Others do not consistently associate themselves with the medium, even while occasionally employing it (e.g. Robertas Narkus, who notably employed photography in his solo exhibitions "The Board" and "Full Moon" at Vartai gallery in Vilnius in 2020 and 2023, respectively). Conversely, artists like Õllek, whose work frequently appears in contemporary art contexts, consistently identify themselves as artists who use photography, even though this categorization may occasionally surprise others.[327] Overall, there appears to be a more deliberate and visible trend in Estonia whereby former graduates consciously identify as "artists using photography". This can be at least partly attributed to the

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325 As of yet, there is no dedicated photography department in Latvia, therefore it was omitted from a direct comparison here. However, it can be observed that the situation of photography knowledge-educational context in Latvia is more aligned to Lithuania than to Estonia. Throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, there was a comparable distrust in photography from the circles of contemporary, and even traditional, art (as remarked by Arnis Balčus in "Editorial Letter", *FK 1* (Riga: KultKom, 2011), 1).

326 It seems that Gelguda's final purely photographic project was the series "Criminal Landscapes", published as *Crimescapes* (Artbooks) in 2011, and featured in a group exhibition "Generation of the Place: Image, Memory and Fiction in the Baltics" (2011 in Tallinn, and 2012 in Vilnius, curated by Michelkevičius).

327 Õllek, interview. See Appendix 1.

successful and strategically implemented framework of expanded photography within Estonian photography pedagogy, and the broader theoretical and cultural milieux.

In conclusion, this divergence in approaches between Estonia and Lithuania reflects deeper structural and cultural differences in the countries' respective image-making landscapes. The lack of a strong photography tradition in Estonia was a contributing factor in allowing for a more open and inclusive attitude towards the medium, fostering a closer integration of photography with contemporary art. Conversely, Lithuania's entrenched humanist photography tradition sometimes hindered the exploration of photography's expanded possibilities and its integration into contemporary art. This historical context influenced the educational approaches and career trajectories of photographers in each country, leading to differing levels among artists of their self-identification with the medium.

2.3 Historical Precedents: Intermediality in Baltic Art Photography

This chapter has thus far examined the concepts of the medium, intermediality, transmediality, hybridity, and expanded photography, outlining their conceptual and critical dimensions. This study mobilizes the notion of intermediality, together with Christina Ljunberg's framework delineating three essential characteristics of intermedial instances. These characteristics encompass *radical performativity* (the capacity to generate novel and distinct hybrid forms); *strong self-reflexivity* (the ability to draw attention to their own method of production); and *effective communication* (the potentiality to offer viewers and users access to diverse layers of meaning).

These capabilities find compelling demonstrations in recent instances of art photography originating from the Baltic states. However, prior to surveying the contemporary landscape, it is worth reviewing some earlier examples of intermedial photography from the region. Such an examination provides a more informed perspective, allowing us to discern both continuities and discontinuities. While not attempting an exhaustive overview, this section briefly highlights a few examples of intermedial gestures involving photography that predate the shift to networked culture.

2.3.1 From Historical Antecedents to the Contemporary Situation

The contemporary cultural landscape is notably shaped by networks, drawing many of its defining features from them. This involves a cultural inclination towards inter-

mediacy and the blurring of clear-cut boundaries between forms. Despite this, the concept of intermediality within the realm of photography is not an occurrence that is exclusive to the digital age. Yet the current manifestations are also conceptually novel. A significant distinction lies in the fact that current instances of intermedial photographic works have become integral to the well-established vanguard of art photography. In contrast, intermedial manifestations from the latter half of the 20th century mostly existed on the periphery of the primary discourse on photography. Essentially, while contemporary intermedial photography acts as a driving force within art photography—pushing the boundaries of the field and offering avenues for reimagining it—photography's historically intermedial nature primarily remained positioned outside the realm of official discourse.

A good case in point is a retrospective group exhibition *(Non)photographic field. 1988-1995* (*(Ne)fotografinis laukas. 1988-1995*), organized and curated by Ieva Meilutė-Svinkūnienė. It was presented at Klaipėda Cultural Communication Center (KCCC) in 2016, and in a slightly smaller version at the Vitas Luckus Photography Center at the Photography Museum in Šiauliai in 2015. In this significant research, Meilutė-Svinkūnienė has collected historical examples of photographic works dating from the last two decades of the 20th century that functioned outside of the official canon of art photography, a canon formed mainly by the Lithuanian Photographers Association during this period. *(Non)photographic field. 1988-1995* included some pieces that crossed boundaries with other media such as painting or performance. As the exhibition text detailed, most of the presented works were not considered artistic (sometimes even labelled as "anti-art") and photographic at the time. This meant that they were largely excluded from publications in the then-functioning photography-dedicated press, or from display in exhibitions.[328]

Drawing upon Raymond Williams's structural classification, these remarkable experiments from the past can be categorized as "residual" cultural moments. They operated on the periphery of the prevailing status quo, and it is important to distinguish them from what Williams termed "emergent" cultural movements, i.e. those pivotal shifts in practices that give birth to new values, meanings, and relationships.[329] Many retrospective exhibitions that revisit unconventional practices of the past have the inherent possibility that these captivating artworks might collectively hint at a cohesive and influential movement. Despite this potentiality, they were primarily experimental endeavours that embraced audacious ideas, often without aspiring to attain the status

328 "(Ne)fotografinis laukas", *Vito Luckaus Fotografijos Centras*, https://vlfc.lt/paroda/vykusi-paroda/ (accessed 25 August, 2022).

329 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122-124

of "legitimate" art. This stands in stark contrast to the present day, when intermedial photographic works not only take centre stage in art photography and are effortlessly integrated into contemporary art contexts, but also push the boundaries of formal presentation and (more crucially) forge extensive networked connections.

That the majority of the pieces featured in *(Non)photographic field* adhered to the traditional mode of presentation, framing two-dimensional photographic images behind glass (with Gintautas Trimakas' work being a notable exception). However, contemporary artists utilizing photography have expanded the horizons of image presentation (see section 3.2.2 "Reframing Photography: Exploring the Boundaries"). It merits mention that many of the works included in the exhibition may not be considered strictly intermedial. Instead, they existed outside period confines of the canon of photographic art, due to perceived aesthetic experimentation, or because they documented live-action performances. Examples include works by Gintaras Zinkevičius, Donatas Srogis, Gintaras Znamierovskis, Linas Liandzbergis, and Herkus Kunčius. Only a few of the displayed works, such as Trimakas's "Torso – a body part" ("Torsas – kūno dalis", 1995) can be unequivocally categorized as intermedial. This is understandable, as the *(Non)photographic field* did not aim to delve into the realm of intermediality, but was rather centred on the discourse of non-photographic versus photographic.[330] Nevertheless, the exhibition successfully presented a series of photographic works that not only existed outside the dominant photographic canon of the time but also displayed intriguing indications of intermedial influences.

Zinkevičius was a member of a Lithuanian experimental artists' group called "Post Ars", officially formed in 1989, and composed of Aleksas Andriuškevičius, Robertas Antinis, Česlovas Lukenskas, and Zinkevičius himself. The group (primarily Zinkevičius) is credited with numerous significant uses of photography during the first half of the 1990s as a means for documenting various artistic performances. Agnė Narušytė convincingly argued that the group's photographic documentation should not be viewed solely as that (documentation), but rather as part of a broader impulse with artistic aspirations.[331] This perspective aligns with Andy Grundberg's exploration in *How Photography Became Contemporary Art*, where he examined the global condition of photographs conceived as documents of land or performance art, revealing their deep entanglement in relations that encompass artistic aspirations in various ways.[332]

330 This further underscores the sporadic nature of research on intermedial photographic practices in the Baltic states, both in historical and contemporary contexts.

331 Agnė Narušytė, "Post Ars Photo Performances: Material for Research or a Work of Art?", *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi*, vol. 27, no. 1-3 (2018).

332 Andy Grundberg, *How Photography Became Contemporary Art: Inside an Artistic Revolution from Pop to the Digital Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

However, that the group's members notably considered themselves "outsiders with regard to the artistic establishment, which they meant to disrupt".[333] In this regard, they were rightly included in the *(Non)photographic field*, as the group's photographic work at the time of its creation was considered to exist outside the discourse of art photography.

Yet, despite this outsider status, performance photography and live-action documentation constitute one of the more pronounced historical cross-mixings between photography and other media in the Baltic states. Laine Kristberga's recent doctoral dissertation looked at the intermedial aspects of performance art in Latvia during the 1964-1989 period.[334] While Kristberga does not focus on photography in particular, she finds that performance art in late Soviet Latvia was marked by intermedial appropriation, with artists not only adopting diverse motifs and aesthetics, but also reshaping performance art itself into a hybrid form that found its way into the public sphere through exhibition catalogues, book covers, photographs, paintings, and serigraphs.[335] Kristberga further points to a complex relationship between a live experience of a performance piece and its viewing through mediated means such as photographs. Although the former is often regarded as the more authentic involvement, when photographic documentation is used strategically and conceptually, "performance art becomes a hybrid, which manifests both the medium-specific features of the live process and the [photographic] reproduction".[336]

This hybrid duality carried into the late 1990s and 2000s, when intermedial photographic gestures in Lithuania were produced by, among others, Jurgita Remeikytė, Dainius Liškevičius, and Darius Žiūra. Remeikytė, who graduated from photography and media at VAA, has been pursuing photography in a way that melded an interest in traditional analogue language and practices with an experimentation with forms and processes. This is evident in, for instance, "For the memory" (2000), which combined black and white traditional silver printing technique on slightly warped wall-attached ceramic objects, creating a photo-object that pointed to the fragility of the archival potential of the image as well as that of (pictorial) memory overall. In a series titled "Field (2)" (2006), the combination is between pinhole photography technique and performativity. In the fire-ravaged landscape of the Curonian Spit, Remeikytė has

333 Narušytė, "Post Ars Photo Performances", 223.
334 Laine Kristberga, "Intermedial Appropriation as a Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of Performance Art in Latvia in the Period of Late Socialism (1964-1989)" (PhD diss., Art Academy of Latvia, 2019).
335 Kristberga, "Intermedial Appropriation", 150.
336 Kristberga, "Intermedial Appropriation", 172-173.

thrown 36 traditional plastic canisters of 35mm film (with a hole in them, thus making a pinhole camera) with a piece of unexposed photographic paper in them. This produced memorable abstract images that bear traces of both the landscape and light, as well as the performative act inherent to them (see Fig. 8).

Performativity is also intrinsic to Liškevičius's work "The Centres of the World / Enjoy Yourself" (1999) and "Timer / 8 sec." (2002), which combined performative acts with a critical interest in specificities of their photographic documentation.[337] "The Centres of the World / Enjoy Yourself" consisted of photographic documentation of the artist standing on his head in various mundane locations—streets, parks, supermarkets or art museums—and occasionally included reactions of the passers-by. Much in line with Kristberga's findings, this project existed in a space between performative act and its (photographic) documentation – a space that encompasses possibilities and features of both. In "Timer / 8 sec.", the artist engaged with a timer feature of a rangefinder camera. By virtue of this engagement and its matter-of-fact title, this project recalls John Divola's photographic series "As Far As I Could Get (Ten Seconds)".[338] Whereas Divola's work was serious and formulaic, however, Liškevičius approached his subject in a more playful and experimental fashion. By welcoming accidents and processes he could not foresee or control (such as giving the camera into the hands of other artists, or throwing it from the Green bridge in Vilnius), Liškevičius constructed a timeline of performances *with* the camera, where one couldn't really function without the other.

Camera iss also central for Žiūra. In his monumental multichannel video work "Gustoniai" (ongoing from 2001) and photographic series "Portraits" (ongoing from 2005), the camera remains unseen, off-screen yet central. It mediates not only between the performative portraits and the viewers, but also between the documenting artist and his subjects. Despite the centrality of the camera, it seems that photography for Žiūra remains somewhat instrumental;[339] it is a (convenient and methodological) technical device for a documentation of passing time and people.

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337 As an artistic perspective of conceiving performative acts through their photographic mediation, Liškevičius' work can be compared to that of the aforementioned Anna Mendieta. While the former is more ironic and, oftentimes, even playful, and the latter is more gender- and body-focused, both artists were keen on paying attention to the particularities of the photographic act.

338 This series is further discussed in Chapter 3.

339 Interestingly, this is reflected by the artist himself, who acknowledged feeling somewhat "heretical" in relation to the various media he has employed, including photography. (Darius Žiūra, "Apie autoportretą ir kita", *Fotografija*, no. 1 (2013), 35.

Figure 8. Left: Jurgita Remeikytė, from the series "Field (2)", digital print, 2006. Right: a moment of the performative act in making the series.

In an exhibition context, both Žiūra and Liškevičius present photographs in a traditional manner, i.e. as two-dimensional square images attached to a wall. And while Liškevičius invests in arranging his (usually small-size and unframed) photographs in creative and non-monotonous grids, Žiūra's presentation follows a conventional approach. For example, in a recent landmark exhibition "Portraits" at the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, photographs were arranged in a straight line at a viewer's "natural" eye level.[340] In this sense, Žiūra's photographs, while powerfully evocative in other aspects, remain tethered to the traditional format of photographic presentation. This affects their intermedial status. Referring again to the characteristics formulated by Ljunberg, it can be observed that while "Portraits" display *effective communication*, they somewhat lack both in *radical performativity* (as the works do not engage in creating new hybrid forms) and *strong self-reflexivity* (their mode of production seeks to remain "transparent" or non-visible), thus making them partially intermedial.

Intermedial gestures involving photography were produced not only by photographers or through performance documentation; Lithuanian painters like Šarūnas Sauka, Audrius Puipa, and Igoris Piekuras were also engaged in such practices.[341] They explored photographic motifs, occasionally going beyond straightforward employment of a photograph for the making of paintings, and instead engaging with photographic

340 The exhibition, curated by Anders Kreuger, was on view 2022 11 18 - 2023 02 19. Besides "Portraits" series, "Gustoniai", "Monument for Utopia" and "Video studio" were also included.

341 See Erika Grigoravičienė, "Intermedialumas ir bioįvairovė XX a. 9–10-ojo dešimtmečio Lietuvos dailėje, arba Dviejų kengūrų pasakojimas", in *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, no. 99 (2020).

language on a broader aesthetic and conceptual level. For example, Puipa collaborated with photographers Trimakas and Saulius Paukštys to create "Staged pictures" ("Inscenizuoti paveikslai"), a series of photographic images based on historical paintings.[342] Their photographic reinterpretation of Spanish Baroque master Jusepe de Ribera's 1626 canvas "Saint Jerome and the Angel" retained the expressive quality of the original, while incorporating photographic effects such as the blur of the saint's hand, and high-contrast black-and-white lighting (Fig. 9). This image exudes a sense of performativity or even theatricality (with regards to its imagined creation process), coupled with a mood that oscillates between seriousness and a touch of irony.

This same attitude resonates in Sauka's painting "A Negative View" ("Negatyvus požiūris", 1982), which depicts a familiar family portrait in a slightly surreal context, featuring individuals of various ages alongside several animals like a kangaroo, a parrot, and a fish. What makes "A Negative View" particularly memorable and photographic is its peculiar technique: the image was painted as a photographic negative, characterized by a distinct dark-blue tonality reminiscent of sepia toning in historical photographs. Sepia toning, which was previously done by hand, is today commonly used as a filter-effect (e.g. on Instagram), often to indicate historicity or nostalgia. While the painting could easily have opted for the simple sepia to show the same scene, the colour inversion produces a negative effect widely associated with photography, while the family portrait is one its more recognizable genres.[343] As Erika Grigoravičienė observed, both Sauka and Puipa tapped into the historical processes and formal aesthetics of photography, effectively blurring the opposition between painting and photography through intermedial interaction.[344]

Throughout the last decades of the 20th century and the 2000s, not only artists have made innovative work that blurred the accepted boundaries of photography. Local curators have also produced exhibitions that displayed photography in a systemic conjunction with various other media. While uncommon, these occasions afforded a hint of photography's possible melding and connections points with other forms, suggesting a possibility for photographers to consider their work as not opposed to, but in relation to painting, sculpture, video, drawings, etc. One early example of such

342 Several works from the "Staged pictures" series were featured in the *(Non-)photographic field. 1988-1995* exhibition. Subsequently, the series was exhibited at the Antanas Mončys House-Museum in Palanga in 2018 and the Vilnius Photography Gallery in 2019.

343 In Lithuanian, I wrote on some of the peculiarities of family portrait photography – „Šventinio fotografavimosi paradoksai", *Permainų šventė*, MO exhibition catalogue, eds. Tomas Pabedinskas and Ugnė Paberžytė. Vilnius: MO museum, 2021.

344 Grigoravičienė, "Intermedialumas ir bioįvairovė XX a. 9–10-ojo dešimtmečio Lietuvos dailėje", 260.

Figure 9. Left:. Audrius Puipa and Gintautas Trimakas, from the series "Staged pictures" ("Inscenizuoti paveikslai"), 1996. Right: Jusepe de Ribera, "Saint Jerome and the Angel", 1626, Public domain image.

an occasion is an exhibition *Signs of Human. Sculpture, drawings, photography* (orig. *Žmogaus ženklai. Skulptūra, piešiniai, fotografija*), curated by Rasa Andriušytė and Elona Lubytė at the Klaipėda Exhibition Hall in 1988. In this group exhibition, sculptures were displayed alongside photographic works made by a group of young and up-and-coming photographers, all of them in their 20s or early 30s.[345] The media were not separated by their kind, as was then rather usual for more traditional exhibitions, but were shown side to side. This gesture of melding of traditional artforms was, at the time, a rather innovative curatorial gesture by Andriušytė and Lubytė.[346]

345 Photographers who took part in the exhibition were: Vytautas Balčytis, Alvydas Lukys, Algimantas Maldutis, Remigijus Pačėsa, Saulius Paukštys, Gintautas Stulgaitis, Andrius Surgailis, and Gintautas Trimakas.

346 Julija Fomina, "Meno parodų kuratorystė Lietuvoje: sampratos ir raida" (PhD diss., Lithuania Culture Research Institute & Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2015), 76-77, http://talpykla.elaba.lt/elaba-fedora/objects/elaba:11679817/datastreams/MAIN/content.

2.3.2 Lithuanian "Postphotography": A Curious Case

During the 2000s, especially the latter part of the decade, a growing interest emerged in Lithuania with regard to reevaluating the intrinsic mechanisms and boundaries of photography. This included a focus on its hybrid interactions. Under the aegis of the short-lived yet productive "Postphotography" (orig. "Postfotografija") movement, these practical experiments, critical inquiries, and explorations of photography's state of being and intersections with other media found perhaps their most unified and concrete form.[347] This noteworthy and curious movement formed in 2006, and marked a specific interest in re-appraising the medium specificity of art photography, shared by a group of likeminded artists, writers, and curators. The main interest here was photography itself.

Most of the works were produced in response to specific (and specifically understood) issues and problems related with the medium qualities of photography. In Postphotography (that is, in how this interest has formed in Lithuania) the history and theory of photography functioned as a special axis of relevance; what came before enabled the "post" condition.[348] It is, in this sense, a *meta*photography through and through. This deep interest in specificities of the medium is what marks an important difference between postphotographic practices of the late 2000s and contemporary intermedial instances. Today in the Baltic countries, photography is employed as part of wider interest in visual networked culture and engagement with creating images. The specific critical interests of the Postphotography's period in Lithuania—including manipulation, doubt in the image, medium-specificity, and similar—remain as if suspended in the current image-making landscape, somewhat latent but not truly active, since today's photographic practices are instead marked by more global interests and perspectives.

Andrew Dewdney notes that the term "post-photography" was contested, if not outright ambiguous.[349] It was pioneeringly discussed in Mitchell's 1992 book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. The term emerged and was localised in Lithuania with the 2006 group exhibition *komentarai@3xpozicija.lt*, and an accompanying special issue of *(Post)Fotografija* journal. The specificity of the concept's adaptation contributed to its distinctive connotations in the local context. In Lithuania, postphotography was mainly understood in relation to the seemingly

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347 One of the declared interests of Lithuanian Postphotography movement was in the hybrid forms of photography.

348 David Joselit characterizes "post" as indicating "both the termination and transformation of a previous era and its signature styles" (*After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), xv).

349 Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 49.

exhausted and depleted medium.[350] This was a problem evidenced mostly within its visible practices.

Postphotography was defined as photography that "looks at itself",[351] in other words as practice that aims to de-construct the photographic medium, and is a looking-inside, an introspective view. It was a movement that sought to de-mythologise what it saw as lingering myths and beliefs attached to photography. While more recently there have been some discussion regarding whether postphotography has made any lasting contributions to the ongoing interests and approaches of Lithuanian art photography,[352] it was a productive period. Some postphotographic (as formed and understood in Lithuania) interests continued into the 2010s, for instance in Remeikytė's 2014 solo exhibition "Interiors beyond view" and Gytis Skudžinskas's solo exhibition and publication *Some thesis on Photography* from 2015.

Whereas in local Postphotography the critical attention was focused more on a rather narrowly understood problematic of the medium, its metacritical and manipulative aspects in forming the image, today's art photographic fields in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia work in a networked field of cultural relations and associations that far exceeds medium-related questions. The present-day photographic look does not so much go *inside* the medium, but rather departs *from* it into the multidimensional and layered co-existence between culture, technology and social sphere. This evolution of photographic practice, from introspective self-analysis to its integration within a networked cultural and technological context, signifies the dynamic and adaptive nature of the medium as it continues to respond to the evolving dynamics of our interconnected world.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has undertaken a critical exploration of the concept of intermediality as it pertains to the practice of art photography in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Intermedi-

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350 See Tomas Čiučelis, "Valsas su nemirėliu: iki, po, už ir be fotografijos. Gyčio Skudžinsko paroda „12 fotografijos tiesų" VDA „Titanike"", *Artnews*, 2015, https://artnews.lt/valsas-su-nemireliu-iki-po-uz-ir-be-fotografijos-gycio-skudzinsko-paroda-12-fotografijos-tiesu-vda-titanike-27360 (accessed 13 January, 2023); and Jurij Dobriakov, "Fotografijos laidojimas jūroje: Apmąstymai, išprovokuoti Akvilės Anglickaitės audiovizualinės instaliacijos „Vandenynas"", *7 meno dienos*, no. 37 (2017): 8.

351 Agnė Narušytė, *Lietuvos fotografija: 1990 – 2010* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2011), author's translation, 278.

352 Jurij Dobriakov, "Postfotografija: Lietuvos fotografijos evoliucijos akligatvis ar tarpinė grandis?", in *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, no. 99 (2020).

ality, as a concept rooted in the fusion of media and the generation of novel forms, offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex, self-reflexive, and multi-layered nature of contemporary art photography. It provides a conceptual perspective for us to appreciate photography as a dynamic and evolving medium, constantly reinventing itself to reflect the shifting currents of our cultural and technological milieu.

In our interconnected networked culture, where we seamlessly multitask across various platforms, applications, and screens, concepts of hybridity seems more natural than any aspiration for purity. Photography, in particular, exemplifies this transformation. While it was once celebrated as a medium capable of producing transparent representations mirroring the world "without the aid of the artist", it has evolved into a complex and ever-changing network of virtual nodes and data clusters, capable of operating in diverse contexts and frameworks.

While earlier instances of intermediality in Baltic photography were often marginalized or located on the periphery of the primary discourse on photography, contemporary intermedial practices have firmly established themselves at the forefront of art photography. Artists are actively engaging with other artistic forms, producing novel hybrid works, and openly reflecting upon their methods of production. In this context, an evolved version of the concept of "expanded photography" appears to become particularly salient in Estonia, fostering closer collaboration between contemporary art and photography fields. This is evident in the work of artists like Õllek, Jancis, Viir, and others. This contrastingly aligns with the more introspective period of "Postphotography" in Lithuania, highlighting a shift from medium-specific concerns to a broader engagement with networked cultural and technological contexts.

The examination of media-related notions and historical precedents has provided insights into the evolving nature of photography within the Baltic region. It is essential to acknowledge that photography in the contemporary Baltic art milieu now operates as a complex intermedial entity, integrated within a networked cultural and technological context that transcends narrow medium-related inquiries. This transformation underscores the medium's adaptability and its capacity to respond dynamically to the ever-evolving cultural and technological landscape. The subsequent chapters unfold further the multifaceted practices of Baltic artists, shedding light on how networked meaning-making expands on and augments photography's intermedial nature.

3. Networked Meaning-Making

3.1 Shifting Paradigms: Classical vs. Networked Schemes of Photographic Meaning-Making

This chapter's primary objective is to formulate a conceptual proposition: contemporary art photography operates within a meaning-making paradigm that in many (though not all) cases fundamentally diverges from the one that predominated in the regime of "classical" photography. In other words, there has been a significant shift, a sort of regime change, within the overarching framework that governs how photography creates and positions itself within our cultural landscape. What follows elucidates this transition by means of a series of case studies, and accompanying discussion of how meaning functions within these cases. On a broader level, this chapter thereby addresses the complex and admittedly challenging question of how photographic images acquire meaning. It outlines some of the cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical factors that play a role in this process. Crucially, Chapter 3 argues that the nature of photographic meaning has evolved from a predominantly straightforward and self-contained state, to a regime that is considerably more interconnected, relational, multi-layered, and diffuse. It posits that meaning-making is not an inherently evident aspect, but rather an active discourse in its own right. It is a phenomenon that both shapes and is shaped by various influences. Furthermore, meaning-making serves as a valuable lens through which we can inflect discussions of contemporary photographic works.

Traditionally, the meaning ascribed to a photograph has been closely linked to its visual content. It is as if the image's rectangular frame serves as a boundary, demarcating the area where meaning originates, and simultaneously distinguishing and isolating the image itself. This isolation imbues the image with an aura of autonomy, as if it was an independent entity. The image thus was conceived as if a sovereign stage, with a set of meaning-making relations largely confined to the image itself, flowing from it to the object/subject represented, and following a certain representational logic. Roland Barthes, in his well-known description of the power of photographs, captured this theoretical perspective with the phrase "that has been". This phrase encapsulates the belief that the photograph is the visual locus of signification, emphasizing the significance of the relationship between the object and the image as conveyed through the photographic process. Furthermore, Barthes' description conveys a sense of wonder; a recognition that what we perceive in an image genuinely occurred (evoking what Barthes has elsewhere termed the "reality effect").[353]

353   See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect", *The Rustle of Language* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986).

This connection with reality is intertwined with photography's culturally and historically established role as a trustworthy means of documenting visual information and as a medium of transparency.[354] It is as though it asserts: "this has truly taken place, as is presented in the photograph". There is a deeply philosophical dimension to this assertion. It can be seen as part of a long-held cultural desire: a longing for images that would be perfectly trustworthy. To use the evocative words of Jean-Luc Nancy: "A desire for the image to speak of itself, in itself, and for itself".[355] Put differently, for it to be contained by what it is and what is in it. It is also a desire for images that would be easily readable and perfectly transparent; thus, for images *to be what they show*. As long as images faithfully convey what they portray (in other words, maintain transparency), we can place our trust in them.

Since its inception, photography appeared to offer a glimmer of hope in response to this yearning for reliability. Part of this optimism stemmed from the perception that the photographic camera was a mechanical device devoid of human subjectivity. This gave rise to a theoretical construct of a seemingly inherent transparency within photography. This belief was as old as the medium itself, as demonstrated in greater depth in Chapter 2.[356] In 2008, Bernd Stiegler asserted that "photography is the technical medium of realism", meaning that "in photographs, reality becomes visible". He further clarified: "This is photography's special legacy, from which the medium has not been able to free itself, and it continues to determine our image of photography".[357]

2008 may have been about the last year to unconditionally and convincingly make such a statement. The changes brought in the following few years by then-nascent networks have dynamically altered the landscape and functionality of photography. Yet the idea of an apparently unmediated presence remains an important (if questioned) theoretical node of photography: according to this notion, a photograph functions as a passive receptor of the light emanating from the objects or scenes before it at the moment of capture. As Tīfentāle put it more recently: "The medium of photography seems to dissolve before our eyes as if we were looking at the subject directly".[358] This

354 On historical origin and circumstances of the culturally-instituted belief in the mechanical objectivity of photography, see Brian Winston "The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription", in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (London: Routledge, 1993).

355 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 72.

356 See e.g. discussion of 19th-century photographer William Henry Fox Talbot and 20th-century film theorist Rudolf Arnheim.

357 Bernd Stiegler, "Photography as the Medium of Reflection", in *The Meaning of Photography*, eds. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2008), 194.

358 Alise Tīfentāle, "Photography: Taken, not Made", in *Territories, Borders, and Checkpoints*, ed. Arnis Balčus (Riga: Society Riga Photomonth, 2016), 91.

entrenched understanding of transparency caused by a seemingly mechanical and objective camera serves as a fundamental basis for apprehending the classical regime of meaning-making, helping elucidate why it places such paramount importance on the image and its visual contents.

3.1.1 Borders and Boundaries

The concept of meaning-within-an-image sets clear boundaries that direct the viewer's attention to (visual) information. To use a metaphor, this regime can be likened to a system with active border control. The boundaries in this context are not only distinctly defined, but also subject to strict operational control. Expanding upon this metaphor, one could envision a regime akin to a heavily patrolled border where all incoming and outgoing traffic is subject to scrutiny. This implies restricted freedom of movement, a controlled and organized migration. In this scenario, the "goods" in transit are crates of potential meaning flowing for the most part in an orderly fashion out of the image. The image here appears not unlike a state with operational and clearly-defined borders: an autonomous site that serves as the centre of political, cultural, and economic importance that spills over its territory over controlled motions.

I would characterize this as the "classical scheme" of meaning-making in photography (see Fig. 10). It is important to note that this regime is by no means purely historical; it continues to be successfully employed in fields like photojournalism and documentary-style artistic photography. The recent photographic series and book *Soon to be Gone* by Lithuanian photographer Tadas Kazakevičius exemplifies this classical approach, capturing local rural inhabitants and their living spaces. According to this scheme, a photographer aims their camera at subjects deemed *worthy* of documentation. The resulting photographs are shaped not only by technical skills such as proficient framing, meticulous lighting and colour correction, and an overall sense of visual aesthetics, but also by the inherent qualities of the subjects themselves.

In the case of Kazakevičius' project, these subjects are the people and places he portrays: remnants of an era seemingly on the verge of disappearing. There is ample space for the photographer's craftsmanship to be discernible, and we can generally distinguish those photographs that "work" well within this regime from those that remain mediocre. In *Soon to be Gone*, this craftsmanship is evident—not only in the skilful use of the mentioned technical aspects, but also (and perhaps especially) in the time the photographer invested in reaching out to these individuals and places, establishing personal connections that allow the subjects to appear visibly comfortable

in the photographs. Still, conceptually, aesthetically, and practically, the work could have been created in the 20th century. There is little within the photographs *per se* that betrays their contemporary origin; what is captured is the paramount and fundamental characteristic. In this photographic regime, *what we see, essentially, is what the photographer wants to show*.
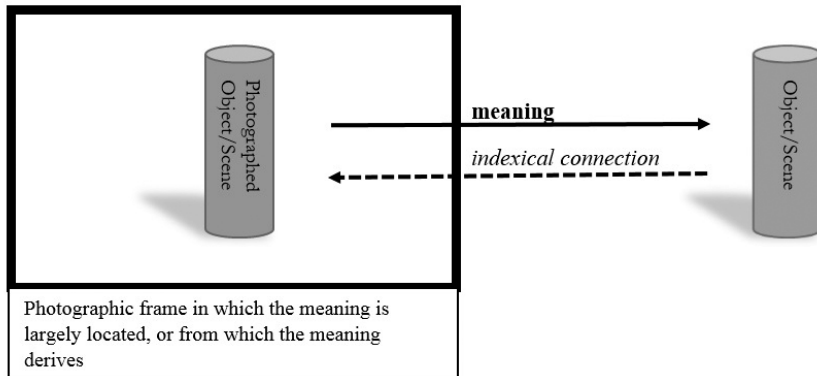

Figure 10. The classical scheme of meaning-making in a photograph. The meaning goes from the photograph to the object photographed, the link between them argued to be "indexical". Author's illustration.

In contrast to the classical scheme, I propose the existence of a "networked scheme" of meaning-making in photography. This regime has become increasingly prevalent in recent photographic works. It is characterized by its emphasis on relationality. Rather than directing the viewer's attention solely to the depicted subject, photographs operating within this framework establish connections with broader, more diffuse, and initially seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena and processes. In these images, *what we perceive may not necessarily align with what is intended and implied, or even what gets imagined.* It is as if we are presented with a dynamic masquerade, where the surface of the image masks something else. The photograph may be addressing an entirely different concept than what its visual appearance suggests. The intricacies of this meaning-making process represent the current chapter's focal point of investigation. What follows discloses the reasons why artists have pivoted from using photographs as direct indicators of given subjects, to employing them to evoke abstract sensations or emotions, and the mechanisms through which they have done this.

Circling back to my earlier metaphor (admittedly still in a somewhat rudimentary form), in the networked regime the image resembles a location devoid of border control. Unrestricted borders promote movement—sometimes in large, disorderly, and chaotic groups. There is considerably less control over the nature of this movement,

what "goods" are exported and imported. The image in this regime functions somewhat akin to a Schengen state, where there is minimal or no control over incoming and outgoing traffic. While certain types of traffic may be more highly valued and culturally prioritized than others, all traffic is theoretically regarded as equal and possible: anything can move in or out within this framework.

Interestingly, the emergence of the *networked scheme of meaning-making* in photography aligns historically with a significant shift in border operations in the three Baltic countries. On 6 December, 2007, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were among the nine new EU member states integrated into the Schengen area. In these three countries, internal land border checks were discontinued as of 21 December, 2007, while checks on individuals at air borders continued for a slightly longer period, concluding on 30 March, 2008. The opening of borders by Schengen was pivotal for regional photography practitioners, with direct consequences not only on personal but also on cultural and professional levels. In our interview, Morkevičius noted that the Lithuanian photography scene was characterised by relative inertia, and a less-than-openly welcoming atmosphere for aspiring experimenters. However, "with the advent of open borders, we began to witness a shift." Open outer borders ultimately seem to have contributed to more local openness, as more active involvement in international communities, acceptance, and new connections encouraged practitioners to experiment: "We started to recognize our own worth without waiting for validation from within Lithuania. This newfound acceptance abroad bolstered our confidence and encouraged a mentality that you can do whatever you want".[359]

As physical borders and border checks were dismantled in the Baltic countries, on a global scale the field of photography underwent transformation due to new functionalities.[360] This period in the late 2000s coincided with monumental changes in photography. While the most intense phase of digital transformation (discussed in Chapter 1) was gradually winding down, a new phase was ascendant. The networked capacity for image creation, sharing, and distribution marked a new phase in the sociotechnological development of photography. These new functionalities had a profound impact on how we perceive photographs and how meaning is attributed to them.

In the former regime, a clear distinction exists between the inside and outside: this cinlcuded the interior of the frame, the image, and the realm of meaning. A well-defined border separates what is contained within the photograph (the source

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359   Morkevičius, interview. See Appendix 5.

360   In 2008, a pioneering article by Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis explored a "growing cultural shift" in photography's capacity as affected by the Internet ("A life more photographic: Mapping the networked image", *Photographies*, no. 1 (2008).

of meaningfulness) from everything external (either less meaningful or entirely devoid of meaning). Meaning is automatically attributed based on the content within the frame, and it tends to remain relatively stable. Conversely, in the second regime, borders are fluid, meanings are subject to fluctuation, and identities can shift. Meaning is constructed and may even appear arbitrary, but it never seems to truly reach a state of complete stability or resolution.

Photographic images operating within the regime of networked meaning-making *suppose* quite a bit. That is, they ask the viewer to actively engage with meaning through activating their collateral knowledge and understanding of cultural codes. Before delving deeper into what this entails and into the current regime of meaning-making, I will explore some specific characteristics of classical meaning operations in photography.

3.1.2 The Classical Scheme

Examining 20th-century photography (particularly that from before the digital revolution) reveals two fundamental principles of meaning-making. The first principle is a belief in the inherent self-sufficiency of the image-object and its binary, finite relationship. The second principle places significant emphasis on a relatively straightforward (direct) line of meaning that emanates from the content depicted in the photograph. In this regime, the photograph essentially exclaims, "This!" By making this proclamation, it directs our attention to what is portrayed within it, and the object or scene gains meaning and significance solely through the act of being captured photographically. This quality of "thisness", represented by a linear meaning-making vector, is relatively straightforward, remaining blurred yet recognizable even in more experimental manifestations of photographic instances.

The classical meaning-making in photography was theoretically grounded in the concept of photographic indexicality. As outlined in Chapter 1, the concept of the index was introduced into photography and film theory during the late 1960s and 1970s, borrowed from Peirce's semiotic framework. According to my research, the earliest articulation of the connection between photographic ontology and Peirce's semiotics was put forth by film theorist Peter Wollen. In an influential article titled "The Semiology of the Cinema", featured in his book *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (1969), Wollen advocated for the usefulness of Peirce's semiotic system and the notion of the index in particular for the better understanding of the exceptionality of the photographic medium. He correlated Peirce's index, which was relatively obscure in visual theory at the time, with the influential concept of the ontology of the photographic

image as proposed by André Bazin. In doing so, he effectively equated indexicality with photographic ontology.[361] By the mid-1970s, Wollen's interpretation had become a fundamental element of visual and film theory, elevating Peirce's semiotics into a prominent position within cultural criticism.[362]

David Levi Strauss has written on belief in photography and the overall human desire for truthful imagery. Regarding Peirce's index and photographic images, he observed that "indexicality has served, over the past forty years or so, as a kind of materialization of belief".[363] In other words, the concept of the index aligned well with the overall longing for credible and trustworthy images. This is one of the reasons why the narrowly defined notion of indexicality—typically understood as a material or existential connection between a sign and its object—was so readily embraced within photography theory. Another incentive for this embrace was the perception that the concept mirrored and reinforced the purification project of classical photography, as expressed in the idea that objects "imprinted themselves" onto the photochemical surface. If the link between an object and its photograph was deemed so robust as to constitute the very ontological foundation of the medium, it becomes easier to comprehend why classical photography often emphasized the iconographic interpretation of the image. Consequently, the meaning of the photograph became explicitly equated (in the words of John Tagg, "snugly fit and seemingly fully adequate"),[364] with the subject depicted in it.

Theory often mirrors the prevailing perceptions of photography. In both popular and artistic contexts, photography embodied what Andrew Dewdney referred to as the medium's "inescapable naturalising logic of the world".[365] This meant that photographs inherently possessed a quality of "thisness", presenting the world as it appeared to be. Regardless of the context, photographic images seemed unable to evade the fact that there were real people or scenes before the camera's lens at the moment the shutter clicked. As psychologist Halla Bellof noted in her 1985 book *Camera Culture*: "The image of a photograph does represent something out in the world. It has great face validity. However sophisticated we are about the construction of social realities, we must intuitively acknowledge the authenticity of

361 Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bury St. Edmunds: BFI, 1998), 86.
362 As evidenced by, for example, Leland A. Poague, "The Semiology of Peter Wollen: A Reconsideration", *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1975).
363 David Levi Strauss, *Photography and Belief* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2020), 41.
364 John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 15.
365 Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 36.

a photograph".[366] The authentic documentary nature of photography, rooted in the seemingly objective and mechanical characteristics of the camera that held sway from the 19th century until the advent of digital technology, is a well-documented aspect of the medium.[367]

However, it is equally important to recognize that throughout history there were numerous attempts to employ photography differently, to subvert the dominant logic. Yet even these alternative approaches, according to Dewdney, were influenced by the medium's inherent truthfulness:

> From the 1930s onwards there have been communist, socialist, feminist and Black arts movements which have used photography in attempts to show an alternative to the world showed by dominant photography. This has been done both within the framing of the photographic document as well as in extended pictorial forms. The great majority of this work remains unrecognised by the institutions of collection and scholarship. But alternative photography was also bound by the same bourgeois social, documentary or aesthetic forms and the *acceptance of the representational logic of the photographic image* (emphasis added).[368]

Dewdney's argument suggests that while these movements aimed to depict different subject matter, they did not fundamentally challenge photography's underlying foundations. In other words, according to Dewdney, they presented alternative realities while still adhering to the narrow understanding of indexical representation as the ontological basis of photography.

I would argue that the use of photography by an emerging group of mostly American conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s poses a unique challenge to the implicit character of the medium during a time when alternatives were scarce. Dewdney did not account for this body of work. Photographic works by these practitioners, along with related group exhibitions like *Photography into Sculpture* (1970), *The Extended Document* (1975), and *Pictures* (1977), complicated the accepted conventions of the photographic medium. Their main objective often revolved around questioning conventional beliefs concerning photographic truthfulness.[369]

366 Halla Beloff, *Camera Culture* (Oxford & New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 101.
367 See Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*.
368 Dewdney, *Forget Photography*, 36.
369 See also Andy Grundberg, *How Photography Became Contemporary Art: Inside an Artistic Revolution from Pop to the Digital Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021), 105.

3.1.3 Probing and Poking at the Dominant Framework

Joanna Zylinska has argued that throughout the 20th century, "photography's trans-formative ambitions were overshadowed by the conviction that the medium was close to 'truth'".[370] In other words, the medium's experimental potential took a subordinate role, while its role in documenting evidence moved to the fore. The narrowly defined concept of indexicality, the faith in the objective and mechanical aspects of the camera process, along with a particular curatorial approach that promoted Humanist and journalistic black-and-white photography as art, all contributed to the reinforcement of the dominant framework of photography, impacting its meaning-making process. Zylinska particularly associates this development with the curatorial vision in the 1960s espoused by prestigious art institutions in the United States such as MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the work of artists like Diane Arbus and Robert Frank. She notes that these factors "helped establish the photographic medium as art, while also curbing its experimental tendencies".[371]

However, even within this context, there were notable exceptions. During the 1960s and 1970s, a select group of artists began to use photography in groundbreaking ways. Rather than treating it as a form of evidence, a "window to the world", or a means of revealing deeper underlying truths about humanity, as seen in Humanist photography, these artists questioned the conventions of photography itself, challenging the very boundaries of the medium. Conceptual artists such as John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Sherrie Levine, Martha Rosler, Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Heinecken, Richard Long, William Anastasi, and others, employed photography in unconventional ways that defied prevailing norms. Curatorial endeavours like, for instance the aforementioned *Photography into Sculpture* (curated by Peter C. Bun-nell), *The Extended Document* (curated by William Jenkins), and *Pictures* (curated by Douglas Crimp), operated similarly.

One reason for the unexpected attention given to photographic techniques by conceptual artists was their perception of photography as firmly situated outside the glamorous stratosphere of "high art". They regarded it as a medium capable of producing deliberately ordinary images.[372] Additionally, photography was appealing for its ability to document ephemeral performance art, which was gaining artistic significance during this period, and would otherwise have been limited to relatively small audiences.[373]

370 Joanna Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2017), 24.
371 Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, 24.
372 Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 4.
373 Grundberg, *How Photography Became Contemporary Art,* 71.

Figure 11. John Baldessari, "Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)", 1973.

John Baldessari (1931-2020), a prominent figure among American conceptual artists of his generation, engaged with various media, including straight photography, photomontages, and found images. Although few at the time considered his photography as anything but experimental and largely insignificant,[374] Baldessari made consequential photographic work that subverted its conventions. One of his works from 1973, titled "Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)" (Fig. 11), exemplifies his overall approach to and interest in photography. The work warrants a more detailed examination, particularly concerning its meaning-making processes.

The title not only provides information about the artwork, but also serves as its conceptual core for the operation of meaning. It informs the viewer about what they "see", and outlines how the artist devised the exercise that would be captured through photography. The title states that attempts were made to throw three identical balls into the air to align them in a straight line. Additionally, it states that there were thirty-six such attempts, a number that corresponds to the quantity of frames on a common 35 mm photographic film. The title also specifies that what can be seen is considered "the best" among these attempts.

Here, meaning arises from a productive clash and dissonance between two modes: what could be termed as a serious ("pretentious", "high-art", etc.) approach and a playful

374 Robert L. Pincus, "In 1970s San Diego, These Groundbreaking Artists Pushed the Boundaries of Photography", *KCET*, 2016 10 11, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/in-1970s-san-diego-these-groundbreaking-artists-pushed-the-boundaries-of-photography (accessed 5 October, 2022).

one ("amateur", "foolish", etc.). Undoubtedly, there is a certain seriousness with which the exercise is executed; the title is informative and matter-of-fact. This seriousness contrasts with the content of the exercise and the choice of medium for documentation. The exercise itself involves frivolously throwing balls, while the medium chosen for documentation is colour photography—which, at the time, was predominantly associated with amateurs, and not considered the domain of serious artists. Colour photographic documentation was relatively uncommon, and colour photography that positioned itself as "art" was rarer still. The black-and-white image was generally deemed more "artistic". Nevertheless, this artwork sets forth in unmistakably vivid colours three identical orange balls against a blue sky. Although the balls are not perfectly aligned, they come fairly close to it, with a slight but noticeable upward trajectory from the left-most to the right-most ball. Additionally, two green palm trees prominently appear in the slightly out-of-focus background.[375] By choosing colour film, Baldessari deliberately positioned himself and this exercise in a realm then regarded as "non-art".

The photograph in "Throwing Three Balls in the Air" primarily serves as a visual document of a conceptual idea transformed into an exercise. The "serious" part is also reflected in the meticulous attention given to the exercise's formal aspects. Baldessari supposedly executed 36 attempted throws, photographing each one, developing the film, and then selecting the attempt he considered the best. The deadpan title, characterized by what artist Carmen Winant aptly termed "productive bluntness",[376] conveys a certain gravity, further accentuated by the presence of the documenting camera. This gravity contrasts with the playful tone of the exercise instructions.

Another point of tension arises from the interplay between the title and the photograph itself. When reading the title, viewers are likely drawn into the work, moved by curiosity about how the exercise unfolded. If a caption is considered a claim, the photograph functions as proof of that claim. The image's meaning is anchored by the concept and the exercise described in the title, but it remains self-contained within the photograph. The image does not explicitly reference anything outside its own operation. It forms a self-contained world where the description of the exercise (the title) and the documentation of it (the image) come together to create a memorable artistic work. It is a subversive photograph, one that does successfully push against the rules of representation historically associated with photography. However, despite its paradoxical artistic complexity, it still essentially presents what the artist intended to convey. Thus, despite blurring the lines, it arguably remains within the classical regime of meaning-making.

375   Since Baldessari was Californian, presumably this is a lush Californian landscape.
376   Carmen Winant, "John Divola", *Frieze,* 2013 01 04, https://www.frieze.com/article/john-divola-0 (accessed 6 October, 2022).

Baldessari's fascination with the unmediated manner whereby the camera captures objects is also evident in his earlier work, "An Artist is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer of a Series of Facts" (1966-1968). This piece is formally acrylic and photoemulsion on canvas, and thus can be considered more of a hybrid print-work with photography rather than a photograph. This piece presents a rather casual monochromatic image of a street scene with cars and greenery. An inscription below the image reads: "An Artist is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer of a Series of Facts. Which in This Case the Camera Has Had to Accept and Mechanically Record". This tongue-in-cheek statement, much like "Throwing Three Balls in the Air", engages with both "serious" and "playful" modes, creating dissonance between them. It also taps into the beliefs and expectations associated with the mechanical nature of photography and the medium's widely accepted credibility at the time. However, despite subversiveness, the inscription also emphasises a connection between the camera-produced photograph and its subject, which it "had to accept". This reminds us of Dewdney's assertion regarding the inescapable "acceptance of the representational logic of the photographic image". While Baldessari playfully challenges and toys with this acceptance, his image remains tethered in many respects to the very logic it provocatively questions. This is not to diminish the radical and conceptually unique nature of Baldessari's photographic work, but rather to highlight that despite the claims it makes, it remains connected to the logic it contests.

Californian artist John Divola (born 1949) has been blending documentary and conceptual photographic approaches since the 1970s. His series "As Far As I Could Get (Ten Seconds)" (1996-97) is a relatively recent body of work that is noteworthy for how it both challenges and aligns with the classical scheme of meaning-making. This series presents a sequence of landscapes featuring a human figure caught mid-run (see Fig. 12). The title, characterized by "productive bluntness" reminiscent of Baldessari, is informative: what we observe is the artist himself in the act of running from the camera towards the horizon, covering as much ground as possible within a ten-second interval. While "Throwing Three Balls in the Air" references photography by specifying the number of attempts, which corresponds to the typical number of shots on a standard 35 mm photographic film, here the meta-photographic reference is based on the operation of the camera's self-timer. Divola would select an appropriate natural setting, position his camera on a tripod, activate a ten-second self-timer, and then sprint towards the horizon as swiftly and as far as he could. In this series, once again, the photographs serve as visual evidence supporting the artist's claim.

We can envision the sequence: setting up the camera, the artist's sprint, his diminishing figure within the frame, possibly some continued running after the shot,

an eventual halt, and perhaps even a moment of uncertainty about whether the ten seconds had already elapsed. The photographs capture the artist in the act of running away from the camera, and we comprehend this action (and thus imbue the photographs with meaning) by connecting the visual aspect with the title, which makes sense and directs us toward the conceptual foundation of the work.

The artistic operation is largely encapsulated within the photograph, even if truly anchored by its title. It is largely self-enclosed. The viewer does not require specialized knowledge about running, photography (except for a basic understanding of what a self-timer is and how it functions), or Divola's broader oeuvre. While the work does draw from the larger traditions of landscape photography and

Figure 12. John Divola, "As Far As I Could Get R02F11", 1996.

performative artistic actions, no explicit external cultural knowledge appears to be necessary to "get it". Its meaning-making operates within a predominantly self-contained framework and remains within the classical regime of meaning-making, even as it challenges established conventions. Both Baldessari and Divola created remarkable ideas-as-art using photography; the medium is employed to produce an image whose title reveals its conceptual operation.

The self-centred nature of Divola's work was curiously evident during a recent public controversy, albeit from a different perspective.[377] In early 2020, photographer William Camargo shared his reinterpretation of "As Far As I Could Get" on his Instagram feed. Whereas Divola was running away from the camera, Camargo, who is of Latin American descent, considered this intense act of running in the context of recent incidents of police shootings. Camargo's image was posted on 16 May, 2020, partially in response to instances of police brutality at the time, such as the tragic cases

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377 The controversy surrounding Divola's and Camargo's public spat is documented by Andy Pham and Callum Beaney, "Running From Reality: Artistic Concept, Content, and Social Context in Photography", in *C4 Journal*, 2021 04 23, https://c4journal.com/running-from-reality/ (accessed 24 May, 2021).

of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.[378] Camargo's post sparked a public dispute between himself and Divola regarding the intended meaning of the work. Divola adopted a highly defensive tone, even accusing Camargo of a "rip off [of] my idea", and engaging in "an incoherent blabber about 'white privilege'".[379]

What Divola seems to have failed to acknowledge—at least on a public level—is that a photographic work may acquire connotations that exceed the artist's intentions, and extend beyond its immediate framed content. This dispute appears to illustrate, at least in part, the presence of differing meaning-making regimes. Despite a conceptual basis, Divola's work operates within the classical regime, characterized by the principles of self-sufficiency and meaning-contained-within-the-image. This clashes with Camargo's interpretation, who operates on the assumption that images are inevitably networked within broader sociocultural associations as soon as they become public. In other words, one could argue that while the considerably younger Camargo considers a networked regime of meaning-making (amplified by concurrent social events) as the natural habitat for a photographic image, Divola sees his work operating within the rarefied realm of the classical tradition.

In the context of conceptual photographic work by Baldessari or Divola, the process of meaning-making, although complex, largely follows a relatively straightforward trajectory. While they skilfully investigate and challenge the classical scheme, they ultimately remain tethered to it, placing emphasis on the content of the photographic image. As previously mentioned, in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the emergence of networked meaning-making can be traced back to around 2007-2008.[380] This period coincided with the Schengen enlargement and the rise of networked photography as a sub-field in photography studies.[381]

Globally, the shift away from the classical meaning-making regime can be linked to the historical emergence of digital technologies that were poised to significantly transform analogue photographic practices. Artistic experiments with more exploratory meanings (also more challenging for the viewer) were systematically produced in late 1960s-early 1980s: in addition to Baldessari and Divola, Sherrie Levine's and Richard Prince's re-photographs, Nancy Burson's early digital experiments, and Dennis Oppen-

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378 An even more historically impactful incident occurred just nine days later when George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, sparking widespread protests and calls for social justice and political reform.

379 Pham and Beaney, "Running From Reality".

380 However, notable experiments challenging the rigidity of the classical scheme locally, such as the works by Gintaras Zinkevičius, were already created in the late 1980s and 1990s.

381 See Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "A life more photographic: Mapping the networked image", *Photographies*, no. 1 (2008).

heim's meta-indexical self-portrait merit mention in this regard. However, the new regime of meaning-making began to gain broader cultural momentum in the 1990s to early 2000s, coinciding with the proliferation of digital technologies in the field of photography. Thus, whereas the Baltic countries experienced a shift in meaning-making regimes towards the end of the digital transformation, on a global scale, both processes—the widespread adoption of digital technologies and the erosion of the classical regime of constrained photographic meaning-making—were practically simultaneous.[382]

3.1.4 Curatorial Exploration: Two Cases of Exhibitions

In addition to artists, curators took aim at photography's dominant paradigms. In the 1960s-70s, when artists like Baldessari, Burson, Levine, and others were experimenting with the medium, the meaning of photographs in of itself became the subject of several exhibitions. One notable exhibition, titled "The Extended Document: An Investigation of Information and Evidence in Photographs", was organized in 1975. Curated by William Jenkins (who would also curate a well-known show "New Topographies" later the same year) and featuring artists like Baldessari, William Wegman, and Marcia Resnick, this exhibition was conceived in response to the landmark "New Documents" show at MoMA in 1967. "New Documents" featured three relatively young and unknown (at the time) photographer: Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand. Curated by John Szarkowski, director of MoMA's photography department, it aimed to highlight a new generation who, according to Szarkowski, "redirected the technique and aesthetic of documentary photography to more personal ends".[383] While "New Documents" focused on documentary photography's evolving subjectivity, "The Extended Document" uncovered how photographs derive their meaning in the first place. In the opening essay for the exhibition's catalogue, Jenkins argued that the meaning of images by photographers like Winogrand and Friedlander in "New Documents" was still fundamentally tied to what was depicted in the photographs themselves.[384] That is, their meaning is what is in the photograph.

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382 The gap can be partly attributed to a slower adaptation of digital technologies into social life in the Baltic countries as well as a lower purchasing power of its citizens amongst other socioeconomic and cultural factors.

383 John Szarkowski cited in "New Documents", *MoMA*, https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3487 (accessed 27 May, 2021).

384 William Jenkins cited in Andy Grundberg, *How Photography Became Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 104.

"The Extended Document" asserted that photographic meaning is intricate and not inherently self-evident, framing the process of meaning-making as a legitimate subject of artistic and critical examination. This idea was rather groundbreaking in the 1970s, challenging the prevailing notion that photographic meaning was largely automatic and based solely on visual content. However, when re-examined today, works in "The Extended Document" mostly appear to play with established conventions of photographic representation. It questioned the presumed truths of photography in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, with Baldessari's work "Embed series: Cigar dreams (Seeing is believing)" displayed in the exhibition. At the same time, "The Extended Document" did not present a new alternative to replace accepted photographic truths; its aim was to reflect on these truths and underscore their constructed nature. Jenkins, despite all his critical proficiency in rightfully pointing out that the meaning in photographs is more complex than casually assumed, did not attempt to formulate an alternative.

One could reasonably argue that the subject of "The Extended Document" was photography itself. The approach taken in the exhibition foreshadowed a renewed cultural and artistic fascination with the medium. In the late 1970s and 1980s, an increasing number of creative practitioners began to direct their attention towards photographic conventions. As critic Andy Grundberg has noted, instead of using the camera to explore the world, they began to employ it to investigate photography itself.[385] Interestingly, this meta-photographic interest manifested much later in Lithuania, in the "Postphotography" movement, which emerged in 2006. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, in Lithuania, Postphotography was conceptualized as photography that "looks at itself".[386]

Still more relevant to the present research is a slightly earlier MoMA exhibition, "Photography into Sculpture", curated by Peter C. Bunnell in 1970. This exhibition stood out as an anomaly within the curatorial landscape of its time, as it boldly brought together 23 photographers and artists whose work called into question the traditional boundaries between photography and other artistic media, particularly sculpture. It was among the earliest museum exhibitions to systematically and seriously examine the intersections of various photographic practices and artistic categories. The displayed artworks were notably three-dimensional, resulting from experiments with printing techniques, materials, and display formats. However, the exhibition was not solely an exploration of formal aspects; "Photography into Sculpture" aimed to delve into

385 Grundberg, *How Photography Became Contemporary Art*, 107.
386 Narušytė, *Lietuvos fotografija: 1990 – 2010*, 278.

the realm of photographic meaning. In the press release for the exhibition, Bunnell elaborated:

> These photographer/sculptors are seeking *new intricacy of meaning* analogous to the complexity of our senses. They are moving *from internal meaning or iconography*—of sex, the environment, war—to a visual duality in which materials are also incorporated as content and at the same time are used as a way of conceiving actual space (emphasis added).[387]

What Bunnell refers to as "internal meaning or iconography" aligns closely with what has been described here as the classical meaning-making framework in photography. Through a deliberate quest for a "new intricacy of meaning" within a coordinated display of works that blurred the boundaries between photography and sculpture, Bunnell's curatorial endeavour challenged traditional beliefs regarding the foundations of photography, including how it derives meaning. It questioned the direct connection between an image and its content as the locus of meaning and the self-contained ideal of the photograph. As scholar Mary Statzer suggests, "The combination of photography and sculpture dislocated straight photography's emphasis on optical description, which was the presumed generator of content in photographs".[388] In other words, the 52 exhibited works, none of which adhered to traditional framing, were explicitly challenging the conventions of the medium through which the work of celebrated practitioners like Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand, showcased at "New Documents", had seemingly achieved significance and meaning.

What kinds of meaning-making intricacies were implied by "Photography into Sculpture"? Statzer emphasizes Bunnell's curatorial vision, particularly his statement, which "signaled that he was interested in something beyond what was conveyed solely by what was being pictured".[389] From this, it can be inferred that the play with forms and materials, characteristic of the exhibited works, hinted at a potential alternative—a shift away from the visual content of the photograph. By loosening the tight bond between the content of a photographic image and its meaning, "Photography into Sculpture" not only interrogated the dominant framework, but also served as a distant precursor to the contemporary networked milieu in which images form unexpected relations extending beyond their immediate content. In this respect it appears as a more

387   Bunnell quoted in Mary Statzer, "Introduction. Case Study: *Photography into Sculpture*", in *The Photographic Object 1970*, ed. Mary Statzer (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 6.
388   Statzer, "Introduction", 6.
389   Statzer, "Introduction", 6.

audacious curatorial exploration into the photographic meaning than the comparably better-known "The Extended Document".

It is crucial to note that, despite its innovation and audacity in presenting radical ideas, "Photography into Sculpture" did not significantly impact photographic communities, nor did it dislodge the prevailing paradigms surrounding the medium. It was a brief episode, an anomaly largely shaped by a unique curatorial impulse rather than an indicator of changing times. A decade after the show, Bunnell himself admitted that he "had not witnessed a serious continuation of the formal or physical notions that 'Photography into Sculpture' expressed".[390] Statzer concurs, stating, "As the 1970s gave over to the 1980s, it became clear that Bunnell's exhibitions failed to upend the dominant discourses of photography or contemporary art".[391] While the exhibition proposed alternative paths, it did so in an environment that was not yet culturally, socially, or technologically prepared for its propositions. Nevertheless, "Photography into Sculpture" remains a significant historical gesture, one that called for thoughtful consideration of the intersection of media and focused some attention to the intricacies of meaning. It highlighted that some photographic artworks possess much more complex mechanisms of meaning-making than were commonly attributed to art photography at the time. Some of its innovative elements—the demands it placed on the viewer due to formal experimentation, and the challenge to conventional notions of meaning, for example—would have to wait several decades to truly find a receptive milieu.

Not surprisingly, the shift in meaning-making that I am attempting to identify, and which I believe forms a conceptual framework for the functioning of most radical and intermedial art photographs today, is closely related to the digital revolution. The advent of digital technology has shattered well-established beliefs and theoretical assumptions about photography, fundamentally altering the practice in the process. The questioning of the indexical link between the image and the depicted scene, primarily due to the digital photographic process's supposed disruption of material contiguity, eroded the longstanding belief in photography's documentary veracity. This created conditions for the subsequent shift in the paradigm of meaning-making to slowly emerge. While theorists often found themselves somewhat perplexed and nostalgic, struggling to define photography's reality in the wake of the digital shift, artists discovered fertile ground in this disruption. When old bonds were severed, new ones

390 Mary Statzer, "Conversation with the curator, Peter Bunnell", in *The Photographic Object 1970*, ed. Mary Statzer (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 31.

391 Mary Statzer, "Peter Bunnell's *Photography as Printmaking* and *Photography into Sculpture*: Photography and Medium Specificity at MoMA circa 1970", in *The Photographic Object 1970*, ed. Mary Statzer (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 35.

were readily established. With its capabilities, the digital network enabled a new level of functionality for digital photographs. Suddenly, anyone with a cell phone camera could become a potential photographer, capturing, editing, and sharing photographs using the same device, almost effortlessly and immediately.

This section delved into the evolution of photographic meaning-making, tracing some of its path from classical interpretations grounded in indexicality to contemporary paradigms shaped by the digital era. It briefly examined pivotal exhibitions, innovative artists, and evolving cultural contexts, all of which have driven photography's transformation from a medium primarily purporting to document reality, to one that questions its own conventions and thrives in networked relationships. While early exhibitions like "The Extended Document" and, especially, "Photography into Sculpture" hinted at a departure from traditional frameworks, they encountered resistance within the photographic community of their time. Nonetheless, these exhibitions represent crucial milestones in the ongoing development of photographic meaning-making, heralding the gradual emergence of new possibilities in the age of digital proliferation. Subsequent sections will explore these shifts and their influence on contemporary art photography and its intricate mechanisms of significance.

3.2 Framing and Beyond: Shaping Meaning in Photography and Exhibition Strategies

3.2.1 Frame and Framing

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines "frame" as "a border that surrounds and supports a picture, door, or window".[392] In the context of images, frame can refer to the physical border of the image, which demarcates its boundaries, or the material frame (wood, metal, plastic, etc.) added to enhance its appearance and protect it from damage and deterioration over time. Furthermore, frame can also be understood more conceptually as a *frame*work (an apparatus, a dispositif)[393] that structures understanding and thought underpinning a reading of a work in a particular way that can be critically discussed. This section concentrates on the first two connotations (frame as the double border of the image); yet this discussion inevitably spills over to touch on the latter one as well. In visual theory, the two are connected, as the historically favoured iconographic

392   *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/frame (accessed 14 October, 2023).

393   Frame as an apparatus or a dispositif is discussed by John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*, 246.

reading of an image emphasises its clear and distinct borders and vice versa. The two meanings of the frame reinforce one another.

For understanding meaning-making in photography, the significance of the frame, as a specific concept that deals with the particulars of outlining and packaging visual content in a distinct manner, warrants a closer examination. It is a decidedly different conception of the frame that underlines the classical scheme than the one operating within the networked regime. The classical scheme is linked to rigid, clear-bordered, square frames, while works functioning in the networked regime have borders that are both more fluid (physically) and more conscious of their work as "frames". As we will see, this self-conscious and critical quality often divulges in the frames that appear as part of the work itself. This begs the questions of how the frame functions in the context of photographic meaning, how more precisely framing differs in the competing meaning-making regimes of photography, and how the frame has been conceptualized in photography theory and practice.

Peter Galassi, an influential curator of photography at MoMA from 1991 to 2011, traced the origins of photography back to the 15th-century Renaissance invention of principles of linear perspective.[394] According to Galassi, linear perspective's framing function played a vital role in the technical excellence of photography. He suggested that "photography is nothing more than a means for automatically producing pictures in perfect perspective".[395] Referring to Leon Battista Alberti's 1435 treatise *On Painting*, Galassi further observed that "a perspective picture will be like a window through which its subject is seen".[396] In this sense, the frame acts as a window, determining the viewpoint and composition of the image.

The frame operates in a dual manner. On the one hand, it defines what is *in* the picture. On the other, it draws the borders of what is *not* in it. This double function of the boundaries set by the frame (what Galassi termed "exclusion" and "inclusion")[397] is not only key to the basic presentation and translation of linear perspective on a flat two-dimensional surface, but is also significant for meaning-making. Framing involves the incorporation of the subject matter within the visible field, enabling a subsequent analysis of what Bunnell referred to as a photograph's "internal meaning or iconography",[398] that is the exact visual matter that appears in an image. This is the most basic

394 Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 12.

395 Galassi, *Before Photography*, 12.

396 Galassi, *Before Photography*, 16.

397 Galassi, *Before Photography*, 17.

398 Statzer, "Introduction", 6.

function of the photographic frame. But, equally importantly, framing also excludes. It isolates the subject from the continuum of time and space, effectively cropping and excluding elements that are not part of the composition. What is cut and left out is consequential, and can become a site of meaning itself. For instance, the famed photograph of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, taken by Antanas Sutkus in Nida in 1965, is well-known for its omission of feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, whose figure was intentionally cropped by Sutkus for compositional purposes.[399] This controversial act of exclusion has sparked broader debates about the erasure of women from historical narratives, especially since the 2018 opening of the Sartre statue in Nida,[400] a monument based on Sutkus's photograph which thereby erases de Beauvoir. In the widely circulated "canonical" version of the image, only the remnants of her shadow touch Sartre's footsteps, highlighting the powerful impact of framing and exclusion for photographic meaning-making.

The notion of exclusion represents a purposeful decision made by an artist to restrict the visible field within a photograph, concentrating on particular objects or subjects while omitting others. This process constitutes an intentional and deliberate act, accomplished through the framing of the camera's lens or subsequent adjustments made in the darkroom during post-processing. Such an interpretation aligns with Galassi's view of the frame as a fundamental structuring process that enables the translation of perspective onto a flat viewing surface. Notably, exclusion in photography does not need to be exclusively driven by aesthetic considerations. Judith Butler has explored the ethical and moral dimensions of framing, particularly in the context of war imagery, such as the Iraq war and the notorious Abu Ghraib photographs.[401] According to Butler, photographs possess the power to not only frame their subject matter, but also shape a broader discourse. She argues that the act of framing is inherently interpretive, as it dictates what falls within the frame and what lies outside of it: "in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame – and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive".[402] In this sense, what is omitted from the frame is just as significant as what is included and how it is presented. Butler writes:

399 "Antanas Sutkus. Jean-Paul Sartre in Nida. 1965", *National Gallery of Art*, http://www.ndg.lt/collection/artworks/antanas-sutkus.aspx (accessed 8 September, 2022).

400 See, for instance, Ignas Jačauskas, "Nidoje svarstoma apie feministės S.de Beauvoir įamžinimą šalia J.P.Sartre'o", 2018 07 01, https://www.15min.lt/kultura/naujiena/naujienos/nidoje-svarstoma-apie-feministes-s-de-beauvoir-iamzinima-salia-j-p-sartre-0-1104-995168#_ (accessed 8 September, 2022).

401 I have discussed performative aspects of the Abu Ghraib photographs in "Performing Togetherness: Tourist-Like Photography from Abu Ghraib", *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, vol. 99 (2020).

402 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 67.

We do not have to be supplied with a caption or a narrative in order to understand that a political background is being explicitly formulated and renewed through and by the frame, that the frame functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself... The question for war photography thus concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows. The "how" not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well.[403]

What is omitted from the frame holds substantial significance, as a photograph's construction is fundamentally shaped by what lies beyond its borders. According to Butler, any critical act of visual interpretation must take into account the conscious exclusions within a photograph. This consideration is particularly pertinent due to photography's historical and cultural association with notions of fidelity and reality, a relationship that holds true for documentary photography in particular. Butler contends that "we cannot understand the field of representability simply by examining its explicit contents, since it is constituted fundamentally by what is left out, maintained outside the frame within which representations appear." Importantly: "We can think of the frame, then, as active, as both jettisoning and presenting, and as doing both at once, in silence, without any visible sign of its operation".[404] While Butler primarily addresses the ethical dimensions of state-sponsored war images, her insights hold relevance for photography as a whole, including the realm of art photography.

John Tagg notes that the art museum (we can extend this to also involve a gallery, a contemporary art centre, a project space) itself functions like a frame. That is, the museum encloses what it considers meaningful, apart from that which it leaves outside: "It cuts an inside from an outside, closing that inside on itself as pure interiority and surrounding it with value".[405] As is the case with the framing discussed by Butler, here, too, the exclusion is important. What is left out is not only significant, but the very act of exclusion should be understood as an active and non-neutral (political) mechanism that also has value for that is inside of it.

Examining the significance of framing in photography discloses its dual role as both a boundary and a structuring force for visual meaning. Whether employed for aesthetic or ethical reasons, the act of exclusion within the frame remains consequential. Valuable insights into the construction and interpretation of images can be gained from understanding the photograph's power to define what is within and

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403 Butler, *Frames of War*, 71.
404 Butler, *Frames of War*, 73.
405 Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*, 249.

beyond its borders. This awareness is especially relevant in the context of documentary photography, and yet extends to art photography, and even to an art museum or a gallery space, highlighting the profound impact that framing has on the perception and comprehension of visual narratives.

3.2.2 Reframing Photography: Exploring the Boundaries

The connection between framing and photographic meaning is intrinsic. This relationship is evident when considering processes of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the frame, achieved through the camera lens' demarcation or cropping in a darkroom. It is likewise apparent in exhibition contexts. According to the classical regime of meaning-making, whereby meaning flows straightforwardly from what the photograph depicts towards its subject or object, it was customary for exhibition settings to mirror this controlled and somewhat rigid flow. This was achieved through formats and processes that convey a sense of fixity: square frames, specific printing sizes, clear distinctions between the exhibited work and its background, standardized lighting, and adherence to viewers' "natural" viewing height, among other aspects. In today's photographic exhibitions, artists are continually experimenting with these conditions, reflecting the new dynamics of meaning-making within network culture. As the meaning in today's photography becomes increasingly interconnected and diffused within broader cultural fields, the physical objects in exhibition contexts mirror this through their physical properties.

That today photographic images in exhibition contexts are often not contained in or by their frames is symptomatic of a broader dissolution of clear-cut borders of photography: as a rigidly-defined modernist medium, as a Positivistic fantasy of an evidentiary force, as a tightly understood indexical trace. We see this in a flurry of activity as photographs are used online and offline in intermedial and hybrid ways that reflect their networked state, including social media and exhibitions. The whole discursive apparatus of photography—photography's *frame*work, including its attending theoretical vocabulary and the social institutions that once held it in a firm place—seem no longer sure of their subject, and appear to be on the verge of unravelling.[406]

Lithuanian artist Vytautas Kumža (b. 1992) reflects this tumultuous state through his practice, which specifically takes aim at various conventions of photographic constructedness and exhibiting strategies. The series "Tricks and Trade secrets" (2017) focused on the manipulation and trickery that often accompanies professional pho-

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406 This is the starting point and motivation for Andrew Dewdney's *Forget Photography*.

tographic trade. "Don't fall in love with a prop" (2018), a related series inspired by a popular how-to guidebook of photography, took aim at the particular constructedness of commercial photography. Kumža dissects the fabrication by means of appropriating commercial image-making tools in a slightly ironic fashion: creating a makeshift photographic studio and hand-making a series of less-than-functional props. By making plainly visible rather than hiding the artifice of the photographic studio space and the staging involving in the photographic act, the artist seeks to deconstruct and problematize the craft aspects of the medium.[407]

Of particular interest to Kumža are the frame and its various connotations, as a significant mechanism of photographic conventions and meaning. Oftentimes he constructs frames himself, as in "Half empty half full" series from 2019, which uses clay or silicone as a framing-support structure. Other times works display elements that visibly protrude, pierce or extend the frame. Kumža's frame is not an invisible element—as was usual in the classical setting—but it becomes an inseparable part of the work itself. This is evident throughout several of the artist's projects. Sometimes the artists adds objects to the frame, as if questioning why not physically include elements as part of the frame, as opposed to photographing them. In the photographic work "Marlboro Man" (2023), a burning cigarette inside an ear in the image is doubled by a real cigarette protruding from the frame. In "Wet" (2023), a physical metal wire overlaid on photographed hands with protective gloves is both inside the frame and outside of it: it is arranged through holes drilled in its glass. In "Did I?" (2022) (Fig. 13), we see kitchen utensils over a lit oven fire. They are in the state of deformation, their usually clearly recognisable shapes deformed into something grotesque. This deformation happening *inside* Kumža's photograph is reflective of the wider shift taking place outside of it. As photography's functioning and meaning-making are increasingly networked and intermedial, fluidity is overtaking what were once discreet shapes and borders, relatively straightforward lines of connotations and meaning.

Sometimes, a specific aspect of the frame receives attention, as in a body of work titled "Objects in the mirror are closer, then they appear", presented as a solo exhibition at Galerie Martin van Zomeren in Amsterdam in 2023. Here, Kumža focuses viewers' attention on the part of the framing apparatus that usually aims to remain invisible: the glass.[408] The artist works with the glass himself and for the series wanted to, in his own words, "investigate, push, and challenge" the conventional framing and protection

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407 Kumža, interview. See Appendix 3.

408 The glass as an element, albeit from a different perspective, is also central to Monko's work "Window Shopping" (2014-2021). This photographic series focuses on shop displays in various cities, as well as found and archival images of storefronts.

Figure 13. Vytautas Kumža, "Did I?", 2022. Archival ink-jet print, door chain, screws, aluminium frame. 50 × 40 cm.

methods for photographic prints.[409] Within the exhibition, glass becomes an active participant in the creation of artistic messages and potential meaning. The exhibition's accompanying text intriguingly makes some speculation on the connection between frame-estrangement and wider meaning-making processes:

> In this exhibition, the glass, the invisible presence preceding the photographs, becomes visible, present, as a scalpel cutting the meanings behind every image. Glass isn't used as a material but as an expression of many temporal stages. It places the viewer not just in an observational position but also to speculate around new meanings, ending up in imaginary stories.[410]

That these relations are mentioned is interesting. Without further elaboration, the text touches on two important principles of contemporary art photography identified in this thesis: the shift of meaning-making paradigms ("new meanings") and

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409 Kumža, interview. See Appendix 3.

410 Martin Van Zomeren, website, https://martinvanzomeren.nl/shows/objects-in-the-mirror-are-closer-then-they-appear-solo-show-vytautas-kumza (accessed 16 October, 2023).

the importance of fiction ("imaginary stories"), as will be explored via the notion of photo-fiction in Chapter 4. At the same time, the gesture to these relations does not appear to be accidental: Kumža's recent oeuvre is intermedial, displaying all three characteristics of *radical performativity*, *strong self-reflexivity*, and *effective communication*. His photographic works are not only novel and unique for their formal aspects, or for how through these aspects they successfully focus attention on their mode of production and semiotic particularities, but also for how they suggest viewers access multiple levels of meaning.

Within the Baltic context, Kumža is not unique for the attention he pays to the frame, and to experimenting with it in his photo-artistic practice. Similar strategies can also be observed, for instance, in Kristina Õllek's recent salt-based photographic pieces, Evy Jokhova's series "Bruised" (2019), Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė's exhibition and series "Arctic Swell" (2023), Gedvilė Tamošiūnaitė's series "Kliudžiau" (2022), or the work by Cloe Jancis and Sigrid Viir, among others. However, Kumža appears to be undertaking these strategies in the most systematic and sustained fashion; for him, framing becomes almost an obsession, where the craft-element in constructing frames meets an interest in how framing adds layers to the photographic meaning. Situated on a historical axis, Kumža continues the line of inquiry into photographic conventions propagated by Baldessari and other conceptual artists using photography of the 1970s and 1980s. Using different means and an updated aesthetic vocabulary, he aims, in the artist's own words, to "problematize the limitations of photography as a medium".[411] While meaning-making appears mostly as a side or additional element in his practice, its fluid dynamism is noteworthy.

3.3 Networked Meaning-Making in Baltic Photography

While focusing on examples by photography practitioners from the three Baltic states, this research is informed by and applicable to a wider international context. What follows takes as a point of departure the proposal that the regime of meaning-making in a number of contemporary photographic works differs quite fundamentally from the way the meaning was ascribed and attributed in photography in the not-so-distant past. Traditional art-historical understanding of photography has emphasized an image's content, implicitly suggesting that meaning emanates first and foremost from that

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411   Vytautas Kumža, "Info", personal website, http://www.vytautaskumza.com (accessed 16 October, 2023).

which is depicted in a photograph. A photograph was "about" the visual matter, with the confines of the image delineated by the photograph's frame seemingly demarcating the site of meaning. This analytical approach was (and, to an extent, still is) continually reinforced by the reliance of visual studies, film, and photography theory on the assumption that the relationship between the photograph and its object is indexical: this bond has been further described as special,[412] existential,[413] and even outright physical or causal.[414] A sense of physical continuity, what cinema scholar Jean-Pierre Geuens vividly referred to as "an invisible umbilical cord",[415] supposedly connects each photograph to its originary scene or object. This has translated to an emphasis on visual analysis comprised of close and intent looking at an image to analyse its visual content. This, as suggested by the concept of photographic indexicality, was formed by the very rays of the object at the moment of its capturing.

The historical establishment of the special existential-physical link between object-turned-content and its image has a direct affinity with the traditional belief in the veracity of photographic images, which was not only an ally of photojournalism and documentary photography, but also key for artistic practices, where it helped to make photographic images distinct from other forms of visual images. One fitting example in the latter context is Henri Cartier-Bresson's idea of the "decisive moment"—the premier slogan of the humanistic photography movement that flourished in the West following WWII—has defined the photographic image as a careful and instinctive observation of the visible. A photograph was conceived as a mirror reflection of a moment when forms, shapes, and shadows meet in a composition that can supposedly reveal something true and genuine about reality. In other words, here the supposition that photographic capture is truthful is further infused with ideas about artistic vision and its symbolic elevation. Art photographers in the Baltic states successfully adopted the notion of "decisive moment".

Practitioners of the so-called Lithuanian School of Photography constituted a generation specifically influenced by Bresson and wider humanistic aesthetic-philosophical ideals. This prominent art movement, most active in the 1960s and 1970s, produced (mostly) carefully composed black and white compositions that sought to capture and display something metaphoric about human lives. The works focused

412   Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 72.

413   Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001), 18.

414   Carolyn Lefley and Peter Smith, *Rethinking Photography: Histories, Theories and Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 175.

415   Jean-Pierre Geuens, "The Digital World Picture", *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2002): 20.

on widely relatable anthropocentric symbolic categories, such as work, study, youth, beauty, etc. Even photographic practices at the time considered edgy or counter to dominant narratives, like those by Violeta Bubelytė or Vytas Luckus, can be seen as more poetic and surrealist-inspired versions of the broader approach. While somewhat complicating the imagined conceptual unity of Lithuanian photography at the time, their works still maintained the overall primacy of the image-content.

Despite some variance, works from the period can be characterised by the crucial bond between a scene and its image. The viewer does not need specific cultural knowledge to appreciate the photographs by Sutkus, Romualdas Rakauskas, or Aleksandras Macijauskas, or their Latvian colleagues Andrejs Grants and Inta Ruka (perhaps one reason why they were and remain popular). The popularity and accessibility are facilitated by the fact that humanism—or more precisely, positivism-influenced ideas about certain qualities of humanity and togetherness—were often at the centre of their pictures. Not so much changed in the 1980s and 1990s. While Lithuanian photographers increasingly turned attention to scenes of the banal, producing what photography historian Agnė Narušytė described as the "Aesthetics of Boredom",[416] the notion locating the source of meaning in the image itself remained slightly twisted. By attending to that which most considered inconsequential and casual, photographers focused on the hitherto unnoticed. In spite of variances, we can say that in the case of 20th-century Baltic photography the regime of meaning was attuned to a rather simple formula: the photographic image largely *is what it depicts*, in tandem with a sought-after symbolic effectiveness coming from the artistic sensibility of its various operators.

This stance was further supported by the traditional system of presentation, meant to be equally accessible and emphasising the image-content. Standard display entailed a (framed) two-dimensional image, hung on or close to the wall, with its centre corresponding to the viewer's eye-level, all this emphasizing the neutrality of the setting and foregrounding the importance of the image-content. Such a mode of presentation aimed to minimize distractions from what was a statement of the autonomy of the photographic image.

Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is in many ways a classic text on photography that reflects its traditional ideals. For Barthes, the medium's ability to present things the camera once saw (an idea encapsulated in his famous "that has been") represents the pinnacle of photography's allure and power, and the kind of photographs reproduced in *Camera Lucida* visually manifest this quality (see Fig. 14). This presentation is imbued with

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416 Agnė Narušytė, *The Aesthetics of Boredom: Lithuanian Photography 1980-1990* (Vilnius: Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2010).

Figure 14. Various photographic illustrations from Camera Lucida.

presence: the depicted scenes come to life, pricking the reader with vestiges of a felt presence. In typically poetic language he writes: "It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures".[417]

For Barthes, this fixed inseparability is the crux of photography's meaningfulness. In other words, the ontological source of photography's strength is in the bond it forms with the world via images. Both Barthes' "that has been" and the indexical relationship, famously imported (or, one could argue, "misimported") to photography theory by Wollen and Rosalind Krauss from the semiotic framework by Peirce, encapsulate the importance of what was in front of the lens at the moment of capture, providing theoretical ground for the idea that what the photograph depicts is where its true meaning lies. Effected by these and like-minded notions such as the concept of "the trace", photographs were seemingly forever tied to their referents in a bond that became medium-defining. This helped ground photography's ontological uniqueness and academic stability, establishing the image's content as the site of meaning.

The meaning-within-an-image is a regime with clear boundaries; the frame around the image is the border that separates the site of meaning from what is not a photograph. This may seem almost self-evident, yet today practitioners *increasingly invest their images*

417 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 5.

with meanings that do not stem from what is in the photograph. There is a shift of emphasis moving the locus of meaningfulness away from the photograph's visual content, *dispersing meaning into a wide cultural field. It is a shift from the primacy of the fixed and natural, towards the fluid, arbitrary, and context-contingent.* Furthermore, functioning as part of a broader cultural field, the photograph *asks* to be decoded, thus actively engaging the viewer, who is tasked with activating the meaning via a combination of collateral knowledge, imagination, and understanding of cultural codes.

"Dream Material" (2012-2015), a series by Lithuanian photographer Paul Herbst, offers a useful case study in this phenomenon. As a classical photographic work in form presented as a sequence of framed images on a wall,[418] its presentation only highlights its departure in terms of meaning-making. These photographs not only explicitly refer to cultural entities and topics beyond their frames, but also refer back to each other. The series as a whole operates as a body wherein a range of motifs recur, yet repeatedly shape-shift or morph into something slightly different.

The sequencing of visibly constructed scenes across the series is highly deliberate. One motif morphs into another, weaving a dream-like narrative and acting as the unifying structure of the work as a whole. Looking at the first six photographs in the series, such inter-referencing, morphing and interconnectedness become evident. Characteristic of the conceptual character of the whole series, the first image shows a drawing fashioned after an iconic portrait of photographer Wolfgang Tillmans that graced the 2010 cover of *Fantastic Man* journal, and is thus a photograph of a drawing of a photograph (see Fig. 15). This multi-layered mediation in the opening image already suggests a rather complex set of operations whereby meaning is attained in the work.

The boomerang appears as a recurring visual motif across the series. Barely decipherable in Tillman's shot, it reveals itself more specifically in images 4-6, varying in shape and size, and most prominently in the sixth photograph, one of a few genuinely black and white shots in the series. Here the boomerang is held by a topless young man, sitting cross-legged on a bed and looking pensively into the distance. This image is a direct reference to an iconic photograph by Larry Clark, on the cover of his then-controversial 1971 photobook *Tulsa* (see Fig. 16). While the gun in Clark's earlier portrait signifies the thrill and potential threat of the kind of life he and his young company were leading at the time (which included gunplay and drug use), the boomerang seems to gesture visually to an elliptical network of references at play in Herbst's work, and can be seen as the central motif of his later series.

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418 "Dream Material" was presented as part of Riga Photography Biennial 2016 central group exhibition "Restart" and was on view 16 April–12 June, 2016.

Figure 15. Left: Paul Herbst, from series "Dream Material", 2012-2015. Right: Cover of Fantastic Man, spring-summer issue, 2010.

As a symbolic device to highlight shapes and motifs returning, the boomerang seems a suitable metaphor for the work and for the networked meaning-making in photography at large, not only gesturing to the repetition of objects and motifs in different photographs, but also functioning as a visual reminder of how external references are able to infiltrate or be "thrown into" the photographic work after the fact.

Significantly, both the meaning-making and arguably the whole aesthetic pleasure of encountering these works remain restricted if the viewer fails to recognize references operating within the series. As the works analysed in this research show, such gesturing beyond the photographic image itself is not restricted to extra-references to other photographic works alone, but can encompass visual and pop culture, film, even personal anecdotes and dreams. *Dream Material* may disappoint if the viewer encounters the work with the expectations of a beholder of traditional photography, for which meaning-making derives from the "that has been" quality of the self-contained image. Herbst's series is more constructed than, for instance, works of the classical School of Lithuanian Photography. The demand on the viewer to actively engage with the work may partly explain why the audience of such work seems more limited.

Due in part to this complexity in meaning operations, photographic works can be successfully used to address today's urgent and complex issues. One example is

Figure 16. Left: Larry Clark, "Dead", from series "Tulsa", 1970. Right: Paul Herbst, from series "Dream Material", 2012-2015.

Estonian artist Kristina Õllek's work, which is research-based, does not shy away from politically-charged topics, and is regularly produced in collaboration with her partner Kert Viiart. "Nautilus new era" (2018), a multi-layered installation that combines photographic images with video work and sculptural objects, draws from Jules Verne's classic novel *Twenty-thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) to address the current problematic topic of deep-sea mining in the age of climate emergency. Whereas the "Dream material" series still adhered to the traditional mode of photographic display (outlined above), Õllek emphatically departs from these conventionalities, instead creating a spatial installation using materials related to the mining industry to develop an artificial deep-sea-like environment, wherein questions concerning the ecosystem's fragility are brought closer to the viewer.

In a related installation, "Filter Feeders, Double Binds & Other Silicones" (2020), she explores marine ecology and man-made attempts at green-energy solutions, using traditional photographs whose simplicity is deceptive.[419] In one particular image

419 Õllek is consciously aware of the task she oftentimes put on a viewer due to the complex research behind her artistic work. She says of her installations: "While doing research and going in-depth

Figure 17. Kristina Õllek, "Feeling With the Water Jelly", installation view, 2020.

(Fig. 17), for instance, a hand seeming holds a jelly-fish, which is in fact a water-bubble made by the artist herself based on current scientific experimentations to reduce plastic waste. This image is symptomatic of the depth of research and labour that may go unnoticed if we merely look at what lies inside the frame.

The opening-up of photography's meaning-making and its functioning within an ever-expanding field is intrinsically linked to the networked turn. Photography today is fluid, adaptive and interconnected, as networked capabilities enable a new functionality for photography and a further expansion into our daily lives, circumstances reflected in artistic practices. Images not only increasingly function on a wide plane of cultural meaning, but are also presented in mixed environments wherein a traditional two-dimensional photographic image (if it exists at all) is often just one element, intermixed with sculpture, installation, video, performative elements, and written word.

Some recent photographic work specifically reflects on the network and the logic of its operating principles.[420] Lithuanian artist Indrė Šerpytytė's "2 Seconds of Colour" (2015), presented as an installation of multiple lightboxes with a specially commissioned sound,[421] explicitly engages with Google image search. Writing the phrase "Isis beheadings" into the engine, the artist focused on the brief moment while the visual information is not yet loaded and the interface instead displayed blocks of a dominant colour comprising the yet-to-be-loaded-photograph, as if slightly skewed

into a topic, it is always a question how much I can present, in a sense that if the viewer can grasp everything. Also, how much of my own interpretation to add, or how much of straight answers I want to give" (interview with author; see Appendix 1).

420 I guest-edited a special 2018 issue of *Fotografija* journal, which, together with an accompanying exhibition *New Tools in Photography: From Google to Algorithm*, addressed this topic.

421 "2 Seconds of Colour" was presented in Šerpytytė's solo exhibition "Absence of Experience" at Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius in 2017.

giant coloured pixels (Fig. 18). Showcasing this in-limbo moment and not the images of atrocities themselves, Šerpytytė engages in a philosophical dilemma taking up the issue of looking at atrocities, and the "decision to not look" as a potent political gesture.

These works actively not only engage with the viewer's imagination, but also require some knowledge of them. It would be hard to understand "2 Seconds of Colour" without being familiar with how Google image search operates, or without personal experience of the characteristic moment of abstract blockness. The work simply could not function without the network. It also recalls that digital data is an information-to-be that can transform into anything rather than existing in a fixed, solid state. Here, images are as if in the moment of transition or latency, instead of being already formed and anchored by their visual appearance, as was the usual case with previous analogue photography. Engaging with the now-ubiquitous image search engine, Šerpytytė's work reminds us that the concrete shapes which digital photographs assume via networks are code-dependent and somewhat arbitrary. *Undecidability*, as Rubinstein and Sluis have put it in one of the pioneering articles on post-digital photography, is the "key property of the networked image".[422]

Figure 18. Indrė Šerpytytė, from the series "2 Seconds of Colour", 2016.

These examples are united by virtue of their meaning referring to wider, more diffuse, and seemingly less relevant (at least, at first glance) cultural phenomena and processes. Here, the meaning of the photographic image gets divorced from a strict bond to its subject matter, to the extent that what is literally seen is not necessarily coupled to what it means. The coloured blocks, boomerang, and jellyfish all point
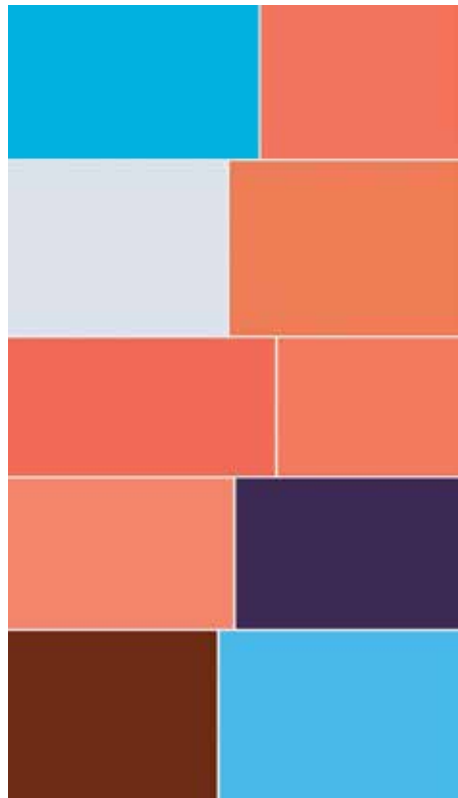
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422 Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "Notes on the margins of metadata: Concerning the undecidability of the digital image", *Photographies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 151.

through cultural codes to something they are not strictly of, not to what they are per se. Put differently, the photograph may be about something totally different than what its appearances ostensibly disclose.

Current-day Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian artists increasingly produce photographic works that not only ask for the viewer's rather active engagement, but also function as elaborate hybrid "systems". While the expanded meaning-making is an invisible process, intermediality is a physical manifestation of the same underlying principles of fluidity and incipient links. The environments wherein photography is displayed today are becoming increasingly intermedial, hybrid, and site-responsive. These include, among others, the settings for Marge Monko's "Stones Against Diamonds, Diamonds Against Stones" (2018); Liga Spunde's "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" (2019) and "What's A Girl Like You Doing In A Place Like This" (2017); Kumža's "Shifting presence" (2021) and "Trust it, Use it, Prove it" (2016); "Trial and Error" (2017) by Reinis Lismanis. Sometimes intermediality may manifest in a rather straightforward and tongue-in-cheek way, as was the case with Robertas Narkus's recent solo exhibition "The Board" (2020), where the artist used characteristic humour to pit life-size photographs of objects with some of the objects themselves in a whimsical display.

Contemporary photography increasingly responds to and engages with the present via hybrid and multi-layered displays, wherein images function as nodes in elaborate artistic systems. The meaning of photographs presented in these systems is likewise networked and multidimensional, not referring back to its referent as much as pointing to diverse and sometimes even contradictory nodes of meaning. When the photograph is divorced from its subject-matter and is "undecided", it can be almost anything, context-dependent. Staking cultural associations, the photograph enables itself as an important currency in the cultural dialogue, able to shape-shift and act as a message of communication.

Intermediality and what has been framed here as a networked regime of meaning-making are noteworthy features of contemporary art photography from the Baltics and beyond. These phenomena are not isolated from wider social and cultural tendencies, but act as both reactions to and expressions of them. Culture is increasingly interconnected, such that fluidity, shape-shifting and adaptability are important cultural and practical principles. Today meaning itself is seemingly more changeable and fragmented. The real is less fixed, and reality is more about shaping notions, opining, and arguing. Discussed contemporary works from the Baltic states correspond to these circumstances, showing that photography actively addresses and shapes complex social, political, and economic issues, while also raising philosophical questions and provok-

ing thoughtful meditations. That this is increasingly done in hybrid forms is another aspect befitting our times. While no longer an unflappable and unflinching mirror of the physical world, photography remains an active mirror of the culture that makes it.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

The evolution of photographic meaning-making, as explored through historical exhibitions and innovative artists, highlights a profound shift from classical interpretations rooted in the narrow conception of indexicality to contemporary paradigms shaped by networked culture. Early exhibitions like "The Extended Document" and "Photography into Sculpture", as well as photographic work by artists like Baldessari and Divola, served as milestones in challenging traditional frameworks, signalling the emergence of new possibilities for photographic meaning-making. These exhibitions, while encountering resistance at the time, were important alternative gestures, suggesting a transformation in how photographs could be understood and interpreted. The digital revolution, by disrupting the established bonds between reality and representation, paved the way for a total re-evaluation of the medium's conventions. This disruption not only shattered the belief in the documentary veracity of photography but also created fertile ground for artists to explore innovative approaches, blurring the lines between reality and imagination, truth and fiction.

Contemporary Baltic art photography, exemplified by the innovative works of artists such as Õllek, Kumža, Šerpytytė, and many others, demonstrates a departure from the conventional paradigms of photographic meaning-making. These artists, globally connected, emphasise a networked regime of interpretation, transcending the bounds of the image's subject matter to create multi-layered, interconnected systems of artistic expression. Through intermediality, they engage viewers actively and challenge them to decode images within a broader cultural context. More specifically, artists are creating intermedial "systems" where photographs serve as nodes connecting to various meanings and interpretations, rather than being direct representations of their subject matter. This hybridity is a physical manifestation of the underlying principles of fluidity and interconnectedness that characterize contemporary culture. In this way, Baltic art photography mirrors the broader shifts in our societies, where meanings are fluid and fragmented, reality is dynamic and contested, and the boundaries of artistic expression extend far beyond traditional boundaries.

The contemporary landscape of art photography is characterized by an intricate interplay of meaning, such that images exist in a networked relationship, extending

beyond their immediate visual content. The shift from classical meaning-making, centred on the visual content of the photograph, to a more expansive, networked paradigm is a reflection of a broader fundamental transformation in the nature of photography as an art form. It is also emblematic of broader cultural and social shifts. This chapter has suggested that as culture becomes more interconnected and reality more dynamic, photography evolves to reflect and engage with these changes, offering new ways of understanding and interacting with the world. This evolution not only challenges our understanding of photographic truth but also emphasizes the power of context, interpretation, and cultural associations in shaping the meaning of images.

4. Baltic Contemporary Art Photography

4.1 Addressing Complex Issues with Networked Images

Photography and media theorist Andrew Dewdney explores photography's current dynamic conditions in his latest book *Forget Photography* (2021), and his related subsequent 2023 article "The Politics of the Networked Image". It is within the fluid state of computational technologies that photographic images function today. As Dewdney sees it, they are significantly shaped and reformed by and through this newfound relationship and functionality. Interconnected via networks and driven by vast data servers and its users, the photographic image becomes a shifting, relational, dynamic and distributed object. It is inherently complex and unstable, yet a global phenomenon. The current photographic culture, which manifests itself in the guise of the networked image, is a sociotechnical assemblage with a particularly wide reach.[423] As such, and due to its inherent complexity, the networked photographic image appears particularly suited to engage with contemporary global issues—which are themselves multi-layered, compound and complex, as well as often interconnected in perplexing ways.

The theoretical proposition that in some way contemporary photography may be a reflective mirror of today's societies via the mere quality of its particular functioning (that is, achieving this mirroring almost automatically) is not entirely novel.[424] Presently, photography encompasses a multitude of interconnected form-potentialities functioning in dynamic networked environments. Photography's circumstances share some parallels with the functioning of various complex systems in the modern world. As discussed in the previous chapter, already in 2009 George Baker suggested that to tap into today's complex issues, we need an equally sophisticated approach to photography.[425] A traditional two-dimensional image is too flat, in both literal and metaphorical sense, to engage complex issues whose underlying causes and driving forces often remain imperceptible to the human eye.

Baker's argument was made in the aftermath of the global financial crash of 2008; his focus, understandably, was primarily on the financial market and global economies. The abstraction of the capital system and its subsequent crisis can be intriguingly linked

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423 Dewdney and Sluis, "Introduction", 19.
424 It should be added that this is not developed into a fully fleshed-out framework in *Forget Photography*.
425 Baker, "Photography and Abstraction".

to the abstraction of digital image code in ways that extend beyond Baker's analysis.[426] Nonetheless, his central insight can be similarly extended to other contexts where intricate global dynamics operate across multiple interlinked levels. This dynamism can be reflected through an intermedial functioning of photography, which becomes part of the methodological tool-package for a concerned artist exploring them. The following discussion examines how issues with global implications—specifically, the emerging domain of deep-sea mining and the diamond industry—are investigated through the lens of intermedial and networked photography.

4.1.1 To See the Sea with Networked Images: Kristina Õllek

Deep-sea mining is a topic of considerable controversy. The trajectory of its current evolution not only opens up a complex array of socioeconomic possibilities and potentially hazardous ecologic scenarios, but also taps into underlying cultural sensitivities. Previously poorly explored and representing one of the Earth's final frontiers,[427] the ocean's depths are currently garnering increasing attention. Fuelled by the drive of neocapitalism to uncover and extract valuable terrestrial resources, the realm of deep-sea mining is undergoing both scientific scrutiny and practical evolution. Its primary emphasis centres on the retrieval of rare earth elements and other metals and minerals from well beneath the ocean's surface. On the flip side, deep-sea formations have been identified with high levels of valuable elements, such as lithium, gold, titanium, nickel, cobalt, manganese, sulphide and others, some of which are in high-demand due to being used in the making of today's so-called green technologies. The rise of electric cars, wind farms, and solar panels in particular have contributed to the accelerated demand for rare metals.[428]

In addition to tangible economic benefits, deep-sea biodiversity has value as a promising source for future pharmaceuticals, biomaterials, as well as other genetic resources, and even microbes that can potentially degrade plastic waste or oil spillages.[429] On the downside, there are a slew of potential risks and dangers. In addition to

426 I have explored some aspects of the relationship between the global finance realm and digital photography in "Realybė, fotoatvaizdas ir pinigų spindesys", *Kultūros barai*, no. 3/591 (2014).

427 Lisa A. Levin, "Sustainability in Deep Water: The Challenges of Climate Change, Human Pressures, and Biodiversity Conservation", *Oceanography*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2019), 170.

428 Kirsten F. Thompson, K.A. Miller, D. Currie, P. Johnston, and D. Santillo, "Seabed Mining and Approaches to Governance of the Deep Seabed", *Frontiers in Marine Science*, vol. 5 (2018), 10.

429 Levin, "Sustainability in Deep Water", 173-174.

possibly causing an "irreversible damage to biodiversity", mitigating which "is likely to remain expensive and technologically difficult, or impossible",[430] deep-sea mining presents other challenges like high costs, further contamination, as well as unpredictable wider environmental impact.

Kristina Õllek (b. 1989) explores these contradictions, together with other related problematic inconsistencies, a series of recent artistic projects, specifically: "Nautilus New Era" (2018), "Filter Feeders, Double Binds & other Silicones" (2019-ongoing), "Powered by" (2020), and "Filtering With Cyanobacteria, Double Binds & other Blooms" (2022). Inspired by a move to The Hague, where the artist lived between 2018 and 2020, and the Netherlands' precarious relationship to water, Õllek began observing the ecology of the North Sea and its habitat. Particularly stimulated by the Zeeland area, where large land parts are below sea level, her attention was drawn by some of the specific economies (such as oyster and blue mussel farms), as well as larger economic interests that underpin marine ecology.

In an email conversation with curator and collaborator Angeliki Tzortzakaki, Õllek has disclosed that research into deep-sea mining has led her "to learn about the global demand for copper, cobalt, nickel, silver, manganese, and other rare earth metals: a demand driven by the creation of renewable energy technologies and the growth of the so-called green economy".[431] This is guiding an ongoing artistic exploration in which photography, video and sculptural elements are used by the artist in an interdisciplinary manner, often to create immersive exhibition environments.

A recent occasion for such immersive (environmental) display was Õllek's solo exhibition at A Tale of A Tub in Rotterdam in 2021.[432] It combined artworks from the projects "Nautilus New Era" and "Filters Feeders, Double Binds & Other Silicones". As outlined in its publication text, by focusing on the shifting ecological situation of the Dutch coastline, the exhibition aimed to "shed a critical light on the excavation of minerals such as cobalt, nickel, silver and manganese from the seabed, to employ them for the production of renewable energy technologies in the so-called blue economy".[433] The immersiveness of the display resulted from an intermedial spatial arrangement done by the artist. The lower-floor part of the exhibition was bathed in a radiant blue light,

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430 Thompson et al., "Seabed Mining", 5.

431 Kristina Õllek, *Filter Feeders, Double Binds and Other Blooms* (Tallinn: Lugemik, 2023), 7.

432 Kristina Õllek's solo show at A Tale of A Tub was on view from May 29th to August 8th, 2021. It was organised as part of exhibitions series "Trade Winds in the Age of Underwater Currents" (with shows by Elisa Strinna and Sami Hammana) curated by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk.

433 Quoted from Kristina Õllek, https://www.kristinaollek.com/selected-works-exhibitions/solo-show-at-a-tale-of-a-tub/ (accessed 18 March, 2023).

Figure 19. Exhibition view from Kristina Õllek's solo show at A Tale of A Tub in Rotterdam. Curated by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk, 2021.

as if plunging the space under the rising levels of water (Fig. 19). This visual metaphor corresponding to the exhibition's themes and subject also aligned with Õllek's aspiration to think through the exhibition-making from the perspective of the viewer.[434] At A Tale of A Tub, this ambition extended to the minutiae, like the specifically-made seats for visitors watching "Nautilus New Era" video. These consisted of a lightweight concrete block covered with a layer of memory foam and a silicone rubber cushion on top. Õllek's interest in using these specific materials was due to "the fact that they are being tested and used for the soft grip for the robotic hands, in order for them to not destroy the habitat when taking samples from the deep-sea". As the artist further explained, "I wanted to give the viewer the feeling of the soft grip while sitting on it. But also to relate these important issues with what might happen in regards to the deep-sea mining".[435]

Õllek's recent exhibitions feature such a combination of haptic material-qualities, with certain suggestive critical clues gesturing towards problematic aspects of an underlying subject intrinsic to the objects on display. Within the context of Baltic art photography, the way in which this synergistic dialogue is achieved is rather distinctive.

434 Õllek, interview. See Appendix 1.
435 Õllek, interview. See Appendix 1.

"Powered by", as presented in the framework of the 2021 "Biotopia" symposium at Viinistu Art Museum in Estonia, offers a series of transparent tablet-screens. They are lined up in front of a row of panoramic windows overlooking the Gulf of Finland, part of the Baltic Sea. Attached to plastic holders, the screens extend in a warped manner, as if something alive advancing with an unspoken suggestion for us to take a closer look. The way the objects are spatially positioned introduced an alien element in the impressive field of vision, courtesy of the museum's special coastal location. As ocean waves roll in the background, visitors could contemplate the exhibition as layered on the very subject it critically discussed.

The screens are objects custom-built by the artist. Their semi-transparency, which blends with the view of the body of water, is tainted with emerald green pigment that makes it look like slime. As viewers, we are naturally inclined to look at the screens, to touch them, but we are also somewhat repulsed by Õllek's objects. This effect is intentional. In a statement, the artist explains that "the artificiality and intrinsic toxicity of the green pigment corresponds to the poisonous proliferation of the blue-green algae as a side effect of climate change and pollution of the environment".[436] Seeing through the tainted tablet-screen (see Fig. 20) to the Baltic Sea—one of the world's most polluted bodies of water facing a number of environmental threats—is a potent reminder of the art's potential to materialise overwhelmingly large issues into specific objects and bring them closer to the spectator.

The custom-built tablets in "Powered by" also serve as a critical gesture towards the global interlinked economies of portable communication devices, the making of which requires extraction of rare resources that leads to further pollution. Our need to seemingly always have the newest, up-to-date screen device (be it a mobile phone, a tablet or a laptop), directly drives the market whose working conditions, ethics, and environmental effects are often problematic.[437]

This is an interesting indicator, if one not fully pursued by the artist in this project. In the aforementioned texts, Dewdney underscores the imperative of incorporating and addressing capitalist conditions in any critical discourse on networked image culture.[438] That is, capitalism's multidimensional relation to the networked image can-

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436   Kristina Õllek, https://www.kristinaollek.com/selected-works-exhibitions/powered-by/ (accessed 24 March, 2023).

437   For a critical discussion of the working conditions at Apple iPhone factories, see Burbridge, *Photography after Capitalism*.

438   Andrew Dewdney, "The Politics of the Networked Image: Representation and Reproduction", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 25.

Figure 20. Left: Kristina Õllek, "Powered by" at Viinistu Art Museum, 2021, part of "Biotopia" symposium's art programme, curated by Peeter Laurit. Right: "Powered by", detail.

not be ignored. Viewing it from a different perspective, it could be suggested that the networked image, with its fluid and intricate nature, itself serves as a potent tool for probing the very capitalist conditions and environment in which it is embedded and operates—an interconnected milieu that Mirzoeff aptly calls the "Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex of modern visuality".[439]

If, as Dewdney suggests, capitalism should be included in discussions of networked images, then perhaps networked images should reciprocally be utilized to dissect capitalism. As argued by Kevin Coleman and Daniel James, photography shares the logic with capitalism.[440] Although Õllek's work doesn't specifically target capitalism, it employs expanded photographic imagery to draw critical attention to underlying economic forces. As demonstrated in these and other recent exhibitions, Õllek is not just making innovative use of networked photography in multi-layered installations to create immersive systemic environments that present her topics to viewers from a multiplicity of perspectives. She also engages in timely expositions of larger economies and economic structures at the core of her topics. Õllek's use of the photographic image in combination with other media reflects a multilevel and research-based method for addressing complex topics. It is noteworthy that she represents a distinctive presence among contemporary Baltic photographic artists, leveraging an interdisciplinary

439 See Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualising the Anthropocene", *Public Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2014): 213.
440 Kevin Coleman and Daniel James, "Capitalism and the Camera", in *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction*, eds. Kevin Coleman and Daniel James (London: Verso, 2021), 10-11.

approach to photography that consistently extends the medium's limits while delving into intricate geopolitical themes.

4.1.2 A Few Notes on Diamonds

The diamond industry is another capitalist venture established to extract precious earth materials and driven by for-profit motives. Yet in distinction to deep-sea mining—a developing sector with numerous technological and social hurdles in sight—diamonds comprise a fully established enterprise with a long-standing history. Owing to its extraordinary commercial success, the diamond market has a global reach, offering lucrative profits for its major players. Yet its history can serve as a cautionary tale (a boon for sceptics of the potential advance of deep-sea mining). Not only was the diamond industry heavily involved in large-scale bloody conflicts in Africa, leading to innumerable civilian deaths and casualties, it also failed in many cases to produce tangible economic and social benefits at their sites of extraction. For instance, a recent study by Rollin F. Tusalem and Minion K.C. Morrison on the impact of lootable diamonds (diamonds that are easily extracted from the soil, as opposed to non-lootable diamonds that are deeper and require technology and capital) for economic growth has found limited to no direct benefit for the African states. The research has shown that in addition to lootable diamonds potentially increasing "the likelihood of adverse regime changes through military coups in Africa", states "that have alluvial diamond deposits have lower economic growth rates than states that do not." This is compounded by the lack of social and democratic development, as "most African states that have a high concentration of lootable diamonds also have inherent problems with the democratisation process, as evidenced by continued political and human rights violations, the denial of civil and political liberties to their citizens, and poor governance."[441] Many African countries have a mixture of lootable and non-lootable diamond repositories. In the cases of the latter, diamond extraction is regulated: nationalised and monopolised, or authorised for private companies.[442]

The most notorious of these private companies is DeBeers. It began operations in 1880, and is since 1925 controlled by a single South African family.[443] DeBeers is

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441 Rollin F. Tusalem and Minion K.C. Morrison, "The impact of diamonds on economic growth, adverse regime change, and democratic state-building in Africa", *International Political Science Review*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2014), 154.

442 Tusalem and Morrison, "The impact of diamonds on economic growth", 155-156.

443 Debora L. Spar, "Markets: Continuity and Change in the International Diamond Market", *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2006), 195.

the dominant player among the international diamond cartel, likely "the most successful and longest-lasting cartel in the world".[444] It is known for aggressive strategy, the ability to ward off competitors, and proactive control of the market. In Botswana, the world's second-largest producer of diamonds, DeBeers negotiated the rights to diamond extraction in a process that was not transparent and possibly corrupt.[445] The company is also known for its line of highly successful advertising campaigns for diamond rings, effectively creating a market for engagement rings with the success of its popular slogan "a diamond is forever". Equating the durability of diamonds with the hope for a lasting marriage proved to be a highly compelling strategy that helped popularise diamond rings.

More recently, DeBeers attempted to adjust and refresh their image by tapping into a contemporaneous zeitgeist, also intended as a boost for the market in smaller-size gemstones. This was the impulse behind their 2003 advertising campaign, "Women of the world, raise your right hand". It specifically targeted women, proposing that they acquire diamonds for and by themselves, to be worn as a ring on the right hand as a symbol of power and independence.[446] Estonian photographic artist Marge Monko (b. 1976) has taken up in her work the particularities of the 2003 campaign specifically, and some aspects of the history of the diamond industry more broadly. Her solo exhibition "Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds" (2018, curated by Evelien Bracke) in Tallinn City Gallery, and the video work "WoW (Women of the World, Raise Your Right Hand)" (published as an artist book in 2018),[447] were particularly inspired by the DeBeers campaign.

In my published interview with the artist conducted in 2019, Monko detailed how her interest was sparked by an ad from the campaign that she found while browsing on Ebay:

It was an interesting campaign by DeBeers that advertised a ring for the right hand, also referred to as the 'power ring'. […] The ad displayed a woman showing off the ring with a kind of bling effect. Next to it was an interesting text, which can be read as a poem. It referred to the left and right hands, and brought out the differences between the left and right halves of the brain: one

444 Spar, "Markets", 195.

445 Anthony J. Venables, "Using Natural Resources for Development: Why Has It Proven So Difficult?", *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2016), 167.

446 This messaging partly contradicted the earlier marketing strategy linking diamonds and matrimony.

447 See Marge Monko, *Women of the World* (Tallinn: Lugemik, 2018).

more rational, and the other more romantic and irrational. I started thinking about this slogan, and what it really means to represent the independence of the woman.[448]

Eventually, Monko's interest in the ad evolved into artistic research into the diamond industry and the marketing of diamond rings, explored in "WoW" and the aforementioned exhibition. This research also branched out, ultimately touching on the issues pertaining to women's rights and reproduction, long-standing interests for the artist. As the focal point of "Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds", a custom-built display cabinet took centre stage (Fig. 21). Crafted in the shape of a diamond, it functioned as a showcase, offering a window on various elements, including rocks, photographic images and a mobile app. These components sought to link, in the artist's words, a "woman's independence to her ability to control her own fertility".[449] Positioned adjacent to the cabinet were two bespoke neon sign bearing the messages "Women of the World" and "Raise your right hand". Additionally, the project was extended in a published artist book, presenting its narrative through a series of printed pages.

One of the objects displayed in the cabinet was a fertility app loaded on an iPhone screen. This seemingly innocuous choice by the artist functioned as a metaphorical loaded gun pointing to two significant global socio-political issues. The first pertains to a woman's autonomy in regulating her reproductive choices. Following the May 2022 leak of the United States Supreme Court's draft decision on Roe v. Wade, a viral social media campaign emerged, urging American women to uninstall period tracking apps from their smartphones.[450] This was based on concerns that app users' menstrual cycle data, along with other information, could be used to prosecute them for having an abortion in a state where it was no longer legal. In Europe, there are severe abortion restrictions in Malta, Northern Ireland, and Poland, where a series of public protests targeted laws imposing new limits.

The other socio-political issue revolves around the intricate matter of privacy. The concerns surrounding period tracking apps are emblematic of a broader problem concerning the sharing of private and sometimes sensitive data with third parties motivated by profit. This is particularly pronounced in the US, where privacy regula-

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448 Petraitis, "Making sense of images".
449 Petraitis, "Making sense of images".
450 See, for instance, Laura McQuillan, "Americans are being urged to delete period tracking apps. Should Canadians do the same?", *CBC*, 2022 07 05, https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/period-tracker-apps-data-privacy-1.6510029 (accessed 20 October, 2023).

Figure 21. Exhibition view from Marge Monko's "Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds", Tallinn City Gallery, 2018. Photo by Marge Monko.

tions are less stringent than in the EU. As researcher and civil rights lawyer Cynthia Conti-Cook has discovered, digital footprints have been utilized to incriminate individuals who sought abortions in the US.[451] This issue serves as a microcosm of wider concerns related to privacy and online surveillance. The smartphone, serving as a site for everyday communication through social media, messaging, and identity-forming visual communication,[452] as well as a repository of vast amounts of data, holds particular significance in this context. The high-end iPhone model, in particular, symbolises the attraction of state-of-the-art mobile technological devices that provide seemingly limitless possibilities for self-expression, all the while concealing the underlying problematic aspects of data collection.

The intermedial displays by Õllek and Monko demonstrate all three characteristics of intermediality as theorized by Christina Ljunberg. As evidenced by custom-made ob-

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451 Conti-Cook, Cynthia, "Surveilling the Digital Abortion Diary", *University of Baltimore Law Review*, vol. 50: no. 1 (2) (2020).

452 Burbridge observes that "the social media platforms on which photographs are shared provide opportunities to enact a public performance of our unique, individual selves" (*Photography After Capitalism*, 53).

jects like the memory foam seats and the algae-infused tablets or the diamond-shaped cabinet, the projects are *radically performative* through "hybrid forms that generate something new and unique". Yet these forms are not merely novel for novelty's sake, but are reflective of the topics explored by the artists in their respective projects. Thus, they are characterised by *strong self-reflexivity* by means of qualities that point to their mode of operation, focusing "attention both on their own mode of production and on their own semiotic specificity". Lastly, multi-layered connotations and various pointers of interpretative references are present in these works. By giving viewers "access to different levels of meaning", the two projects express *effective communication*. Beyond Õllek and Monko and the projects discussed above, the three intermedial qualities are observed in and mapped against other artistic projects analysed here.

The exhibition emerges as a locale where intermedial operations can be most potently expressed and experienced. The exhibition display becomes a refined yet partial expression of a research-based artistic approach. In another interview, Monko stated that her fascination with photography is driven partly by her recognition of its vital role in perpetuating myths related to consumption and gender roles.[453] Similarly to how the Zeeland area has inspired Õllek to explore deep-sea mining's wider agency, the DeBeers ad catalysed further research into the history and present state of the diamond industry, as well as the ideologically suggestive marketing discourse.[454] This illustrates a characteristic of contemporary intermedial art photography projects, which often constitute only the tip of a much larger proverbial iceberg encompassing a depth and richness of ideas and investigation. As Lucy Soutter has noted, the resulting images "have a seductive surface layer" that functions and is recognized as photographic, yet the projects are "underpinned by layers of conceptual subtext".[455] This makes intermedial photography exhibitions today likely places for encountering an interlinked "system" of ideas, thoughts, and artistic investigation. The next section discusses both this functioning and the exhibition form itself.

In summary, Kristina Õllek's exploration of deep-sea mining and Marge Monko's examination of the diamond industry reveal the complex interplay of economic, environmental, and cultural factors within these industries. While deep-sea mining

453 Elīna Ruka, "Women of the world, unite! Interview with Marge Monko", *FK Magazine*, 2021 06 28, https://fkmagazine.lv/2021/06/28/women-of-the-world-unite-interview-with-marge-monko/ (accessed 23 March, 2023).

454 Besides sharing a form of a mixed-media display, Õllek's and Monko's project can be linked by an engagement with capitalistic conditions that underlie their subjects of deep-sea mining and diamond industry.

455 Soutter, *Why Art Photography?*, 17.

represents a burgeoning sector with the potential for both economic gain and ecological harm, the diamond industry serves as a cautionary tale of exploitation and social consequences. These projects also touch on related important global problematics, including capitalistic exploitation, restriction of women's rights, and online privacy. Both artists employ intermedial approaches to shed light on these issues, creating immersive exhibition environments that engage viewers with multi-layered narratives. Through their work, Õllek and Monko exemplify photography's capacity to delve into the intricate web of global economies and environmental concerns. No mere documentary representations, their projects are self-reflexive, performative expressions that challenge viewers to consider these industries' broader implications. Both artists employ intermediality not only for aesthetic reasons, but as a means to convey nuanced layers of meaning, self-reflexivity, and critical inquiry.

4.2 Evolving Perspectives: Exhibition as Networked and Intermedial System

The exhibition has been gaining importance in the art field throughout the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century.[456] For many Baltic artists working with photography in an intermedial way, it has become a primary vehicle for the public presentation of their work. Today, a solo show is a key opportunity to demonstrate new work, ideas, and artistic methods. For some, it has effectively replaced the other major traditional channel for presenting photographic work—namely, a publication, and more specifically the photobook, which has a storied background and is still widely celebrated worldwide.[457] While locally the photobook has been referred to as the pinnacle of a photographer's professional achievement,[458] many present-day artists prefer exhibitions, due to the latter's relative greater degree of interactivity, immersiveness, and their spatial character.[459] This shift is also evidenced by some recent instances when

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456 Fomina, "Meno parodų kuratorystė Lietuvoje", 42.

457 This is evidenced by anthologies dedicated to the history and contemporary state of the photobook, such as the authoritative three-volume *The Photobook: A History* (eds. Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, 2004, 2006, 2014) and *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks By Women, 1843-1999* (eds. Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich, 2021), regional or national overviews (*The Latin American Photobook*, 2011; *The Dutch Photobook*, 2012; *The Chinese Photobook: From the 1900s to the Present*, 2015, *Making Strange: The Modernist Photobook in France*, 2020, and others) as well as a plethora of international bookfairs specialising in or including a significant amount of photobooks.

458 Bartusevičiūtė, "S. Valiulis: sprogimas fotografijoje tęsiasi!", 11.

459 There are some exceptions. For Paul Herbst, who does not exhibit often, the photobook remains the primary vehicle for presenting work. Marge Monko, Visvaldas Morkevičius, Gintaras

the publication has been subsumed, such that it primarily functions as an expanded catalogue presenting one or several exhibitions. Such is the case with Reinis Lismanis' *Trial and Error* (2019), Paul Kuimet's *Compositions with Passing Time* (2021), and Õllek's *Filter Feeders, Double Binds and Other Blooms* (2023). In these instances, the main visual component in the book is an photographic illustration of an exhibition installation, and not the photographic image(s) itself or themselves.[460] That these publications present photographic works as they were shown in an exhibition context is unconventional for the photobook format. This only further points to the exhibition's present-day importance as a conceptual and practical locus.

Contemporary Baltic photographic artists value exhibitions as sites of public and professional engagement, where they can immerse themselves in interconnected and exploratory ways of suggesting meaning or experiment with intersections of various media. Moreover, they also stage photographic exhibitions in a particular way. My text for Riga Photography Biennial's 2016 catalogue recounted some of the challenges of curating photography in network culture. I specifically touched on how the novel conditions affecting photography's making, circulation, and viewing demand a kind of an exhibition that is different from those traditionally employed by and for photography.[461] I identified two operating principles of the "traditional" photographic exhibition (regrettably still largely the prevailing format at the time). The first was a "neutral" type of gallery setting with (two-dimensional) prints hung on walls, mostly at a traditional height. The second was the idea of a "contemplative spectator" who takes advantage of this kind of "transparent" setting to delve deeper into a given work's meaning—which in this case is understood as fixed. "Typically, the artwork within this environment, being immobile, is understood as finalized in meaning […] Thus facilitating immersion also serves the purpose of creating a suitable condition allowing the viewer to 'uncover' this meaning".[462] The prevalence of these principles led me to formulate a paradox:

Didžiapetris, Paul Kuimet, Gerda Paliušytė, Rokas Pralgauskas, and Justinas Vilutis work with the book format in addition to exhibiting, although their publications significantly differ from the traditional photobooks and can be classified as artist's books. Andrew Miksys' seems to most systematically engage with the photobook in a way that blends its traditional framework with experimentation.

460 The prominence of installation views, i.e. photographic documentations of exhibitions, is an important contemporary cultural phenomena in of itself.

461 Paulius Petraitis, "Curating Photography in the Digital Age: New Challenges and *Blog Re-blog*", in *Riga Photography Biennial 2016* catalogue (Riga: 2016).

462 Petraitis, "Curating Photography in the Digital Age", 86.

Despite the hardly dismissible fact that the landscape has shifted, an absolute majority of photography exhibitions still rely on time honoured tradition of wall-hung prints and the idea of a contemplative viewer looking at them. This presents a glaring gap between how most users are viewing photographs today and the experience offered to them by photography exhibitions. While the experience of viewing photographs online, in front of our bigger or smaller, but increasingly mobile screens, imbues it with a sense of fleetingness and temporality, and a background of rich surrounding activities, the gallery space is just the opposite: the prints are solid, the noise is kept to a minimum and the time is presented as still.[463]

As the editors of *Photography Reframed* noted, five years is a long time in the milieu of photography.[464] A lot has changed since I advocated for photography exhibitions that would take note of the network conditions and engage with images in a different way.[465] The landscape of photographic exhibitions in the Baltic states—including both curated affairs and those organised and led by a single artist—has changed quite significantly. While there are still exhibitions that cling to the aforementioned principles, this kind of purely traditional setting for contemporary-made (not archival or historical) photographs has become somewhat of a rarity. Even displaying what could be understood as more traditionally-inclined photography, today there is more willingness to experiment with the exhibition format in terms of print sizes and placements, materiality, lightning, and the inclusion of other elements or media. In some of these cases there is some form of consideration of the network conditions of image-making.

For some artists, a mere nod to the networked culture that surrounds us is not enough; they reflect its conditions through the very setting of the exhibition itself. An exhibition in these instances becomes not unlike a networked "system" itself, such that the interaction of different elements to engage an active viewer and suggest fluid meanings and associations mimics the functioning of networks at large and networked photography in particular. The examples of Õllek's exhibition at A Tale of the Tub and Monko's "Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds" discussed above can both be considered systematic, given the way disparate elements weave complex and

463 Petraitis, "Curating Photography in the Digital Age", 86-87.
464 Ben Burbridge and Annebella Pollen, "Photography Reframed: Always, Already, Again", in *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture,* eds. Ben Burbridge and Annebella Pollen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), xvii.
465 "Curating Photography in the Digital Age" was based on a paper read at "21st Century Photography" conference at Central Saint Martins, London in 2015.

multileveled narratives rooted in substantial artistic research. The following sections look more closely at several additional exhibited projects, which emerge as systematic intermedial displays of artistic concerns and inquiries.

4.2.1 A System through Trial and Error

The solo exhibition "Trial and Error" by Latvian artist Reinis Lismanis (b. 1992) was on view at the Arsenals Exhibition Hall of the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga from November 2017 to January 2018.[466] The display brought together a number of distinct and disparate elements, including a looped video projection, framed photographs of various sizes, framed test prints, sprayed-ink prints arranged in a grid, sixty-eight minutes of variable-image video on a TV screen, and two rolls of photographs installed over a green photographic background on tripods. Despite its variety, this seemingly rather eclectic mix of components and materials created an impression of a systematic and thoughtful exhibition setting. The coherence was partly achieved by means of a careful consideration of the space's architectural layout, which contributed to an overall sense of harmony among the displayed objects. One interesting aspect of in-space decisions concerned the hanging of the framed photographic works, which were placed slightly lower than what standard museum practice would dictate. This subtly referenced the influence of photographer Christopher Williams,[467] who often employs this approach in his exhibitions.[468] Less overtly, but perhaps even more importantly, the exhibition was also united by several conceptual and critical threads. The most evident, and arguably the most significant, was related to the framework of photographic production, a topic of enduring interest for Lismanis. His engagement with the architecture of the exhibition space can be seen as an attempt to reflect the networked conditions through the overall structure of the display.

In some ways "Trial and Error" can be regarded a meta-photography exhibition. It engaged partly with the photographic apparatus and its networked operation within the realm of the everyday life.[469] Of particular interest were photography's inner workings and boundaries, the surface of the image, and the conditionalities of

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466 The exhibition was curated by Josef Konczak and Līna Birzaka-Priekule.

467 Personal email correspondence with Reinis Lismanis, 2017 11 29.

468 For a discussion of Christopher William's photographic work in exhibition setting, see Mark Godfrey, "Cameras, Corn, Christopher Williams, and the Cold War", *October*, no. 126 (2008).

469 For more on how the work in the exhibition addresses the everyday sphere, see my text "The Creative Resistance of Everyday".

printing—evidenced by, respectively, the sprayed-ink prints, the framed test prints, and the video, which focuses on screen-calibration. In its attempt to address and dissect the state of photographic image-making, the exhibition may be considered as a somewhat surprising successor of the Lithuanian "Post-Photography" movement. The two are linked by shared critical interests, although the overarching issues operative in Lismanis's project, and the way in which he engages with the material to create a narrative, differ significantly. Lismanis is interested in the practical and critical vocabulary of photography-making, but not in isolated terms, or in relation to the medium-specificity of photography. Rather, he seeks to open up these issues, touching on a wide variety of themes and subtexts as part of the spheres of everyday creativity and mundane imaginativeness.

Another specificity of "Trial and Error" was its focus on the quotidian. The everyday sphere took on a twofold character in the exhibition. One materialised as a double roll of images mounted on both sides of a green studio background (see Fig. 22), whose content could have been described as not particularly noteworthy "Instagrammable images". In a review of the show, curator and artist Kaspars Groševs labeled them "daily observations of an urban environment without distinction marks".[470] The significance of presentation of these images being as *loaded* on a photographic green background can be linked with similar usage for producing special effects specifically. More generally, it gestured to the never-ending scroll within the network. The exhibition's second materialisation of the mundane took form in the artist's text, which was presented via a printed hand-out and online. In the absence of a curatorial statement, this text functioned as the exhibition's principal informational document.

It was written as a sort of stream-of-consciousness diary in the day of the life of the artist, including description of quotidian details such as walking in London, Kendrick Lamar's rap music, a choice between ice-cream flavours, and visiting an Aldi supermarket. In its casual style and near disorderliness, the text was reminiscent of someone's ramblings on a personal Facebook feed—another nod to the computational sphere that surrounds image-making and sharing these days. It signaled the importance of the mundane as the sphere where creativity is born out of daily habits and small gestures of personal choices. Written by Lismanis as the exhibition's intended press release, this proved too daring for Museum staff, who according to the artist found it "too messy".[471]

470 Kaspars Groševs, "Nebeidzama riņķošana", *FK Magazine*, https://fotokvartals.lv/2017/11/30/nebeidzama-rinkosana/, author's translation.

471 Personal email correspondence with Reinis Lismanis, 2018 07 06.

"Trial and Error" linked the mundane with the photographic in a systematic and intermedial display. It could be said that one reason why the exhibition worked rather well as a system is because it was dedicated to the exploration of a system—that is, the framework of photographic production within the realm of the quotidian. The messiness of the artist's text mirrors the chaotic nature of image circulation within the computational environment. By placing us amidst objects pertaining to photographic productions and indicators of mundane creativity, Lismanis seemingly asks where image production starts and ends, when everything seems to be photographic today. He questions how images that are often taken as "neutral" states are largely conditioned by the technological apparatus in which they appear. And he problematises the ways in which we see are modified by the lenses that produce images through which we orient ourselves in the world.

These are all questions and issues pertinent to the culture of the networked image, which presents photography as the increasingly communicable part of everyday (as detailed in Chapter 1). Photography has become so mundane, that to talk about photography and the everyday is indeed rather like talking about two aspects of the same register. Lismanis has been attuned to the changes photography has been un-

dergoing—in fact, one could characterise him as an observer, inasmuch as his acute observations are then transposed and repositioned as artworks touching on an array of sociotechnical aspects that interest him. One potential critique of this approach is that even though the subject matter of "Trial and Error" is rather concrete and well-researched, the work's viewer may or may not be able to access all the strands pertaining to histories and frameworks touched upon individually. That is, part of the system might be too coded to be easily approachable. This issue, however, is not specific to Lismanis' exhibition. Rather it is characteristic of today's photography making, which increasingly operates in an expanded field of cultural references.[472]

4.2.2 Navigating Planetary and Personal Narratives

This section briefly explores two cases of systematic and intermedial exhibitions featuring contemporary art photography: Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė's "Arctic Swell" (2023) and Cloe Jancis's "Wishing Well" (2022).[473] While the traditional format for exhibiting photography outlined above still appears in the mixed setting of "Trial and Error", these three exhibitions depart still further from conventional modes of presentation. Considering that Lismanis's exhibition opened in 2017, these recent displays may potentially indicate a progressing evolution: an ongoing exploration of photographic forms within the exhibition context, and a further opening of possibilities in relation to their interactions and capabilities to suggest meaning. One might contend that these exhibitions maintain a photographic essence, preserving a fundamental element related to the perception and interpretation intrinsic to photography, even though they contain minimal conventional photographic elements.

    Kiliulytė's (b. 1986) "Arctic Swell" intricately interweaves two seemingly contradictory narratives. The first encompasses anxieties related to climate change and intensifying ecological disturbances. The second conveys a sense of hope through a potential for renewal. These narratives originate from the artist's personal experiences, but extend to broader global issues. While fears are rooted in universal feelings that perhaps most of us share with regards to planetary fragilities, the hopes are more intimately connected to the artist's journey into motherhood. The constant oscillation

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472 This aspect is also touched upon by Õllek, Kumža, Kiliulytė, and Morkevičius (see interviews in Appendices 1, 3, 4, and 5, respectively).

473 "Arctic Swell" (orig. "Artktinis Pilnėjimas") was exhibited from July 26, 2023, to September 2, 2023, at Prospektas gallery in Vilnius. "Wishing Well" (orig. "Soovide kaev"), curated by Siim Preiman, was on display at Tallinn City Gallery from July 9, 2022, to September 4, 2022.

Figure 23. Layers and forms at Kiliulytė's "Arctic Swell", Prospektas gallery, 2023. Exhibition views by the author.

between decay and the promise of rejuvenation is a recurring thematic motif that permeates the objects presented within this intermedial exhibition. This is done not in conflict or opposition (as *either/or*), but through a conjunction and concurrence—an exploratory *and*. As highlighted in Kiliulytė's exhibition text, we witness "acts of merging and dividing, symbiotic relationships and interconnectedness" as a means of exploring coexistence with other entities, whether human, species, or life forms.[474]

The exhibition consisted of a 4-part video work (its centrepiece), photographic images on various materials and in varied forms, and an accompanying publication. The harmonious coexistence of these elements within the installation reflected a systematic approach taken by the artist to the exhibition. Symbiotic coexistence—the functioning of several elements in a mutually beneficial way—was both the overarching theme of "Arctic Swell" and part of its internal methodology. Such relationships were dynamically reflected on three levels: that of the media (through constant interplay between different forms on display), theme (oscillation between fears on the planetary scale and personal yet universal hope), and also on an aesthetic level. This is evident in, for instance, photographic images of Arctic moss, a symbiotic organism collected by the artist during a residency above the Arctic Circle and captured through an electronic

474 "Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė: Arctic Swell", *Lietuvos fotomenininkų sąjunga*, https://www.photography.lt/en/exhibitions/buvusios/p5/arctic-swell.html (accessed 23 October, 2023).

microscope. As aptly observed by critic Rosana Lukauskaitė, these images not only underscored the overarching theme of the project, but also evoked imagery reminiscent of human physiology, with their delicate structures mirroring human veins or the ebb and flow of white and red blood cells. "This visual parallel reinforces the concept of interconnectedness, reminding us that, despite the vast differences in scale and form, there exists a shared essence and rhythm between all living entities."[475]

The images in "Arctic Swell" (see Fig. 23) suggest fluidity. As is typical in contemporary intermedial photography displays, the interchanges in meaning, as described above, were further advanced and reflected by means of format and material selection, through a series of very practical choices taken by the artist in preparing the project for display. This was notably evident in photogrammetric drone images depicting forests of Lithuania and Northern Finland, which took two distinct forms within the exhibition space. Some were printed on semi-transparent fabric, which was rather loosely hung, occasionally overlapping. Others took shape as three-dimensional UV prints on Perspex, each cut into varying forms that symbolized liquidity. By drawing attention to these distinctive and artistically deliberate modes of production, these digital landscapes embodied a significant degree of *strong self-reflexivity*. Moreover, the entire exhibition was intermedial in nature, marked by its *radical performativity* involving the presentation of new hybrid material forms, and *effective communication* facilitated through its continuous and multi-layered interplay between strands of personal and global themes.

4.2.3 Mirror, Mirror

These pages have consistently referenced mirroring and reflection: photography *for* culture at large, physical matter and forms *for* internal meaning, networked practices *for* sociotechnological assemblages, and so on. These broad processes symbolise interconnectedness operating at macro levels of networked culture. Yet photography, as a "mirror with a memory" (to quote Holmes's expressive phrase), can be seen as uniquely suited to exceed explorations of the micro-gestures of interconnected existence, and examine the role of the mirror itself. This is done in Estonian photographic artist Cloe Jancis's (b. 1992) "Wishing Well", a solo exhibition which directs attention to the mundane sphere wherein beauty rituals are re-enacted daily.

475 Rosana Lukauskaitė, "Lullabies for a Planet in Distress", *Arterritory*, 2023 08 29, https://arterritory. com/en/visual_arts/reviews/26840-lullabies_for_a_planet_in_distress (accessed 23 October, 2023).

Plenty of reflective surfaces were on display. For viewers acquainted with Jancis' practice, this might not have been surprising, considering her enduring fascination with performative acts of self-(re)creation through beauty rites and self-care routines, with mirrors serving as symbolic spaces in which these rituals take place. Notably, this theme was explored in "In front of the mirror, on a day full of enthusiasm, you put your mask on too heavily, it bites your skin",[476] an artistic project developed in collaboration with Sigrid Viir. This work was exhibited at Temnikova & Kasela gallery in 2021 and featured in the Riga Photography Biennial central exhibition "Screen Age III: Still Life" in 2022. "Wishing Well", however, marked the first time that the mirror appeared so decisively, forming a poetic centre for the exhibition's nodes.

A mirror functions as a surface that reflects our own image back to us. It has taken on many forms and served various purposes throughout history. This historical context is referenced in the exhibition, which incorporates different reflective elements, sometimes symbolically and others more directly through the artistic objects on display. These objects include an aquatic pond, polished bronze, a silver mirror, and a smartphone screen. The smartphone can be seen as a culmination of the development of portable personal mirrors—a sort of contemporary expanded mirror that reflects not only our outer appearances but also aspects of our social lives, values, and aspirations. Notably, and in line with the idea that we perform a (curated) version of ourselves in front of a mirror, images reflected in the exhibition were seldom (if ever) truly clear. The reflections appeared distorted, clouded, and layered. This last aspect is interesting: in most cases some kind of image of oneself reflected could be seen, yet occasionally this was superimposed on the artist's face imprinted on the reflective surfaces (see Fig. 24). The frequent presence of the artist's face suggests an introspective dimension and an acknowledgment that this, too, is a deeply personal exploration.

Similarly to Kiliulytė's exhibition, "Wishing Well" is rooted in daily experiences and personal observations. Their trajectories of expansion share commonalities as well, shifting from the personal sphere to the cultural and global domains. Jancis, in describing the exhibition, noted: "All these works are very subjective. They all stem from my experience, but they also represent the perspective of a fictitious, generalised female figure".[477] Femininity, understood as a specific social construct associated with certain consumerist choices and objects in relation to identity-formation (a topic explored separately in the next section), could thus be singled out

476 The title is a quote from the autobiography of French artist and writer Claude Cahun. The longer passage it is taken from indicates a feeling of being at odds and disconnected from one's body.
477 "Intervjuu kunstnik Cloe Jancisega / Interview with artist Cloe Jancis", *Vimeo*, Tallinn Art Hall, 2022 07 11, https://vimeo.com/728757695 (accessed 23 October, 2023).
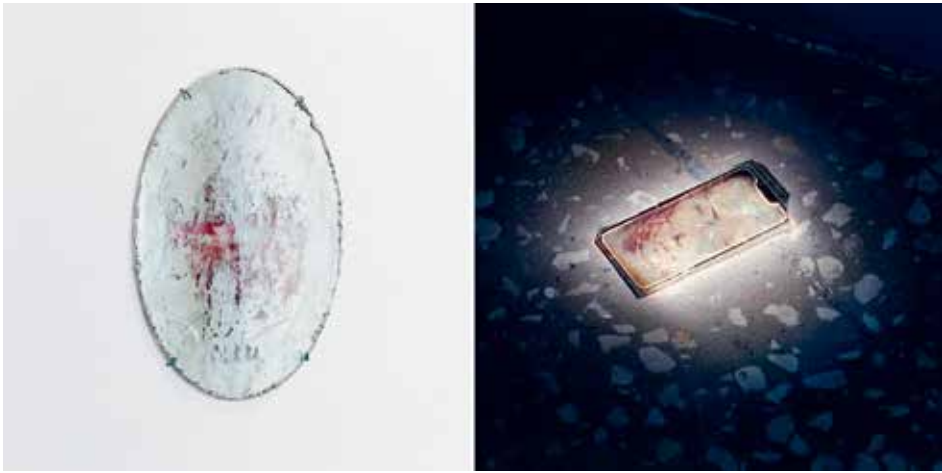
Figure 24. Exhibition views from "Wishing Well", Cloe Jancis, Tallinn Art Hall, 2022. Images by Paul Kuimet.

as one particular cultural implication expanding from a personal look. Another wider vector gestured towards society's enduring preoccupation with preserving youthfulness, and the role cosmetics play in this endeavour. Social media, represented by the recurring object of the smartphone, as acknowledged by the artist,[478] significantly amplifies our pursuit of youth, often subjecting individuals to markedly unrealistic peer pressure.

Visiting "Arctic Swell" and "Wishing Well" provides intensely atmospheric experiences, engaging the senses from spectators and aiming to prompt critical thinking. In "Arctic Swell" this experience is delicately balanced, evoking a poetic and at least partly optimistic ambiance. In contrast, the atmosphere in "Wishing Well" can be more accurately described as "ghostly". The lighting is notably subdued, partitions transforming the familiar space of the Tallinn Art Hall into an unfamiliar, somewhat phantasmal chamber with multiple rooms. These spaces were enclosed by blackout curtains, creating semi-dark zones where ethereal components of the installation suddenly manifest themselves. One of these spaces featured a projected video work with a round, pond-like reflective object on the floor. A faint beam of light illuminated its hazy surface, casting a rippling, water-like reflection onto the ceiling. In another enclosed and darkened area, a black wooden cabinet held an unfolded tri-part vanity mirror. Upon closer reflection, one could see a faint outline of the artist's face etched onto its surface.

478 Intervjuu kunstnik Cloe Jancisega".

This recurring motif of the artist's face, taking on various forms throughout the exhibition, may appear to border on an (self-)obsession that could be labelled as "narcissistic". In Greek mythology, Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection, failing to understand the mediatedness of the mirror image. Jancis appears to be well aware of the mediating aspect and repeatedly encourages the viewers to consider how alien (ghostly) some of the aspects of these rituals may appear if we pay closer attention. Her face, rendered repeatedly on numerous surfaces, yet never entirely clear, assumes a spectral quality more fictional than real. It is never the image, but the mirror that takes the centre stage. Jancis's "Wishing Well" pursues self-examination from multiple perspectives, while remaining acutely aware of the mediating role of photography and images in this process, and evincing a particular interest in identity formation. The installation can be intriguingly juxtaposed with Visvaldas Morkevičius's "Looking Forward to Meet Me", another intermedial photography exhibition delving into the theme of self-creation.

4.2.4 Engaging the (Active) Viewer

Due to the layers of complexity entailed in its interpretation, a networked intermedial exhibition engages the viewer in a particular way. There often is an unspoken expectation with regards to the viewer's visual literacy and fluency. Put differently, such an exhibition is produced with an ideal of a certain kind of beholder who is different from the model viewer implicit in the above-defined traditional photography exhibition setting. The new exhibition paradigm presupposes a spectator who is imaginative and knowledgeable, and willing to use her knowledge-imagination reserves to activate the artworks on display and be attuned to their multiplicities of meanings. The demands put the viewer in a peculiar spot: she is no longer a passive spectator enjoying a largely aesthetic (and, to a degree, occasionally poetic and philosophical) experience. This was characteristic of the traditional photographs operating in the indexical regime of meaning-making, within a classical exhibition setting. Rather, she becomes an actively engaged participant in the networked meaning-making, involving images, objects, and beholder within an exhibition space. In other words, the spectator becomes not unlike another node in an exhibition-network, which "produces" meaning of and for other elements within exhibition setting.

This may be partly because of the academic fitness of the participants in the present-day art milieu. Knowing what you know, and having colleagues who know as much, may create a shared incentive to make use of this knowledge and an expectation

that everyone has it. As Soutter has noted, "the art world today assumes a fairly high level of academic training in artists as well as critics".[479] The potential overwhelming of the beholder that is thus created aligns intermedial and networked contemporary photography exhibitions closer to exhibitions of contemporary art than those of traditional photography which seemingly precede it.

The increasing intermedial functioning of photography appears to be key for this shift. In 2009, Taiwanese-American artist and photography theorist Arthur Ou has presciently noted that the expansion of the photographic field, and the merger of photography with other media, are affecting viewers' engagement with photographs. This has bearing on meaning-making and meaning-deciphering. Ou claimed:

> What seems necessary is for the viewer to knowingly reinsert or reinstate the photographs encountered into a broader cultural discourse that acknowledges an increasingly interrelated web of ideas and practices wherein material and intellectual factors simultaneously coincide and collide. The *destination of meaning is in the viewer*, but it becomes the task of the viewer to now only have knowledge of the technical, historical and conceptual conditions of photography, but to also expand this awareness into the wider cultural and political implications (emphasis added).[480]

This passage indicates a certain conceptual distance from the region's photographic practices and those of the West in 2009, as then such an observation would have been more difficult to make in the context of Baltic art photography. Yet as networked culture has encompassed an increasingly globalised sphere, a realisation of the shifted viewing situation has become more likely. What has further compounded the viewing situation in the Baltic states, in addition to intermedial processes and networked culture, is the increasing interest in conducting photography as part of wider research-based art projects.

As the examples of Õllek, Šerpytytė, Lismanis, Kiliulytė, Monko, and Liga Spunde (analysed below) demonstrate, artworks in contemporary photography exhibitions come as the results of meticulous research. This makes them *encoded*, infused with multi-layered meanings that reference wider fields of culture, technology, society and global issues. The rich underlying informational subtext makes the meaning of the artwork complex, specifically in those cases when no explanation is provided through

479 Soutter, *Why Art Photography?*, 31.
480 Arthur Ou, "Subject: Photography's Destinations", in *Words Without Images*, ed. Alex Klein (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2009), 16.

accompanying text or caption. A decision to not explain every single reference operating in the exhibition may be understandable. In the case of multiple references from varied fields, describing each one may feel burdensome and over-the-top; for instance, Õllek has stated that she wishes to avoid being seen as "didactic". She explained: "To say directly – this is like this – that is not my intention. I think art should initiate questions".[481] Similarly, Kumža described his intention "to deliberately step back" in matters relating to "guiding the viewers", as that "risks making the experience overly prescriptive".[482]

Yet this can also mean that an artwork's meaning becomes in some ways outsourced to the viewer. Kiliulytė acknowledges that she "tend[s] to pack, sometimes overpack, the work" in an exhibition context. This asks for some active mental engagement by the beholder, leading to a possibility that "only 10% gets picked up if someone is rushing through the gallery".[483] Encountering an encoded piece of art, a spectator is confronted with a choice to decipher it using the clues provided by the exhibition and her personal knowledge and imagination. This also suggests that these kinds of exhibitions concern themselves less with the real world as photographed than with the complex ways in which reality (mingled with imagination) is experienced by the viewer. This shift can be seen as part of the wider sociocultural realm, wherein meaning is increasingly fragmented, and points of views arise in the chaotic dissolution of the so-called "grand narratives". This can be linked to the fact that identity is seen as increasingly malleable and shaped by interpersonal subjectivities, something addressed in the next section. Identities themselves are largely fluid (changing content) and fragile (not anchored firmly).

In conclusion, contemporary photography exhibitions in the Baltic states have evolved significantly to reflect the changing landscape of photography. These exhibitions have embraced intermediality, networked culture, and research-based art projects as integral components of their displays. This shift challenges viewers to actively engage with the artworks, decode their complex meanings, and consider the broader cultural, technological, and social implications embedded within them. In this evolving milieu, the beholder's role has become crucial, as they are tasked with reinserting the exhibited photographs into a broader cultural discourse and expanding their awareness of the technical, historical, and conceptual conditions of photography. The exhibitions themselves function as dynamic systems, mirroring the complexity and interconnectedness of the networked culture in which they exist.

481 Õllek, interview. See Appendix 1.
482 Kumža, interview. See Appendix 3.
483 Kiliulytė, interview. See Appendix 4.

4.3 Photo-Fiction

The term "photo-fiction" was developed by French philosopher François Laruelle, following and building on his concept of "non-photography".[484] Rather than a term simply addressing photographs partaking in fiction in a straightforward way, photo-fiction is a significantly more complex and thoroughgoing philosophical engagement with fiction-making. In an eponymously titled book, Laruelle suggests that the fiction his concept deals with are "like 'theoretical captions' that eventually accompany the photos".[485] It serves as a model of thinking about various potentialities, a framework of thinking with and through photographic images in relation to the ways they show the world. Laruelle, in *The Concept of Non-Photography*, suggests that the "photographic process […] lets things be, or frees them from the World".[486] This implies that photographs do not solely represent depicted objects, but have the capacity "to produce a new presentation, emergent and novel in relation to the imagination, and in principle more universal than the latter".[487] This perspective broadens the scope of photographs with respect to potential meanings.

Understanding the role of imagination is crucial for grasping both photo-fiction and the broader networked photographic regime. That photographs were traditionally considered ontologically and conceptually linked with their referents was famously articulated by Barthes, who likened them to being "glued together, limb by limb".[488] Rooted in classical photographic theory, this thinking emphasized indexicality, but often neglected the ways in which images interact with and evoke the imagination. In classical readings of photography, the function of imagination was typically attributed to photomontage or overt manipulation, rather than critically applied to all types of photography.[489] Thera Mjaaland recently observed that "imagination's role in the interpretation of realistic photographic representations (still-images and films) has not been addressed in photographic theory".[490] Laruelle's framework presents a remedy

484 See François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, translated by Robin Mackay (Sequence Press: New York, 2012).

485 François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, translated by Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012), 12.

486 Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, 55.

487 Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, 63.

488 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6.

489 See Patricia D. Leighten, "Critical Attitudes toward Overtly Manipulated Photography in the 20th Century", *Art Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1977-1978).

490 Thera Mjaaland, "Imagining the Real: The Photographic Image and Imagination in Knowledge Production", *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2017), 1.

to this oversight, as it rejects ontological essentialisations of photography that limit its scope or confine discussions solely to aesthetic theory.

In addition to acknowledging the emergence of new relations through imagination, *The Concept of Non-Photography* highlights another crucial insight: photographic images signify not only the objects they depict, but also other images and the phenomenon of photography itself as a process of representation. According to Laruelle, photography's essence is that it always resembles itself and the very process of becoming-photographic, which entails a distancing that prompts scrutiny of perception. Photography is not, simply speaking, of the world, but is metaphorically a "World" by and in itself—one whose f(r)iction (and connection) with the physical external sphere is established in its inherent pointing to the distance between the two, and questioning our perception of it.[491] This means two things: any photograph resembles all other photographs in essence, and a photograph is simultaneously telling a story and questioning it (and our initial believing of it) at the same time.

Open-endedness therefore emerges as a defining feature of photo-fiction, inviting interpretation and speculative thought. It disrupts the determinism inherent in the perceived closure between photographic images and their depicted subjects (or the world), which is often viewed as conclusive. Laruelle contends:

> Even the simplest of photographic acts has the tendency of being described (despite nuances and certain reserves) as being closed in on itself, turned back on itself, or considers itself completed, distinct, or discontinuous… On the other hand, photo-fiction interprets the photographic act as a vector or an arrow rather than closing back in on itself.[492]

491 There is an interesting (and as yet, I think, underexplored) conceptual link between Laruelle's theorisation and that of Andre Bazin. This can be attributed to Bazin's suggestion that photography "contributes something to the order of natural creation". Bazin underlines that a photograph is not merely of its model, but "*is* the model". He further writes: "Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake". That is, Bazin seems to propose that photography is not merely representing phenomena of nature, but is, in fact, like one. Its power to affect us is not unlike natural marvels. While there are important differences, for instance Laruelle further devalues the link between photography and the world – which was very important to Bazin – both theorists show an understanding of how photographic images become objects themselves, in result poignantly questioning our theoretical inclination to conflate photographs with objects appearing in them.

492 Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, 59.

This conception contrasts with the classical scheme of meaning-making, underscoring the potentiality and openness inherent in photo-fiction. Positioned within the networked regime of meaning-making proposed in Chapter 3, the metaphor of the vector or arrow aptly captures the multifaceted flow of photographic meaning.[493] While Laruelle does not discuss specific photographic works (he remains firmly a philosopher in this regard) or aspects of the frame and framing, his notion of photo-fiction offers a philosophically robust scaffold that affords a radically differentiated perspective on photography than traditional visual theory.

The indeterminacy of photo-fiction makes it well-suited for discussions of the networked image (see also Chapter 1 on undecided meaning), yet its flexibility creates a challenge to pin it down. According to Alexander R. Galloway, fiction for Laruelle "means performance, invention, creativity, artifice, construction; for example, thought is fictive because it fabricates".[494] In its refusal to anchor photographs in *some* kind of bond with their objects depicted, photo-fiction may appear somewhat loose and hypothetical. Indeed, the Laruelle version of photo-fiction is not a straightforward or easy-to-use concept, it is complex and, at points, can even appear contradictory.[495] It should be noted that for him, photography was mainly a way to explore wider philosophical interest into the nature of things.[496] There is little interest in the particularities of photographic art or its history. Nonetheless, photo-fiction is a valuable tool for its capacity to be mobilized in analyses of contemporary art photography—more specifically, to account for the ways projects deal with fictionalised world-making and identity-building. This research aims neither to dissect exhaustively nor adhere strictly to Laruelle's concept, but rather to employ it imaginatively as a theoretical framework for discussing contemporary photographic practices and their processes of meaning-making.

4.3.1 Between Fact and Fiction: Liga Spunde's Storytelling

Liga Spunde (b. 1990) is a Latvian visual artist whose creative practice spans photography, video, illustration, and sculpture. Her work is usually presented in

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493   Laruelle further explains that "the vector is of virtual order and does not correspond to a photo-centric representation", meaning it is interpretive, free-flowing and borderless (*Photo-Fiction*, 81).

494   Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 158.

495   For a discussion and critique of Laruelle's theoretical abstraction of photography, see John Roberts, "Ideation and Photography: a critique of François Laruelle's concept of Abstraction", *photographies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2016).

496   Galloway, *Laruelle*, 146.

dynamic immersive installations. The exhibition is a primary vehicle for the public presentation of her major projects, as is for many of the contemporary artists discussed here. Storytelling emerges within the exhibition context as a marked feature of the artist's practice. It combines personal narratives with constructed elements of fiction. Storytelling also acts as a unifying structural element: it binds works of different media within a solo exhibition, systematising its seemingly disparate elements for a single artistic goal.

A defining characteristic of Spunde's storytelling is its foundation in factual personal experiences, which she then expands, distorts, and interweaves with references from broader cultural contexts. The resulting narratives straddle the line between fact and fiction, engaging with both registers to create a nuanced narrative experience. In my interview with the artist, she elaborates:

> I find it fascinating when reality is stranger than fiction… Basically, I'm re-telling stories, as I find it interesting to add to or deform reality a bit… That is also why I'm using many references – to expand on the emotion. Sometimes I'm telling stories that are very personal. I see getting too personal as a big risk. Then probably it's not that interesting for others, and not always can be relatable. Quite often I'm using elements from pop culture, which helps involving wider audience, as they can relate better to an experience that is made more universal through the use of symbols and references.[497]

This multi-layered approach is exemplified in her project "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" (Fig. 25), which was presented as a solo exhibition at Kim? Contemporary Art Centre in Riga in 2019. Inspired by a personal event at her sister's workplace, the project evolved into an artistically constructed system filled with references ranging from video games to Disney films. In a way, it became a re-telling of the original occurrence, re-staging it with different characters, as if directed actors and props appearing on an exhibition-stage. The artist calls this a "strategy" to distance herself from the emotional intensity of her intimate experiences, allowing her to navigate sensitive subjects in a more detached manner. Spunde admits: "It's my way of dealing with it. Otherwise it is too personal and sensitive".[498] Through this approach, she transforms personal narratives into universally resonant stories, inviting viewers to engage with her work on multiple levels.

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497 Liga Spunde, interview by author, Skype, 8 January, 2021. See also Appendix 2.
498 Spunde, interview. See Appendix 2.

Figure 25. Exhibition view from Liga Spunde's exhibition "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" at Kim? in Riga. Photograph by Ansis Starks, 2019.

The press text accompanying the exhibition, crafted by Klāvs Melis as a fictionalized account of Spunde's sister's experience, provides viewers with an overview of the events that transpired.[499] In a subsequent interview with *De:Formal* in 2020, the artist revealed more precise details regarding the incident that inspired her project. Unexpectedly, half of the staff at her sister's office in Riga were abruptly terminated, revealing unsettling revelations. It was discovered that these individuals had maintained a secret chat where they engaged in harassment, stalking, and gossip about their colleagues. Most alarmingly, the chat revealed plans to harm one colleague physically, including plotting their murder:

> Afterwards it turned out that for several years these people had maintained a secret hate chat where they humiliated, stalked and gossiped about their colleagues. The contents of this chat revealed that the perpetrators had hacked their colleagues' bank accounts, social media accounts and emails, where they obtained sensitive and private information. The most alarming aspect of this

499 Klav Melis' text is available on Liga Spunde, https://ligaspunde.com/When-Hell-Is-Full-the-Dead-Will-Walk-the-Earth (accessed 20 March, 2023).

story is the fact that their actions were not limited to virtual mobbing—the chat revealed that the perpetrators had regularly drugged their colleagues' food causing various allergies and physical discomfort. But the culmination was the planning of one colleague's murder.[500]

The title of the exhibition, "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" is a direct quotation from the tagline of Rotten.com, a now-defunct "shock website" that operated from 1996 to 2012.[501] This website gained infamy for its collection of user-submitted morbid visual content, featuring violent acts, deformities, abuse, and other disturbing imagery. Its rise paralleled that of the Internet, which "provided a whole new platform for gore and shock sites".[502] On a variety of occasions, Spunde has emphasized the significance of technology and the internet in her life and artistic practice, recounting how her formative years coincided with the emergence of online forums and chat rooms: "When I was growing up the Internet just arrived into our daily lives. I belonged to a generation who, in this region, were among the first to try forums and chat-rooms. My teenage years are really linked with this experience. Of course, it was not only nice."[503]

Rotten.com was particularly notorious for its visual content openly aimed at eliciting a shocked reaction. What is noteworthy is that while images had one-line descriptions (somewhat similar to today's short feeds on X, formerly known as Twitter) functioning as links to them, those often did not provide any contextualising information for their images. Instead, many were attempts at added morbid humour (for example a link titled "refreshment" led to an image of a man drinking a monkey's urine).[504] This deliberate lack of contextualization aimed to provide viewers with an unfiltered and unsettling experience, devoid of any narrative or explanation accompanying the images. As Josette Féral observed, this approach succeeded in delivering "the spectator a genuinely unpleasant uncensored experience by eliminating any story that goes along with the image".[505]

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500 "Lige Spunde: Artist Interview", *De:Formal*, 2020 04 05, https://www.deformal.com/artists/liga-spunde (accessed 20 March, 2023).

501 The site's importance as an inspiration source was also emphasized by the appearance of its logo-banner (in an Eastern-egg fashion) in the exhibition space.

502 Teo Keipi, Matti Näsi, Atte Oksanen, and Pekka Räsänen, *Online Hate and Harmful Content: Cross-national perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 94.

503 Spunde, interview. See Appendix 2.

504 *Internet Archive*, "Rotten.com archive", http://web.archive.org/web/20170828063640/http://poetry.rotten.com/refreshment/ (accessed 6 April, 2023).

505 Josette Féral, "From Event to Extreme Reality: The Aesthetic of Shock", *TDR*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2011), 62.

Figure 26. Left: Liga Spunde, "BOO", projection, a screen made of polyester resin, steel frame, 60 × 100 cm, 2019. "When Hell Is Full, the Dead Will Walk the Earth" at Kim? Contemporary Center, Riga, Latvia. Photo by Ansis Starks. Right: Magic mirror in Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937), screenshot.

The de-contextualization of images on Rotten.com, where users uploaded images along with their own descriptions, bears some resemblance to the re-blogging feature found on later platforms such as Tumblr. This practice can be viewed as an early manifestation of the networked condition within the still-digital aesthetics of Web 2.0 prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s internet. It also reflects how Spunde repurposes images in her artistic practice, where the de-contextualising borrowing is not a relatively straightforward rehashing, as was the case with the re-blog function on Tumblr or a borrowed re-upload on Rotten.com. Instead, it becomes an elaborate artistic process involving craft. One particular reference in the "When Hell Is Full" is to Walt Disney's 1937 animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (itself based on German fairy tale "Snow White", published by Brothers Grimm in 1812), specifically to the "Magic Mirror". In the story the mirror is an all-knowing entity belonging to the Evil Queen.

Figure 26 shows how closely the work in the exhibition resembles the iconic object in the animated film. Sitting in the gallery space before the eerie "mirror"—a video projection on a custom polyester resin screen—the beholder can feel as if put into the role of someone browsing Rotten.com's morbid archives, revealing information that only further fuels dark desires and fantasies. Notably, the source of the artwork does not seem to have been disclosed in the exhibition materials (although it is stated in the artist's website). It was left up to the viewer to recognize it. Acknowledging that a recognition helps the spectator to engage with the show, Spunde maintains that they

have their own "stories behind these images", noting that "quite often these stories or emotions are quite similar".[506]

Incorporating references to a wide array of cultural phenomena and artifacts, Spunde weaves a multi-layered narrative wherein facts intersect fiction. Her exhibition acts as an interconnected and multi-layered field of open-ended references based on an emotional state. In revisiting the concept of photo-fiction, it could be argued that the images within "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" function as imaginative vessels for a myriad of other images through potential suggestive references, rather than direct depictions of their referents. It is not so much what is shown that is key here, but what is suggested, together with the open-ended structure of this evocative artistic system. This places agency upon the viewer and their capacity to connect with the thematic cues provided. The adaptable emotional impact, potentially different for each spectator, is befitting of the storytelling technique. Within Spunde's dynamic exhibition-theatre, the personal and the fictional intertwine in a story that is as networked as the cultural field it references and photography that partakes in it.

4.3.2 Fiction and Identity-Formation

In a state of networked, fluid, and continually context-reshuffling relations, fictive elements and fictional narratives emerge as rather natural potentialities. The fictional represents a notable aspect of artistic strategy in the context of present-day Baltic art photography. This situation is not new: local artists and writers on photography have employed and discussed the fictive, most notably and recently in "Generation of the Place: Image, Memory and Fiction in the Baltics" (2011). At the same time, the circumstances are also characterised by novelty, given their situatedness in the network culture, which collapses old hierarches and provides photography with radical new platforms for distribution and visibility. While in "Generation of the Place" fiction was conceptualised as an aspect of (and for) place-making, what follows brings in a different connection: the relationship between fiction and identity. This relation is shaped considerably by the network apparatus and often materialises as part of its relations.

The actuality and artistic potential of fiction for contemporary practices is well demonstrated by the 2018 edition of the annual publication *Latvian Photography*. Showing work by 5 artists—in addition to Spunde, Toms Harjo, Andrejs Lavrinovičs, Alnis Stakle, and Juris Zemītis are featured—the volume is dedicated precisely to the

506 Spunde, interview. See Appendix 2.

connection between fiction and fact. In the editorial introduction, Arnis Balčus notes that the characteristics of contemporary Latvian photography include responsible social engagement and critique.[507] Thus, it is not surprising that the fictional narratives are created as an integral part of the artist's reaction to the developing dynamics of their social milieu. They are engagements, responses to, and attempts at a better understanding of the various social and cultural conditions that surround their practices.

Harjo immerses himself within a Jehovah's Witnesses community, capturing their rituals as a means of exploring group identity and religious practices. The series, titled "In the Truth", draws inspiration from Harjo's own extensive experience as a member of this community, particularly the challenges he encountered in conforming to the identity dynamics among his peers.[508] The series predominantly comprises well-composed portraits, which give the impression of being carefully choreographed, perhaps staged even. They exude an aesthetically pleasing and deliberate artificiality that might be found in a scene from a film by Roy Andersson (among Harjo's influences). A film set was an even more particular source of inspiration for Zemītis. Emerging from his experience working on sets of different cinematic and commercial productions,[509] photographs in the series "So Fake, It's Real" construct a peculiar world simultaneously familiar and uncanny. This mode of world-creation through photographic means is also important for Stakle. Over a series of visits to China from 2013 to 2017, he meticulously documented the country and its inhabitants. Mindful of the distinctive foreign nature of his perspective, Stakle portrays his series as glimpses not into an actual geographic location but into "a place in my imagination".[510]

According to Laruelle, a fundamental trait of photography is its ability to offer a distinct perspective, a unique view on the state of things. This operation of perspectival creation is not a mere play on optical vision, but is understood in decidedly wide, philosophical terms: photography, being "parallel to the World", creates its own world to some respect.[511] Thus photography can be seen as not only a tool for vision, but also a tool for world-making and thinking through this creative act. It is a way to both launch a unique perspectival vision of philosophical and aesthetic kind, and also to

507 Arnis Balčus, untitled, *Latvian Photography 2018* (Riga: KultKom, 2018), unpaged.

508 "In the Truth – Toms Harjo Explores the Difficulties of Being a Young Jehovah's Witness", *Foto-Room*, undated, https://fotoroom.co/in-the-truth-toms-harjo/ (accessed 25 October, 2023).

509 Olga Osipova, "Fiction and Truth in a Project by FK Prize Winner Juris Zemitis", *Bird in Flight*, 2017 05 30, https://birdinflight.com/en/inspiration/project/20170530-so-fake-its-real-juris-zemitis.html, accessed 2023 10 25.

510 "Between Reality and Fiction", [untitled], *Latvian Photography 2018* (Riga: KultKom, 2018), unpaginated.

511 Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*.

enjoy this perspective oneself, as a kind of distancing from the World to an alternative universe, where parameters and rules can be broken or experimented with for personal and artistic purposes. In Laruelle's account, traditional photographic theory is immanently restrictive, due to its focusing on the indexical connection between an object/subject and its image (discussed above). The overemphasis on this connection restricts the vast philosophical potential of the photographic universe. He devised photo-fiction as a concept better suited to address the dynamic and multidirectional vectors of potential image relations.

Contemporary Estonian photographic art, curator, and art historian Anneli Porri commented on the expanded nature of meaning-making:

> The photographic image increasingly pursues ways to intrude into space, to be more than a two-dimensional index denoting something that has been photographed with just one thing in mind… a photograph often draws attention to its own surface to emphasise *its own independent identity*, not as an objective fragment of life, or truth preserved by a lens (emphasis added).[512]

Porri's apt observation raises the issue of the restrictiveness of the specific reading of indexicality, which was promoted in visual theory and which focuses on bilateral object-image relations. She contrasts this against the ways in which the contemporary photographic image opens up and pursues what she calls "its own independent identity", an existence not limited to what appears in it. This autonomous functioning on the part of the image is noteworthy. Tt effectively liberate photographs from the "burden of representation", to use John Tagg's phrase.[513] What is more, it points to a potential of alternative narrative-formation: namely, a capacity to imagine new relations outside of the strict object-image bond. One could stretch this a bit to say that this allows photographic images to attain potential to exist not within the World (as strictly affirmed by the indexical connection), but function somewhere parallel to it (not unlike what Laruelle's framework suggests).

In contemporary Baltic photography, there is a connection between the fictive element and the artist's personal identity. The interest in the aspect of identity can be partially attributed to the prevailing sense of instability and constantly fluctuating state inherent to modern existence. Today's fragmented world, where identities appear to change and be donned arbitrarily, lends a critical significance to the questions of

512 Porri, "The Screen, Archive and Waiting Room", 59.
513 See John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

what to identify with and to what extent. Another reason for this interest in identity formations can be more specifically linked to the precarious circumstances facing art professionals and photographers in the Baltic states. Historically, art photographers relied on their technical expertise with the camera to earn a livelihood through commercial or semi-commercial assignments. However, the landscape shifted dramatically with the advent of easy access to digital photography and editing; documentation, reportage, portraits, photography teaching as a once-privileged area for photographers started to dissolve. The popular notion that "anyone can be a photographer" has not proved financially beneficial for photographic artists, as it dilutes their skills' professional exclusivity.

The traditional model whereby photographic artists were hired for commercial projects has largely given way to a network of state-sponsored applications and project-based work, often lacking clear financial guarantees. While exceptions exist, contemporary young photographic artists often find themselves compelled to seek temporary side jobs unrelated to their artistic endeavours. In a group interview with artists featured in the *Latvian Photography 2018* annual, Spunde candidly remarked, "We don't work as artists, we work to be artists".[514] She pointed out that the fragile professional condition, characterized by unstable and insufficient income, remains one of the primary challenges in a creative career. This situation has not significantly improved, even as Spunde gained wider recognition, receiving two nominations for the prestigious Purvītis prize in 2020 and 2022, and having her works featured in institutional collections.[515] Her side-jobs include teaching and freelancing as a graphic designer for various projects. It is evident how this fragmented professional identity, typical for emerging art practitioners, provides fertile ground for artistic exploration and investigation.

Given the precarious nature of the local professional field and art market, photography and photo-fiction unsurprisingly are employed for alternative storytelling (as seen in Spunde's work), or for the exploration of constructed personal (as evident in Jancis' projects) and fragile group identities (as demonstrated by Harjo's series). What is more, these strategies are also mobilized more specifically in relation to capitalist conditions and their economic peculiarities. As discussed above, Õllek's and Monko's projects expanded conceptually during their development to encompass considerations of capitalist elements. In this respect, it is pertinent to mention Monko's project "Ten past Ten" (2015). For both this project and "Women of the World", Monko collected

514 "Between Reality and Fiction", unpaged.
515 Spunde, interview. See Appendix 2.

advertisements, primarily sourced from magazines sold on eBay. These advertisements were subsequently appropriated and transformed in combination with and through a process of artistic research and intervention.[516]

Both of Monko's projects thus construct narratives that engage in a critical examination of advertising and the fetishization of consumer goods, with a particular feminist perspective. In both cases, eBay serves as a starting point and nexus. eBay's underpinning algorithms— which influence our browsing experience within its database and from which the artists sourced materials for their projects—fundamentally operate as profit-driven entities within the neo-capitalistic logic-induced landscape. However, it is also worth considering the role of identity formation, particularly concerning the advertising campaign that inspired the "Women of the World" project. The activist tone of the DeBeers "Women of the World, raise your right hand" campaign, which promoted diamond rings on the right hand as a symbolic "power ring" for women, carries various ideological underpinnings. These messages may be associated with the contemporary social norm "to construct ourselves through the micro-identities we consume".[517]

4.3.3 Identity in Visvaldas Morkevičius's "Looking Forward to Meet Me"

Much like Spunde, Lithuanian photographic artist Visvaldas Morkevičius (b. 1990) draws inspiration from personal experiences and interests in his projects. His breakthrough work "Public Secrets" (2013-2015) revolves around what art critic Aušra Trakšelytė has aptly termed "urban experiences",[518] encompassing nightlife, the aftermath of nightlife, and private gatherings. The photographic series captures vibrant moments of energy, including scenes of people dancing and dogs embracing, juxtaposed with instances of emptiness or inactivity, such as vacant tables, unoccupied bar corners, closed festival kiosks, and abandoned microphones. In its depiction of a wide spectrum of emotional experiences, "Public Secrets" can be read as a subjective diary of a city party-goer. Morkevičius approaches his subjects with a sense of intimacy, while always maintaining a respectful distance, with an inherent transparency about his photographic process. This approach reveals a photographer who is deeply attuned

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516 Petraitis, "Making sense of images".

517 Ben Burbridge, "Post-Capitalist Photography", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney and Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 68.

518 Aušra Trakšelytė, "Public Secrets, 2013-2015", Visvaldas Morkevičius personal website, https://visvaldas.com/Public-Secrets (accessed 3 April, 2023).

to the environment he documents, one in which he is not merely an observer, but an active participant.[519] This quality places his project within the lineage of embedded photography projects that focus on the experiences of people attending parties and concerts, akin to the work of Wolfgang Tillmans in the 1990s, for instance.

While "Public Secrets" offers glimpses into urban experiences, providing indirect means of self-reflection (as a way to contemplate one's experiences from a slightly external perspective), the focus on identity formation is not yet central to this work. It is explored more explicitly in "Looking Forward to Meet Me" (2020-2021), a more recent project by Morkevičius that was presented as a solo exhibition at the ISSP gallery in Riga and Prospektas gallery in Vilnius.[520] In this project, the complexity of self-formation takes centre stage. Structurally rooted in the classical myth of Narcissus from Ovid's Metamorphoses, "Looking Forward to Meet Me" is conceived as an encounter with the intricate process of self-discovery. Drawing inspiration from Freudian psychoanalysis, a subset of photographs in the exhibition specifically corresponds to various versions of competing "selves". As Narušytė noted in a review of the exhibition, the stages of self-formation (inspired by Freud) are somewhat difficult to cypher from individual images,[521] yet an overall conflicting state of being pervades the series as a whole.

A pivotal work in the exhibition is a double self-portrait (see Fig. 27) that alternates between nude and clothed depictions, encased in a custom-made glass panel. Notably, this panel bears a coloured stain, obscuring the more intimate aspect of the nude portrait. These stains, presented in different colour variations and shapes, serve as a common motif connecting several artworks on display. They simultaneously erase and reveal identity—as seen in a portrait of a father and son where two emerald stains conceal their faces, hinting at concealed yet evident identities. What this suggests, perhaps, is that genuinely meeting one's true self is an elusive endeavour, as blind spots and stains obscure our inner vision, clouding our perspective.

"Public Secrets", despite its subtleties and aesthetic sensitivity, can be considered relatively self-explanatory in terms of narrative construction and the process of deriving meaning from the photographs presented. It adheres to the traditional framework of meaning-making in photography. In contrast, "Looking Forward to Meet Me" is characterized by complexity, multiple layers, and frequent ambiguity. The narrative draws

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519 This sense of quiet participation is augmented by the artist's use of a compact camera for this project (see also Puķīte, "The Imaginary Portrait of Visvaldas Morkevičius", 27).

520 "Looking Forward to Meet Me" was exhibited at ISSP gallery 2021 07 09-08 11 (as part of Riga Photography Biennial) and Prospektas gallery 2021 10 06 - 11 06.

521 Agnė Narušytė, "Narcizo nerimas: Visvaldo Morkevičiaus paroda Prospekto galerijoje", *7md,* 2021 10 22, https://www.7md.lt/24221 (accessed 3 April, 2023).

upon psychoanalysis, mythology, art and photography history (particularly the genre of self-portraiture with its associated baggage), and personal memories. This project is comparatively less transparent in terms of how it incorporates references and engages with broader cultural contexts, as opposed to works like "Powered by" or "Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds", where the method of referencing may be more readily apprehended and deciphered.

In "Looking Forward to Meet Me" the points of reference seem somewhat less cohesive, offering only partial glimpses of a systematic and interconnected network. They appear more fragmented, which, perhaps, is a deliberate choice. In line with the theme of exploring the intricacies of self-engagement, the arrangement of references here resembles the glimpsing of memories: obscured, hazy, and often conflicting. Morkevičius' project effectively illustrates how the photographic medium, with its delicate balance between revelation and concealment, representation and non-representation, myth and truth, is well-suited for the task of self-exploration. The acts of self-awareness and self-scrutiny mirror this oscillation between apparent comprehension and complete loss. Just as photography never truly "holds" or encapsulates its subject, the idea of achieving perfect synchronization with oneself is perhaps only an elusive fantasy.

As its accompanying text clarifies, the exhibition does not offer a "realistic representation", but rather a subtly altered and deliberately manipulated reflection, constructed through the use of symbols from art history and various cultural tropes.[522] The artist's intention is not to provide an objective or conclusive revelation of self-discovery. Instead, he acknowledges that all our attempts to delve into the core of our being are inherently limited and imperfect, much like our endeavours to construct narratives based on this introspection. Yet this artistic effort might be considered akin to photo-fiction. By constructing a narrative that takes on fictional qualities, it offers an alternative perspective that aids in our understanding of the world, even if it does not claim to definitively arrive at a fixed truth. It creates new relations through imaginative frameworks that are valuable in themselves.

As Stouter has aptly observed, photographs can be regarded not only as static representations but also as dynamic actions,[523] akin to the enactment of events rather than the mere decodings of their meanings. Through the medium of photography, Morkevičius engages in a form of reenactment of various personal memories, effectively reliving or embodying his encounters with past events. This process can be regarded as therapeutic, as the act of restaging memories through photography serves to clear away the dust that may have settled upon them, allowing a fresh perspective to illuminate these experiences. There is an element of performativity inherent in this endeavour, both in the act of re-staging memories through photography, and in the public presentation of these reconstructed memories within the exhibition.

In many ways, "Looking Forward to Meet Me" can be seen as a performance of the self, a manifestation of various modes of self-creation. While unmistakably personal, the narrative Morkevičius constructs is fictional and open-ended enough to provide avenues for interpretation for an engaged viewer. However, it also resonates with broader social and cultural themes, particularly the recent emergence of the "self-help" culture and the trend of self-introspection. Morkevičius infuses his work with playfulness and occasional tongue-in-cheek humour (notably, the self-portrait also serves as a portrait of the artist in a more general sense, adding a layer of complexity). Still, there is an undeniable seriousness in his approach—a commitment that mirrors the dedication and devotion often associated with the self-improvement genre.

Compared to some other projects discussed here, in "Looking Forward to Meet Me" the fictive element does not articulate itself as clearly as a consciously framed strategic choice (at least, there is no mention of it in the exhibition text). However,

522 Ignas Petronis, untitled, Visvaldas Morkevičius personal website, https://visvaldas.com/Looking-Forward-to-Meet-Me (accessed 3 April, 2023).

523 Soutter, *Why Art Photography?*, 96.

through the portrayal of multiple versions of the self, their intricate and often conflicting coexistence, and the selective withholding of certain information, Morkevičius crafts a form of photo-fiction. This photo-fiction does not primarily direct our attention to the objects represented within his photographs, but rather serves as a lens through which to explore mental states, memories, and the acts of recollecting them. It also sheds light on how additional tools, such as myths and psychology, are incorporated into our attempts to fathom our own identities. The multifaceted potential for meaning in Morkevičius's work is further emphasized by the fact that our comprehension of someone else's self-awareness and self-understanding is inherently limited by our own subjective, imaginative, and often flawed perspectives. In essence, we can only grasp the self-awareness of others through the filter of our own subjectivity, making it a highly subjective, flawed, and imaginative process.

It is important to recognize that the creation of fictionalized narratives and an exploration of identity formation are not unique to the Baltic states. Instead, they are part of a global phenomenon that links regional photographic artists to the broader international discourse of photography, primarily originating in Western contexts. Notable contemporary photographers such as David Fathi (in *Wolfgang*, 2016), Daniel Shea (in *Blisner, IL*, 2014), Bieke Depoorter (in "A Chance Encounter", 2022), and Thomas Albdorf (in *General View*, 2017) are just a few examples of practitioners engaged in similar projects. The photo-fiction as employed in the exploration of identity by Baltic artists is inseparable from wider sociotechnological shifts. It serves as a lens through which to examine the existential conditions of fragmented identity, particularly in a context where working and professional conditions are often precarious. The absence of a clear and universally accepted referentiality, alongside the displacement of indexicality in favour of more expansive interpretations within the dynamic networked sphere of multi-meaning, establishes a vital connection between contemporary artistic photographic practices and the prevailing conditions and tendencies of contemporary world.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the exploration of contemporary Baltic photographic art presented in this chapter provides insights into the intricate interplay between artistic creativity, identity formation, and the evolving socio-technological landscape. Through the lens of photo-fiction, these artists navigate the shifting boundaries of reality and imagination, challenging traditional distinctions, and prompting viewers to reconsider

their perception of the division between fact and fiction. What emerges from these narratives is a profound reflection on the multifaceted, and often fragmented, nature of identity in today's interconnected world. The artists adeptly utilize photography as more than just a means of documentation; it becomes a critical and expansive tool for constructing narratives that blur the lines between personal experiences, cultural references, and imaginative storytelling.

These artistic endeavours are notably characterised by their profound exploration of identity's fragility and fluidity. In a contemporary milieu marked by rapid social, economic, and technological transformations, the notion of a fixed, stable identity has become increasingly untenable. The artists, cognisant of this reality, unfold the intricate nuances of identity formation, often drawing from personal experiences, cultural symbols, and historical references. Through their innovative use of photo-fiction, they challenge the viewers to confront the malleability of identity, urging us to question established norms and embrace the plurality of fragmented narratives that shape our sense of self.

The photographic exhibition has undergone a significant transformation and is now a primary site for artists to publicly present their work. Reflecting the changing landscape of image creation, dissemination, and consumption, contemporary displays have largely departed from the strict conventions of traditional presentation. The examples discussed here have embraced intermediality, incorporating diverse forms of media and artistic practices, and have become deeply entwined with networked culture. This integration of various mediums challenges viewers to actively engage with the artworks, implying a high level of visual literacy and critical thinking. Moreover, the shift towards research-based art projects has encoded artworks with multi-layered and networked meanings, referencing broader cultural, technological, and social contexts. The exhibition spaces themselves function as dynamic systems, reflecting the complexity and interconnectedness of the networked culture in which they exist. In this context, the role of the beholder is increasingly underscored, as they are implicitly tasked with deciphering the encoded pieces of art, utilizing the clues provided by the exhibition as well as their personal knowledge and imagination.

Furthermore, framing these Baltic artists within the global context highlights the universality of their themes. The exploration of capitalist-related issues, the tension between reality and fiction, fragmented identities, and the profound impact of socio-technological shifts echo broader global concerns not unique to the Baltic states. In an era dominated by digital networks and virtual realities, these photographers serve as keen and sensitive observers, dissecting the intricate threads that weave together our perceptions of self, others, and our planet. Their works have the potential to resonate

with audiences worldwide, inviting contemplation on the complex tapestry of human existence in the contemporary age.

In essence, the contemporary photographic art of the Baltic region serves as evidence of the medium's enduring relevance and vitality in a rapidly evolving world. In its networked and intermedial state, present-day photographic practices reflect art's power to not only mirror, but also challenge, re-shape, and transcend the societal and cultural currents of our time.

Conclusions

1. Society evolves together with the political, cultural, and social frameworks that shape the multitudinous contexts of photography. The contemporary visual landscape, influenced by what has been termed the "Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex", deeply impacts both image creation and their content. Within the last decade, the landscape of photography has undergone a profound paradigm shift, propelled into the heart of contemporary culture and identity. It is not merely a medium, but a pervasive sociocultural force shaping our everyday lives and the very fabric of our collective consciousness. Through its integration into the network, photography has moved past and transcended its traditional (documentary) roles, morphing into an essential component of our daily interactions and communications. It reflects and constructs our cultural identities, adapting to the digital age where its indexicality (once a hallmark of its authenticity) is reimagined. Peirce's index, understood in its original, fluid and adaptable complexity, provides a potent theoretical lens through which to analyse this transformation—embracing creativity, imagination, and "collateral knowledge" to navigate the cultural nuances of this networked era.

In reviewing the historical context, this thesis traced this transformative journey of photography, from the digital break to the establishment of a networked image culture, marking a departure from photography's traditional roots in mechanical objectivity and realism. The analysis reflected on the "digital debate" that signified a seismic shift in the medium's ontology, which was conceived as a loss of indexicality understood in specific terms as a direct, material and "causal" connection between an object and its image. This discourse paved the way for a more fluid and interconnected photographic practice. This shift foregrounds photography's role not just as a reflective medium, but as an active participant in the creation and communication of contemporary experience, influencing both the production, dissemination, and interpretation of images.

Digital technology has disrupted photochemical credence, opening the door to uncertainty and narrative potential, challenging the linear historical progression of the photographic medium. The digital image, once peripheral, now sits at the core of a complex web of social exchanges, not merely as a technology but as a node in a vast network of data. The networked image, increasingly subject to intermedial crossovers and interdisciplinary studies, commands a new cultural-theoretical position, shifting from the objective reproducibility to a dynamic entity within a web of social interactions.

As we navigate the 21st century, the notion of photography as a fixed, objective medium is fading, giving way to networked photography facilitated by advancing

technologies. Photographic images continue to represent the visible world, but their transparency belies the complex processes underlying their production and existence. The ongoing technological transformation means that while photographs are rendered visible (and visibly recognisable) through established protocols, there is a profusion of image data fulfilling its function within the network. Algorithms, despite being portrayed as objective, are inherently subjective due to the human character of the datasets they rely on. This subjectivity can lead to varying results over time, showcasing the limitations and biases present in AI technologies. In this context, the future of photographic rendering and meaning-making is potentially more fluid and dynamic, with photographs serving as indices not just of the visible world, but of the complex data processes shaping our interconnected existence.

The transition to networked photography reflects a broader societal movement towards technology-enabled interconnectedness and data-cloud infrastructure advancement. This transformation not only impacts the creation and interpretation of images, but also raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality, authenticity, identity, and the (ethical) implications of manipulation. As we navigate this evolving visual landscape, it becomes imperative to engage critically with the complexities of networked image culture, and its implications for human and non-human perception and meaning-making processes. Additionally, no "way of seeing" the world is entirely transparent, as vision is shaped not only by individuals but also by societal and cultural influences. This complexity underscores the need to critically analyse how images are constructed and interpreted in our networked landscape.

2. Images have become a ubiquitous language, supporting an "image-experienced" way of life. Photography now operates within a diverse sociotechnical landscape, thriving on intermediality and new affective involvements. Artists are actively engaging with other artistic forms, producing intermedial works that challenge viewers to decode images within broader cultural contexts. Exemplifying this transformation, Baltic art photography departs from classical paradigms to embrace networked functionality and interpretability. Artists such as Õllek, Spunde, Kumža, Lismanis, Monko, Jancis, Kiliulytė, Morkevičius, and others, create intermedial systems where photographic images serve as nodes connecting various meanings and interpretations. This dynamic hybridity mirrors broader shifts in society, where meanings are fluid, reality is contested, and artistic expression extends readily beyond traditional boundaries.

3. Exhibitions have begun to reflect this change, encouraging a sensual, imagination-empowered and interactive engagement with photography, thus acknowledging the medium's role within a larger structural arrangement of ideas. This new complexity extends to our perception of images. While they remain somewhat tied to their

historical role as representatives of reality, their manifestation as data actualizations complicates their very essence. The majority of images we encounter across various screens are but one possible expression of underlying data, sometimes intended solely for machine-to-machine communication, circumventing the need for visual representation. This dual existence of photography—as both a visible artifact for human consumption and an invisible data point within a digital network—underscores the intricate, layered nature of the medium in the current age.

The photographic exhibition is now often a primary site for artists to present their work publicly. Reflecting the changing landscape of image creation, dissemination, and consumption, contemporary displays have largely departed from the strict confines of traditional presentation conventions. The examples discussed in this study have embraced intermediality, incorporating diverse forms of media and artistic practices, and have become deeply entwined with networked culture. Intermedial photography exhibitions today function as *systems*, wherein photographic artefacts are but one node in an artist-created universe dedicated to and exploring a certain topic, subject-area or several interrelated themes. This integration of various media challenges viewers to actively engage with the artworks, implying a high level of visual literacy and critical thinking.

Moreover, the shift towards research-based art projects has encoded artworks with multi-layered and networked meanings which reference broader cultural, technological, and social contexts. The exhibition spaces themselves function as dynamic and complex arrangements, reflecting the complexity and interconnectedness of the networked culture in which they exist. In this context, the role of the viewer is increasingly underscored, as they are implicitly tasked with deciphering the encoded pieces of art, utilizing the clues provided by the exhibition as well as their personal knowledge and imagination.

4. Intermedial instances of photography and the expansion of its meaning-making are closely inter-related processes. The thesis identifies a shift in meaning-making paradigms in relation to art photography, whereby a transition has been effected from the classical scheme to *the networked scheme*. The classical scheme was characterised by: 1) the importance of the visual content of the photographic image and clear borders demarcating it; 2) a relatively straight line of meaning flowing from the content to the object/subject in the real world. In contrast, *the networked scheme* is characterised by: 1) blurred or fractured boundaries; 2) more complex functioning of visual content and relatively less importance of it; 3) involving operations that engage with decidedly broad cultural and sociotechnical spectres. This dissertation's introduction of *networked meaning-making* as a conceptual tool suggests new avenues for interpreting

contemporary art photography within the networked cultural milieu. By contrasting this contemporary framework with traditional modes of meaning-making, this study has illuminated the intricate interactivity and participatory nature of contemporary art consumption, revealing the increasingly complex relationship between artwork and viewer in the digital age. As the *networked meaning-making* paradigm functions in a decidedly fluid environment for the meaning of photographic works, this places the viewer in a particular and highlighted spot, where a certain expectation to be an active participating in the networked regime of meaning-making arises.

5. The incorporation of Christina Ljungberg's semiotic approach to intermedial operations into the analysis of contemporary Baltic art photography offers a multifaceted framework for understanding the evolution of the medium. Her emphasis on *radical performativity*, *strong self-reflexivity*, and *effective communication* is particularly apt for interpreting the nuanced interactions between photography and other artistic forms and media within the Baltic states. Through this lens, we see that the expansion of photography in Estonia, for instance, reflects a comparatively more conscious and critically-engaged evolution, illustrating a burgeoning symbiosis between contemporary art and photography – two spheres that in Lithuania and Latvia remain conceptually and practically to some degree more separate and distinct.

6. Artistic exploration and investigation flourish in the fertile ground created by the convergence of photography and expanded realms of meaning-making and intermediality. This in turn fosters the development of novel relationships and imaginative frameworks that enrich our comprehension of contemporary cultural situation and complexities. This expansion transcends the mere hybridization of media; it signifies a mature self-awareness and proactive engagement by photographic artists with both production methods and the semiotic complexities of artworks. In the Baltic states these interactions are not confined to the networked and digital era alone; analogue performance photography and live-action documentation, in particular, have served as gateways to blend photographic practices with other artistic domains.

The transformation of photography in this context represents an inflection away from introspection within the medium towards a broader engagement with the networked field of cultural relations. This transition marks a pivot from a focus on medium-specific issues, evident in Lithuanian photography scene in the mid-2000s, to a more expansive, outward-looking approach that intertwines cultural, technological, and social spheres. Today artists in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are thus not merely producing images; they are weaving an intricate tapestry of intermedial connections that redefines the boundaries and possibilities of photography. These practices underscore a contemporary photographic perspective that extends beyond the medium

itself, delving into a layered and multidimensional space where art, technology, and society intersect and interact in dynamic and ever-evolving ways.

7. The fictional element has established itself as an important and meaningful aspect of contemporary expanded photography projects. Through the lens of photo-fiction, the artists discussed in this study navigate the shifting boundaries of reality and imagination, challenging traditional distinctions and prompting viewers to reconsider their perception of the division between fact and fiction. What emerges from these narratives is a profound reflection on the multifaceted, and often fragmented, nature of identity in today's interconnected world.

A notable characteristic of these artistic endeavours is their profound exploration of the fragility and fluidity of identity. In a contemporary milieu marked by rapid social, economic, and technological transformations, the notion of a fixed, stable identity has become increasingly untenable. Cognizant of this reality, the artists delve into the intricate nuances of identity formation, often drawing from personal experiences, cultural symbols, and historical references. Through their innovative use of photo-fiction, they challenge viewers to confront the malleability of identity, urging us to question established norms and embrace the plurality of fragmented narratives that shape our sense of self.

Collaborative efforts in the meaning-making operations intrinsic to intermedial exhibitions involve artists, curators, other creative individuals, and even active viewers, all working together to combine research with fiction, resulting in multi-layered narratives that bridge the gap between fact and imagination. By merging (photo-)fiction with factual elements, contemporary photographic art practices strategically utilize this approach to delve into complex issues, offering a deeper exploration of topics such as ecology, cultural issues, and societal challenges. This collaborative process enhances the depth and richness of artistic expression, engendering multi-dimensional artworks that engage viewers in a thought-provoking and immersive experience.

The deliberate fusion of fiction and fact in contemporary intermedial photography not only resonates with today's artistic practices but also reflects the evolving nature of artistic expression. This conscious blending of fiction with factual elements serves as a strategic method for artists to explore diverse themes and provoke critical engagement with their work. By challenging perceptions and pushing the boundaries of traditional artistic norms, artists can create multi-layered narratives that invite viewers to contemplate the complexities of the world around them. The integration of fiction with factual elements in today's photography exemplifies the dynamic nature of artistic practices in the modern era, showcasing the power of art to inspire, provoke, and engage audiences on a profound level.

8. Furthermore, the examination of these Baltic artists within the global context highlights the universality of their themes. The exploration of capitalist-related issues, the tension between reality and fiction, fragmented identities, and the profound impact of sociotechnological shifts are not unique to the Baltic states; they echo broader global concerns. In an era dominated by digital networks and virtual realities, these photographers serve as keen and sensitive observers, dissecting the intricate threads that weave together our perceptions of self, others, and our planet. Their work has the potential to resonate with audiences worldwide, inviting contemplation on the complex tapestry of human existence in the contemporary age.

The study of Baltic contemporary art photography reveals a rich tapestry of visual narratives that transcend traditional (medium-, meaning-, and nation-related) boundaries and critically challenge conventional notions of image-making. Artists in the region leverage intermediality and networked systems to create immersive and thought-provoking experiences that invite viewers to participate in the construction of meaning. By blurring the lines between fiction and reality, Baltic practitioners demonstrate a keen awareness of the complexities inherent in contemporary visual culture, reflecting a global trend towards a more interconnected and digitally mediated artistic landscape.

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List of Illustrations

Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview with Kristina Õllek
Conducted via Skype, 30 March, 2021.

Paulius Petraitis: Where do you situate yourself as a practitioner? And what role does photography play within your practice?

Kristina Õllek: I define myself as a visual artist, who uses photography together with installation and video. I'm interested in the interconnectedness between media and I want to expand the medium of photography through my practice. When exhibiting, I constantly consider how to display photography, because I don't want it to be just a two-dimensional image on a wall, but rather for it to become three-dimensional and acquire new perceptions. In today's world we are constantly surrounded by two-dimensional images. I think, I got tired of it. I want to experiment how to give a different approach, materiality or feeling to the photographic medium.

PP: You have studied photography at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Was your interest in photography wide-ranging and fluid, so to say, from the beginning, or did that develop gradually?

KÕ: At first, I entered the Estonian Academy of Arts with an idea to become a photographer, but this idea started to shift during my first years of studies. I became more aware of the spatial aspects, developing an interest in the architectural side of exhibition-making and critical thinking. I also started considering the viewer and the phenomenological side of how we inhabit spaces – following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea that "the body inhabits the space, lives the space while entering it". We create a space with ourselves inhabiting it, even as we walk on a street. I became interested in how an exhibition space becomes activated when a viewer enters it, and together with her walking directions. This interest evolved into other, wider themes: the historical side of museums and exhibition spaces, and then to the broader topic of our natural environment and ecology.

When I was applying to the photography department we had to produce a proposal for an art project. I remember now that, actually, I proposed an installation. However, at the time I didn't consider it as such. I remember seeing "Ars Fennica 2008" exhibition at Kumu, where I saw a photographic work in a different form and display context, which I think gave me a new way of sensing the photographic medium and inspired me to experiment with that proposal.

At the beginning of my studies, I was more into photography as a specific medium. One thing that always interested me in relation to the photographic medium was the question of reality – questioning the truthfulness of an image. The photography department at the time was led by Marko Laimre, who is not a photographer himself. He was a leading artist in the Estonian contemporary art scene then. He was always telling us that it is not just a photography department, but it's a contemporary art department. Although we had all the technical courses, such as studio photography and documentation photography, but conceptual side and theory played an important part in our education. Altogether, this has led us, the students, to push the boundaries and think a bit wider in terms of how to use photography. And be critical about it and its power. After the BA I already felt that I'm mainly using the installation format. I also started playing with the materiality of the photograph. And then during the MA this only expanded further. These days, I'm actually more considered as an installation artist. Though, I think this is also symptomatic to contemporary art today to not to have a fixed medium-based presence.

PP: An interest in hybridity manifests in your practice in a variety of ways. For example, it is demonstrated in hybrid forms and materiality – intertwining natural with the synthetic – but also in a more conceptual merging of the notions of copy and original. What attracts you to this fluid interaction? I also wonder if there is something about hybridity and intermediality that is especially relevant to tackling today's issues – ecological crises, anthropocene, etc – which are interconnected and complex, thus we almost need an equal richness of forms to address them?

KÕ: Thinking about the ecological situation, I think it is very important that we have this hybrid attention, so to say, because this gives us ability to look at the issue from different sides. Not to have a black/white simplistic view, but to consider it from various angles. A good example is solar panels and wind turbines, which we, as society, need to go for, as it is the way to get cleaner energy and less CO_2 in our air. At the same time, the panels and turbines are built using metals that are really hard to get, or are politically-charged since a lot of these rare earth elements are found in China, and the recycling system for these metals is still in its early stage and is currently seen as too expensive (which is, of course, a problem of its own how things are not recycled enough!). The rest of the world is looking for alternatives for China, and within the recent decade deep-sea mining has become an ever-growing topic, as all the needed rare earth elements and other valuable metals could be found from the certain deep seabed layers. This shows that parallel to the push for green energy and "green/blue economy", there's also another side which doesn't always go hand in hand with the initial intention. With deep-sea mining, we could destroy the whole habitat and species

in the deep-sea, and this would also lead to other devastating effects on life on Earth at large, as the two are very much connected. Shifting to deep-sea mining will have consequences that we don't know yet, or we intuit but don't want to acknowledge. Hybridity is very important to begin to see these different aspects of a complex issue.

PP: Could you name some theorists or theory books that have been influential in your thinking and artistic work?

KŌ: When I was in my BA, I was very influenced by Boris Groys' essay "Politics of Installation". In it, he considers how artworks and images flow from one context and situation to another, similarly to what Hito Steyerl writes about image culture in "In Defense of the Poor Image". How a saved and copied image becomes a new version of itself. We have the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, but we also have a postcard of Mona Lisa – and the latter is also an original in a specific sense, a postcard-original. While thinking about the materiality and geopolitics of the technology, then Jussi Parikka and his book "A Geology of Media" deepened my critical thinking and wider understanding of media materialities, its geophysicality, background and its current realities. Surely there are many other writers and thinkers who have been important to me, such as Astrida Neimanis, Rachel Carson, Donna Haraway and... I find it always quite hard to pinpoint some specific authors, as there are many that have shaped me in some way or another. It is also interesting how authors and texts come back – they influence you at one point, and then you read them again and start to think differently, and find new ways of understanding them.

PP: Your artworks are often richly multilayered and well-researched – referencing wider fields of culture, society, ecology and technology. How do you see referencing working in your pieces? And another question related to this, how do you deal (or not deal) with the possibility that the viewer may not be able to open up and access this extra-textual information? What is your view on this aspect, which I think is pertinent to much of contemporary art of today, that the meaning of an artwork is seemingly almost outsourced to the viewer, because it is particularly fluid or coded?

KŌ: While doing research and going in-depth into a topic, it is always a question of how much I can present, in a sense that if the viewer can grasp everything. Also, how much of my own interpretation to add, or how much of straight answers I want to give. In this situation the question of the medium becomes more apparent. I feel that with video, for example, I can give more knowledge to the viewer, as it becomes more like a linear story-telling. I think talking about certain issues through video might give a better possibility of being understood. With video, a person sits down and takes time to be engaged. Though the decision to watch it entirely is made by the viewer, so there's always a chance that the work is not seen as a whole. I've noticed that if a work

doesn't demand a specific time to be viewed, then people tend to be quicker in viewing, but of course that's not always the case. The question of how to trigger knowledge is complex, I also don't want to be didactic. To say directly – this is like this – that is not my intention. I think art should initiate questions.

I also feel that the text or visual essay format is a good way to communicate with the viewer. For example, now I was collaborating with curator Angeliki Tzortzakaki. During the studio visit, when I was still living in The Hague, she was very interested in my practice and the topics I'm currently working on – thinking about ecology of the sea, filter feeders, the coastal area of the Netherlands. While discussing my research and being in a dialogue for almost 2 years, we decided to make a visual essay "Filter Feeders and Ill-Mannered Bodies", for which my partner Kert Viiart made the graphic design. Angeliki created a fictional story using scientific facts that I shared with her from my own research, and then she interpreted these through her own "filters" and our discussions, which formed into a really nice multi-layered science fictional story. I really enjoyed how she combined all the knowledge into the fictional state and also how Kert combined her text and my photography with his fluid graphic design decisions. I think it is a really nice format to use research together with fiction, and as well to collaborate with each other within that framework.

PP: I'm interested in this element of fiction, which is noticeably utilised in contemporary art. It seems there's something about merging fiction with the factual that suits today's artistic practices. Liga Spunde, for example, talks about it as a sort of conscious strategic method.

KÕ: I think this is also what differentiates artistic practices from documentary. Otherwise, it would be mostly stating facts. Art has the ability to create imaginative perspectives and fictional speculative assumptions. When I'm doing research, I'm still an artist, I don't think as a scientist. I take facts and start thinking further, and add my ideas or fiction to that. If this is not done, then it is just science or visualising science. Fiction adds a different layer and a perspective to think about complex issues.

PP: Philosopher Nelson Goodman in *Ways of Worldmaking* argued that artist are able to create new world-versions, through making new concepts and thus realities. For example, Goodman talked about the notion of "a Kafkaesque situation", which we recognise after Kafka, or the so-called Rembrandt's light. I think it is a useful approach to think about the power of art, and how it differs from science. We know that the glaciers are melting – that's a scientific fact. But I am touched rather differently seeing an artistic work about it, which carries a different emotional impact.

KÕ: And also, though many people know facts like these, but more like a regular headline in newspaper. But an exhibition might, hopefully, open some possibilities to

think further, or at least get another perspective on it. I would imagine that it could create a different stimulation for the viewer in relation to the issue.

PP: When you work on an exhibition, do you have certain ideas how you would like the viewer to be touched and engaged with?

KŌ: I always think about the viewer when installing, or even developing the work. I imagine myself as a viewer and think how I would like the work to be seen and approached. In the case of *Nautilus New Era* video, I was very aware how I wanted the viewer to feel while sitting on these specific seats that I created. The seats consist of a fibo block, which resembles the hydrothermal vent structure, and is covered with a memory foam layer, and a blue squishy silicone rubber cushion on top. My interest in using these specific materials also extended to the fact that they are being tested and used for the soft grip for the robotic hands, in order for them to not destroy the habitat when taking samples from the deep-sea. I wanted to give the viewer the feeling of the soft grip while sitting on it. But also to relate these important issues with what might happen in regards to the deep-sea mining.

In my solo show "Filter Feeders, Double Binds & Other Silicones" at Draakoni gallery, I displayed some of the works on the floor, with a sand-mat surface underneath them – so that the works would be seen as if they were laying on a seaside. I also liked how the angle of viewing corresponds with how I photographed the works as well. And if a person wants to see in detail, she needs to kneel down, like on a beach.

PP: So one could say you try to incorporate the viewer's perspective when thinking about installation and arranging works in a space?

KŌ: Yes. Especially when we see so many documentation images constantly, the viewer needs to get a different perspective when entering an exhibition space. So it's not – "ok, I already saw it on Instagram, I don't mind anymore". I think it is important to create a multi-dimensional feeling in a space.

PP: Special treatment.

KŌ: Yes, exactly.

PP: The discussion about documentation and its importance is quite significant and, of course, ongoing. When I open Instagram, I'm already spoiled, in some way, about most exhibitions in Vilnius – which became only more apparent after the galleries and museums finally re-opened recently. Of course, you can always argue that there is something special about being in the space. But in some cases it's more special than in others.

KŌ: I agree. Though, for example the sound and smell in the space can change the perception a lot, and that's something yet (!) we can't sense through the images. For example, in "Nautilus New Era" video I used a 60 Hz sound frequency, which gives

vibration to the body. So the feeling is a bit like being under the sea or in an underwater vessel, but also the sound really goes into your body in a very affective and physical way.

PP: You seem to approach your projects like an artist-researcher. Could you say more about the research part and how do you go about it?

KÕ: It very much starts with my own interest in something. I begin doing research and looking at scientific papers and other related writings. They can often be quite hard to understand due to specific scientific language and complex terminology, but I'm interested in learning and gaining knowledge as an artist, and filtering it through my artistic sensibilities. Visual material in scientific research also influences me. In relation to the deep-sea, it is researched primarily through the camera-eye, which is attached to a rover. A robotic system doing research in the depth of 4000-6000 metres, while people are seeing it on the surface via various screens. It also creates a bit of a video game feeling, as it feels distant and imaginary. But it's also photographic in a sense, as the visual perspective is very much influenced by the lens and the apparatus.

In addition, going out to see these different locations and places that are connected to the research in a closer or distant way is also an important part of my practice, and I kind of consider these places as my extended studio locations at that time.

I'm also very interested in testing out different materials. This, especially working with organic materials, became an integral part of my practice within the last couple of years. During the first lockdown in 2020, I was trying out bioplastic. I was interested in the seaweed and the agar, and thinking how plastic could be created using them by my own means. I was using it for "Powered by" work which combines bioplastic together with resin in a self-decomposing structure. So it changes in time. Currently I'm experimenting with sea salt.

I also feel that I have created my own lab in the studio, which makes me less dependent on others and allows more freedom in testing out my own materials. It's a really nice feeling to have the ability to create sculptural pieces from scratch, as well as see themselves growing/changing.

PP: Seeing a couple of your installations, it felt like there's an element of hands-on construction present. Do you enjoy this part of your practice?

KÕ: I really enjoy it, and I think it increasingly became an important part of my practice. For example two years ago I came across an article that in London marathon they are testing out new ways of providing drinks for the runners. The goal is to eliminate the use of plastic cups, and to use these water bubbles instead, which you "drink" while swallowing it. I really liked how these water bubbles looked, and I started searching for a recipe to make it myself. At first I just did some regular tests on how to create this water bubble, but soon I proceeded to manipulate with its form,

and tried to give it a shape as of a jelly-fish. Which I then photographed for the work "Feeling with the Water", and displayed in a blue showcase frame that I covered with a synthetic jelly-fish-esque material, silicone.

I also filmed having this water-bubble-jelly-fish-look-alike in my hand, slightly squishing it and eventually the water breaking out from it. I'm interested in manipulating the viewer's perception of seeing and sensing.

PP: To link this back to your current project with photography and salt. Could you talk a bit more about it?

KŌ: Currently I'm working with salt. I'm growing salt crystals on photographs in order to have texture on the image, but also on the frames and on parts of the installation. It's a dialogue with materiality. I'm also questioning longevity, because salt is constantly evolving so it may make the photograph disappear in the end. This will be used for a new body of work which will be presented in my solo show at A Tale of A Tub this summer. The photographic images which I'm using to grow salt on, are commenting on the sea ecology, to which I also want to give a perspective of salinity. Salinity is an issue in the Netherlands due to the rising sea-levels. The groundwater is in danger of being infused with the sea water. I was thinking about how to combine these issues in my artistic practice and started to test growing salt crystals in my studio. This led me to experiment this process also with a sculpturesque metal grid structure and on photographs. I made many tests to see which materials and photographic paper I could use to evoke the growth. It takes a few weeks to grow. I'm interested in the process also because I've let it loose in some way, and I'm not fully in control of it. Now every time I come to the studio, I'm excited to see how the growing process has evolved and notice the development by its own rhythm.

Appendix 2. Interview with Liga Spunde

Conducted via Skype, 8 January, 2021.[524]

Paulius Petraitis: I'm interested in identification. I have multiple roles and emphasize different aspects depending on a situation. Thus identification is something that occasionally confuses me, and I wonder how do you deal with that? You successfully work across media, incorporating video, photography, installation, sculptural and performative elements. How do you identify yourself as a practitioner, and is there a need to identify somehow?

Liga Spunde: Well, I'm also struggling with this, especially since I'm working with various media. It sometimes really confuses me how to classify myself. I especially feel that applying for projects like residencies or funding, where they really want to profile you. It's also related to commercial work and selling works, as then they don't really know where to put you, somehow. At the same time, I think that art in general is so mixed nowadays that as an artist you don't have to define yourself, or be attached to some concrete medium.

PP: What role does photography play within your practice, and how has this role developed over time?

LS: I think photography is still very close for me, even though I'm not using it as often anymore. My interest in photography was the reason I started doing art. For a long time, especially when I was a teenager, I was almost obsessed with taking pictures of everything. That is also why I decided to find a professional art education. Back then, the only option to study photography was in Janis Rosenthal Art School, which was a quite prestigious art college specialising in drawing and painting. So the trick was that to learn photography I had to learn how to draw and paint. So my understanding about art expanded and I began to increasingly experiment with other media. And I think I'm still continuing that.

My relationship with photography is complicated. I wouldn't call myself a photographer. But I still feel very linked with photography as a medium and also the photography scene in Latvia. I am sometimes still using it – taking pictures and employing archival images. But my relationship is definitely different now than it was at the beginning, when I was mostly interested in the depiction of reality.

PP: I would like to touch on this interdisciplinary aspect further, but I think what you're saying about this interest in capturing reality that has shifted is interesting. How would you characterise your interest in photography now? What photography does for you?

LS: I think that at one point I started to realise that what makes me very interested in photography is this phenomenon that it still sort of shows reality, the real appear-

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524 An abbreviated version of this interview appeared on *Echo gone wrong* as "A Strange Reality in Fictionalised Voices. A conversation with Liga Spunde", 11 February, 2021.

ance of something. Even if it's made-up or somehow manipulated, it's still a depiction of something real. I started to also use the made-up side of photography – arranging artificial scenes in a studio to express my feelings about something real. Not how it looks like, but how I feel about it. I started taking made-up portraits of my friends, which are connected to some of my stories and projects. In this case the stories and emotions were real and I wanted to tell about them, even if the appearance was completely made-up. I found it fascinating that photography at the beginning was also a tool for evidence, for crimes or identity. However you can really manipulate it nowadays. In my latest projects I maybe don't use this motive that much, but it still interests me.

PP: The interdisciplinary element of photography is quite interesting nowadays. In a group interview for "Latvian Photography 2018" annual, you briefly touched on photography as an idea rather than a medium, and how that opens it up, giving new possibilities to the term and its use. The ongoing expansion of photography, which is also reflected in the physical expansion into other media and other form of art, is what interests me. At the same time, I feel that this interdisciplinary employment complicates our understanding of what photography is. It creates some confusion over the term. Do you think it makes sense to talk about the *photographic* more – as a sort of cultural lens of perception – rather than photography? How do you see this confusion in today's age, when there are also photographs made by machines for other machines, AI-generated images, and so on?

LS: Indeed, nowadays the term of photography is very wide. It has many functions. As you were saying, it is really hard to define what photography is or what should it be, or how it looks like, because it depends on the categories employed to look at it. I think one of the ways photography is trying to interact with fine arts is changing its physical appearance, like printing on new materials. But I'm not sure if that really changes much – it's the same image, but in a different shape. It's a complicated subject, I don't have one answer, I can just say some things I noticed. What do you think?

PP: I think that on the one hand it is wide and hard to grasp. Because photography is almost everything, or so much of things – so what is it? So there is a bit of this, I guess, nostalgia for documentary photography or photojournalism. At least here in Lithuania one could feel that – there were some noteworthy projects that came up recently and were quite popular. Because there photography, in some way at least, is rather easy to understand and to grasp. But when one deals with, for example, AI-generated images or images that look like photograph but one doesn't really know if they're photographs, it gets really tricky. So, on the one hand there is this wish for simple photography and on the other, we just use photographic processes so much that it is really hard to define it in any certain way. And therefore I feel that the notion of the photographic could

potentially be helpful in discussions, as there is so much that is sort-of photographic in our culture, but not necessarily photography. Like in video games, for example.

LS: Yes, it's a good subject to think about. It is also related to this relationship between fine arts and photography. In the latest review in the FK magazine, professionals were asked about the disappointments of this year. One curator said that she is disappointed that photography is going beyond its borders and mixing with fine arts, and that she really enjoys seeing "clear" photography.

PP: Interesting.

LS: Yeah, that also betrays that people are looking for the simple in photography.

PP: Yes, I feel that for quite some time – in the past 10-15 years, but also beyond that – the relationship between photography and fine arts is complicated.

LS: True, the photography field is like a separate position. But at the same time, of course, it's part of fine arts.

PP: And I feel it is also to a degree culturally and historically specific. When I talk with some Estonian colleagues, for example Marge Monko or Laura Toots, they often emphasize how art photography in Estonian education was always intimately connected with contemporary art. Therefore it is more natural for them to mix it and they do it more. So there's a bit less discussion about this tension between fine arts and photography, it feels more natural that photography is part of contemporary art.

LS: I had an interesting discussion with Estonian artist Kristina Õllek. I also think that probably it has something to do with education. Here in Latvia one of the leading departments [in the art academy] is the visual communication department. It is based on the tradition of conceptual thinking. The professors there are a bit sceptical, so to say, about photography as a separate field. In the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn, the photography department is one of the leading ones. In Latvia we are still struggling with the photography education. In the art academy you still cannot study photography.

PP: To go back more specifically into your work, I would like to talk about storytelling. It seems that is important for your practice, and not only storytelling but also stories mixed with different elements to create an atmosphere. This atmosphere is quite palpable in your exhibitions. Could you talk a little bit about that?

LS: I really like storytelling, specifically strange and unbelievable stories. I find it fascinating when reality is stranger than fiction. I'm using storytelling a lot. Basically, I'm re-telling stories, as I find it interesting to add to or deform reality a bit. Not showing exactly what happened or how things looked like – instead I'm trying to keep the essence of truth but interpret it somehow. That is also why I'm using many references – to expand on the emotion. Sometimes I'm telling stories that are very personal. I see getting too personal as a big risk. Then probably it's not that interesting for others,

and not always can be relatable. Quite often I'm using elements from pop culture, which helps involving wider audience, as they can relate better to an experience that is made more universal through the use of symbols and references. But this happens without changing the main story-line – I allow myself changing the characters and some actions, but not what's the most important.

PP: You mentioned references operating in your work. Linking that with the notion of interdisciplinary photography, what I find rather interesting is that, as I've noticed, photography increasingly references wider culture. It is used not as an image of something depicted there, but the image is a symbol for something outside of the frame – what the spectator is, I guess, encouraged to decode. The ability to imagine and to link different cultural elements is quite useful viewing contemporary photography, I think. How do you feel about this notion of referencing and creating a fictionalised environment, which becomes a mixture of your personal story and varied layers of elements from pop culture, literature, video games, etc?

LS: In my case references also help me express my emotions and feelings in a more precise manner. I'm from a generation who grew up with Disney and video games and these things for me are already specific codes for emotions. For example, when someone talks about magic, I can immediately visualise sparks characteristic of Disney. Following my memories and intuition, I'm using some of the fictional characters trying to find a very precise element or gesture that could symbolize what I want to say. In some cases, they are already visual ready-mades. Probably how I'm using them is not so far from what is done in social networks, with the sending of gifs, which are meant to convey emotions. In that sense, it is fictional and not so fictional at the same time, because we already have these codes and know what they mean. In my case, the feeling behind fictionalised appearances is real, just visually it doesn't look so real.

PP: Interesting. We can interpret visual symbols differently, but they – for example the Dysney snow white's mirror that you're using in "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" – perhaps work on some level for those who have seen it. Do you feel this recognition of something familiar enables viewers to better engage with the exhibition?

LS: That's exactly what I mean. I think it helps. They have their stories behind these images. Quite often these stories or emotions are quite similar, actually.

PP: I'm thinking about a discussion in philosophy that we have seen so many images, that we tend to think visually – we remember in images to a significant degree more than before. That also relates to that we have such a rich repository of images and visuals, almost as if wired into our brain, that we can relate to so much that flat images become, in a way, alive, as we almost animate them ourselves in the brain.

LS: I can relate with that. That's also how I find motives for my projects. I'm trying

to think what does it remind me, where I have seen something similar. And then a certain scene from a movie pops in my mind, in which a feeling or a situation was kind of similar. Then I start do some research about that, discovering new things.

PP: Maybe here we could talk about a related aspect – technologies and Internet. I feel these are interests that we share. "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" includes a reference to *The Sims* video game franchise. What role do visual technologies play in your everyday life?

LS: When I was growing up the Internet just arrived into our daily lives. I belonged to a generation who, in this region, were among the first to try forums and chat-rooms. My teenage years are really linked with this experience. Of course, it was not only nice. It was actually quite interesting, as a young person you don't know what to expect, and you learn different things. The title, "When hell is full", comes from rotten.com, which was a horror archive of pictures and various disgusting things. It was very popular. Interestingly, it was accessible for very long time, till 2012. I grew up with these technologies and also photography, which was my first hobby, though at that time I believed that art photography can be only analogue, of course. But then I got over that. I think technologies play a big role in my everyday. I'm spending so much time with computer, both because I'm working with various digital applications and softwares, but also because I'm communicating that way and spending my time reading things online. Technology is also part of my personality, also.

PP: What's your relationship with video games today?

LS: These days I'm not playing video games that much. But when I was a teenager I really played a lot. *The Sims* was one of my favourite games. I find it very interesting due to it also being a life-simulation game. It is really interesting that after some time the game becomes so boring that the only entertainment left is to kill the avatars. Everyone has done it. Interestingly, you don't feel any empathy, because life there is super boring. Also the existence of all the cheat codes… Somehow, I think it is also symbolic. At least in the project "When Hell Is Full" the point to use *The Sims* was an interest in life simulation gone wrong.

PP: You're talking about "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth", but I guess that could also apply to "There's No Harm In Any Blessings", specifically the real-life story of David Vetter.

LS: That's a very interesting and tragic case. I don't really dare to make any speculations if David wouldn't be there in the bubble due to his condition, would he be alive. Probably no, because he had such a disease that he couldn't live without this environment. So, on the one hand, I understand this decision. But of course, the fact that he lived there 12 years – and not a few months, as was originally predicted – really changed a lot. It is also a technology, but a different one. In his case, it is complicated, since it's a question

of life and death. It is really hard to make any comments. I also don't envy his parents who have made the decision. It's really tough. But the aspect of life in complete isolation is interesting. When I started to read a book about him I learnt a lot of interesting things – for example that the closed bubble environment he was in really impacted his perception. He thought that things are flat, because he saw them from only one angle. He was not familiar with the concepts of wind, things that seem normal for us.

PP: What was the process of connecting David Vetter's story with your personal story? The two are quite closely interlinked in the project.

LS: Actually, I was struggling to connect them. I am lucky as I didn't have the kind of experience he did, and never had such serious health issues. On one hand, it was hard for me to dare to connect these two stories. But the angle I could do that was through overprotection. Experiencing actions in the name of love that are probably not logical, or a bit extreme. In my case, my mum took me to stand for 16 hours during night to see this icon. She insisted on that wanting to make sure that my life would be successful. You know, it won't harm to see this icon. Sounds a bit crazy, but we did it. This made me think about this duality when intentions are good but results are not that good or not what you wanted then. When you want something good but do actually something bad is an issue for me. In David Vetter's case – of course, I can't say that they did something bad, but obviously he was not lucky with his life living in his bubble, and it couldn't have gone further because he could not live there.

PP: What is your way of working from one project to the other – is your schedule largely based on exhibitions planned? And how do you generate ideas?

LS: Usually I work on projects tied with exhibitions. I expect that may change now, as I have a studio for the first time. I feel I can come here and work without an attachment to any concrete project. The question regarding generating ideas is complicated. I'm trying to use what has left a strong emotional impact on me, because that also helps me investing in it. It kind of guarantees my personal involvement in the project, as talking about something I'm emotionally connected with becomes really important. I have also done projects which, probably, were more intellectual, less linked with emotions or personal stories but were more formal. But in the past few years I feel that these projects where I can really invest with all my heart and that involve personal stories are also, somehow, more successful.

PP: That's interesting. Do you feel vulnerable in this process of exposing personal stories? I'm thinking for example about "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" where it was an event in the company where your sister was working. So you don't give all the details about exactly what happened, and of course, I can only speculate or guess, but there's this implication that it's a rather personal event that has

affected you and your family. So do you feel there is an element of vulnerability, and does that help also, in terms of realizing a project, or making it, as you say, successful?

LS: Well, of course, it is very sensitive for me to work with these personal stories. That is also one of the reasons why I have chosen the strategy of interpreting these events. I'm inventing new characters, new environment and situations to play out the storyline with different characters. I think that really helps me to create distance and for it to not become too personal. I'm quite aware of this strategy. It's my way of dealing with it. Otherwise it is too personal and sensitive.

PP: Could you say that these projects then become, in some way at least, therapeutic?

LS: Yes, definitely. I don't do it on purpose, but in the end, when I've been working with a certain issue for so much time, and looking at this issue from all the possible angles and playing out with different characters and so on, I feel enough of that and can kind of let it go.

PP: This is a bit of a side topic, but I remembered when I was doing my MA in Stockholm and was really struggling with photography. I felt that my old style, which was more diaristic – I was mostly shooting friends and scenes of everyday life – had changed and I can't really do that anymore, but I haven't found a new approach yet. And I did a project where I had a notebook and instead of taking photographs I wrote them down: noting the date, what happened and if it's horizontal or vertical. And it became really helpful for me. It was personal, in a different sense to what you're talking, but it really helped me. It was a therapeutic project that allowed me to accept the change and that it's normal.

LS: It's really interesting that you wrote down also if it's vertical or horizontal.

PP: Yes, I felt that I wanted to make it a bit formal. So I noted the date and vertical or horizontal. I did it for about 9 months and it was published as a zine by Japanese small publisher "Booklet Press". They wanted to translate it. Me and designer who was working on it, felt that that works even better – adding an additional layer of translation onto a project that is, essentially, a translation already. And adding Japanese – nice and unreadable symbols for us – worked really well in this regard.

LS: It sounds really nice.

PP: It was definitely helpful. Especially afterwards, I felt that it was needed – this diary of a struggle.

LS: Actually it's an interesting point. When I was giving an artist talk at ISSP school was a moment I realized that probably my ongoing interest in reality, though in latest projects it manifests mostly through facts or stories, is something I took from early experience with photography. It's not the image, but the very basic essence of a fact – like the short texts you wrote down.

PP: Interesting. I feel that even for these artists who transitioned to contemporary art, but were photographers, or trained as ones, before, this photographic logic or

language somehow remains visible. I can almost recognize the logic of it operating, which is quite interesting.

In the mentioned group interview for the annual of Latvian Photography in 2018, you said that "we don't work as artists, we work to be artists". This statement encapsulates certain precariousness of cultural workers and artists today quite well. The past two years your work received several recognitions: the artist scholarship in 2019, "When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth" was acquired for the collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art, and recently you've been nominated for the Purvitis prize. How has that changed your situation, especially financially, and do you feel your career is now at a different stage than it was two years ago?

LS: I have gained certain recognition that helped me with publicity, especially within non-art circles. Financially-wise, this year I can afford renting a studio, even without the scholarship. The museum has acquired my works, so now I have some savings, but in general I don't think that somehow solved the overall situation of being an artist. In an interview for Purvitis prize nominees, I was asked if Latvia is friendly for young artists. That's part of the problem that Latvia is especially friendly for young artists, but it is really hard to maintain one's practice when you're not considered young anymore. And after 35 years you are not old. It's really hard to apply for funding – there is no system or structure for support. This was the first year we had the scholarships. During this one year, I was able to do a lot of things, but the year is over. I'm kind of back to reality. A year is too short to really become somehow stable. And I don't feel that I became established somehow. I still need to work a lot.

PP: Including side-jobs?

LS: Yes, I'm teaching and freelancing. Even some artists who had received the Purvitis prize were my colleagues at graphic design agencies. I don't know what should happen to be really able to work as an artist. I think here most of the artists have side-jobs. I'm worried about this dynamic: that when you're young you're interesting, but not so much when you're not that young. It's hard to maintain this interest. Luckily now I'm at a point where I'm still interesting, but I don't know for how long.

PP: There's this rather cynical saying that "you're as interesting as your latest project".

LS: That's a good one. I'll remember it.

PP: It's quite cynical, but there's some truth to it.

I would like to talk a bit about community. You already touched that you're part of the Latvian system – as a cultural and societal system, but also a capitalistic system that affords certain opportunities. Do you feel a sense of community in Riga? How is it being a young artist in Latvia?

LS: There's a small community. The art scene is vivid but small. Everyone is applying for the same foundation, thus we are all expecting to get funding from the same source. It be-

comes a bit competitive in this sense, but also not too much. There are really nice artist-run spaces. We still don't have a contemporary art museum, which is a big issue and a shame.

I think people here, in general, are ready to work a lot, and invest themselves in projects also without getting paid. They are able and ready to do great things. Some of the initiatives you can see. People are also connected globally. There is also a tendency of the local art institutions to work with local artists who are a bit successful abroad. This makes the situation even more complex. So the way to survive in the local context is to go abroad. And that is something I've been thinking about a lot. I'm kind of doing well here, but perhaps not enough to maintain this interest in my practice.

PP: I wanted to touch also on the collaborative aspect of your practice. You quite often collaborate with artists, writers, actors. David Vetter is also, in a way, a collaborator. What does collaboration enable for you? Do you feel it is somehow different than doing your own individual thing, or is it more practical – that you need a certain different skill and therefore you work with someone who has it?

LS: I think it's both. Sometimes I have ideas I'm not able to realize myself. Then I'm really happy to invite my friends. Of course, when inviting them I take into account that they will also bring something from themselves into a project – it's not only a technical help, it's a collaboration in this sense. I have very good actor friends, that's probably one of the reasons I'm collaborating with actors quite often. For texts, I'm usually working with Klāvs Mellis, who is an actor and theatre director. We studied together in the art college, so I know him since 16. I know he writes very well. He also understands my thinking. When I tell my story, I don't want to tell it too directly – I'm open for his interpretation.

PP: Does collaborating interests you as part of the process of storytelling? In other words, is that a way to share the story and involve other people, allowing others to have a voice in the process of telling? It's still your story, but other people seemingly add their own voices and it becomes a bit more polyphonic.

LS: Definitely. In my case, I invite other people – so I ask them to put their voice into my story. But that's actually what I'm looking forward when I'm collaborating. Especially with text. Occasionally I write myself, but I really enjoy when someone else tells my story with his or her words. Sometimes I'm even surprised how it turns out. For example in the case of "What's a Girl Like You Doing In a Place Like This", the text tells a story that is really fictional. I wrote down certain things I needed to include in the story, but I had no idea that that would end up in a kind of detective story. The part with the fridge was completely made up, but I was really happy how Klāvs managed to interpret. So other voice is something that I wish to add to my practice.

Appendix 3. Interview with Vytautas Kumža

Conducted via MS Teams, 17 January, 2024.

Paulius Petraitis: Let's start with a question I often pose to fellow photography practitioners. How do you define yourself as an artist? These days, this labelling can be tricky, with photography being so broad, but at the same time occasionally too specific for what one does.

Vytautas Kumža: A few years ago, I was presenting myself primarily as a photographer, but now I'm starting to call myself a visual artist who uses the medium of photography. I've realized I possess a photographic vision, enabling me to create spatial installations and photographic worlds, forming exhibition spaces. So, I would say I use the tools, techniques, and theory of photography in my wider practice. While the fundamentals, problems, limitations, and inspiration still originate from photography, it extends beyond the definition of what photography is.

PP: Your perspective on photography is intriguing, akin to sentiments expressed by other practitioners like Kristina Õllek or Līga Spunde. A number of Baltic artists began with a narrow interest in the medium but then expanded their focus. Is there something specific in photography or its language and technique that currently captivates you or is relevant to the questions you aim to explore?

VK: I have a love-hate relationship with photography, coming from Lithuania and being in the scene from a young age. There's a lot of documentary or humanistic photography, which was frustrating for me. The principles inherent in documentary photography, and the outcomes they produce, offer too little autonomy for my taste. The artistry within this genre seems confined to that moment of capturing the image and framing it, which, in my view, is overly limiting.

So I explored various photographic approaches, ranging from documentary to fashion and still life. When I moved to Amsterdam I discovered that photography can be used in a simplistic way for a very conceptual outcome. What intrigues me the most is the control of photography and how it allows complete autonomy. The setting or person becomes submissive as I try out different settings. I photograph my friends who are comfortable with me, for instance, putting objects on top of them, and I would ask, "Why I use that?" because it also creates the illusion. I think the illusion of photography is the most interesting because if you move the lens a bit to one side, you would shatter this whole *trompe-l'œil* effect. The mystery of realness, achieved by manipulating real subjects and objects through the lens and light, holds particular fascination for me.

PP: It's interesting that you brought up control and illusion. Your earlier projects, such as "Tricks and Trade Secrets" and "Don't Fall in Love with the Prop", delved

into exploring the illusion of photography and attempting to deconstruct it. Can you elaborate on that?

VK: These projects were made during a transitional period in my career, as at that time I decided to try to move more into Fine Arts. Having assisted fashion photographers, I observed backstage tricks that transformed the visual into different outcomes. For instance, a seemingly ordinary setup, like a duct tape on a tripod, could be visually transformed through filters, creating a captivating illusion. It blew my mind how simple creative gestures can create such an outcome. So I wanted to kind of deconstruct that and to bring this backstage of this whole photo-kitchen to the front, showing the viewer how things are made and what kind of creative sculptural elements happen in the production of an image.

With "Tricks and Trade Secrets", it was a year of daily studio exploration, constructing sets by hand without digital alterations. It was interesting not to use Photoshop but to create trickery from what I learnt through the years. In "Don't Fall in Love with the Prop", I constructed gadgets – some real and functional, others metaphorical dummies without purpose. Combining them into a series formed what I would term photographical sculptures.

PP: What's your attitude toward conducting this deconstruction? Is it somewhat ironic towards the medium, given your close observation of its role in creating artifice?

VK: I would say there's always a kind of irony in my work, but because I treat it very seriously, it hovers on a delicate border, and viewers are questioning whether it's funny or serious. So, yes, I try to balance it like a scale, determining how far I should push it. But overall these projects act like a commentary on what's happening in the photography discourse.

PP: Was the impetus behind these two series influenced by discussions on digital photography and its perceived lack of trustworthiness?

VK: Yes, exactly. I think we no longer question what's altered and what's not. When we encounter something strange or abnormal, we immediately label it as a digital render or alteration. That's what I like to play around with. Regarding "Don't Fall in Love with the Prop", it was not just a provocation for the viewer but also a personal test for me – avoiding any props in the set. There were no real props; the tripods and these gadgets and the lights themselves became the prop.

PP: That title is a direct message for the viewer. What is your relationship in general with viewership and their response to your work? I find it interesting that art photography is becoming increasingly coded. To fully deconstruct and enjoy the coded meanings and messages nowadays, a viewer almost needs specialist knowledge. I touched on this when talking with Kristina Õllek – in her projects, she's trying to strike a balance between

providing enough information to the viewer and not making the works too coded.

VK: That's a very interesting question, and I'm mindful of that. In the process of creating my work, I consciously step back, seeking potential triggers. Symbols and how we interpret objects, motives, and messages occupy my thoughts, and I often introduce tension between opposites – positive and negative, constructed and deconstructed. Each artwork features an element of cuteness juxtaposed with a sense of deconstruction or brokenness. For me, creating without considering how a viewer will interpret it wouldn't be effective. There's a psychological layer in my practice, particularly when dealing with potentially suggestive objects like, for instance, a perforated shoe. Depending on the setting and lighting, what may initially convey violence can become predictable and simultaneously horrific.

In the creative process, I engage with friends, creating multiple image versions and selecting the one that elicits the most emotions. However, when it comes to guiding viewers on how to perceive or interpret the work, I deliberately step back. It's not interesting for me, and attempting to educate viewers on how to engage with the project risks making the experience overly prescriptive. When putting together an exhibition, I maintain a thematic thread. Even though the images may appear diverse, I aim to create a cohesive series, featuring, for instance, a hand, a person, and perhaps five still life images. This approach forms a complete universe around a person, as I've observed that exhibitions lacking a human element create a different atmosphere. The narrative needs to be activated by our human perspective.

Over the years, I've witnessed how people attach meaning to my images, and at times, it can be emotionally weighty. For instance, a woman purchased an image from my graduation project featuring burned matches, a small sculpture with half-burnt matches. She explained that it reminded her of her deceased husband, and despite initially not intending to buy anything, she felt compelled to make the purchase. This emotional connection highlighted the power of symbols. In different cultural contexts, exhibitions may be perceived as humorous or commentary, as illustrated during my visit to Dubai, where some viewed the work as aggressive and serious. It's intriguing to observe these cultural interpretations.

PP: I find it fascinating how viewers today actively engage in the meaning-making of art, and art photography specifically. There are numerous layers of meaning – as on one hand, photographs have coded information and visual references. On the other hand, they offer so many layers that viewers can invest in or even invent their own meanings.

VK: I view this as a positive development because, to me, it signifies the medium is liberating itself, akin to painting. With painting, you don't need to justify why something is in a particular corner; it simply exists. However, in photography, there's

often a need to explain or create a narrative behind the image. Many contemporary artists working within the photography discourse free themselves from the burden of over-explaining. They establish methods that are clear to a certain extent for themselves, creating a semi-open, semi-closed space for the viewer. This approach encourages more thinking and interpretation, filling a void that may have existed in photography, a lack of space for interpretation.

PP: One of the tendencies I'm attempting to identify with this research is the shift towards more open and interpretative meanings, engaging the viewer in new and dynamic ways. It's fascinating that now, meaning extends beyond what's solely within the photograph. While you may see specific objects like matches or a nail, the true meaning often lies elsewhere, outside of the immediate frames of the photographs, and viewers can create their own mental connections.

VK: Yes. And that is a valuable exercise, especially in the era of social media and the abundance of images. Artists are stepping back, allowing themselves more room for interpretation, and generating new meanings in their process. In a time when everyone can capture images of matches or a nail, the artistry lies in creating a thread, linking elements to form a broader universe for a project or series. Not so much in a single imagery, but in this thread that links things to create a universe for a project or a series.

PP: Talking about universes, perhaps we could delve into the exhibition as a specific setting for displaying photography. It's intriguing that contemporary photography exhibitions frequently embrace intermediality, integrating various forms and media. While photography may take a dominant role, it coexists with and complements other forms of artistic expression. Moreover, contemporary photography exhibitions often function as atmospheric systems, where diverse elements converge to construct a cohesive system of meaning. This integration is guided by a theme, a central question, or an overarching interest – reminiscent of what you describe as a universe. Could you elaborate on your process of thinking about exhibitions? How do you transition from working on specific pieces to considering how they will be displayed?

VK: That's a very good question. Especially with more recent projects, I started to think about them as site-specific, although I try not to disclose this to the viewer. The works and exhibitions might appear elsewhere or function singularly. For the exhibition "Objects in the Mirror are Closer than They Appear" at the Martin Van Zomeren gallery, where I was invited to do a solo show, I thought it would be interesting to create an illusionary sticker on their large windows. Since I've been working a lot with glass lately, and they had this big window-front, I decided to theme it around a burglary scene. The smashed windows, a car mirror, a hand with holes in the glove, perforated with wire – there were many traces of incidents or happenings. It served as a starting

point for me, this thematic exploration. Then, I look for objects and materials, usually visiting a second-hand store close to my studio, where they sell items from people who passed away or from closed shops. I create an archive of objects, manipulate them, and that's when the series comes alive.

This universe is enhanced by different methodologies and gestures that I use outside of photography. For example, a clear sticker imitates a broken window in the gallery, presenting an illusory aspect of photography. Or making chairs from glass, which evoke the idea of a function but remain completely non-functional, just like a photograph. The same goes for wavy sheets of glass, creating a vibrating effect that is captured in the moment. These sculptural extensions in the exhibition space, which create a coherent universe, are still closely linked to ideas coming from the medium of photography.

PP: What was the first exhibition where you started considering the spatial aspects and site-specificity? Was it "Trust it, use it, prove it" in 2016?

VK: Yes, I would say that was the one. However, I withdrew myself back from it. I think I was overwhelmed and not yet ready to fully embrace it at the time. For me, it was a project I couldn't fully stand behind yet; I wasn't ready. The inclusion of track canvases and paper objects marked an interesting exploration, although I later reabsorbed it into my practice. I believe I began to re-engage with spatial considerations from the exhibition "Shifting Presence" that you saw at Prospektas gallery.

PP: A rather speculative question: do you imagine yourself doing a pure photography exhibition in the upcoming, let's say, couple of years? Just thinking about what you could potentially gain or lose with that approach…

VK: I would not say no. In fact, as you mention it, it triggers a response in me because I find limitations intriguing; they prompt me to think about how I can work within them. If someone were to invite me to do a purely photographic exhibition, I would accept the challenge and try to do something different. Maybe using huge wall stickers throughout the entire space instead of traditional frames. And one of the biggest drivers for me is the limitation of deadlines. Maybe in five years, feeling a bit bored with doing the universes, I might decide, "Let's just do prints with the nails". And that could be fresh again and rejuvenate my practice by breaking the cycle. I once heard a Lithuanian film director, I think it was Algimantas Puipa, say that with every film, he makes mistakes that he aims to correct in the next one. Of course, new mistakes arise with each new project, creating an endless chain. As an artist, I want to keep evolving my practice, and this philosophy has become a bit of a motto for me now. With every project, I succeed in one aspect but feel I've fallen short in another. That's why I wouldn't say no.

PP: This aspect of mistakes is curious. I edited *Too Good to be Photographed* book, which delved into the relationships different photographers have with failure. So I'm curious to know about your relationship with mistakes and how you incorporate accidents into your practice. Do you actively allow them, or do they just happen?

VK: Initially, I found mistakes frustrating because I was accustomed to highly perfected imagery and meticulously controlled lighting. So for me that was the big obstacle which I needed to overcome. I received valuable advice from a teacher during my studies. He worked with sculptures at the time and emphasized the beauty of mistakes, comparing them to the brushstrokes of a painter. This perspective resonated with me because it introduced a sense of hand gesture that was often lacking in photography. So I started to leave these mistakes like traces and dusts, also started to use daylight instead of studio lights. I began pushing myself more towards the realm of errors and mistakes.

PP: One aspect I'm keen to discuss is framing – the function of frames in your work. It seems that lately, over the past few years, the frame has become an integral and important part of your artwork. Could you share how this started, the initial experiments, and the evolution of your interest in expanding or incorporating the frame into the artwork?

VK: I think this exploration began during the COVID pandemic when I started questioning the idea of a photographic print. I wanted to remind the viewer that when we look at a photographic image we not only see a subject but also look at an object, a framed entity. And then also started to think that with the distribution and viewing of images online we tend to lose this tangible aspect. I wanted to create photographic objects. I called them as such because they are framed in what I would say is a classical manner. But without that frame and the glass and an object on top of the glass, a photographic print would lose its meaning, it would lose this kind of, I don't know, creative value. This aspect became crucial for my investigation. In the past, photographs were often found in books, on fridges, or in various contexts, maintaining their tangible presence. During COVID, I experimented with stained glass constructions in front of the print. I learned how to create these colourful constructions resembling church-like stained glass, casting vibrant blocks of colour when light hit the print. So it was interesting for me to experiment a bit with that. Subsequently I created a "Carriers" series with see-through suitcases, resembling X-ray objects, linking back to the idea of a storage of a photographic print and surrounding ideas. These collages form loose narrative.

Then, I moved into working with glass, learning to drill and collaborating with manufacturers. This added an interesting dimension as an object placed on top of the glass turned the work more into a sculptural body. The fragility of the glass and the decon-

struction of the production of the photographic print process became essential elements. I found it frustrating to send prints to a framer and receive finished pieces without being involved in every step. I wanted to control and interfere with each stage practically.

PP: Do you create these frames yourself, or do you work with other professionals? Or does it vary from project to project?

VK: It depends on the project. I have manufacturers with whom I work for the frames, as I already know their system. However, with the glass I work myself. I've trained in drilling, cutting, and welding stained glass. So, the glasswork is a personal undertaking. The aluminium frame is ordered, but I also handle the printing. This approach gives me a bit of freedom and pace in the creative process. If I were to wait for an image to come from the printer, it might take two weeks, and then I'd need to add an object, extending the timeline. I prefer a quicker pace, similar to a painter's workflow. I create an image, print it, have the glass, drill a hole, and add an object – it's a rapid process. Perhaps the subject is still in my studio while I'm producing a print. I print, conduct a test, and if it doesn't work, I adjust, maybe changing the angle of the photograph. So, yeah, I try to create a sort of a manufacturing chain within my studio.

PP: You mentioned glass, and I find the function of glass in photographic framing quite interesting. It seems to have a defined dual role – one, to protect from environmental effects, aging, and yellowing, and the other, to remain nearly invisible. Museum glass, for example, is designed to reflect less light. In "Objects in the Mirror are Closer than They Appear", you shifted attention to this aspect of framed photographic object that typically strives to stay invisible.

VK: Exactly, and that's where the tension arises. It's almost as if we're not allowed to touch it, or we're afraid it will break or get damaged. This tension is something I leverage because the conventional framing and protection methods have remained the same for almost a century or more. I find it a bit monotonous, and I want to investigate, push, and challenge it more.

You're absolutely right. It's about protection and invisibility. I play with making it visible and introducing a moment of fragility that we tend to forget about. We assume that once a photograph is framed, it's safe, but what if it falls from the wall? It can still break and get damaged. Institutionally, I've had discussions with museums interested in acquiring my works. While they appreciate the novelty and challenging aspects, the conservation issue makes them cautious. They're intrigued by the work but wonder how they'll deal with it. So, there's still a gap to explore.

PP: That's very interesting.

VK: Yeah, I had studio visits from one of the main institutions in the Netherlands. They appreciated the work and the idea of pushing the limits of image presentation.

Yet they were also hesitant, concerned about conservation because of the open holes in the framed object. The other part of the industry looks at it very differently, have a different perspective. They appreciate the work, but also question, OK, what will be with it in the future?

PP: So, on one hand, they're drawn to the work because it explores the photographic format of framing and challenges conventions. On the other hand, they're cautious for the exact same reasons.

VK: Yes, exactly. It's intriguing because now they tend to collect photographic artworks that are more three-dimensional or explore space. However, they also encounter limitations due to restoration and preservation concerns, which is interesting but also poses challenges for the artist. While you don't want to cater to those concerns entirely, you also wonder if you're creating obstacles for yourself as an artist. That's an interesting dilemma.

PP: When I was talking with Līga Spunde, we touched on this aspect a bit. She has been quite vocal in the Latvian community about the precarious situation of art workers. In an interview Līga said – and this has stayed with me – that many in her community don't solely work as artists but work to be artists, meaning they have second jobs. How do you deal with that practical side?

VK: Somehow I was very lucky in the last three or four years, that I was able to taste what it means to fully sustain myself through work. I have a gallery in Vilnius and another one here in Amsterdam, so my works have been circulating, and collectors are buying. Occasionally, I receive stipends from Lithuania or some local grants. So that helped me to just work and push some limits of my work. Previously I also had a more affordable living situation than I do now. It's interesting; just this Monday, I went to a fund for an event, and everyone was like, "Wow, your career is skyrocketing". And last week, I was thinking about how to survive this year, what changes I need to make. No exhibitions are planned yet, and everything starts piling up. I've been teaching for two or three years, having a semester at the Academy, which helps, but it barely covers my rent and studio expenses. It's always a hustle, and maybe because I'm a bit more stress-resilient now, I see it as a business in a way. Having a gallery helps because you understand that sometimes you have to approach things practically.

I have friends from my studies who had opportunities but gave up their artistic careers. They might have been stubborn, wanting to create large-scale works, but the reality is that in the Netherlands, where people mostly have small apartments, few buy huge artworks. I don't want to compromise my artistic vision entirely, but I understand that if a gallery suggests making two smaller works for an exhibition, it could benefit both parties. I wouldn't say no because I've come to realize that's the reality in which I live. Every year, I become a bit more worried.

I would say that on paper, the career looks great, but not always practically. I've also tried to invest and took risks. I think that's my shortcoming – I have an exhibition, and I put everything into it. Now, with a recession in the art market, I question why I did it. I'm trying to be more cautious and save.

PP: Within the past three years, have there been any readings, ideas, other practitioners' works, or tutors that have been particularly influential in your thinking and development?

VK: I would say the most important person in the last four years was Gabriel Lester. I got him as a mentor from Mondriaan Fund. It was exactly during COVID, and we had a call or a meeting almost every week for a year. He encouraged me not to confine myself to photography but to expand my practice into the realm of visual arts, allowing me to apply my photographic vision to this universe, as I call it. So, he was the most significant influence in recent years. During my time at the Rietveld Academy, there was also Edward Clydesdale Thomson, a sculptor in our photography department, who nudged me toward embracing error and leaving a human trace. These two individuals, along with Paul Kooiker, my graduation project tutor, who taught me how to select images and create connections between them, were quite influential.

PP: We were discussing broader themes and ideas, so for a concluding question, I'd like you to talk about a specific piece. The work in question is "Did I?" from 2022, where kitchen utensils are on fire. The visible deformation within the image struck me as a metaphor for your broader approach to photography, seemingly melting these frames and constructions that are often taken for granted. Can you share more about your interest in this piece?

VK: Yes, my interest was in creating a sense of anxiety, evoking memories of childhood when you were never allowed to leave fire or put metal objects on it. I wanted to exaggerate this motif. I bent the kitchen utensils by hand, as they don't naturally bend in the way shown in the photograph. There's backstage trickery involved. Because they appear red, it gives the impression of them becoming very fluid.

And, the silver frame and the lock emphasize the piece melting into the space. It brings back the idea of a lock and the moment you leave a house, questioning, "Did I plug off my iron? Did I close the door?" Creating these small gestures or elements aims to evoke feelings of anxiety in viewers regarding their homes.

The frames and objects in my works serve as extensions of the photographic print, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion. This fusion of elements creates an uncanny feeling, where the familiar and graspable intertwine with the dreamy and ungraspable. As viewers engage with the printed image, they are confronted with a blend of tangible reality and intangible imagination. This juxtaposition evokes a sense of intrigue, as the familiar becomes intertwined with the mysterious.

Appendix 4. Interview with Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė
Conducted via MS Teams, 18 January, 2024.

Paulius Petraitis: Let's start with a simple question I like to ask fellow practitioners these days. How do you define yourself as an artist?

Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė: Recently, I've just been saying I'm a contemporary artist. In fact, I simply state that I'm an artist, and then I proceed to outline the mediums I work with. So I would say, "Kotryna is an artist working with lens-based media, installation, and sculptural elements". This is a shift from about 10 years ago when I would have identified as a photographer. It reflects a slow transition over the past decade.

PP: Why do you think that is? Do you feel that your relationship to photography changed on some fundamental level? Or is it more about practical labelling?

KŪK: First of all, there's a very practical thing that I used to use photography only, and that was my sole mode of making. But I think the transition was deeper than that. So, one was that perhaps I didn't feel like I was fitting in the photographic medium alone, but also that the photographic medium had the world of photography attached to it. I'm talking about galleries and institutions and other kinds of constructions built around it that I started to become critical of, and I found them, in some ways, limiting. And perhaps kind of a bit narrow in terms of themes and topics, as well as existing separately from the rest of contemporary art discourse, which seemed to be moving a bit faster with times.

PP: Are these feelings based on your experience with the Lithuanian photography scene or the UK scene? Or do you feel that's kind of universal?

KŪK: I guess I do exist in between these two scenes, but I would say Lithuanian and Scottish more than UK, since Scotland has its own separate bubble. I would say that applies to both, to be honest. The international photography scene is bigger than the Lithuanian one. In Lithuania, specifically, there's such a strong tradition of documentary photography, which is also present in Scotland. So there's this overlap where this tradition continues, with people in their early 20s drawn to social documentary or black and white photographs that comment on social topics.

In my education, which was split between Vilnius Art Academy and later Glasgow School of Art, where I studied in the Communication Design department, there was an emphasis on photography. It focused on editorial work and photographic storytelling. After a while, I became uncertain about the direction this kind of photography was heading, especially considering the challenges in the commercial and editorial sectors, with many newspapers or magazines facing financial difficulties. It just didn't feel like there was a promising future for that world.

In Lithuania, only in the past few years I have started seeing people work in the more expanded photographic field, let's say, or interdisciplinary modes and being shown in the photography galleries that we have, or being presented in the Nida photography symposium.

PP: That's interesting. My exposure to the Scottish scene was limited, observing it from the perspective of an outsider living in London. From that viewpoint it seemed that the Scottish scene was more conservative, akin to the Lithuanian scene, with an attachment to traditional ways of using and framing photography, and ways to talk about it. My own experience from 10 or 15 years ago was that this kind of strong legacy in Lithuania was limiting to many younger artists, including myself, working with photography who wanted to explore and expand a little bit. And the scene just wasn't ready for that in many ways.

KŪK: Yeah, I agree. The two strands that dominated photographic spaces (galleries, events, publications) both in Lithuania and Scotland were either documentary story-telling or analogue process-centred. The artists who would work with photography in an expanded field would then not be included in those purely photographic spaces or scenes, so the pool of practitioners remained small. There's definitely a shift happening lately, and the worlds of contemporary art and photography have more areas of overlap.

PP: Let's talk about your project "Arctic Swell", which was exhibited at the Prospektas gallery recently, and previously in Finland. Maybe you can talk a bit about the motivation for the project, how it started and what, what was the process of doing it?

KŪK: The project originated from a residency, starting with a month-long stay in Finland in early 2020. When applying for this residency, my proposal encompassed broader themes of ecology and the climate crisis. Setting off, my intention was to explore the Arctic and snow, contemplating the creation of temporary snow sculptures that would serve as photographic material. I took a lot of books, as I wanted to make sure it was as research-based as possible. I was reading Timothy Morton and Anna Tsing, who wrote *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. I was looking at the topics of post-climate crisis and mass extinction.

A couple of factors affected the residency. Firstly, the pandemic reached Europe, shortening my stay by a few days. It was hard to ignore, and it was challenging not to, in some way, incorporate that into the work a little bit. Additionally, I was pregnant, expecting my son – a significant, life-changing event. So things fed into the work in the sense that I was contemplating interconnectedness and symbiotic relationships, from the small scale of carrying a baby to the global scale impacted by the rapidly spreading pandemic.

While I was there, the process was a fairly intuitive gathering of moving image footage. Mainly, I photographed a little bit, but in fact, before setting off, I knew I wasn't going to do much photography, apart from maybe the snow sculptures, which I ended

up never doing. So it was gathering footage and recording. Some of it was beyond the Arctic Circle in a small village in Northern Finland, where I ventured out and used a drone for the first time. I gathered some kind of aerial footage, being not sure where this is going. It was a very intuitive way of working. And then, because the pandemic set in, I ended up having much more time for this work. Everything closed down, everything slowed down. I used the rest of 2020 and most of 2021 to see what could grow out of it.

So at the centre of the project is moving image work. It is the main piece. It was the first time when I started writing texts. Initially, they were meant to be for the video work – for an overhead voice – but in the end, these short poetic texts were gathered into a separate publication, also called *Arctic Swell*. The video work is in 4 chapters, and that's where I started to use the drone footage to transform it into kind of distorted 3D digital landscapes. So I was using the raw video from the drone and feeding it into photogrammetry software and recreating these kind of distorted digital landscapes, as I call them. Doing this, I was partially rethinking the connection to nature that humans have. In the past few hundred years, we've had a [detached] romantic attitude: nature is over there, beautiful mountains, beautiful views. And I, human, am spectating it here separately. So kind of exoticizing and othering nature. I wanted to distort and break that up and make my landscapes into slightly surreal and broken digital landscapes that are turning and slowly moving to the voice – actually, my voice – talking about symbiosis and being a dyad. In the context of me being pregnant, it was related to pregnancy, but was also about other species. So interspecies relationships were kind of at the front of my mind, especially in the first chapter "Dyad".

The second chapter of the video, titled "A Simple Melody: Atoms Buzz Like Linden Trees in July", is set to a soundtrack of lullabies. During lockdowns, I asked my family members to record some lullabies. Both my family in Scotland and the one in Lithuania. So sound became a starting point for that chapter. Then I worked with a Glasgow-based composer Adriana Minu on that chapter thinking about climate crisis anxiety and the term solastalgia, which basically describes the anxiety, fear, and sadness in relation to changing climate and breaking down ecosystems. Using a lullaby to soothe a baby, a planet, but also singers themselves. So all of us.

Midway through working, I was invited to show this work as a solo exhibition in Northern Photographic Centre in Oulu, where I had my residency. Suddenly, I was facing a gallery that was made up of seven different rooms with just a video work in the process. So I had to expand the work to fill and make sense of the space. I had to think more tangibly about how the video work would be presented. But also, is there going to be anything else? What would be the other elements? In the end, it was quite a similar exhibition to the one you saw in Prospektas Gallery, but also different due

to the gallery's difference and it being a dark space. I started extracting stills from 3D landscapes that I made for the video, working on digital collages. Normally in the past, I would have just opted for printing on paper, mounting, and either framing it or not – that is, thinking in terms of a wall-based work. This time I considering the exhibition as a whole, as an experience for the viewer to walk through. And I didn't want it to be something where a viewer goes in and stands at the wall, looking at it. So I started to think about how to introduce different materials and different ways of presenting work.

That's how I began envisioning printing on textiles. And specifically in this case, they became big wall hangings printed on translucent fabrics of organza and chiffon. I suddenly realised that transparency, layeredness, and materiality were important aspects of the work. These digital collages would have worked so differently if they were just plonked on the wall on paper. Suddenly they became two or three metre high, very transparent and light fabric hangings that were then clipped with industrial photo clips to photographic background stands. (I guess it is a reference to industrial photographic world of tripods and stands.) So they made-up part of the show together with video works projected onto 3 hanging screens. Again, it was quite important I'm not projecting on the wall in that particular show. I wanted to make it more spatial.

The third element were seven light-boxes. They were not traditional light-boxes, but were made using electroluminescent panels. They're basically like a piece of laminated paper; thin and bendable, they have a little wire that plugs into electricity and they glow. So that means they are easily transportable, practically fitting into an envelope. I printed some of the photographic work on duratrans and then basically clipped them onto these light panels. There are eleven of these images in total. Three are microscopic images for which I collaborated with the University of Edinburgh. They have a lab with a scanning electronic microscope, which means they can make amazing close-up images of tiniest particles. I used lichens that I brought from The Arctic Circle. Lichen is probably our best known symbiotic organism, characterised by a relationship in between a fungi and a plant and algae. They were also important to local ecosystems in the northern Finland, as they provide crucial nutrition for reindeer populations. So there were these kind of pointers to my experience in Finland.

And the other images were photographic, but I just approached them differently this time. So I guess before when I used to work with photography, I used to work with film photography quite a bit, and I would think in terms of series. I would think of work as a cluster of images, twenty, thirty, forty. These all were kind of a partly a by-product of me filming and doing video work. These were all separate images of sauna, of some kind of Finnish nature bits. I saw them as kind of separate from this kind of more traditional narrative storytelling that I used to engage with photographically before.

They don't kind of have a storyline amongst them. They're more like a constellation of photographic and microscopic images that connect to the video work and the writing. And I think I've mentioned every element now.

PP: A helpful overview. I immediately have two questions in relation to what you've just said. One relates to the research part you touched upon. I'm quite interested in the role research plays in today's expanded photographic projects. So what is the role of research for your work, especially for "Arctic Swell"? A related question is, how are you thinking in terms of viewer engagement? Is there something in this engagement that you find challenging, considering that the viewer may not be able to unpack all the meaning that is there, to put it simply?

KŪK: Research-wise, I've come to love research lately. In the past couple of years, I've finally understood what research can do for work. It can be very exciting; it doesn't need to be something you feel obligated to do. Perhaps I've finally found topics that genuinely excite me. I mentioned some authors before, and now, for the next body of work, I'm delving more into plants, the philosophy of plants, and interspecies relationships. I read and let it sit in my brain. I don't expect concrete steps to follow, like reading a book and then thinking, "My next work must be like this". It doesn't work like this for me, but as I progress with my research, it shapes my outlook gently. Maybe six months or a year down the line, I'll be thinking about these topics or the world differently due to the research I've done. It's not formal but intuitive.

That's one part of the research. Another part, which I call more practical research, involves trying things out – essentially my sketchbook if I were a painter. I still use sketchbooks a lot, but experimenting with new techniques, software, or materials is crucial. Practical research is essential because it drives the visual outcome of the work and keeps me excited as I try new things. The ideas from the books I've read simmer slowly in the background, and I'm always surprised when, a few years down the line, I look back and realize it all came together, influenced by the books I've read, whether it's Timothy Morton or Emmanuela Coccia, the Italian philosopher who writes about plants.

As for your other question, yes, I've thought about that a lot. I tend to pack, sometimes overpack, the work. I'm pretty sure with "Arctic Swell", I could talk all day, and still, not everything I meant to convey in the work would be mentioned. Partly, that's my way of working.

Thinking of the viewer, I realize everyone will take something else from the work, reading one layer or another, or a few, but not necessarily getting everything. I'm fine with it. I feel there's enough there that, hopefully, everyone will be able to relate in one way or another. Even if it's just visual appreciation, I don't mind. I don't separate surface aesthetics from deep concepts so much; I see them as one. If someone goes in

and says, "Climate change, motherhood", not understanding, but appreciating the fabric or the light boxes, I'm okay with that. I do hope they get a bit more, not just thinking, "Where can I order these light boxes for my own work?" I'm aware that maybe only 10% gets picked up if someone is rushing through the gallery, and that's okay.

PP: I'm interested in how contemporary practitioners working in the expanded sense of photography view exhibitions differently compared to photographers and photography in more traditional settings. Exhibitions seem to be evolving into systems where different elements form relationships and work together to produce a more or less unified message. What was your experience working with "Arctic Swell"? Was that the first show where you systematically considered the exhibition, almost making it site-responsive by looking at how the space works and creating the exhibition in relation to the space?

KŪK: Seven, eight, nine years ago, when I worked more photographically, and my work would be prints in one way or another, it would travel from gallery to gallery with minimal change. Maybe more prints for larger spaces, less for smaller ones, adjusting the height based on the architecture. With "Arctic Swell", it was one of the first times I was creating work already knowing where it would be shown. While developing the work, they provided the gallery plan, measurements, and it was for the one in Finland in early 2022. As I mentioned earlier, dealing with seven interconnected rooms required me to work to my advantage. I used the space to make sense of my topics, thinking of it like a womb-like experience. The dark crevices were coloured with pink lighting in one room, creating a rosy, salmon-coloured atmosphere to evoke the sense of being inside the body.

The same show couldn't smoothly translate to Prospektas Gallery because of its smaller space and different lighting conditions. The institution's response to my ideas, available resources, and financial support also played a role. In Prospektas Gallery, I had to adapt to the predefined spaces – one darker and artificially lit, the other naturally lit with a huge window. Working with these circumstances presented challenges, but I made them work for me. I did create extra elements for Prospektas Gallery because I wanted to keep myself engaged. The prints on perspex in organic shapes were made specifically for the show, my first time working with UV printing onto surfaces other than paper. I utilized the big window, adding a pink salmon-coloured film for a similar effect to Finland, albeit with a different outcome due to the summer season and natural light flooding the space.

I like your idea of calling it a system. I sometimes call it more poetically, a constellation where things kind of exist separately, but they also come together to make meaning and to make experience. The riddle of adapting existing ideas to the space, is one of the interesting bits of being an artist. It becomes a slightly different story. It becomes a slightly different thing.

Appendix 5. Interview with Visvaldas Morkevičius
Conducted via MS Teams, 13 February, 2024.

Paulius Petraitis: Let's start with a straightforward question. I'm interested in your evolving relationship with photography. Could you share how it has developed over the past four to five years? I know you've been exploring the medium from an expanded perspective and experimenting lately. Could you elaborate on your current relationship with it?

Visvaldas Morkevičius: This relationship has been evolving over time. Today, I don't even necessarily categorize myself as working solely with photography; I think more in terms of images or visuals. Photography has become a medium with increasingly blurred boundaries, offering a sense of freedom. This ambiguity prompted me to experiment more and explore where my own artistic boundaries lie. I'm interested in how other mediums like installation, sculpture, or video can complement a photography series or contribute to its overall message.

PP: When someone asks you to define yourself nowadays, how do you typically respond?

VM: I simply say, "I'm an artist".

PP: It's always a bit of a tricky question, isn't it? On the one hand photography is so wide so it doesn't really mean much. On the other, the term photography comes with a specific historical and theoretical baggage.

VM: Oh yes, I agree. If I need to be more precise when asked what I'm working on, or what kind of artist I am, I say I'm an artist working with the medium of photography.

Particularly in the past decade or two, the boundaries have become increasingly blurred, making it difficult to define what exactly constitutes photography. Is it a digitally generated image? Is it a machine-to-machine image? Or is it photography in the classical sense? I try to avoid confining myself to a specific label because doing so would impose limitations on how I think about expressing myself.

I think, in a sense, it is not so important if one defines oneself as a painter or a photographer. These terms simply indicate the chosen medium, but then we can delve into discussions about the boundaries of that medium... Like any other art form, photography is just a medium that artists find comfortable and effective for expressing their ideas at a given moment.

So, at this moment, I don't define myself as a photographer. It's not because of any historical baggage associated with the term "photographer". Perhaps there's some lingering misconception that photography isn't considered art, but I think that's outdated. It's like a generational trauma that persists, causing people to unfairly segregate

photography from the realm of art or contemporary art. Those who narrowly define photography as separate from art may not be fully open to exploring the broader artistic landscape. But personally, I don't have an issue with it. If others do, I believe it's more their problem than mine.

PP: I feel a lot has changed, especially in the Lithuanian photography scene over the past decade. Photography has become much more integral to our way of critically engaging with and exploring the global complexities of our dynamic networked world. However, some interviewees I've spoken with have noted that there used to be a strong, and somewhat narrow, sense of photography schooling in Lithuania, which didn't necessarily create conducive conditions for young practitioners to explore and experiment with their own ways of using the medium. There seems to be some tension there.

VM: Reflecting on this, it appears there was a gap, a disconnect from the older generation of photographers, perhaps from the 1970s and '80s or so. They seemed content to rest on their laurels, believing their award-winning photographs represented the world. And they just maybe didn't follow up what's happening globally around the world that much.

It's possible that within art schools in Lithuania, there was more emphasis on traditional, humanistic photography, which clashed with the emerging trends in contemporary art. This conflict led to the perception that photography was merely snapshots of a romanticized reality, rather than art. Consequently, a gap emerged, fostering a sense of animosity and creating a lack of acceptance for the younger generation's artistic endeavours. There was a prevailing notion that if you weren't highly conceptual, then you were relegated to being a journalistic photographer. This gap and complacency may have stemmed from a lack of leadership in the field at the time, someone who could have elevated Lithuanian photography to a global stage and provided a voice for its practitioners. However, with the advent of open borders, we began to witness a shift. We started to recognize our own worth without waiting for validation from within Lithuania. This newfound acceptance abroad bolstered our confidence and encouraged a mentality that you can do whatever you want.

PP: What were the influences for you? Maybe you could mention some writers, particular projects, or other artists who have had an impact on your way of rediscovering and reshaping these boundaries, and rethinking what photography can be.

VM: For a long time, I worked almost like an illiterate, unaware of the photography field or what was happening within it, and I wasn't particularly curious to find out.

Photography, for me, was like a key, granting access to explore the world. It served as an excuse or a tool, a rather traditional narrative, akin to classical photography stories. But through this visual exploration and encounters with people from various

backgrounds, both commercial and artistic, my worldview expanded. The initial impact came from a photographer I worked with as an assistant, who introduced me to the commercial and glamorous side of the industry. However, after a few years, I realized I wasn't comfortable there; the ethics and environment didn't align with me. This realization sparked a curiosity to understand the bubble I was in, leading me to explore myself further. While I can't pinpoint a single influential figure, I acknowledge the broader influence of certain images, surroundings, and experiences. If we talk specifically about Lithuanian photography, Rimaldas Vikšraitis can be mentioned, whose work stands out as a protest against the humanistic photography of his time. This acceptance of being different resonated with me, especially as someone working in the commercial realm but feeling out of place. My protest was to capture the mundane beauty of everyday life, a departure from the glamorous facade perpetuated in commercial photography. This shift marked a turning point in my career, steering it towards a more artistic path, where photography serves as a tool for personal expression and growth. Looking back, I now understand why I made certain choices and how they contributed to my journey.

Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* significantly changed my understanding of what an image could be. I think that was the biggest change in my head, even though before I read *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, which was my first study book. I was reading it when I was an assisting photographer. I wrote down all the names, checked what they do. This bit of history of photography was interesting, but not a game changer. The game changer was Vilém Flusser.

PP: You mentioned photography as a tool for exploration, which is manifested in your two latest major projects, "Public Secrets" and "Looking Forward to Meet Me", albeit in quite different ways. It seems that in "Public Secrets", this exploration, termed in the book as "a collection of urban experiences", is perhaps more straightforward, reflecting on the surroundings. Meanwhile, in "Looking Forward to Meet Me", you delved deeper into not only how you, as a person or artist, are reflected through the project, but also how photography can shape the conception of identity. Could you discuss these two projects?

VM: It's interesting that you bring this up. Upon reflecting on my work over the past year, I realized that "Public Secrets" is also about identity, but it's more about social identity – where I fit into the society surrounding me. It's an unconscious exploration of a young person seeking their place and grappling with a sense of being lost, compared to "Looking Forward to Meet Me", which turns the focus inward, examining personal identity and self-acceptance. It's like shifting from a wide-angle lens to a close-up,

starting with a broad perspective and gradually zooming in on the self. As I examined these projects introspectively, I discovered that they're all part of my search for identity. When working with other people, their portraits become a reflection of myself – why I'm drawn to them, why I choose to capture their realities. While identity may not be central to every project, it's a common thread. As these projects evolved, so too did my understanding of identity, evolving into a more philosophical way of thinking.

PP: I'm interested in the element of fiction and its operative presence in contemporary photographic projects. For example, Liga Spunde's work incorporates fictional narratives into photography, challenging the traditional association of photography with factuality and documentary portrayal. This intersection of fiction and photography is interesting, and I'd like to address its role in your project "Looking Forward to Meet Me". As I visited your exhibition, I sensed a delicate dance between fiction and objective portrayal. It was present all over the installation. Could you elaborate on the place of fiction in your project and how you navigate this dynamic?

VM: Let me start by expressing my view of photography as one of the most genuine forms of representation. It serves as a tool that faithfully reflects what our eyes see, although individuals may interpret reality differently. However, over time, photography has been perceived as a fact-making machine of sorts, creating a sense of reality even when images are manipulated. This unquestioning acceptance of photographs as factual presents a dilemma. In "Looking Forward to Meet Me", I wanted to play with this dilemma, exploring the boundaries between consciousness and subconsciousness, reality and fiction. Through symbols and imagery, I sought to evoke memories and emotions, prompting viewers to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions. While I labelled the project an "auto-portrait", it serves more as a mirror, inviting viewers to contemplate their own identities. Even the traditional self-portrait you see in the project is not merely a depiction of myself but a reflection on the concept of identity – an ever-evolving journey of self-realization and growth.

PP: That's interesting. You mentioned the viewer's perspective and how you strive to keep your work open-ended for interpretation. I've noted a tendency in contemporary photography where images are increasingly loaded with various meanings, becoming more coded and symbolic. While this invites viewers to engage actively and invest their own meaning, there's a risk of the work becoming overly coded and challenging to fully comprehend. What a viewers sees is not necessarily what is meant by an image, rather the visual is there as a springboard for some kind of mental association or link.

VM: Yes, I agree. Balancing this complexity is perhaps one of the greatest challenges in art. It's about finding a middle ground where the work isn't too straightforward or too coded, but rather invites viewers to explore further. It's akin to composing music –

you want to evoke emotions and draw listeners in without dictating their experience. This delicate balance separates good artists from great ones. Sometimes, I find myself shifting between extremes, either overcomplicating my work or oversimplifying it. Finding that balance is an ongoing journey, and I hope it remains unanswered, as it adds to the fun and intrigue of art-making.

In today's visually saturated world, images can have little effect. Understanding your audience and tailoring your approach accordingly is essential. It's all about finding the right rhythm, the right tone, the right trigger to captivate and engage viewers, no matter their age or background. But… I don't know. Maybe this question is never answerable. It's, as you have expressed beautifully, indeed a dance – a constant interplay between creator and audience, complexity and simplicity.

PP: And it's important to dance in life, so why not dance with photography as well? You are currently pursuing a master's in photography at ECAL in Switzerland. If I am not mistaken, this is your first formal education in photography. Could you share a bit about the questions you're exploring now and your experience thus far? How is this shaping your perspective on photography?

VM: Indeed, this is my first formal education in photography (and my first education after secondary school). At times, I felt like I was stuck in reinventing the wheel – I was familiar with photography, but there were aspects I hadn't known or explored. Pursuing a master's at ECAL felt like an opportunity to break that cycle. Being accepted directly into the program boosted my confidence and reaffirmed the value of my work in an international context.

On one hand, the program introduces me to disciplines and research methods I hadn't previously considered, forcing me to explore new avenues and adopt more disciplined approaches. It broadens my perspective on photography, introducing new tools and techniques like CGI and automated photography. Through workshops and projects, I'm challenged to step out of my comfort zone and confront unfamiliar territories. This discomfort pushes me to expand my boundaries and explore. While not every aspect of the program may align with me personally, I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn from diverse perspectives.

Overall, the program has been a journey of self-discovery, enabling me to engage in conversations with professionals across different fields and develop a deeper understanding of photography as a medium. It's about embracing discomfort, pushing boundaries, and ultimately, evolving as an artist.

SANTRAUKA

Atvaizdų tyrinėjimas leidžia kritiškai pažvelgti į platesnius sociotechnologinius ir kultūrinius pokyčius, atspindinčius mūsų bandymus orientuotis vis labiau tinkliniais ryšiais susaistytame šiandienos pasaulyje. Nors įprastai manome, kad sąveikaudami su atvaizdais galime veikti kaip nepriklausomi sąmoningi vartotojai, šiuos procesus dažnai lemia į „juodąsias dėžes" įvilkti technologiniai procesai, kurie kvestionuoja mūsų kontrolės prielaidas. Dar XX a. 9 deš. filosofas Vilémas Flusseris įžvalgiai numatė, kad visuomenę užvaldys elektroniniai vaizdai – tai regima šiandien, kai skaitmeniniai vaizdai formuoja mūsų įpročius ir kultūrą. Fotografija, vykstant šioms sociotechnologinėms permainoms, atsiduria takioje teritorijoje, skatinančioje diskusijas dėl jos apibrėžties ir svarbos šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje. Dabartinė fotografinių vaizdų kūrimo būklė yra glaudžiai susijusi su daugiasluoksniais ir dinamiškais duomenų bei „debesų" tinklais, atspindinčiais ir svarbius kultūros bei egzistencijos būvio pokyčius. Nauja tinklinė ekosistema yra paremta didžiuliais duomenų kiekiais, kuriais keičiasi daugybė prietaisų, susieta su dideliais serverių ūkiais ir duomenų debesimis. Šioje atvaizdų gausoje iškyla klausimai apie fotografijos aktualumą ir vaidmenį fiksuojant socialinių, kultūrinių ir technologinių kontekstų subtilybes. Taip pat kyla klausimai, kaip tyrinėti naujoje sistemoje veikiančią fotografiją kaip kintančią ir aktualią šiandienos mediją, netraktuojant jos kaip technologinio praeities relikto? Kaip dabarties meninės fotografijos praktikos yra veikiamos naujų lūžių ir siekia paveikti kaitos procesus? Kaip fotografiniams vaizdams pavyksta užčiuopti šiandienos socialinio, kultūrinio ir technologinio konteksto subtilybes? Kas apibrėžia šiuolaikinę intermedialią ir prasmėmis įsitinklinusią meninę fotografiją, kokie esminiai jos bruožai? Šie klausimai keliami siekiant geriau suprasti šiandieninės meninės fotografijos būklę, taip pat atskleidžiant skirtumus tarp šiuolaikinės ir ankstesnių periodų (pavyzdžiui, pirmojo XXI a. dešimtmečio ar 2010-ųjų metų pradžios) praktikos.

Siekiant šiuos klausimus įveiklinti ir nušviesti, dėmesys sutelkiamas į dvi tarpusavyje susijusias svarbias šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos tendencijas, kurios reikšmingai įtakoja ir keičia fotografijos praktinį lauką. Pirmoji yra *intermedialumas* – meninei fotografijai būdingas požymis, susijęs su medijos plėtra ir aiškių ribų trinimu. Antrasis – *įtinklintų prasmių kūrimas*, kuris apima platų ir dinamišką kultūrinių ir fikcinių signifikantų spektrą. Į šias šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos tendencijas – *intermedialumą* ir *įtinklintų prasmių kūrimą* – disertacijoje žvelgiama kaip į tarpusavyje glaudžiai ir dinamiškai susijusius procesus, kurie atsirado dėl skaitmeninio virsmo bei įsigalėjo tinklinėje aplinkoje. Pasitelkiant šiuolaikinės Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos atvejų studijas, tyrime nagrinėjama, kaip fotografijos darbuose kritiškai

reflektuojamas platesnis sociokultūrinių realijų laukas. Kaip postmodernizmo paveikta prasmių gamyba dabarties meninėje fotografijoje vyksta intermedialumo kontekste, trindama ribas tarp medijų ir formų, lemdama kultūrinės produkcijos pokyčius. Menininkai, pasitelkdami ne tik tikrus, bet ir fikcinius elementus, kuria vizualinius pasakojimus, paneigdami tradicinės fotografijos patikimumo ir dokumentalumo sampratas. Šis santykis tarp fotografijos ir fikcijos pastebimai atviresnis negu tas, kuris būdingas ankstesnių periodų fotografiniam diskursui. Tai lemia kultūriniai, socialiniai ir technologiniai kompleksiškumai būdingi šiuolaikinių atvaizdų kūrimui ir distribucijai. Aktyviai įsitraukdami į fiktyvių naratyvų kūrimą, šiandien fotomenininkai kuria kompleksiškus daugiasluoksnius (vaizdinius) pasakojimus, atskleidžiančius įvairius šiuolaikybės būvio aspektus.

Šiuo tyrimu siekiama prisidėti prie niuansuoto supratimo apie kintantį fotografijos pobūdį mus saistančiame dabarties pasaulyje, formuojant teorines prieigas jai tirti, pateikiant įžvalgų apie dabarties Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos kraštovaizdį bei išskiriant vienus reikšmingiausių jo bruožų: intermedialumą bei tinkliškumą.

Disertacijos objektas

Šioje disertacijoje dinamiška ir transformuojanti šiuolaikinės Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos sritis Lietuvoje, Latvijoje ir Estijoje analizuojama dviejų tarpusavyje susijusių reiškinių pjūviais: intermedialumo ir įtinklintų prasmių kūrimo. Tyrimą paskatino daugiasluoksnis tinklo technologijų poveikis vaizdų kūrimui, sklaidai ir interpretacijai, suproblemineęs fotografiją ir paveikęs kaitos procesus. Jame analizuojama, kaip naujo tipo sociotechnologinėje terpėje vaizdai įprasmina mūsų kintančią ir sudėtingą gyvenimo aplinką. Nagrinėjama, kaip vaizdai evoliucionavo reaguodami į sudėtingų tinklinių procesų veikiamą pasaulį. Kaip ne tik kinta estetikos pozicija, bet ir prasminiai sandaros elementai audžia sudėtingas tiklines struktūras. Daug Baltijos šalių menininkų šiandien savo praktikoje eksperimentuoja su intermedialia fotografija: Annemarija Gulbe, Paul Herbst, Ivars Grāvlejs, Cloe Jancis, Evy Jokhova, Kotryna Ūla Kiliulytė, Geistė Marija Kinčinaitytė, Karel Koplimets, Paul Kuimet, Vytautas Kumža, Mari-Leen Kiipli, Reinis Lismanis, Ieva Maslinskaitė, Marge Monko, Visvaldas Morkevičius, Tanja Muravskaja, Robertas Narkus, Kristina Õllek, Rokas Pralgauskas, Līga Spunde, Indrė Šerpytytė, Diana Tamanė, Gedvilė Tamošiūnaitė, Ruudu Ulas, Anu Vahtra, Ivar Veermäe, Sigrid Viir, Reimo Võsa-Tangsoo ir kiti. Disertacijos skyriuose daugiausia analizuojami (nors ir ne tik) parodose pristatyti jų kūriniai. Siekiant giliau suprasti jų kūrybos principus, darbe aptariamos ir kai kurios ankstesnės istorinės, teorinės bei sociotechnologinės fotografijos raidos ašys, kurios sudarė sąlygas šioms praktikoms atsiskleisti dabarties kultūroje (t. y. kai kurie jau ankstesniuose perioduose

fotografijai būdinti elementai buvo perstruktūruoti ir tapo esminiais dabarties bruožais). Taip pat tyrime žvelgiant per fotografijos teorijos perspektyvą aptariami kai kurie ankstesnių periodų intermedialumo fotografijoje pavyzdžiai bei išsamiai analizuojamos su medijomis ir medijų jungtimis susijusios sąvokos, leidžiančios kritiškiau žvelgti į dabarties fotografijos tinkliškumo apraiškas.

Tyrimo naujumas

Tyrimo naujumą lemia apjungiantis tiriamasis žvilgsnis į tinklinį prasmių lauką fotografijoje, kuris analizuojamas *kartu su* ir *sąveikoje* su intermedialumu. Rinktinės *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism* (2013) sudarytojai Raphaël Pirenne ir Alexander Streitberger pastebi, jog „stebina, kaip mažai dėmesio teoriniuose kontekstuose buvo skiriama fotografijos ir intermedialumo santykiui“, šią mokslinę spragą apibūdidami kaip „stulbinantį trūkumą“[1]. Nors pastarąjį dešimtmetį ši spraga bent iš dalies buvo užpildyta, vien intermedialios fotografijos tyrimas dėl palyginti menko šios srities tyrinėjimo turi savaiminį naujo mokslinio indėlio potencialą. Šiame tyrime atsiliepiama į šį trūkumą, kartu žengiant toliau ir susiejant intermedialumo svarstymus su Baltijos šalių menine fotografija, kuri neabejotinai yra tinklinė, taip pat konceptualizuojant šį pokytį per besikeičiančių prasmių kūrimo schemų supratimą. Taip formuojama ir atveriama nauja teorinė prieiga susijusi su sudėtingomis šiuolaikinių fotografijos kūrinių prasmės kūrimo operacijomis. 2018 m. Lucy Soutter pabrėžė, kad dabartinė būsena, „kai idėjos, cirkuliuojančios aplink meninę fotografiją, yra ir būtinos interpretacijai, ir kartu dažnai sunkiai prieinamos“, yra „vienas svarbiausių ir nepakankamai ištirtų šiuolaikinės praktikos aspektų“[2].

Iki šiol teoriniu požiūriu bemaž netyrinėti liko ne tik prasmės kūrimo aspektai, bet ir kai kurie praktiniai dabarties meninei fotografijos būdingi bruožai. Lietuvoje pastarojo dešimtmečio (maždaug nuo 2013–2014 m.) meninė fotografija akademiniame žemėlapyje palyginti menkai reprezentuojama. Nors ir kilo svarbių diskusijų apie atskirus autorius ir jų projektus (dažnai straipsnių ar viešų pasisakymų pavidalu), išsamesnio ir fundamentalaus tyrimo trūksta. Vietinės diskusijos apie šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos tarpiškumą, hibridiškumą ar reikšmių kūrimą taip pat lieka neišplėtotos, aiškiau nepagrįstos. Iki šiol Lietuvoje nebuvo išsamiai aptartas šiuolaikinės fotografijos intermedialumas ar jo reikšmė įtinklintoje aplinkoje.

1   Raphaël Pirenne ir Alexander Streitberger, „Introduction“, in *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism*, eds. Raphaël Pirenne ir Alexander Streitberger (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), xvii.
2   Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* (Oxon ir New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

Dauguma disertacijoje analizuojamų menininkų, išskyrus Šerpytytę ir galbūt Monko, dar nėra tvirtai įsitvirtinę regioniniame menotyros, fototeorijos ir vizualumo studijų diskurse. Analizuojant Õllek, Spunde, Morkevičiaus, Lismanio, Kumžos, Jančio, Kiliulytės, Herbsto ir kitų autorių kūrybą, disertacijoje siekiama įtraukti juos į akademinį diskursą. Jų kūryba aptariama daugiausia parodų kontekstuose, kurie konceptualizuojami kaip intermedialios ir susietos sistemos. Disertacijoje formuojama teorinė prieiga, nagrinėjanti prasmių kūrimo tinklų ir intermedialių santykių kaitą, kuri gali būti pritaikyta ateities tyrimuose analizuoti kitų menininkų praktiką. Tyrime išplėtojama kritinė teorija skirta paradigminiams prasmės kūrimo pokyčiams šiuolaikinėje meninėje fotografijoje tirti. Pateikiamos dvi išplėstinės apibrėžtys: pirma, „klasikinė" fotografinių reikšmių kūrimo schema, kurioje pirmenybė teikiama aiškiai apibrėžtoms riboms ir tiesioginei reprezentacijai, ir, antra, įtinklinto prasmių lauko schema, kuriai būdingos tarpusavyje susijusios ir daugiasluoksnės reikšmės, peržengiančios įprastas ribas, įtraukiančios įvairius kultūros laukus ir fiktyvius subjektus. Šie apibrėžimai ir jų paaiškinimai leidžia glaustai ir veiksmingai suvokti sudėtingas klasikinio periodo fotografijos ir tinklinės prasmės kūrimo paradigmas fotografijoje, taip suteikiant vertingą analitinį požiūrį būsimoms diskusijoms apie šiuolaikinius fotografijos kūrinius. Šiuolaikinis globalus fotografijos diskursas skatina menotyrininkus prieiti prie fotografijos istorijos pasakojimo „atviresniais, daugiasluoksniais, kompleksiškais" būdais[3]. Tai apima nuorodų lauko plėtrą, naujų autorių paiešką ir vengimą jaustis „apsunkintam fotografijos kanono svorio", taip skatinant imtis drąsesnių apmąstymų ir tyrimo krypčių[4]. Šie poslinkiai kyla iš suvokimo, kad pati fotografija ir mąstymas apie fotografiją keičiasi, kartu pripažįstant, kad susiformavęs diskursas yra nepakankamas, kad „suteiktų reikalingus konceptualius įrankius"[5]. Kai kurie žengia dar toliau, teigdami kad nusistovėjusi fotografijos kalba, mąstymas, reikšmės ir vertybės dabar yra kliūtis suvokti naujas (tinklo nulemtas) sąlygas. Apskritai šios aplinkybės yra reikšmingas pasiūlymas kintančioje pasaulinėje fotografijos teorijos aplinkoje. Lietuvos mokslininkų bendruomenė, plėtojanti fotografijos teoriją, kol kas veiksmingai nesureagavo į šią nuostatą.

Apskritai fotografijos teorinis laukas yra gana inertiškas. Galima teigti, kad R. Bartheso, S. Sontag ir J. Bergerio (iš dalies ir A. Bazino) trijulė Lietuvos fotografijos diskurse

3   Steffen Siegel, „Collaborations", *Still Searching*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2020 07 15, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2020/07/15/collaborations/.

4   Ronnie Close, Catherine Grant, Sarah E. James ir Sandra Plummer, „Closing Reflections", in *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture*, eds. Ben Burbridge ir Annebella Pollen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 236.

5   Robert Hariman ir John Louis Lucaites, „Seeing the public image anew: Photography exhibitions and civic spectatorship", in *The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory*, eds. Mark Durden ir Jane Tormey (London: Routledge, 2020), 159.

yra ypač dažnai naudojama. Tai tampa ypač akivaizdu (ir potencialiai problemiška), kai jų teorinės įžvalgos, suformuotos ankstesniais laikais ir atsižvelgiant į skirtingus fotografijos procesus, taikomos diskusijose apie šiuolaikinės vaizdo kultūros reiškinius. Todėl darbe dabarties fotografijos sąlygos aptariamos iš kompleksiškos ir dinamiškos perspektyvos. Tai daroma remiantis autoriais, į kuriuos vietiniame diskurse retai arba visai nereferuojama, ir kurių idėjos gali praturtinti regionines diskusijas apie fotografiją ir jos šiuolaikines praktikas.

Šiame tyrime pristatoma François Laruelle'io „fotofikcijos" sąvoka kaip kritinis įrankis šiuolaikinių fotografijos projektų fiktyvumo nagrinėjimui. Ši sąvoka iki šiol buvo menkai vartojama Lietuvos ir apskritai Baltijos šalių vizualumo studijose. Laruelle'io fotofikcijos terminas kaip konceptuali priemonė leidžia analizuoti, kaip (ir dėl kokių priežasčių) fiktyvūs elementai įsiterpia į fotografinius projektus, bet ir apskritai leidžia geriau paaiškinti bendrą atvaizdų, veikiančių juos tarpusavyje siejančiame tinkle, diskursyvumą. Tinklo erdvėje atvaizdai susisieja vienas su kitu, abipusiai (per)kurdami savas reikšmes. Intermedialūs fotografiniai atvaizdai šiandien nefunkcionuoja izoliuotai; jie dažnai tarsi nevalingai tampa didžiulio kultūrinių nuorodų registro dalimi. Kiekviena nauja atvaizdo iteracija yra ne tik dalis neįsivaizduojamo fotografijų pasaulio mastelio, bet ir iškart yra nuoroda į kitus (mentalinius ar materialius) vaizdus. Kitas šio tyrimo projekto naujumo aspektas kyla iš to, kad disertacija išreiškia alternatyvų balsą. 2018 m. vykusio Rygos fotografijos bienalės simpoziumo įžangoje estų menotyrininkas Indrekas Grigoras pastebėjo, kad dėl mūsų šalių kompaktiškumo rašant Baltijos šalių meno naratyvus atsiranda polinkis į tam tikras autorines monopolijas. Lietuvos fotografijos diskursas užima ganėtinai nedidelę ir izoliuotą teritoriją, kuriam, tikėtina, bus naudinga įtraukti šį ir kitus balsus, taip formuojant polifoniškesnį pasakojimą.

Istorinė ir geografinė aprėptis

Nors disertacijoje nesiekiama pateikti išsamios šiuolaikinės Baltijos šalių fotografijos apžvalgos, tačiau pasitelkiant konkrečius iliustruojančius fotografijos praktikos pavyzdžius, per atvejo studijų rinkinį siekiama plačiau ištirti šiuolaikinei meninei fotografijai būdingą tinkliškumą ir intermedialumą. Dėmesio centre yra apytikriai 2013–2023 m. laikotarpis, su pateikiamomis nuorodomis į ankstesnius kūrinius ir procesus, kurie yra tarpusavyje susiję. Šis periodas pasirinktas dėl dviejų pagrindinių priežasčių. Pirma, šis laikotarpis iki šiol sulaukė tik riboto Baltijos šalių fotografijos tyrinėtojų akademinio dėmesio. Tai menkai ištyrinėta teritorija su fragmentiškomis įžvalgomis, kurias dar reikia sujungti į išsamų teorinį požiūrį. Disertacija siekia užpildyti šią spragą.

Antrasis aspektas susijęs su svarbiais kultūriniais ir sociotechnologiniais veiks-
niais. Antrojoje 2000-ųjų metų pusėje teoriškai ir praktiškai jau nebebuvo akcentuo-
jami su skaitmeninėmis manipuliacijomis susiję klausimai, kurie buvo ypač svarbūs
1990-aisiais ir 2000-ųjų pradžioje. Bendrame 2008 m. straipsnyje Daniel Rubinstein ir
Katrina Sluis įvedė naują „tinklinio atvaizdo" (angl. *networked image*) terminą. Autoriai
atkreipė dėmesį į interneto sukeltą „stiprėjantį kultūrinį pokytį", turintį įtakos fotogra-
fijos funkcionalumui. Šiai teorinei minčiai prireikė laiko subręsti – ji tapo visaverte
maždaug 2010–2014 m. Iš daugybės svarbių sociotechnologinių naujovių, įgyvendintų
per šį trumpą laikotarpį ir suteikusių galimybę taikyti naujus vaizdų kūrimo, naudojimo
ir platinimo metodus, svarbiausios buvo 4G mobiliojo ryšio technologijos diegimas
Baltijos šalyse, pirmojo iPad ir ketvirtojo iPhone su nauja priekine kamera išleidimas
bei tokių platformų kaip Google Image Search, Instagram ir Snapchat atsiradimas.
Eksponentiškai didėjant bendrinamų, saugomų, fiksuojamų ir platinamų vaizdų
kiekiui, fotografija virto „visur esančiu" ir „įtinklintu" kasdienės kultūros aspektu.

Baltijos šalys – Lietuva, Latvija ir Estija – buvo pasirinktos kaip geografinė šio tyri-
mo vieta dėl kelių priežasčių. Pirmoji priežastis yra pragmatinė: kaip praktikas esu giliai
įsitraukęs į šio regiono meninius ir kuratorinius tinklus. Estijoje du kartus dalyvavau
Talino fotomėnesyje, 2015 m. pristačiau fotoknygą *Smoke Screen*, o 2017 m. – sudarytą
leidinį *Too Good to be Photographed*. Estijos menų akademijoje (EKA) 2018, 2020 ir
2022 m. vedžiau su fotografija susijusias kūrybines dirbtuves studentams ir įvairiomis
progomis dalyvavau viešose diskusijose. Mano įsitraukimas į Latvijoje fotografijos
lauką panašus: 2016 m. prasidėjo iki šiol trunkantis profesinis bendradarbiavimas su
Rygos fotografijos bienale, kurio rezultatas – trys kuruotos parodos, mano asmeninė
paroda Rygoje 2022 m. ir daugybė kitų patirčių vietos fotografijos ir vaizdų kūrimo
erdvėse. Be bienalės, kitas Latvijos fotografų bendruomenės ryšių mazgas buvo „Self
Publish Riga" – tarptautinis kas dvejus metus vykstantis renginys, skirtas menininkų
knygoms, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant fotografijai. Esu kuravęs Lietuvos fotoknygų
pristatymus pagrindinėje parodoje 2014 ir 2021 m., dalyvavau ir 2016 m. Lietuvos
fotografijos scenoje ir institucinėje aplinkoje dalyvauti pradėjau 2004 m.

Šį ilgametį asmeninį ir profesinį įsitraukimą (nemažai šio bendradarbiavimo
patirčių skleidėsi šio tyrimo metu) papildo tai, kad Baltijos šalys kartu sudaro grupę
šalių, kurios yra panašios savo dydžiu, geopolitine ir demografine padėtimi. Jos taip
pat lygintinos istoriniu ir kultūriniu požiūriu. Šie bendri bruožai suteikia pagrindą
kritiniam žvilgsniui į lyginamąsias dabartinės Lietuvos, Latvijos ir Estijos meninės
fotografijos praktikas. Svarbu pabrėžti, kad lyginamosios analizės fotografijos teo-
rijos lauke iki šiol retos. Lietuvos fotografija – ypač jos klasikinis XX a. laikotarpis,
kuriame susiformavo savita humanistinė fotografijos mokykla – dažnai aptariama

kaip autonomiška ir atskira sritis. Baltijos šalių sugretinimai buvo atliekami retai. Nors pastaraisiais metais atsirado glaudesnio Baltijos šalių fotografijos bendruomenių bendradarbiavimo galimybių, tokios iniciatyvos vis dar nedidelės ir dažnai apsiriboja mažesnio masto renginiais. Viena dėmesio verta išimtis: 2011 m. Vytauto Michelkevičiaus organizuotas ir kuruotas projektas „Vietos karta: atvaizdas, atmintis ir fikcija Baltijos šalyse". Šis projektas pristatė vienos Baltijos šalių menininkų kartos (gimusių 1975–1985 m.) fotografijos darbus ir buvo orientuotas į vietos ir vietos kūrimo sampratą, pasitelkiant mnemonines ir fikcines technikas. Nors projektas neapėmė kai kurių šiuolaikiškesnių fotografijos praktikų temų ir formų, „Vietos karta" reikšmingai išryškino Baltijos šalių fotografų bendradarbiavimo galimybes.

Dėl ribotų tarptautinių ryšių sovietmečiu fotografų bendruomenės buvo sąlyginai izoliuotos, tačiau dabartinis vietinių fotografijos procesų kraštovaizdis yra giliai įsipainiojęs į globalų tinklą. Šiuolaikiniai praktikai yra glaudžiai susiję asmeniniais ir profesiniais ryšiais, dažnai žino vieni apie kitų veiklą, taip sudarydami laisvai susietą į fotografiją orientuotų profesionalų tinklą. Tačiau Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos praktikos, kaip tarpusavyje susijusios ir susietos, iš esmės liko neįtrauktos į akademinį diskursą – būtent šią spragą ir siekiama užpildyti šioje disertacijoje. Be šių aplinkybių, dar vienas veiksnys, paskatinęs pasirinkti Baltijos šalis kaip geografinį tyrimo objektą, yra mano įsitikinimas, kad vykstantys regioniniai pokyčiai ekspansyvioje fotografijos ir vaizdų kūrimo srityje turi didelę kultūrinę reikšmę. Šie pokyčiai ne tik suteikia įžvalgų sociotechnologiniu požiūriu, bet ir atspindi platesnius pokyčius meninės fotografijos srityje pasauliniu mastu.

Šį tyrimą atlikau kaip aktyvus lauko dalyvis, įsitraukęs į tiriamąją sritį. Iš esmės šis disertacijos projektas pagrįstas sąmoningais stebėjimais *iš vidaus*, o ne iš pašalinio stebėtojo perspektyvos. Tai galima laikyti specifiniu metodologiniu aspektu: tam tikru rašymu iš vidaus. Kaip minėta anksčiau, mano dalyvavimas fotografijos lauke apėmė įvairialypį bendradarbiavimą su institucijomis ir praktikais, esančiais visose trijose Baltijos šalyse. Kaip kuratorius vykdžiau projektus su (be kitų institucijų) Lietuvos fotomenininkų sąjunga („Nauji įrankiai fotografijoje: nuo Google iki algoritmo", 2018); Rupert (*Tarsi nebūtų rytojaus*, 2013); Latvijos nacionaliniu meno muziejumi („On Photographic Beings", 2020) ir Talino fotomėnesiu. Nuo 2019 m. esu Rygos fotografijos bienalės bendradarbiaujantis kuratorius. Be to, esu praktikuojantis menininkas, savo projektus ir meninius tyrimus pristatęs įvairiuose instituciniuose ir nepriklausomuose kontekstuose. Šis dvigubas vaidmuo suteikė galimybę užčiuopti tyrimo aplinkos „pulsą" įtraukiau nei vien kritinį žvilgsnį iš šono. Manau, kad tiek kuratorinė, tiek meninė mano praktikos patirtis padėjo atskleisti fotografijos kaitos dinamiką platesniuose sociokultūriniuose ir technologiniuose rėmuose. Svarbu ir tai, kad ši praktika mano

kaip mokslininko pozicijai šio tyrimo atžvilgiu suteikia tam tikro subjektyvumo, kurį noriai deklaruoju. Kitaip tariant, nė vienas šio tyrimo segmentas nesiekia pateikti atvirai objektyvios pozicijos ar parodyti „matymo visko iš niekur", kaip išsireiškė Donna Haraway[6]. Priešingai, jis įkūnija situacinį ir subjektyviai susiformavusį supratimą.

Žemėliapiuoti galima ne tik mano, kaip individualaus tyrėjo, poziciją, bet ir pačios disertacijos tarpdalykinį pobūdį. Šį tyrimą galima priskirti prie to, ką tinklo vaizdų tyrėjai Andrew Dewdney ir Katrina Sluis neseniai įvardino kaip „besiformuojantį lauką, kuriame vizualumas ir jo santykis su technologijomis yra tarpdisciplininių tyrimų objektas"[7]. Šis apibūdinimas gan taikliai atspindi šio tyrimo esmę, nes jame (tinklinis) fotografinis atvaizdas suvokiamas kaip neatsiejamai susijęs su sociotechninėmis aplinkybėmis, esmingai įtakojamčiomis jo kūrimą, sklaidą ir reprodukciją įvairiais lygmenimis. Tarpdalykiškumas yra ne tik pagrindinė šios disertacijos tema, bet formuoja ir jos metodologiją. Atliekama kritinė analizė apima platų spektrą šaltinių iš fotografijos teorijos, medijų ir vizualinių studijų, meninės praktikos, kultūros ir technologijų studijų, kiek mažiau – filosofijos ir semiotikos. Šiuos šaltinius papildo septyni interviu su praktikais, taip pat pokalbiai su jais elektroniniu paštu.

Tikslas ir uždaviniai

Pagrindinis šios daktaro disertacijos tikslas – atskleisti šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos kraštovaizdžio daugialypiškumo aspektus konceptualiame intermedialumo ir įtinklintos vaizdų kultūros kontekste, remiantis atvejo tyrimais, orientuotais į Baltijos šalis – Lietuvą, Latviją ir Estiją. Šį tyrimą skatina didžiulis skaitmeninių technologijų poveikis vaizdų kūrimui, platinimui ir interpretavimui mus vis labiau tarpusavyje saistančiame pasaulyje. Svarbiausias darbo tikslas – visapusiškai suprasti, kaip fotografijos medija transformavosi reaguodama į šiuos technologinius ir kultūrinius pokyčius. Disertacija siekiama prisidėti prie gilesnio ir subtilesnio supratimo apie fotografijos intermedialias sąveikas, jos šiuolaikinį būvį, kuomet fotografija įveiklinama kartu su įvairiomis kitomis medijomis, formuojant ir perteikiant prasmes tinklaveikos amžiuje. Tokiu būdu disertacija siekia užpildyti esamą akademinių tyrimų spragą, susijusią su dabarties Baltijos šalių fotografija, ir siūlo apibendrinančių įžvalgų apie jos raidą. Be to, platesnis šio tyrimo tikslas – sukurti naujus teorinius įrankius, kuriuos būtų galima taikyti analizuojant meninę fotografiją šiuolaikinėje tinklaveikos kultūroje, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant šiuolaikinėms intermedialioms praktikoms Lietuvoje, Latvijoje ir Estijoje.

6   Donna Haraway, „Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

7   Andrew Dewdney ir Katrina Sluis, „Introduction", in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dewdney ir Katrina Sluis (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 4.

Įgyvendinant šiuos tikslus, darbe siekiama prisidėti prie įvairesnio ir polifoniškesnio diskurso kūrimo regioniniame fotografijos lauke. Atsižvelgiant į tai suformulavau šiuos tikslus:

1) Nustatyti sociotechnologinį kontekstą, kuriame veikia intermediali meninė fotografija, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant dviejų svarbiausių fotografijos medijos istorijos poslinkių – skaitmeninio lūžio ir tinklinės transformacijos – aptarimui. Atsižvelgiant į tai, apibrėžti intermedialumo Baltijos šalių fotografijoje istorinius pagrindus, raidą ir sklaidą.

2) Teoriniu požiūriu ištirti intermedialumo sistemą, ypač jo raišką ir aktualumą fotografijos studijų srityje. Pritaikius peržiūrėtą teorinę prieigą analizuoti ir interpretuoti dabartines Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos praktikas, atskleidžiant savitus bruožus ir indėlį į fotografijos medijos raidą.

3) Atlikti išsamų empirinį šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos Baltijos šalyse 2013–2023 m. tyrimą, nagrinėjant ir dokumentuojant šiuolaikines intermedialumo praktikas, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant fotografijos projektams, pristatomiems parodų aplinkoje.

4) Į regioninį fotografijos diskursą įvesti ir integruoti naujus teorinius požiūrius ir sąvokas. Pritaikyti „fotofikcijos" koncepciją empirinėje analizėje, nagrinėjant fikcijų vaidmenį meniniuose asmeninio identiteto ir kolektyvinės tapatybės refleksijuose šiuolaikinės Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos kontekste.

5) Įvesti įtinklintų prasmių kūrimo sampratą kaip konceptualų pagrindą šiuolaikinei intermedialiai meninei fotografijai tirti, išryškinant skirtis su tradiciniu („klasikiniu") reikšmių kūrimo režimu.

6) Apibrėžti pagrindinius terminus, tokius kaip tinklinis reikšmių kūrimas, tinklinė ir išplėstinė fotografija, suteikiant tvirtą teorinį šiuolaikinės kūrybinės praktikos tyrimo pagrindą.

7) Nagrinėti žiūrovo įtraukimo aspektus, atsirandančius susidūrus su intermedialiais ir tinkliniais kūriniais, veikiančiais pagal išplėstinį prasmės režimą, nušviečiant interaktyvius ir dalyvaujamuosius šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos aspektus.

Įgyvendinant šiuos tikslus, daktaro disertacija siekia pagilinti šiuolaikinės Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos supratimą, atskleisti jos intermedialumo bruožus ir tinklaveikos dinamiką, taip prisidedant prie fotografijos diskurso plėtojimo. Ja siekiama pateikti holistinį požiūrį į fotografijos, kaip medijos, transformacijas, kurias ji patyrė reaguodama į tinklo amžiaus iššūkius ir galimybes.

Tyrimų metodai

Disertacijos tyrimo metodologija iš esmės kyla iš teorinio tinklinio reikšmių kūrimo sąvokų plėtojimo ir taikymo, susijusio su intermedialia fotografija, atsižvelgiant

į šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos praktiką. Šis tyrimas vyksta dinamiškoje ir besivystančioje šių dviejų reiškinių sankirtoje, tarpinėje zonoje, kurioje jie produktyviai susiduria, įvairiapusiškai papildydami ir praplėsdami vienas kitą. Disertacijoje atliekami analizės pjūviai skirti ištirti daugialypį šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos kraštovaizdį intermedialumo ir tinkliškumo aspektais. Siekiant įgyvendinti užsibrėžtus tikslus, tyrime taikomi kokybiniai, istoriniai ir teoriniai tyrimo metodai. Daugiametodiniame tyrime buvo renkami ir analizuojami duomenys pasitelkiant kokybinius interviu, atvejo studijas, turinio analizę, archyvinius tyrimus ir kritinę diskurso analizę.

1) Kritinio diskurso (istorinio konteksto) analizė. Disertacija pradedama istorine socialinio-technologinio konteksto analize. Šis istorinis kontekstas įrėmina reikšmingus skaitmeninių ir tinklinių technologijų sukeltus pokyčius, sutelkiant dėmesį į 2000–2010 m periodą. Pasitelkiant istorinę analizę nagrinėjama, kaip šie technologiniai pasiekimai paveikė vaizdų kūrimą, sklaidą ir interpretaciją. Kritinė diskurso analizė pasitelkiama ištirti sociotechnologines fotografijos kraštovaizdžio aplinkybes nuo 1990-ųjų iki 2010-ųjų, atkreipiant dėmesį į skaitmeninius ir tinklo pokyčius bei jų poveikį fotografijos teorijai ir praktikai.

2) Empirinis tyrimas ir turinio analizė (atvejo studijos). Empiriniame šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos Baltijos šalyse 2013–2023 m. tyrime daugiausia dėmesio skiriama parodose pristatomiems kūriniams. Jis taip pat apima atidų konkrečių meno kūrinių ir jiems būdingų intermedialių elementų tyrimą. Buvo atliktos kelios atvejo analizės, kad būtų galima išsamiai susipažinti su šiuolaikinės intermedijinės fotografijos projektais Baltijos šalyse. Atvejai buvo pasirinkti atsižvelgiant į jų aktualumą ir svarbą šioje srityje. Kiekvieno atvejo studija apima išsamią meno kūrinių, menininkų pasisakymų, parodų katalogų ir interviu su dalyvaujančiais praktikais analizę. Be to, mobilizuojama turinio analizė, siekiant sistemingai išnagrinėti su meninės fotografijos projektais susijusį vizualinį ir tekstinį turinį. Šis metodas leidžia atskleisti meninės raiškos ypatymus, naratyvus ir temines tendencijas intermedialioje regiono fotografijoje.

3) Literatūros apžvalga ir lyginamoji analizė. Tyrime atliekama išsami literatūros apžvalga, siekiant išsiaiškinti su medijomis susijusias sąvokas, tokias kaip intermedialumas, išplėstinė fotografija ir fotofikcija, apimančias tiek pasaulinę, tiek regioninę perspektyvą. Be to, disertacijoje atliekama lyginamoji analizė, siekiant palyginti Baltijos šalių raidą su platesnėmis tarptautinėmis šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos ir tinklinės vaizdų kultūros tendencijomis. Toks požiūris padeda nustatyti bendrus ir unikalius regioninius bruožus.

4) Interviu ir susirašinėjimas elektroniniu paštu. Atliekant šį tyrimą buvo atlikti išsamūs pusiau struktūruoti interviu su menininkais, fotografais, kuratoriais ir kitais Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos aplinkos dalyviais. Iš viso buvo atlikti 7 interviu,

kurių tikslas – surinkti įžvalgas apie jų patirtį ir požiūrį į šiuolaikinę intermedialinę fotografiją. 2019 m. du žvalgomieji interviu padėjo žemėlapiuoti disertacijos kryptį. Disertacijos rengimo metu buvo atlikti penki papildomi interviu, o vienas iš jų tarnavo validaciniam tikslui – disertacijos išvadoms patikrinti. Be to, susirašinėjau elektroniniu paštu, keisdamasis informacija ir rinkdamas vizualią medžiagą. Šiais elektroniniais laiškais buvo užduodami klausimai, aiškinamasi dėl konkrečių detalių ar informacijos spragų ir koordinuojamas vaizdinės medžiagos persiuntimas ir tikslinimas. Svarbu pabrėžti, kad daktaro disertacijos tyrimas apsiriboja dviem ryškiais šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos bruožais: intermedialumu ir išplėstiniu prasmių kūrimo režimu. Tai reiškia, kad čia analizuojami daugiausia parodų atvejai, o fotografijos knygos – tradicinė vieša fotografų darbų pristatymo platforma – paminimos tik glaustai. Nors parodos tapo pagrindine šiuolaikinių meno fotografų darbų pristatymo priemone (plačiau apie tai kalbama 4 skyriuje), verta pažymėti, kad fotoknyga išlieka gyvybinga platforma ir galėtų būti nagrinėjama būsimuose tyrimuose.

Terminologija: pagrindinės apibrėžtys

Tinklinė fotografija nurodo į transformuojančią fotografijos lauko raidą; ji atsirado 2000-ųjų pabaigoje ir 2010-ųjų pradžioje dėl reikšmingų technologinių ir socialinių pokyčių, kurie pakeitė tai, kaip kuriami ir vartojami fotografiniai vaizdai, kaip jais dalijamasi. Pagrindiniai sociotechnologiniai pokyčiai, prisidėję prie tinklinės fotografijos, yra šie: 4G mobiliojo ryšio tinklų technologijų diegimas, mobiliųjų telefonų fotoaparatų tobulinimas, socialinės žiniasklaidos diegimas ir tokių platformų kaip Instagram bei Google vaizdų paieškos pradžia. Tinklinė fotografija yra glaudžiai susijusi su platesne įtinklintos kultūros sąvoka, kuriai būdingi dinamiški tarpusavio ryšiai, kuriuos stiprina didžiuliai duomenų debesys, mobiliojo ryšio tinklai ir nešiojamųjų kompiuterių technologijos. Šis pokytis sukėlė naujų klausimų vizualumo ir fotografijos teorijose. Tinklinis fotografinis vaizdas taip pat paskatino naujus meninius ir kuratorinius tyrimus. Tai veikia ir besiplečiantį prasmės kūrimo operacijų lauką, kuriame menininkai pasitelkia medialias sąveikas, įsišaknijusias vaizduose, tinkluose ir pasaulinėse problemose. Tinklinė fotografija kritiškai atspindi dinamišką šiuolaikinės vizualiosios kultūros prigimtį.

Intermedialumas – sudėtinga ir dinamiška sąvoka, kuri laikui bėgant keitėsi. Ji apima platų reikšmių ir požiūrių spektrą. Iš pradžių ji buvo siejama su vienos medijos apibūdinimu per kitą. Tačiau šiuolaikinė intermedialumo samprata apima daugialypį skirtingų medijų santykių lauką, kuriame daugiausia dėmesio skiriama medžiagiškumo, prasmės kūrimo ir socialinių funkcijų klausimams. Intermedialumas, kaip jis suprantamas šio tyrimo kontekste, nėra tiesiog dviejų nusistovėjusių

meno formų ar medijų maišymas. Jis taip pat apima platų reikšmių ir santykių lauką. Tai reiškia, kad intermedialumas neapsiriboja vien nusistovėjusių medijų sąveika, bet apima ir aplinkinius kultūrinius, socialinius ir technologinius aspektus, kurie sudaro sąlygas šiai sąveikai. Jis leidžia pamatyti, kodėl tam tikros medijos sąveikauja, kaip šios sąveikos susiformuoja ir kas perduodama konkrečiais deriniais. Intermedialumas meno praktikoje apima radikalų performatyvumą, stiprų savirefleksyvumą ir veiksmingą komunikaciją, leidžiančią kūrinių specifiką. Menininkai ir mokslininkai ją priėmė kaip strateginį atsaką, padedantį orientuotis kintančiame kultūriniame kraštovaizdyje, tyrinėti naujas tinklų teikiamas funkcijas ir spręsti tarpdisciplininius uždavinius. Šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos kontekste intermedialumas suteikia pagrindą nagrinėti besikeičiančius įvairių medijų formų santykius ir jų vaidmenį parodų erdvėse.

Prasmių kūrimas arba gamyba (*meaning-making*) šiuolaikinėje meninėje fotografijoje reiškia daugialypį ir besivystantį procesą, apimantį būdus, kuriais žiūrovai interpretuoja ir priskiria reikšmę fotografiniams vaizdams. Prasmės gamyba reiškia gilų perėjimą nuo tradicinių paradigmų, pagrįstų indeksiškumo sąvoka, prie tinklinės schemos, kuriai būdingos tarpusavyje susijusios, daugiasluoksnės ir kintančios reikšmės, peržengiančios įprastas ribas. Šis naujas požiūris į reikšmių kūrimą veikia dinamiškoje ir tarpusavyje susijusioje srityje, kuriai didelę įtaką daro skaitmeninė revoliucija ir tinklinė kultūra. Klasikinėje prasmės kūrimo schemoje prasmė daugiausia kildinama iš fotografijos kadre esančio turinio. Egzistuoja aiškiai apibrėžta riba tarp to, kas vaizduojama fotografijoje (prasmingumo šaltinis), ir visko, kas yra už kadro ribų, kas dažnai laikoma mažiau prasmingu arba neturi prasmės. Prasmė automatiškai priskiriama remiantis kadre esančiu turiniu, ji išlieka palyginti stabili ir savarankiška. Šiam režimui būdingos aiškios ribos ir tiesioginis vaizdavimas. Priešingai, tinklinę prasmės kūrimo schemą apibūdina tai, kad joje akcentuojamas santykinumas ir tarpusavio ryšys. Pagal šią sistemą veikiančios fotografijos nustato ryšius su platesniais, iš pažiūros nesusijusiais kultūros reiškiniais ir procesais. Žiūrovo dėmesys nukreipiamas ne tik į vaizduojamą objektą, bet ir į asociacijų ir prasmių tinklą, kuris peržengia vaizdinio turinio ribas. Ši schema leidžia kurti kintančias, fluidiškas ir dažnai atviras interpretacijoms prasmes. Reikšmės yra ne tik kadre, bet ir apima platesnius kultūrinius laukus ir fiktyvius subjektus, atspindinčius mūsų globalaus ir tinklais sujungto pasaulio sudėtingumą. Prasmės kūrimo paradigmų kaita šiuolaikinėje meninėje fotografijoje neatsiejama nuo tinklinės kultūros. Menininkams atsivėrė naujos galimybės taikyti novatoriškus metodus, kurie trina ribas tarp tikrovės ir vaizduotės, tiesos ir fikcijos. Šiuolaikinei meninei fotografijai, veikiančiai pagal tinklinę reikšmių kūrimo schemą, būdingas intermedialumas, kai fotografijos integruojamos į kitas formas, tokias kaip

skulptūra, performansas, vaizdo įrašas, instaliacija ir rašytinis žodis. Ribos tarp šių formų išsitrina, pabrėžiant šiuolaikinės fotografijos kintamumą ir pritaikomumą. Menininkai aktyviai įtraukia žiūrovus, ragindami juos šifruoti vaizdus platesniame kultūriniame kontekste ir nepaisant ankstesnių takoskyrų.

Medija šioje disertacijoje suvokiama kaip iš esmės tarpininkaujanti sąvoka. Medija niekada nėra visiškai neutrali; ji visada kontekstualizuoja, išverčia ir net iškraipo informaciją. Tai ypač aktualu fotografijos srityje, kuri istoriškai siejama su skaidraus pasaulio, toks, koks jis yra, vaizdavimo idėja. Tačiau fotografija, kaip ir visos medijos, veikia kaip filtras tarp informacijos ir jos gavėjo, dėl to atsiranda įvairios filtravimo, apkarpymo, iškraipymo ir tarpininkavimo formos. Medija yra teorinis konstruktas, o jos apibrėžimas priklauso nuo istorinio, diskursyvaus, technologinio ir kultūrinio konteksto. Labai svarbu pripažinti, kad jokia medija neturi grynos, išskirtinės esmės. Medijos iš esmės yra mišrios ir susipynusios. Todėl „medijos" sąvoka yra labai svarbi norint suprasti intermedialumą ir transmedialumą. Vis dėlto su medija susiduriama praktikoje ne kaip su abstrakčia kategorija, o per konkrečius kūrinius ar atvejus. Pripažindamas medijų kategorijų konstruktyvų pobūdį, šiame tyrime laikausi pozicijos, kad vis dar įmanoma ir aktualu aptarti santykines skirtingų medijų ribas. Šios ribos išlieka kintančios, o medijos ir toliau sąveikauja įvairiomis formomis. Šioje perspektyvoje pripažįstamas ir medijų specifiškumas, ir skirtumai, taip pat jų sąveika įvairiuose kultūriniuose ir meniniuose kontekstuose. Praktiniu požiūriu medijų ribos tebėra svarbios kultūrinėje ir socialinėje srityse, kaip rodo su konkrečiomis medijomis susijusios institucijos, renginiai ir pavadinimai. Pavyzdžiui, su fotografija susijusių organizacijų, galerijų, žurnalų ir muziejų išlikimas rodo, kad fotografija tebėra pripažįstama kaip atskira medija, net ir intermedialumo sąlygomis.

Indeksas ir indeksiškumas – fotografijos kontekste įkrauta „indeksiškumo" sąvoka laikui bėgant keitėsi. Suformuluotas Charleso Sanderso Peirce'o semiotinėje filosofijoje, indeksas neapsiribojo tiesioginiu priežastingumu ar materialiu tęstinumu, bet taip pat apėmė vaizduotės galią. Tačiau XX a. antrojoje pusėje fotografijos ir kino teorijoje paplito siauresnis indeksiškumo supratimas, pabrėžiantis tiesioginį fizinį ryšį ir priežastingumą (kaip nagrinėjama 1 skyriuje). Šis pokytis įtvirtino įsitikinimą, kad fotografijos indeksiškumas yra prigimtinė, savarankiška medijos savybė, nepriklausanti nuo kultūrinės įtakos. Skaitmeninė revoliucija gerokai pakoregavo šį suvokimą. Nors diskusijos kilo apie bendresnį skaitmeninių technologijų poveikį fotografijai, tapo akivaizdu, kad lūžis įvyko ir nusistovėjusiame indeksiškumo, kaip griežtai priežastinės-materialios fotografijos savybės, supratime. Ši samprata, vyravusi nuo septintojo dešimtmečio pabaigos iki dešimtojo dešimtmečio, užleido vietą lankstesniam ir sudėtingesniam indekso supratimui, labiau atitinkančiam originalią Peirce'o koncepciją, kuri skatina

tyrinėti šiuolaikinę fotografiją ir svarstyti „gretutinio žinojimo" (*collateral knowledge*) ir vaizduotės vaidmenis formuojant fotografinių vaizdų indeksualumą.

Išplėstinė fotografija (*expanded photography*) – tai terminas, įgavęs reikšmę diskurse, susijusiame su fotografijos evoliucionavimu ir jos sąveika su kitomis meno formomis. Jis turi gilias istorines šaknis, atsiradusias įtakingoje Georgeʼo Bakerio esė „Photographyʼs Expanded Field" (2005). Juo buvo mestas iššūkis tuometiniam tradiciniam požiūriui į fotografiją kaip į sąlyginai stabilią mediją ir teigiama, kad skaitmeninės transformacijos ir kintančios meninės praktikos išplėtė fotografijos ribas. Svarbu tai, kad, užuot laikęs skaitmeninį perėjimą grėsme tradicinei fotografijai, Bakeris teigė, kad jis suteikia fotografijai galimybę užmegzti naujus, anksčiau neįsivaizduojamus ryšius su kitomis meno formomis. Šioje disertacijoje pritaikomas Bakerio požiūris, akcentuojant, kad šis (nuolatinis) fotografijos ribų išplėtimas rodo nuolatinę medijos transformaciją. Toliau svarstoma, kad net ir šiame kontekste, kai ribos išsitrina ir skatinamos įvairios medijų sąveikos, fotografijos elementas išlieka pastebimas ir reikšmingas. Baltijos šalių kontekste Bakerio idėjos rado ypatingą atgarsį Estijoje, kur EKA fotografijos katedra ėmė laikytis įtraukiančio požiūrio į šiuolaikinį meną. 2 skyriuje aptariama, kaip vadovaujant tarpdiscipliniam menininkui Marko Laimre, katedra skatino studentus eksperimentuoti su įvairiomis medijomis, todėl išaugo menininkų karta (kai kurių, pavyzdžiui, Kristina Õllek, kūryba plačiai aptariama šiame darbe), kurie fotografiją naudoja kaip pagrindinį savo kūrybos elementą, tačiau nėra ribojami jos ribų. Estijos kontekste, ypač švietimo ir meno praktikoje, fotografija išlieka pagrindiniu, bet lengvai pritaikomu šiuolaikinio meno kūrybos elementu.

Struktūra

Ši disertacija sudaryta iš keturių skyrių. Įvadiniame skyriuje „Technology Matters: Digital Break, Networked Photography, and Algorithms" nustatomas ir apibrėžiamas platesnis tyrimo technologinis kontekstas, nagrinėjant du esminius sociotechnologinius pokyčius: skaitmeninių technologijų atsiradimą ir tinklinių sistemų įsigalėjimą Vadovaudamasis Dewdney ir Sluis pastebėjimais, kad „tinklas daugelyje savo praktikų tebėra neištirta teritorija" ir kad „tinklinio vaizdo prigimtį ir sudėtingumą geriausiai ir galbūt tik per jo praktikas galima suvokti"[8], aptariu šiuos sudėtingus lūžius (taip glaustai, kaip tik leidžia vienas skyrius), kad nustatyčiau tam tikrą atskaitos tašką, nuo kurio bus pradėta tyrinėti šiuolaikinė Baltijos šalių meninė fotografija, kaip praktikų, kurios ne tik yra įsiliejusios į tinklinę postskaitmeninę kultūrą, bet ir kartais pasiskolina tam tikrus jai būdingus parametrus, priemones ir savybes, junginys. Nenagrinėjant

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8   Andrew Dewdney ir Katrina Sluis, „Introduction", 3.

kompiuterinių technologijų, kurių logika dabar persmelkia kultūrinę raišką, o ypač fotografijos lauką, būtų sunku ar net neįmanoma iki galo suprasti tam tikrų šiandieninės fotografinės raiškos atvejų. Savo ruožtu fotografijos praktikų analizė gali aiškiau nušviesti naujausius technologinius pokyčius, susijusius su trapiomis galios ir kapitalo ekosistemomis, kurios iš dalies tvarko mūsų šiandienos pasaulį.

Antrajame skyriuje „The Intermediality of Photography" analizuojamos įvairios su medijomis susijusios sąvokos, svarbios meninės fotografijos tyrimui. Šiame skyriuje, atskleidžiant medijos, kaip įtarpinančios ir visada tarpininkaujančios, sąvoką, aptariamos intermedialumo (ir jo pirmtako „intermedijos"), hibridiškumo ir transmedialumo sąvokos. Taip pat aptariama „išplėstinės fotografijos" samprata ir jos skirtingos interpretacijos Lietuvos ir Estijos meno ir teorijos kontekstuose. Nors visos šios sąvokos yra specifinės kontekstui, turinčios savitą konceptualią istoriją ir tam tikrus bendrumus, šiame tyrime intermedialumas įvardijamas kaip tinkamiausias analitiniams tikslams dėl aiškiau apibrėžiamų parametrų. Fotografijos intermedialumui atskleisti pasitelkiamos trys Christinos Ljunberg apibrėžtos su šiuolaikiniu menu susijusios intermedialumo operacijų savybės: radikalus performatyvumas, stiprus savirefleksyvumas ir veiksminga komunikacija. Aptarti Baltijos šalių intermedialinės fotografijos atvejai: nuo pirmtakų iki šiuolaikinius pokyčius iliustruojančių atvejų.

Trečiajame skyriuje „Networked Meaning-Making" gilinamasi į sudėtingą fotografinės prasmės sritį. Jame pateikiamas konceptualus teiginys, kad šiuolaikiniai meninės fotografijos kūriniai veikia prasmės kūrimo režimu, kuris iš esmės skiriasi nuo klasikinei fotografijai būdingų parametrų. Iš esmės radikaliai keičiasi terpė, kurioje veikia meninės fotografijos prasmės kūrimas. Šis pokytis susijęs su sociokultūrine ir technologine fotografijos padėtimi tinklinėje aplinkoje. Nepaisant to, kad istoriškai fotografijos medijos indeksinis tikrumas buvo suprantamas kaip jos ontologinis pagrindas, atkleidžiami atvejai, kurie metė iššūkį tokiam požiūriui ir atvėrė daugiau galimybių eksperimentinei fotografijos pusei. Šiame skyriuje aptariamas fotografijos panaudojimas XX a. septintojo ir aštuntojo dešimtmečių amerikiečių konceptualiųjų menininkų kūriniuose, išskiriant žymias grupines parodas „Photography into Sculpture" (1970) ir „The Extended Document" (1975), kurios kvestionavo tradicines fotografijos medijos konvencijas. Skyriuje prieinama apibendrijimo, kad fotografinės prasmės kūrimo(si) pobūdis perėjo į režimą, kuris yra labiau susietas, susijęs, daugiasluoksnis ir išsklaidytas. Prasmės kūrimas tapo aktyviu diskursu, į kurį įtraukiamas žiūrovas, suaktyvinant jo vaizduotę.

Ketvirtajame ir paskutiniame skyriuje „Baltic Contemporary Art Photography" išplėtojamas nuodugnus empirinis dabartinė regiono fotografijos praktikos tyrimas. Išsamiau aptariami keli fotografijos projektai, kurių veikimui būdingas intermedia-

lumas ir tinklinis prasmių kūrimas. Tarp kitų būdingų atvejų minimi „Powered by“ (Kristina Õllek); „When Hell Is Full the Dead Will Walk the Earth“ (Liga Spunde); „Trial and Error“ (Reinis Lismanis); „Diamonds Against Stones, Stones Against Diamonds“ (Marge Monko); „Looking Forward to Meet Me“ (Visvaldas Morkevičius). Daugelis šių ir panašių projektų atsiskleidžia dinamiškoje parodinėje aplinkoje. Būtent parodų erdvėje meninės fotografijos projektai iškyla kaip tinklinės ir tarpinės sistemos, kuriose skirtingi elementai susijungia pristatant meninę viziją ar tyrimą, ir į kuriuos įtraukiamas žiūrovas. Norint suaktyvinti eksponuojamus meno kūrinius ir reikšmių daugialypumą, dažnai reikia žinių ir vaizduotės. Tai taip pat susiję su šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos projektuose veikiančiu fikcijos elementu. Todėl analizei pagilinti pasitelkiama fotofikcijos sąvoka. Be to, atskleidžiamas ryšys tarp fikcijos ir tapatybės konstravimo – šis interesas sieja Baltijos šalių praktikus su jų kolegomis pasaulyje.

Priedai papildo disertaciją penkių interviu – su Kristina Õllek, Liga Spunde, Vytautu Kumža, Kotryna Ūla Kiliulyte ir Visvaldu Morkevičiumi – transkripcijomis. Ši medžiaga suteikia papildomų įžvalgų iš šios srities praktikų, kurios gali tapti naudingais šaltiniais būsimiems tyrimams.

Išvados

1. Kintant sociotechnologinėms ir kultūrėms aplinkybėms, susiformavo naujas vizualinis kraštovaizdis, veikiamas taip vadinamo „antropoceno-estetinio-kapitalistinio komplekso“, darančio didelę įtaką tiek atvaizdų gamybai, tiek jų turiniui. Šiame kontekste fotografijos laukas patyrė paradigminį pokytį. Naujo tipo terpėje fotografija skleidžiasi kaip įtakingas sociokultūrinis veiksnys, betarpiškai įsiterpiantis į kasdienį gyvenimą ir formuojantis kolektyvinės sąmonės struktūrą. Integruota į tinklus, ji peržengė tradicinius (dokumentavimo) vaidmenis ir tapo neatsiejamu bendravimo ir komunikacijos komponentu. Fotografija atspindi ir konstruoja socialines bei kultūrines tapatybes, kartu ir prisitaikydama prie skaitmeninio amžiaus ir būdama viena iš jos varomųjų jėgų.

Darbe atskleidžiama ši fotografijos transformacijos kelionė nuo skaitmeninio lūžio iki tinklinės vaizdų kultūros, žyminti nuokrypį nuo tradicinių fotografijos šaknų, sietinų su mechaniniu objektyvumu ir tikrovės atspindėjimu. Skaitmenizacija reiškė seisminį pokytį fotografijos kaip savitos medijos (susietos su siaurai suvokta indeksiškumo interpretacija) ontologijoje, atveriant kelius įtinklintoms ir intermedialioms fotografijos praktikoms. Skaitmeninės technologijos suproblemino ir išplėtė fotografijos medijos sampratą, sutrikdė fotocheminį patikimumą, atverdamos duris neapibrėžtumui ir pasakojimo potencialumui. Tinklaveikos sistemoje skaitmeninis fotografinis atvaizdas tapo sudėtingo socialinių mainų tinklo šerdimi ir reikšminiu

mazgu didžiuliame save vis perkuriančiame duomenų tinkle. Įtinklintas atvaizdas šiandien užima naują kultūrinę-teorinę poziciją, atspindėdamas dinamišką subjektų sąveikų tinkle. Todėl fotografijos, kaip fiksuotos, objektyvios medijos, samprata XXI amžiuje užleidžia vietą tinklinei fotografijai.

Fotografiniai atvaizdai ir toliau reprezentuoja matomą pasaulį, tačiau jų skaidrumą komplikuoja sudėtingi algoritminiai procesai, kuriais grindžiamas jų kūrimas ir sklaida. Dauguma atvaizdų, su kuriais kasdien susiduriame ekranuose, yra tik viena iš galimų duomenų išraiškos formų, kartais skirtų tik mašinų tarpusavio bendravimui, išvengiant vizualizacijos poreikio. Šis dvigubas fotografijos, kaip matomo artefakto, skirto žmonėms vartoti, ir nematomo duomenų taško skaitmeniniame tinkle, egzistavimas pabrėžia kompleksišką, daugiasluoksnį medijos funkcionavimą. Perėjimas prie tinklinės fotografijos atspindi poslinkį link technologijomis paremto tarpusavio ryšio ir duomenų debesų infrastruktūros. Šis poslinkis ne tik daro įtaką vaizdų kūrimui ir interpretacijai, bet ir kelia esminius klausimus apie tikrovę, autentiškumą, tapatybės prigimtį ir (etines) technologinių manipuliacijų pasekmes. Keliaujant šiuo besikeičiančiu vizualiniu kraštovaizdžiu, būtina kritiškai vertinti tinklinę vaizdų kultūrą ir jos poveikį žmogaus ir nežmogaus suvokimo bei prasmės kūrimo procesams.

2. Atvaizdai tapo esmine įtinklintos šiuolaikybės kasdienio būvio komunikacijos priemone. Fotografija šiandien veikia dinamiškuose, hibridiškuose ir vis save perkuriančiuose kontekstuose. Fotomenininkai aktyviai įtraukia kitas meno formas, kurdami intermedialius kūrinius, kurie meta žiūrovams iššūkį iškoduoti vaizdus platesniuose kultūriniuose kontekstuose. Baltijos šalių meninė fotografija yra savitas šių transformacijų pavyzdys: nutolsdama nuo klasikinių paradigmų, ji pasitelkia tinklo funkcionalumą ir interpretacijos galimybes. Tokie menininkai kaip Õllek, Spunde, Kumža, Lismanis, Monko, Jancis, Kiliulytė, Morkevičius ir kiti kuria intermedialias sistemas, kuriose fotografiniai vaizdai tarnauja kaip mazgai, jungiantys įvairias prasmes ir interpretacijų galimybes. Ši dinamiška sąveika atspindi platesnius pokyčius kultūroje, kurioje reikšmės yra takios, tikrovė ginčijama, o meninė raiška peržengia anksčiau nubrėžtas formalias ribas.

3. Parodos taip pat atspindi šiuos pokyčius, įgalindamos interaktyvias intermedialios fotografijos prieigas. Intermedialumas ir interaktyvumas glaudžiai sąveikauja su prasmių laukais. Atspindėdamos besikeičiantį vaizdų kūrimo, sklaidos ir vartojimo kraštovaizdį, šiuolaikinės ekspozicijos iš esmės nutolo nuo tradicinių parodinių konvencijų. Šiame tyrime aptariami pavyzdžiai įveiklina intermedialumą, įvairias medijų formas ir menines praktikas bei yra betarpiškai susieti su tinkline kultūra. Intermedialios fotografijos parodos šiandien veikia kaip „sistemos", kuriose fotografijos artefaktai yra tik vienas veiksnys menininko sukurtoje visatoje, tyrinėjančioje tam tikrą temą,

dalykinę sritį ar kelias tarpusavyje susijusias temas. Tokia įvairių medijų integracija kelia žiūrovams tam tikrą iššūkį interpretuojant meno kūrinius, reikalauja vizualinio raštingumo ir kritinės prieigos. Tyrimais grįstų fotografinių projektų kūriniai neretai užkoduojami daugiasluoksnėmis ir tinklinėmis reikšmėmis, nuorodomis į platesnius kultūrinius, technologinius ir socialinius kontekstus. Pačios parodų erdvės veikia kaip dinamiškos ir sudėtingos struktūros, atspindinčios tinklinės kultūros, kurioje jos egzistuoja, sudėtingumą ir susietumą. Šiame kontekste vis labiau išryškėja žiūrovo vaidmuo, nes jam netiesiogiai tenka užduotis aktyvinant vaizduotę iššifruoti užkoduotus meno kūrinius, pasitelkiant parodoje pateiktas užuominas ir nuorodas.

4. Intermedialiai fotografijai būdinga išplėstinė prasmių gamyba. Šie du procesai yra tarpusavyje glaudžiai susiję. Disertacijoje išryškinamas paradigminis prasmių kūrimo pokytis meninėje fotografijoje, pereinant nuo klasikinės prie tinklinės schemos. Klasikinei schemai būdinga: 1) fotografijos vaizdo turinio svarba ir aiškios jį skiriančios ribos; 2) palyginti tiesi prasminė linija, einanti nuo turinio iki objekto/subjekto realiame pasaulyje. Priešingai, tinklinę schemą charakterizuoja: 1) neryškios arba lūžtančios ribos; 2) sudėtingesnis vizualinio turinio veikimas ir santykinai mažesnė jo svarba; 3) vaizduotę įgalinančios sąveikos, funkcionuojančios plačiuose kultūriniuose kontekstuose. Tinklinės reikšmių kūrimo schemos kaip konceptualios priemonės įvedimas šiame tyrime siūlo naujas galimybes analizuoti, kaip šiuolaikinė meninė fotografija konstruoja prasmes ir yra interpretuojama tinklaveikos kultūrinėje terpėje. Palyginus šią šiuolaikinę sistemą su tradiciniais prasmės kūrimo būdais, tyrimas atskleidžia daugialypį šiuolaikinio fotomeno vartojimo interaktyvumą ir dalyvaujamąjį pobūdį.

5. Christinos Ljungberg konceptualios prieigos prie intermedialumo sąveikų įtraukimas į šiuolaikinės Baltijos šalių meninės fotografijos analizę siūlo kritišką medijos supratimo įrankį. Jos akcentuojamas *radikalus performatyvumas*, *stiprus savirefleksyvumas* ir *veiksminga komunikacija* įgalina niuansuotą fotografijos ir kitų meno formų bei medijų šiandienos sąveikų interpretaciją. Per šią prizmę galime teigti, kad fotografijos plėtra, pavyzdžiui, Estijoje, atspindi santykinai sąmoningesnę ir kritiškesnę evoliuciją, iliustruojančią sėkmingą simbiozę tarp šiuolaikinio meno ir fotografijos – dviejų sričių, kurios Lietuvoje ir Latvijoje konceptualiai ir praktiškai išlieka tam tikru laipsniu labiau atskirtos.

6. Meniniai ieškojimai ir tyrinėjimai klesti fotografijos ir išplėstų prasmių kūrimo laukų produktyviuose susiliejimuose, skatinančiuose kurti naujus santykius ir vaizduotės sistemas, praturtinančias šiuolaikinės kultūrinės situacijos ir sudėtingumo suvokimą. Ši plėtra išeina iš įprastos medijų hibridizacijos ribų; ji nurodo brandžią fotografijos menininkų savimonę ir aktyvų įsitraukimą tiek į gamybos metodus, tiek į semiotinį meno kūrinių sudėtingumą. Baltijos šalyse intermedialumo ir tinkliškumo

sąveika neapsiriboja vien tik skaitmenine terpe: analoginėje performanso fotografijoje ir meninio veiksmo dokumentacijoje randamos tam tikros ankstyvos šios sąveikos ištakos. Fotografijos transformacija šiame kontekste – perėjimas nuo introspekcijos medijos viduje prie platesnio įsitraukimo į tinklinių kultūrinių ryšių lauką. Tai slinktis nuo susitelkimo į konkrečią (meta)medijos problematiką, kuri Lietuvos fotografijos diskurse buvo matoma 2000-ųjų viduryje, į platesnį, į išorę žvelgiantį požiūrį, kuriame dinamiškai persipina kultūrinės, technologinės ir socialinės trajektorijos. Dabarties Lietuvos, Latvijos ir Estijos menininkai ne tik kuria atvaizdus, bet ir įmantriai audžia tarpdalykinių ryšių audinį, apmąstydami (vis) naujai perbrėžiamas fotografijos ribas ir galimybes. Ši praktika pabrėžia šiuolaikinės fotografijos perspektyvą, kuri apima daugiasluoksnę ir daugialypę erdvę, kurioje menas, technologijos ir visuomenė susikerta ir sąveikauja dinamiškais ir nuolat kintančiais būdais.

7. Fikcinis elementas įsitvirtina kaip reikšmingas šiuolaikinės išplėstinės fotografijos projektų aspektas. Šiame tyrime aptariami menininkai per „fotofikcijos" objektyvą naršo kintančias realybės ir vaizduotės ribas, skatina persvarstyti skirtį tarp fakto ir fikcijos. Išplėstiniuose fotografiniuose pasakojimuose išryškėja apmąstymai apie daugialypę ir dažnai fragmentišką tapatybės prigimtį šiuolaikybėje. Kūriniuose tyrnėjamas tapatybės takumas ir fragmentiškumas. Šiuolaikinėje aplinkoje, pasižyminčioje sparčiomis permainomis, fiksuotos, stabilios tapatybės samprata tampa vis labiau nepatikima. Menininkai, suvokdami šią realybę, gilinasi į sudėtingus tapatybės formavimosi ir konstravimo niuansus, remdamiesi ne tik asmenine patirtimi, bet ir sockultūriniais simboliais ir istorinėmis nuorodomis. Novatoriškai naudodami fotofikciją, jie skatina žiūrovus apmąsytyti tapatybės klastingumą, suabejoti nusistovėjusiomis normomis ir priimti fragmentiškų pasakojimų, formuojančių mūsų savimonę, įvairovę.

Intermedialių parodų daugiasluoksnių pasakojimų ir jų prasmių kūrime bendradarbiaudami dalyvauja menininkai, kuratoriai ir (aktyvūs) žiūrovai. Šiuolaikinės fotografijos meno praktikos, jungdamos (foto)fikciją su faktiniais elementais, strategiškai pasitelkia šį metodą, kad įsigilintų į sudėtingus klausimus, siūlydamos giliau tyrinėti tokias temas kaip ekologija, tapatybė, kultūriniai ir visuomeniniai iššūkiai. Šis bendradarbiavimo procesas sustiprina meninės išraiškos gilumą ir turtingumą, kuria daugialypius meno kūrinius, kurie įtraukia žiūrovus į mąstymą skatinančią ir vaizduotę aktyvinančią patirtį. Sąmoningas fikcijos ir faktų sujungimas šiuolaikinėje intermedialioje fotografijoje ne tik rezonuoja su bendra šiandienos menine praktika, bet ir atspindi besikeičiantį meninės raiškos pobūdį. Keldami iššūkį suvokimui ir peržengdami meno formų ribas, menininkai kuria daugiasluoksnius pasakojimus, kviečiančius žiūrovus apmąstyti juos supančio pasaulio sudėtingumą. Išgalvotų ir faktinių elementų integravimas šiuolaikinėje fotografijoje iliustruoja dinamišką

šiuolaikinio meno praktikų pobūdį ir parodo meno galią įkvėpti, provokuoti ir įtraukti auditoriją.

8. Nagrinėjant Baltijos šalių menininkų kūrybą pasauliniame kontekste išryškėja jų gvildenamų temų universalumas. Su kapitalizmu susijusių problemų, įtampos tarp realybės ir fikcijos, susiskaldžiusios tapatybės ir gilaus sociotechnologinių pokyčių poveikio tyrinėjimas nėra unikalus tik Baltijos šalims; jis atspindi platesnes pasaulines tendencijas. Skaitmeninių tinklų ir virtualios tikrovės dominuojamoje eroje šiuolaikiniai fotografai yra akyli ir jautrūs stebėtojai, narpliojantys sudėtingas gijas, kuriomis susipina mūsų suvokimas apie save, kitus ir mūsų planetą. Jų darbai gali rasti atgarsį viso pasaulio auditorijoje ir paskatinti apmąstyti sudėtingą šiuolaikinio žmogaus ir pasaulio egzistencijos tinklą. Baltijos šalių šiuolaikinės meninės fotografijos analizė atskleidžia turtingą vaizdinių pasakojimų audinį, kuris peržengia tradicines (medijų, prasmių ir regionų) ribas. Regiono fotografijos praktikai pasitelkia intermedialumą ir tinklines sistemas kurdami įtraukiančias ir mąstyti verčiančias patirtis, kviečiančias žiūrovus dalyvauti kuriant prasmines struktūras. Trindami ribas tarp fikcijos ir tikrovės, jie demonstruoja, kad išmano šiuolaikinei vizualinei kultūrai būdingą sudėtingumą ir atspindi pasaulinę tendenciją kurti vis labiau tarpusavyje susaistytą ir skaitmeniniu būdu įtarpintą meninį kraštovaizdį.

Apie autorių

Paulius Petraitis (g. 1985) yra tyrėjas, nepriklausomas kuratorius ir menininkas. Savo įvairialypėje praktikoje domisi vaizdų prasmių gamyba platesniuose sockultūriniuose ir technologiniuose kontekstuose. 2020 m. Latvijos nacionaliniame meno muziejuje kuravo intermedialios fotografijos parodą „On Photographic Beings". Jis taip pat dirba su leidybos praktikomis – menininko knygos įtrauktos į įvairias institucines kolekcijas, tarp jų MoMA ir Metropoliteno meno muziejaus bibliotekų, Danijos dizaino muziejaus, Estijos taikomojo meno ir dizaino muziejaus bei kitas.

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„Networked Meaning-Making and Hybridity: Contemporary Baltic Photography", *Ideas and materials: In the context of the hybridity of cultures in the Baltics and other regions*, Latvijos menų akademija, Ryga, 2021 06 16.

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Paulius Petraitis (1985) is an artist-theorist and independent curator based in Vilnius. His practice orbits around the expanded notion of photography within broader social and cultural contexts. Much of his work explores the interplay between technology and the construction of meaning, examining subjectivities encoded in machine vision and networked functionality.

Petraitis curated pioneering screen-based photography exhibitions "Sraunus" and "Blog Reblog", as well as the first art show on Snapchat "This is It/Now". He has also published a number of artist's books, including *A man with dark hair and a sunset in the background* and *Too Good to be Photographed.*

Peer-reviewed publications on the subject of the dissertation:
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"Networked Meaning-Making and Hybridity: Contemporary Baltic Photography", *Ideas and materials: In the context of the hybridity of cultures in the Baltics and other regions*, Art Academy of Latvia, Riga, 2021 06 16.

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INTERMEDIALITY AND NETWORKED
MEANING-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY
BALTIC ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Doctoral Dissertation
Humanities, Art History and Theory (H 003)

INTERMEDIALUMAS IR ĮTINKLINTŲ PRASMIŲ
KŪRIMAS ŠIUOLAIKINĖJE BALTIJOS ŠALIŲ
MENINĖJE FOTOGRAFIJOJE

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