

Nonhuman

Photography

Andrew Dewdney interviews
Joanna Zylińska for
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I thought the obvious place to start is for you to tell us a bit about how your book *Nonhuman Photography* came about and what motivated you to write it?

There were a number of inspirations behind the book. One was my longstanding passion for photography and my interest in photography as an academic discipline. Another was that I'm also a photographer and I have my own photomedia practice. All of this led me to notice a certain lack – if we could call it that – of criticality around what was being said about photography by mainstream photography theories.

Often reactions to the proliferation of photographs on social media, with everyone becoming a photographer because they always carry an image-making device with them, evoke a sense of panic resulting from the volume of images being produced and distributed today. But the way of approaching this phenomenon seems to be still very much through the established criteria and narratives. So we either have the perception of photography as a sequence of precious objects, via Roland Barthes' notion of the punctum and his link between photography and death, or general commiseration about the image deluge. I was trying to tell a different story about photography and about this supposed excess of images – and to think about the 21st century as 'the photographic century'.

Last but not least, in my analysis I was going back to my earlier work on the Anthropocene, the issues around climate change and the dual eco-eco (economic and ecological) crisis. And I was trying to think what photography can tell us about this. Is it part of this crisis? Can it help with the crisis?

Thank you, that's a good start. I'll come back to some of the problematics you've mentioned, particularly those around the Anthropocene. But your opening gambit in the book is to say that a new conceptual framework is needed. Can you be more specific about photography? Other than the problem with the continued dominance of semiology in

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photographic discourse, why do we need a new conceptual framework for thinking about photography now?

The dominant analytical frameworks in photography theory come either out of art history, where photography is seen as a series of individual artefacts displayed in a white cube, or photojournalism, where photography is predominantly seen as professional practice. Yet these frameworks seem too narrow to capture what's happening today. Your *Centre for the Study of the Networked Image at London South Bank University* recognises that photographs now function more as flows, as aspects of a digital touch, as artefacts that mean something – not necessarily on the visual level but rather algorithmically and haptically. So my goal was to mobilise this sense of transformation and look at photographs 'beyond looking', so to speak.

I think that's a very clear agenda, especially for a research community, but I wonder who else do you see as the readership for your book?

I would hope that there would be two bodies of readers. This is actually what I've been experiencing for the last few years, when presenting work from the book while it was being written and soon after it came out. One would indeed be the academic community of people who aren't just working on photography but who are also trying to situate the study of photography within a broader framework of media theory and understand photography's kinship with other media. The other, and I think much bigger, group would be all sorts of image creators. I know 'creators' is such a problematic word, often associated with the neoliberal digital economy. But I mean it here in a broader sense of people thinking with, and about, cameras, images and the practice of photography in a variety of ways. That applies to both individuals and institutions.

I've had very generous responses to the book from institutions such as *Fotomuseum Winterthur* and *The Photographers' Gallery*. These are places that are already thinking about photography and what's happening with it, where these questions about the need for a new framework are being asked a lot. But I also wanted to appeal to so called 'amateurs' – although in the digital era the term has become difficult to defend. For Roland Barthes the amateur was someone who didn't exhibit, who didn't 'make himself heard'. Of course, in the age of online displays of everyone's life and work that notion of the amateur is difficult to maintain. So, given that we are all photographers today, the book is hopefully for everyone, in one way or another...

Before we go into specific arguments contained in the chapters, I would like to discuss the title of the book...What does the term nonhuman do in the analysis and why did you call it 'Nonhuman Photography'?

It's a conceptual provocation aimed at challenging the more humanist discourse around photography. But 'nonhuman' here is not opposed to the human and it doesn't mean that no humans are involved in photography. Specifically, I defined nonhuman photography as photography that is not of, by or for the human. I was trying to play with this idea of displacing the human from their position as the key agent and narrator of history. I also wanted to look at photography in the so-called 'deep time' framework, by thinking about photography's relationship to geology, fossils and other kinds of deep-time imprints on surfaces.

Then, going back to this idea that we are all photographers today, I wanted to consider that maybe all humans are to some extent nonhuman, running on algorithms as much as exercising their own 'individualism'. If not, then how come most people's Instagram feeds or wedding photographs look almost the same? Again, it's a certain provocation, you can call it an intellectual joke, but it's a serious joke aimed at getting people to think about how we produce culture, and how we think about, but also with, machines. Do machines make us? Do they impose certain decisions on us? Are we all, to some extent, machines?

By saying this I'm not suggesting we fully abandon notions such as rationality or free will, but rather recognise that our free will is always, to some extent, constrained. And then, to return to the question posed by the philosopher of technology Vilém Flusser, whose work inspired my book to a large extent, what would it mean to photograph in a universe which is partly constrained by these algorithmic forces – and that is inevitably moving towards entropy?

You define nonhuman photography as photographs not made by, for or of humans. However, the term nonhuman photography also names certain kinds of procedures in photography and they're all gathered up under this title. How do you think about the nonhuman and its relationship to technologies?

I'm thinking here with philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler, in particular his analysis of the human being as 'originarily technological', which means that the human has emerged with and via technology. In the early days those technologies included fire, stones – which then became tools and mirrors, or sticks – which became weapons but also pointing devices, writing devices, trace-leaving devices. To evoke this relation to our pre-historical past is not say that nothing's changed now. Our technologies have of course been significantly altered, there's been a lot of acceleration. But rather than seeing technology as something coming from Silicon Valley or only appearing after the Industrial Age, I'm looking at technology as shaping us humans since time immemorial. This line of thinking can offer us a less panic-stricken narrative about technology,

with phones and cameras, and their underpinning algorithms, being seen as just another element in the long history of human entanglement with technology.

I'm interested to know if you see the human entanglement with technology as fitting with Marshall McLuhan's view of a medium as an extension of the body?

To some extent yes, although I don't follow McLuhan all the way. My book is very much inspired not just by McLuhan but also by other thinkers from the realm of Canadian media theory, especially McLuhan's predecessor Harold Innis, who looked at media in terms of infrastructures. Innis did a study of fur trade in Canada, examining how goods travelled alongside the road network – which for him was an early communication system. So you can perhaps see roads or railway networks as early forms of the Internet.

That historical understanding of media, which inscribes them in the time of human and nonhuman history (with a continuity posited between photographs and fossils), debunks the hysterical narrative about the fragility and terribleness of the present moment, in which there is too much photography that it's actually over as a meaningful medium of expression. Recognising that there is a long history to all these technological entanglements can encourage us to slow down and revisit those assumptions.

Trying to tease out the title a bit more; a key aspect of your argument for the nonhuman is that it is a position to renegotiate and relook at the human. You speak very specifically about a kind of politics that arises from making that separation between the human and nonhuman. Can you say a bit more about what you call the ethico-political? It seems to me something which encompasses a range of practices as well as being a philosophic outlook.

If I may just take a step back and reiterate that for me it's important to point to this dual relationship: seeing photography as both technical-algorithmic and geological. So those two modes of understanding come into this definition of 'nonhuman photography'. I would hope this proposition is seen as more than just an intellectual exercise. I very much imagined this renegotiation as being tied to an ethico-political agenda.

It stems from a desire to rethink our position in the world and to ask whether we can develop better ways of being and of living in the world, through this displacement of the human as the central point of history. So the ethico-political question is about the demand put on the human to give an account of his or her position in the world. Challenging the human doesn't of course mean getting rid of the human, because that in itself would be a

very humanist gesture. Only the human can declare getting rid of the human, at least for now.

Yet the theoretical gesture of announcing the end of the human or the arrival of the post-human, unless done critically or with a certain realisation that it is the human still doing something to him/herself, would be quite vacuous. So the reason for engaging in this exercise is not a desire to move beyond the human and towards some new species, but rather an attempt to ask questions about the human that is the subject of culture, of making photography, but also of making the world, and making it better.

The notion of nonhuman photography addresses the political issues that photography traditionally brings to the fore: issues of injustice, representation, privacy. Yet, like many other scholars, I'm slightly suspicious of representational photography and what it can actually achieve. I'm also concerned about privacy, surveillance and other issues that machine vision and machine learning are now bringing to the fore. Photography in a way becomes a filter that casts a certain light over a lot of the current political issues that need addressing. But I think that it would be helpful to address them beyond the 'human vs machine' position.

If we recognise our human entanglement with machines, with technology, then what kind of politics can we develop from here? It doesn't of course mean that we have to accept any form of entanglement, or that any forms of being with technology are equally valid or good.

Pursuing your question of what kind of politics come out of this entanglement with machines, towards the end of the book you say that the strategic role of the concept of the human is a temporary stabilisation in any kind of artistic, creative, political or ethical project. You're seeing the human as a placeholder, but I can't quite uncouple this abstraction from the way in which you site the political in the notion of creative practice. So for you, creative practice is a kind of politics, or the politics of the nonhuman is expressed by creative practice.

I read an interview with the video artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, who is very politically aware, the other day. People often ask him: So are you trying to do politics through your work? And are you doing something else besides? And he said something like: Well, with all these things happening in the world, some people respond by joining political parties, others become activists, while I respond the best way I can, which is through creative practice.

So maybe rather than go so far as to call creative practice a form of politics, we could be a little bit more modest and call it a form of response to the things that are happening around us – and a minimal form of intervention into those things. I think it's

important to decouple this notion of creative practice from the notion of art. Art can of course have its own interventions, it can be productive, damaging or indifferent.

But this broader idea of creative practice is less bound with certain institutions. It's also about doing something rather than nothing, trying to mobilise the sensory apparatus into the intervention. I am channelling here philosopher Jacques Rancière's desire to reconfigure the sensible by means of aesthetic interventions. With my students who are doing PhDs by practice, I always recommend that they shouldn't make too big claims for art and how it supposedly changes the world. So it's about the need to recognise our own affective investment in, say, photography or filmmaking, and also about acknowledging a particular human pleasure, at a particular moment in time, related to creating something.

So, even though I'm wary of making too big a claim for it, I see creative practice as a form of thinking otherwise. I was originally trained in literature and philosophy: I couldn't go to an art school because I was not very good at drawing and painting, and when I was growing up in Poland, art schools were more conventional there at the time. But already working as a media theorist in a university in the UK I returned to study a Masters in Photography, because suddenly I was able to work with machines as my medium at quite an advanced creative level, and that was seen as valid.

My writing has also changed a lot since I did that Masters, as it has allowed me to realise that it's OK to think like an artist in my philosophical writings – even if I had no particular desire to be an artist as such. So maybe that explains why I tend to pile up ideas, both in my book and in this interview with you now, as it's part of my attempt to also do philosophy or, more broadly, theory as a form of creative practice.

Indeed, one concept always carries so many things for me. I am quite capable of more analytical modes of thinking [laughter], I can offer all sorts of overviews and typologies. But part of me refuses to do that. There is a certain intellectual pleasure in this refusal, but it also springs from the recognition of the complexity and urgency of the world. This piling up of ideas and concepts, that more artistic mode of thinking which can express itself in media other than just words, may also be a more appropriate way of trying to capture what's happening right now...

However, your argument does seem to fall back on photographer as artist or that the term artist carries this liberatory possibility, and yet at the same time photography is ubiquitous, photography is done by everybody, knowingly or unknowingly. So in a way you develop the politics of practice essentially through the notion of an art practice as opposed to the common practices, but at some other point you do want to rescue the selfie or the ubiquitous practices.

Can you just say a bit more about how you think the nonhuman helps us understand that broader set of practices, particularly in relationship to some notion of politics or criticality.

I think you are right to identify this tension in my work. I introduced this first-year core course called *Media Arts* at Goldsmiths for all our Media and Communications students, in which they think via making stuff. The idea of thinking through different media is more important to me than any sense of producing 'art'. Yet, at the end of the day, the course is called 'Media Arts', and, as part of it, I show students examples that are recognised as 'art'. I do the same thing in Nonhuman Photography. The 'art' designation becomes something of a shortcut for me. I try to do my best to go and find interesting things that happen online and offline, but sometimes I go through curators and institutions that have already identified some things as interesting.

In any case, I definitely think there is a need to go beyond the conventional forms of art and look at media practice more broadly. At the same time, not all practices are interesting due to the sheer fact of their existence. So it does make sense, for me at least, to get a helping hand from curators and institutions to point to things that are worth noticing. Many of these 'things' – images, photomedia practices, spaces, online sites – don't necessarily work according to the criteria of what would count as art traditionally. I am particularly keen on others helping me find things that disrupt the idea that most media practices are banal and that something is only being worth being paid attention to if it can be recognised as art. I'm therefore more interested in finding this kind of 'third space' between the indistinguishable media flow and the clearly recognised media art.

Right yes... I guess a lot of that does depend on the institutional apparatuses and structures, but also on the context. This seems an opportune time to ask you what you wanted to achieve by making your own photographic practice the examples in the book, almost like it's two books or it's a parallel: there's the argument, you as a philosopher, then there's you as a practitioner and so the examples of your works actually fulfil quite an important part of the book. What were you hoping that they do in the book, for the book?

For me, it was important to show readers: Look, I'm really trying to think in some other ways. This is linked to my embracing of this dual idea of photography as philosophy and philosophy as photography, but also recognising different affordances of each practice. Certain things can be said quicker with an image, of course. Images also allow us a certain form of meandering and criss-crossing. This is why it was important for

me to include my own photographs in the book and also on the companion website: <http://nonhuman.photography>

But it also allowed me to demonstrate that there are similarities between the two: writing and visual practice. My photographs are not just illustrations of ideas, they are objects that take me somewhere else and allow me to see something in my thinking. They may also reveal the banality of my argument and push me to roll back on it.

I definitely recommend that readers need to look at the companion website alongside the book, because of course, academic books always have a limit on reproduction and the quality of visual images. But I was also thinking where the home of your practice is when you're holding together the idea that you're a teacher, an academic, a researcher, a theorist and an artist. I wonder whether or not your work has a relationship to the new paradigms of practice-based research or practice-led research. The examples of your work given in the book seem like a hybrid practice.

I think it probably is a hybrid and I'm seeing it not just in myself, but also in the MA and PhD students I'm supervising, many of whom who are going in that direction. It used to be the case that some people were extremely talented artists or practitioners, but they were not very good at writing. Writing was a bit of a pain they had to do as part of their research. But there have always been those who have embraced writing as just another medium, like wood or drawing – or photography.

I'm seeing my practice in this latter way, as a way of bringing together different media. The media I feel most comfortable with are mechanical photomedia but writing continues to be an equally significant medium for me. It is also a medium that the main institution of my career, the university, recognises as the dominant one. So I'm also trying to hack this professional value judgment from within the space of the university in order to show that there are other modes of thinking and other possibilities that can be as rigorous and as valid.

But does that lead to a tension with your aspiration for the work to also exist in a conventional art context of galleries?

Probably, but I would say that this aspiration is quite truncated in the sense that I know how hard it is to break into the established art world. I don't have this desire, but I am in a privileged position of not needing to have it because I already have a job and a career that allows me to do creative practice in a variety of ways. Having said this, some of my work has been shown in galleries and also in some more peripheral spaces. I also show work online. I am involved in the 'radical open access' movement, which is a movement that gifts academic labour to a just cause, i.e. making academic knowledge available for free, outside the consortia of large for-profit publishers. But I

recognise I can do all this because I have the infrastructure and umbrella of the academic position – so I'm aware this is not a model for everyone.

I can see that your practice is institutionally located but at the same time you use a number of mainstream artists to illustrate your arguments. So again I just wonder why so many of the examples are drawn from art practices rather than many of the other photographic practices in the world. It seems to me as if the human practices attach to the artist, but the nonhuman becomes simply media.

A specific example of this is that you take Tacita Dean to task for mourning the passing of analogue film, whilst at the same time holding out the value of her museum and gallery practice. On the other hand you discuss the work of Trevor Paglen, who comes out of a newer sense of understanding about the digital. I suppose my question here is why do you go to the example of artists in order to help unpack this idea of photography, whatever the contemporary practices of photography are?

Using examples conventionally recognised as 'art' is a way of holding the book together, in the sense that I'm already working with quite a few different conceptual planes, taking photography outside its usual home and moving it more towards media studies or ecological media theories, with roads and clouds also being seen as media. So that is already one weird bit, and then we're looking at this idea of photography as geology, and then we're looking at different media and technological practices.

So, as discussed earlier, drawing on 'art' is partly an intellectual shortcut for me. But it may also be one of the blind spots of the book. And in future work I probably should expand the circle of people I invite to point to things for me in that Duchampesque gesture of anointing those things as being worth our attention. I realise that art might be almost too easy an option here. Yet even with the art I choose, not all the practitioners I discuss have had a lot of recognition. Some of them were artists I found in zines, student shows and other peripheral places.

This question interests me a lot because, as you know, in Bruno Latour's sense, art is the constant purification of the hybrid, whereas your practice seems to be of the hybrid that wants to stay and reveal the nature of hybridity.

Yes, absolutely. At the same time, to hybridise things a practice also needs to recognise its sources. For example, when introducing the idea of the nonhuman, I'm not trying to erase the human, as I explained earlier, but rather point to the ongoing conversations and processes that show the human as being itself a hybrid, on a philosophical, biological and geological level.

But we also need to ask: Who is performing this recognition of hybridity? For whom does it matter? As well as hybridising, I believe we need to at least partly show our sources or anchor points, be it in philosophy, literature, music, art or another cultural form, so that the act of hybridising is understood and appreciated, at least by some – rather than just producing one blurry mess...

The other way I saw it is was your announcement of your ‘Deleuzian’ world and therefore a way of looking at all these elements in the book is that you are making a cut. There’s a deliberate changing of register in order to open up and see something else and I like that, I think...

That’s a very good way of putting it – although I have to admit I’m not a very faithful Deleuzian...

In the first part of the interview we dealt with the question of why we need a new conception of photography and why the title or your book is intended as a provocation. We also discussed how the book is put together and in particular the place of your photographic practice within it. Maybe we should now come back to some of the key elements of your argument.

One of the key issues you take up in your definition of the nonhuman is photography’s relationship to the body. We know that the Enlightenment led to this highly singular point of the eye and the visible world and that’s a point of critique for you. But can you say a bit more now about how we reconfigure visibility in relationship to the body through this idea of the nonhuman?

In my attempt to rethink vision I was drawing on Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘situated knowledges’ and also on the theories of perception by psychologist James Gibson and architect Juhani Pallasmaa. The idea was to challenge the model of vision premised on ‘the ray of light’, which was believed to connect the human observer in a straight line with God on the one hand and with the perceived object on the other.

I was also inspired by Nick Mirzoeff’s critique of Western vision, which for him resembled the masterful eye of the general scanning the battlefield. As we know from art and cultural history, vision has been associated with mastery and possession. In many Indo-European languages, knowing and seeing share the same etymology. So I was trying to think: What would it mean to try and see otherwise, in a less dominant and possessive way? This is obviously a political question, not just an aesthetic one. What and how would we see if we saw with our whole bodies?

As part of that conceptual experiment I undertook a project using a camera called The Autographer, which I wore on my neck for nearly two years on different occasions. The Autographer had

originally been devised for Alzheimer's patients as a kind of aide-mémoire but was later rebranded as a gadget for the 'always-on' generation. I was trying to see what happens when a human makes a decision to wear it and then the camera's mechanism takes over, 'deciding' when to take a picture, so to speak, by being triggered by the movement of its wearer's body. For me the project was also a commentary on all those terrible inventions such as the Google Clips and other ubiquitous recording devices, which are supposed to be fun by allowing, or even encouraging, us to document everything constantly so that we don't miss anything. But I was also trying to think how I would need or want to edit my own stream of thousands of images received in the process. What kinds of cuts would I want to introduce and where? How would I move my body to change the way the camera photographs things?

And that seems also then to lead into the attempt to speak of the non-representational in photography as embodiment.

Yes, absolutely: we can think here about playful experiments with the body by the early avant-gardes: Rodchenko's sharp angles and unusual vantage points, Moholy-Nagy's 'New Vision'. They all involved exercises in twisting the body of the photographer to get a certain result. The avant-gardes embraced the idea of the human becoming a camera to see better and to imagine a better world. So it's really about asking the question: What happens if you see something from a different vantage point?

It's a very pertinent question today as well, in the age of Black Lives Matter, global inequality and multiple crises of economy and ecology. What would happen if we adopted a different viewpoint, a more distributed vision, beyond that masterful gaze of the general who scans the field around him as if he owned it? So that little experiment with bodily perception also had a bigger ethico-political agenda of trying to displace our established viewpoints. This ties in with the bigger issue around the Anthropocene and leads to some further questions: How do we see the world? How do we treat it? Is the world the product of our imagination? Is the Earth an object we can play with? Could we see it otherwise?

Yes, I still haven't got to my questions about the Anthropocene, but isn't there a danger in calling up the Russian Revolution or the avant-garde around the notion of abstraction as a counterpoint to non-representation? Because the way that has been gathered up by photographic history or conventional art history of course is aesthetic formalism and that doesn't seem to me what you're talking about at all.

I think we should see the avant-gardes, especially the artists I've mentioned earlier, beyond mere formalism, and recognise their original revolutionary spirit. However, a question that emerges here – and that I've been dealing with, somewhat indirectly, in the book is as follows: Where are the avant-gardes of today? They won't be found in visual formalism, or any other kind of formalism. That gesture has already been performed and, to a large extent, has now lost its force.

For me the avant-garde is not really about escalating the weird but rather and about recognising that it's not just a question of making the singular image itself indecipherable and strange. Maybe the strangeness of the avant-garde moment today, that Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, can be found in the recognition of there being such a plethora of images that surround us, and of not knowing whether those images have been computer- or human-generated, whether it is CGI or photography.

Well I think that's where the media force of your argument goes, it goes back into the flow and the liquidity, doesn't it, rather than the formalisation within an image, which takes us to the flip side of the transparency of the image. Because photography has always been either art or journalism, hasn't it really?

Yes, absolutely.

Can we discuss 'photography and extinction'? I think we've dealt quite well with why we need a new framework and how you're moving towards that in both practice and theory. I suppose in the place of the time of the moderns you've turned to post-humanist theory, but also to the Anthropocene, in order to challenge modernism as a notion of contemporaneity and time. So suddenly we're in the world of deep time. How does the geological turn of the Anthropocene couple with the nonhuman in photography?

Thinking through 'deep', or geological, time allowed me to justify that notion of photography having always had a nonhuman dimension. I was borrowing here from the work of nineteenth-century photographer and geologist William Jerome Harrison. He looked at processes of making an impression on different surfaces, such as skin – being affected by tanning, wax – being melted by heat, or fossils – being formed by imprints of plant and animal remains on rocks. By looking at photography in the geological context of rock formation and decay I was also interested in linking back to the problematics of the death of the image, the predicted (even if unwarranted) death of photography as a medium – and of our own supposed drowning in the deluge of images.

My exploration of the issue of technological obsolescence, of the overproduction of cameras due to their constant updates and upgrades, coincided with my visit to the National Media Museum in Bradford – which was then in the process of killing off its photography collection and its photographic legacy by sending it off to the V&A in London, while refocusing on ‘the digital’. But I was also interested in exploring the relationship between photography and light from an environmental perspective, and in asking questions such as: What do we see when we see light?

The idea of photography capturing not just light but also particulate matter in the air was aptly revealed in the 2014 series of photographs called *Dust* by Nadav Kander, showing the Russian towns of Priozersk and Kurchatov. Those photographs captured radioactive pollution as beautifully glowing pink light. Photography’s original link with ‘light-writing’ leads us back to the sun, while raising the problem of energy sources. It also raises the question of the vulnerability not just of our media ecologies but also of the environmental ecologies we find ourselves in. Extinction thus became another layer, another trope, for me to think with.

I can see that reframing time within the Anthropocene allows us to see into the past in a different way, which is important. But then it seems to me you make a very polemical move when you say that ‘We have always been digital’ and you talk about the shift from lace to code. Why did you take that position?

I wrote that particular chapter much earlier and then revisited it when putting together the book. My original impulse was to offer a provocation around the analogue/digital divide, with the analogue being perceived as original and thus somehow artistically and morally purer and better, with the digital being somehow seen as a bad copy. My statement that ‘we have always been digital’ has therefore less to do with any kind of ontological proclamation with regard to what we humans are really like. It’s rather an attempt to traverse the analogue/digital dualism by following Geoffrey Batchen’s lead and identifying aspects of the ON/OFF digitality in the early analogue photographs of Fox Talbot, be they of lace or latticework in Lacock Abbey.

I was also referencing Katherine Hayles’s engagement with the work of Edward Fredkin, who claims that our universe is computational and that a universal informational code underlies the structure of everything that exists. I’m of course not able to assess whether this is actually true scientifically, and Hayles herself is quite suspicious towards this kind of computational reductionism. But I took this proposition precisely as a provocation, in order to challenge this view of the digital being something that only appeared in the wider culture in the 1990s,

and that ruined photography as an art form. So I was basically seeking an alternative trajectory within the story of analogue photography.

Yes, although again, I find it a curious thing that the point at which you are really trying to reconfigure the way we think about photography and the history and theory of photography, that point about how we have always been digital and particularly Batchen's view, could be seen as quite conservative. It's a saviour of photography per se, whereas at least the post-photography debate, whilst it might be hung up on its binary of the analogue and digital, actually wants to make a different kind of enquiry, wants to make a break rather than maintain the continuity.

At this point in the book it seems that part of your desire is in fact literally to write a new history of photography in order to keep photography, whereas the post-photography of course is saying 'Well, photography is over', we're somewhere else'. It also seems that another part of you wants to actually say 'Yes of course it is over because now we're dealing with different technologies, different apparatuses'. So that seems like a possible conflict.

I don't think that photography is over. My book is not really about me wanting to preserve photography: I think photography is doing quite well as it is [laughter]. While I acknowledge the radical transformation it has undergone, I also want to recognise its historical legacy. This is why I am interested in the Western history of photography, starting from Niépce and that quintessential image of Le Gras, which is supposed to have taken eight hours to produce and could thus be seen to be revealing a nonhuman vision – because no human was capable of simultaneously seeing shadows on both sides of a building. That was interesting for me, as was Daguerre's interest in fossils.

With this kind of historical zig-zagging, I'm trying to tell a bigger story of photography by reconnecting what's happening today to the early days of the medium. So, to be honest, I'm not really buying into the narrative about post-photography. Longer term, photography will probably become extinct, and so will everything else, including us humans. But here and now, and in the near-future, my concern is more about how we can talk interestingly about photography while also exploring its evolution and kinship with other media, across time. At the moment those kinds of transformations include CGI, in-game photography and photogrammetry, but for me it does make sense to analyse them within the broader scope of the debates on photography while recognising that photography had previously undergone equally significant ontological shifts.

For example, when Polaroids came onto the scene, they didn't look like daguerreotypes, yet people still saw both as belonging within the medium of photography. So for me it's

more about retaining the concept and legacy of photography while remoulding it, rather than just moving on from photography.

Right. But given that as a media scholar, you also really understand the apparatuses of photography in reproduction, seeing in photography the apparatuses of capitalist reproduction. But by extending time to deep time, as opposed to say Benjamin's historical time of mechanical revolution, you've kind of just gone round that one, which has played an important part in photographic theory. I'm interested in why Benjamin doesn't get a mention, at least because of that role of reproduction, I can see that we have a different way of now thinking about representation, but where does photography in reproduction fit not only in this new sense of new geological time, but in industrial time?

Yes, there's always been this tension between reproduction and creation. You are right that I don't really reference Benjamin directly, although his work has to a large extent shaped my understanding of the democratisation of photography and of the technological forces of its production. Yet forms of reproduction always carry with them a certain form of creation. Maybe the gesture of reproducibility allows the very generation of multiple images, which is why I was also interested in moving away from the image's content.

And again I would say we need to turn here to the work that your Centre at LSBU is doing and that yourself and Katrina Sluis are undertaking, which is looking at different forms of the networked image which are like streaks unfolding over time, across which something happens. So for me reproduction always entails a production of new things: it's not just an enslaving gesture to be performed by, or inflicted upon, the masses. We could obviously undertake a Marxian analysis around this, and turn, for example, to the work of Jonathan Beller and his idea that today in particular 'to look is to labour'. An average teenager apparently spends two hours a day working for free for Mark Zuckerberg – so that's a lot of labour to undertake. All of this of course demands an analysis – and there are plenty of media scholars engaging in such work.

One of the expanding areas of discourse in media practice is platform capitalism as a way to stay within that version of neo-Marxist understandings of the mode of production and reproduction.

Yes, but there's always the question of how come the critic suddenly sees all of this, while also existing within the very same network of technologies and influences as everyone else? So I'm slightly wary of a model (and I'm necessarily simplifying here) whereby you have, on the one hand, all these kids running

around like wild things with their phone cameras and posting on Insta like there is no tomorrow, and then the critic who is somehow floating above all of this, completely unaffected on the level of interest, desire and pleasure by the libidinal energy of digital flows.

We can of course write this narrative about the terribleness of the reproducibility of photography, both as a medium and a series of constantly upgraded devices, and about the banality of it – but we'll most likely be doing it using a technical device (laptop, desktop) running Microsoft Word or similar software. Yet the question of the reproducibility of their own technical setup doesn't tend to trouble the critic too much... By saying that we're all trapped in, or at least entangled with, the network, I don't mean to suggest that we can't do critical analysis at all. I just think we need to recognise our own entanglement with the network – and dependence on it.

The way you talk about technology gets us back, to some extent, into the territory of the mode of technological advancement and its relationship to extinction. At times it feels like extinction is happening, which actually of course it is in many ways, but at other points in the book extinction reads as a conceptual way of rethinking time. Where is the emphasis here, is it on an environmental politics that set up the agenda for your practice?

For me extinction does function on these two levels: actual and conceptual. On the one hand, the book deals with the extinction of different species. I'm engaging with Elizabeth Kolbert's argument about how we're supposedly going through the Sixth Extinction now. Other scholars have claimed that we've continuously been experiencing extinction, which sometimes intensifies. At the same time, I'm thinking about Stanisław Lem's *Summa Technologiae*, which I had the pleasure to translate a few years ago for the University of Minnesota Press. This beautiful 1960s philosophical treatise talks, in parallel, about biological and technical evolution. This parallel is to some extent a metaphor, which Lem uses to look at what he calls the pre-decline blossom of dying evolutionary branches.

For him, the last zeppelins of the 1930s could be compared with the giant animals of the Cretaceous period. Similarly, the steam-driven freight train became huge before it was made obsolete by diesel and electric locomotives. You can see a follow-up of this logic with cameras. There are so many devices on the market now, with very similar names, all doing the same thing. When people ask me 'Which camera should I buy?', I usually say 'Well, buy any one you like, they're really all good', with only minor differences between them – although looking at the whole genre of equipment reviews you wouldn't think that.

The photography industry borrows from evolutionary narratives to justify its own belief in technological obsolescence,

yet it forgets that evolution is not a linear and orderly process. For Lem, evolution doesn't have any advance plan of action. It moves in a series of jumps that are full of mistakes, false starts, repetitions and blind alleys. The state of the photographic (and, more broadly, electronic) industry exemplifies this chaos very well! Yet the industry remains oblivious to it, instead naturalising its own marketing imperatives as the right course of action – which is only upwards. It then makes us feel that there is something wrong with us if we don't upgrade our devices regularly. And even if you oppose this push towards regular upgrades, they will do it for you anyway because at some point they will block the old version of software on your phone or camera. So in my book there's this concern about extinction as part of the broader evolutionary and ecological agenda, but there is also a desire to map out the rhetorical and material intertwining of the technological and the biological, and see if we can rethink this relationship.

I'm quite interested in the way that you take John Tagg to task in his 2009 'Mindless Photography' essay. I think probably many other people might agree with your criticisms of Tagg when you say that he draws back from the logic of his own argument, which is as you say to go with, rather than against, the digital recalibration of the image, although to some extent he's trying to get to the same place as you, isn't he?

In his much earlier and very influential work, *The Burden of Representation*, Tagg defines the founding moment of photography within a very specific historical time, essentially a capitalist, industrial kind of time. Whereas you very interestingly want to keep the semiotic part of photographic theory, clearly you don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but in a sense you don't reference or want to keep the kind of attempt at a materialist history. If you want to keep the semiotic in the mix, why not the understanding of photography as defined by its institutional formation?

I can maybe answer it broadly by saying that what this project is trying to do, alongside my other work on the Anthropocene, is attempt to think a different form of left politics in times of the global eco-eco crisis. I am aware that in *Nonhuman Photography* I stop short of articulating a clear political project, but I hope readers will be able to see that underlying political commitment. The lack of a clear articulation and the search for a more ambiguous, less certain mode of thinking and writing are intentional. The book arose out of a sense of disappointment with the traditional discourse of left politics and its impasses, which is why I took Tagg to task for his mode of argument and its underpinning certainty.

But you're absolutely right that we end up in the same place – and probably start from a similar place too. *Nonhuman Photography* is shaped by my wider concern about the structuring of the world, about its material arrangements. But maybe, coming from a different generation than Tagg, I also look for hope in other places – while also recognising the pleasure that this mechanical and reproducible practice of photography carries for many. As discussed earlier, I'm also somewhat wary of the kind of analysis in which the critic does the great unveiling: you will analyse injustice and others will see it and then go and do a revolution. So I'm seeking of ways of doing left politics and left theory otherwise, in media res, so to speak.

So for instance, yesterday I went to The Barbican and saw the Dorothea Lange exhibition. What would somebody armed with having read your book could take from that, when looking at photography?

I would like to think that they would look at photographs, both present and past ones, with a certain depth. I mean 'depth' not just on the semiotic level, or the material level of the image, but also in terms of trying to reconnect those old images to the digital flow of here and now, remediate them and maybe find new life in them. There is a danger sometimes of seeing photographs from the past as belonging firmly in the past. So I am trying to develop sets of relations between images and practices across time, across species, across technologies, and identify certain old tropes that are returning today.

I would like to think that my mode of looking, which involves placing images along those deep-historical lines, is also a way of showing why photography matters. Because I do think that photography is vitally important. To some extent we can argue that it's the most important medium today. But to understand this medium, to read it really well and not to drown in it, we need to slow down and look at these historical images, and also to ask why people were taking images then. What were they trying to do?

And that seems to be connected to the other section in your book where you talk about Photomediations, an open book and the whole question of the archive.

Yes, you are right.

So what will we collect in the future?

I am trying to figure out precisely that. I am also interested in exploring which archives we draw from now – and how archives of the future, especially photographic archives, will be constructed.

Thinking of the new Photography Centre that recently opened at the V&A, do you think that your book has something to offer the curators of the museum in terms of addressing the question of photography, not only in terms of what you collect of the history of photography but photography in the future?

I'm a great admirer of the work done at the V&A around photography. And I totally accept the need for more, shall we say, conventional histories of photography, because, to go and play with the genre, we need to know the genre in the first place. But maybe the book could encourage curators to also narrate alternative histories of photography and to revisit not just photography's kinship with other media today, but also its link with deep-time past? What other narratives and other lines of connection can we establish? Could we make links between photography and jewellery, for example?

But are there practices outside of our main cultural institutions, thinking of the online and your own practices, which you think do lead us to, and where we might have a new sense of audience or a new critical perspective through either online practices or collective practices?

We've covered so many different topics in our conversation and you have very generously pulled out all these different threads from my book. But I'm also slightly nervous about making too big claims about my argument and its ambitions. At the same time, I do believe that *Nonhuman Photography* is not just about photography. Or rather, it's a book that uses photography as a lens that gathers all these different concerns of today. So if we are in agreement with the proposition that the 21st century is a photographic century, and that we need to understand ourselves and the world through images, then the book becomes a way of providing tools for anchoring that understanding. And it's not just about being able to read images, it's also about being able to read ourselves as constituted with or in relation to images, and also as being image produces, users and senders. So the idea is to invite everyone to stop and think: Well, what does it mean? What are we doing? What are we participating in?

But, very much in line with Trevor Paglen's thinking, I also want people to consider another question: What happens if the majority of images made today are not made for the human? Rather, we have a plethora of images made by machines for other machines: QR codes, all these images that go into big databases that train Artificial Intelligence. So that question of nonhuman photography, the fact that the images we deal with, whether we see them or whether they pass us by on the Facebook timeline, are still a small percentage of all these other images that are out there, aimed at nonhuman agents.

Well, I heard your talk at the evening of the P3 post-photography prize and it seems to me you've shifted your thought to the algorithmic, and the sense of the automation of culture and its control by the Silicon Valley has become more in your sightlines.

Yes, that's my next project, which is centred around this idea of *undigital photography*. I'm borrowing this term from the field of Computational Photography, where undigital photography is an alternative term for images that you first take and then finish off afterwards – not just like you do in Photoshop, but actually alter their depth of field, focus, the lot. But I also see undigital photography as a figuration of a possibility of thinking about images not just as modes of data production. What I was criticising in that P3 talk was the mindless production of mesmerising artworks in certain forms of AI-enabled image-making that end up looking vaguely photographic. I was also exploring whether perhaps the most interesting work around images today doesn't happen on the level of images, but rather on the level of discourse, or in the flows between images, infrastructures and discourses.

And is your method of doing the work based upon the same idea of slowing down?

Hmm, I think so. Slowing down but maybe my work is also becoming a bit more direct. It's quite angry and quite political as well. Maybe I'm going to be a little bit less poetic and a bit more shouty...

Is that a good note to end on? A little bit more shouty?

No, maybe not the shouty bit, because shoutiness is not my ultimate goal. The idea in my new work is rather to try and articulate that kind of ethico-political dimension that *Nonhuman Photography* dealt with more playfully and indirectly. Now I want to express it a little more explicitly, while connecting it to the current concerns around surveillance, data and artificial intelligence, while also blowing some cool air on the promises around robotics, computer vision and machine learning. I'm not saying that the digital is bad, Big Data is bad, algorithms are bad. But I want to do a little more poking around to understand what's happening with computer vision, who is doing the looking, who is being seen and not being seen – and to reconnect more explicitly with other political issues. So, I want to explore further the inhumane aspect of the nonhuman.

How much of the perspective that you've outlined in this book can you carry into that the new project, in the sense of the Anthropocene? Particularly for me, most people who

currently enter into the kind of politics of the automation of everything, seem to be doing that very much in a sharp sense of presence. It's a political critique of the corporation, of accountability and unaccountability. And you would say 'No look, take this book with you when you think about this'. So I mean what would you take then from what you've put together here into that 'let's look now specifically at the politics of the invisible, the invisible in the machinic image'?

I would take that non-hysterical approach to technology, that sense of entanglement, that sense that maybe we've always been nonhuman. So the idea is not to panic because 'the algorithms are trying to come and get us'. It's more about asking who is writing those algorithms, where are they coming from. And can we think of other ways of being with machines, of creating interesting work, be it in art or the wider realm of creative practice as we discussed earlier, from which alternative stories of humans entangled with technology, entrapped in technology, being made up by technology and through technology, can emerge? The commitment to thinking the Anthropocene carries on, in the sense that I'm wondering whether Artificial Intelligence hasn't actually become a way of not dealing with the Anthropocene. It's become a way of replacing the Anthropocene.

We could say that AI actually stands for the Anthropocene Imperative: the imperative to respond to the fact that our planet is falling apart, the air and the light are being irreparably damaged – yet suddenly we've got a new narrative, which proclaims: 'Let's just ship ourselves to Mars' and 'Let's also redesign ourselves totally, out of and beyond extinction'. So the Anthropocene does return in the debates on AI as a kind of spectre. I do recognise that some AI developments are pretty amazing. At the same time, the direction of research and the tone of the surrounding narratives do concern me...