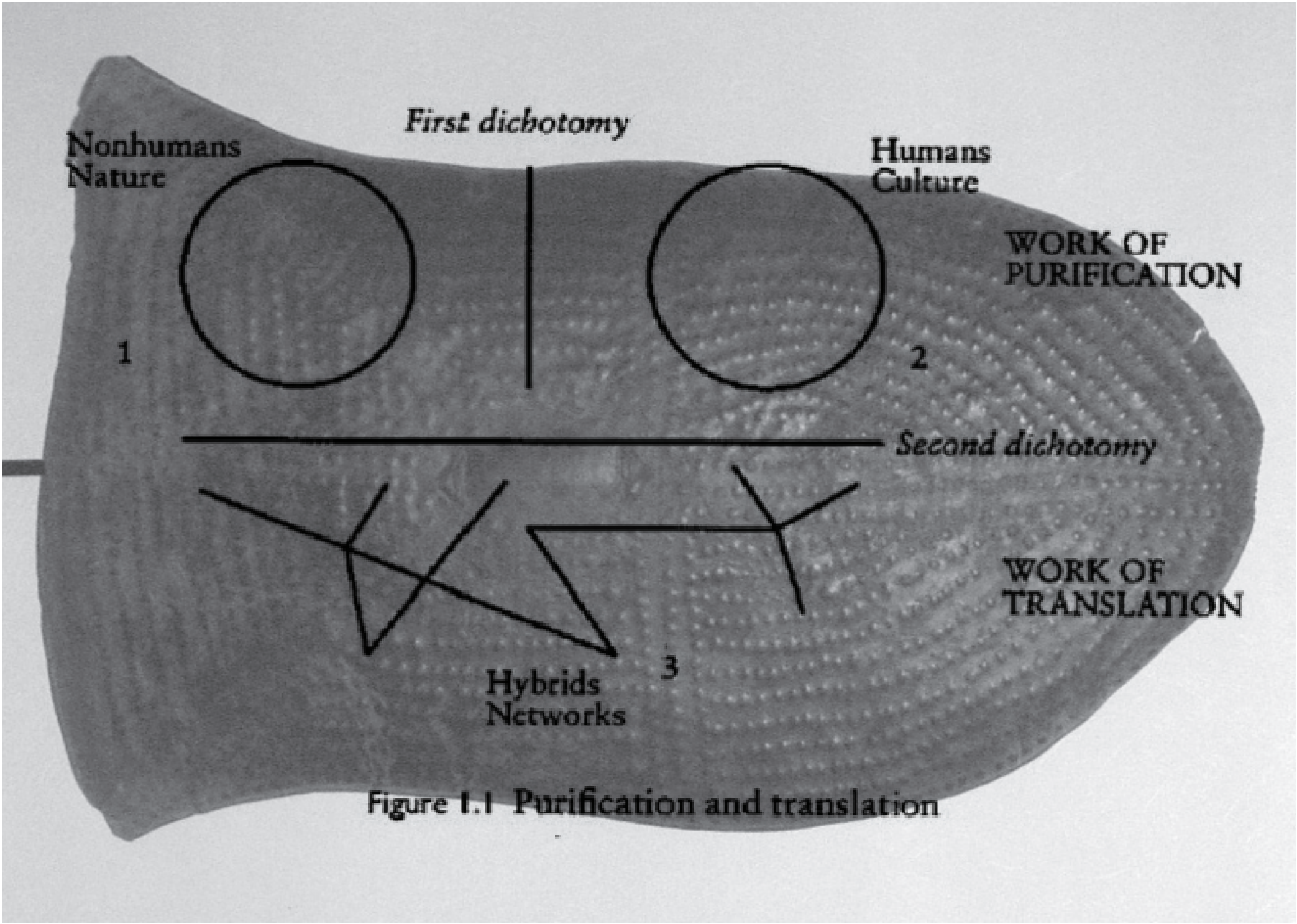

Figure 1.1 Purification and translation

(I.)
This text intends to propose an alternative photographic practice which can be employed to deconstruct and address key problems inherent to non-human representation in photography. I want to preface this essay by acknowledging that this alternative method of working does not fully rectify these issues in their entirety, and does not provide a fully resolute practice; rather, this method of working hopes to encourage a more developed dialogue into the representation and imaging of non-human objects, and to critique prevalent themes and tendencies within photographic practice.

PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH AND THE INDEX

The allure of photography is in part due to its claim as a visual imprint of reality.[1] Objects which have been physically marked by the outside world, channelled through an unbiased apparatus, to produce a truthful depiction of a subject(s) - human or not. Photographs are a combination of touch and sight in a single haptic outcome. (Batchen, 2000) However, as contemporary photographic theory has continued to expand, this claim to reality has come under scrutiny.

In order to deconstruct and evaluate the truth-claim of photography, we must first understand the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce. Peirce (1897) distinguishes between three different kinds of signs and how they relate to objects. The icon, the index, and the symbol:

An icon is defined as a sign having visual properties which resemble its object (e.g. an illustration of a tree signifies a tree).

An index is defined as having been directly influenced and as a result of its object (e.g. smoke from a fire, or a footstep imprinted in the ground).

Finally, a symbol is defined as a constructed signifier, holding its meaning due to cultural and societal usage (e.g. the word dog does not resemble an actual dog, however we have come to agree that it signifies a living animal we know as a dog).

Of these signs, what I want to specifically focus on is the index. The index is important because it has a physical relationship to its referent. By virtue of an index being present, it affirms that its referent object existed at a specific place at a specific time. To put simply, an index signifies that something has happened. It is upon this concept of the index that the truth-claim of photography relies upon. However, for a photograph to be identified as an image of reality, it must also iconically resemble the object it is attempting to portray, that which is not an inherent characteristic of an index. (Gunning, 2004)

It is immediately apparent that, with a photograph, it is not exclusively an icon, an index, or a symbol; Rather, it encapsulates aspects of all three of these categories. It contains iconic elements through it's visual resemblance to the object, it contains indexical elements since the picture is directly influenced by the lightwaves interpreted, and finally it contains symbolic elements since reading a photograph must be learned. (Dines, 1988.)

I would argue however, that a photographic image - despite containing indexical elements - is not inherently an index, and therefore cannot be relied upon for its representation of reality. In order for this index claim to hold, we need to assume that the photograph alone transforms its information into a visual form without intervention. This implication acts to further 'foster the myth that photography involves a transparent process, a direct transfer from the object to the photograph.' (Gunning, 2004, p. 40) The indexicality of a photograph exists in the influence of lightwaves on chemicals, or through the raw data received by the digital camera; not in the photographic image it produces. Rather than relied upon for its truth-claim, we could argue that photography instead 'aspires to the condition of painting, in which colour, shape, texture (...) are completely up to the [practitioner], rather than determined (...) through an indexical process.' (Gunning, 2004, p. 41)[2]

MECHANISMS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The term 'photography' etymologically originates from the Greek terms 'phos' - meaning 'light' -, and 'graphe' - meaning 'writing' or 'drawing'. (Bull, 2009) Traditionally, a camera is faced toward a relative perspective, in which the light reflecting off the subject(s) is channelled into the lens and notated onto a surface in which this information is recorded. (Azoulay, 2015) This information is then transposed into a visual object.

The camera apparatus is not always a necessary agent in this process however, as illustrated in the work 'The Day Nobody Died III (2008)' by artists Broomberg and Chanarin. In this work, the artists were commissioned by the British Army to document their operation in Afghanistan. This body of work utilises light-sensitive paper to make visual imprints in the surface, creating abstracted images which reference the 'impossibility of capturing [photographically] the horrors of war' (Artsy, n.d. para.1). This work still adheres within a traditional understanding of photography, physically and visually depicting writing with light.

I want to further deconstruct this understanding of photography by arguing that light does not have to be the sole agent in the visual inscription of information. I'm not arguing this strictly on the formal definition of the word - light is a key etymological part of the term -, but rather in how the utilisation of photography within society and culture functions.[3] The societal role of a photograph is to document a duration of time, wherein that period is then memorialised through a physical and/or digital object. Instead of light being the sole agent in this action, I'm proposing that we can understand photography as the process of a blank medium being subjected to information which physically marks itself on the medium's surface. This inscribed information can then be traced indexically to the subject of which the photographic object intends to represent.[4]

(II.)

OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a school of thought which rejects the understanding that human thinking exists as its own type of entity, whereas non-humans and inanimate objects belong to their own distinctly separate kind. (Harman, 2015) OOO contends that every entity - living or not - is considered equal. A concrete tile, a priest, and an ant, all exist on equal footing. (Bogost, 2009)

Object-Oriented Ontology is important as photography has traditionally been inherently human-centric. Historically, it has been used as a tool for a human to document a perspective they see, wherein the image is kept - and sometimes distributed - to commemorate that specific moment. A representation of a past reality, relating to a unique moment in the object's existence. (Barthes, 1981)

AZOULAY'S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

Often little recognition is given to the spectator in the event of photography. The dominant narrative argues that the photographer holds complete agency over what exists 'inside' and 'outside' a photograph, and that they have the absolute authority to seal off an instant from the outside, unto which the event of photography has been concluded. Azoulay (2015) argues this is an erroneous understanding, and that instead the act of spectatorship allows for a continual renewal and activation of the photographic event. She argues that the event is never the 'testimony of the photographer alone', and that 'the event of photography, unlike the photographed event, continues to exist despite all other considerations'. (Azoulay, 2015, p.29)

OBJECT-ORIENTED PHOTOGRAPHY

Drawing on these key concepts, - the mechanism of photography, object-oriented ontology, and Azoulay's political ontology - I want to propose an alternative method of working which I have tentatively termed 'Object-Oriented Photography' (OOP). OOP involves utilising a blank medium - e.g. glass, paper, steel - unto which it is exposed to a space over a specified time-frame. The resulting aggregate of physical materials that accumulate on the blank surface can then be understood as the 'exposure' of the image-object. These markings are inherently indexical in nature, illustrating a physical and visible exchange between surfaces. OOP rejects the holistically human-centred approach to photography, instead giving non-human entities agency over the exposure process. It tasks the blank object to carry and communicate information, visually representing the documentation of an event, much in the same way a traditional photograph operates; however that representation is entirely mediated and shaped by the object and the land, instead of by an omniscient photographer.

Another key component to OOP is that similarly to the way in which the event of photography continues to exist outside of the photographer event, so too does this further exchange visually transpose itself to the image-object. The object continues to physically illustrate the dialogue of post-exposure, making visible the continual renewal of the event of photography.

As was prefaced earlier, OOP is not intended to be an entirely comprehensive answer to an ethically resolute practice, nor does it solve many of the inherent issues embedded within photographic practice. However, I do believe that it opens a space for critique and dialogue of photography as a medium, and aids in the deconstruction of the core implications that shape it.

CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES OF OBJECT AGENCY

Although themes of object and political ontology have not been directly referenced, there are some contemporary practitioners who have incorporated similar ideas into their own works, thereby having also influenced this text to a large degree. Both Walead Beshty and Rebecca Nadjowski utilise alternative methods of 'exposure', creating works which directly speak to object agency and indexicality.

Walead Beshty (Born UK, 1976) is an LA based artist practising since 2003. His 'FedEx' series of works (2007-2014) consisted of constructed glass objects made specifically to fit within the dimensions of standard FedEx shipping containers. These objects were then shipped from the artists studio to the gallery, wherein the manual handling and transit of the objects would produce an aggregate of markings in the glass. The work was then unpackaged by gallerists, and displayed alongside their shipping boxes. (Jobson, 2017) Through transport, these objects physically recorded the passage through space on their surface, indexically illustrating the events that transpire around it. Beshty (2010) spoke to the works in an interview, stating he was 'interested in how art objects acquire meaning through their context and through travel ... [I] wanted to make a work that was specifically organised around its traffic, becoming materially manifest through its movement from one place to another.' (Beshty & Carl, 2010, para.5)

Rebecca Nadjowski is a research based practitioner and educator working out of Melbourne, Australia. Her practice centres around the relationship between photography and nature, and how 'humans engage with, relate to, and think of non-human nature' with reference to landscape photographic practices. (Vuorinen, 2018, para.27) Najdowski (2018) has cited the semiotic functions of photography - in particular, the idea of indexicality - as a key concept in her ongoing artistic research. In her body of work Surfacing (2017-2018), Najdowski uses geothermal activity as both the subject, and the agent of exposure. Light sensitive photo paper is exposed to natural phenomena such as steam geysers, or submerged in lake water, wherein it physically records on its surface the aggregate of moisture and minerals. The resulting image-objects render abstract gradients of pinks, oranges, and blues, visually representing a bodily exchange between surface and landscape. Even after the resulting images are 'fixed' via chemical processes, the works continue to shift and fluctuate as a result of the conditions they are subjected to; continuing to physically and bodily document the ever continuing event of photography. (Vuorinen, 2018)

CONCLUSION (III.)

The truth-claim of photography is ensnared within its semiotic relationship to the icon and the index. Although a latent image comprises the index of light, once transposed to a visually recognisable image that relationship is no longer primary. By utilising object-oriented ontology and Azoulay's political event of photography, I am proposing an alternative method of production. Object-Oriented Photography (OOP) involves the 'exposure' of a blank medium, wherein the aggregate of material upon its surface over time becomes the vessel for information. OOP rejects the human-centred tendencies of traditional photography, instead giving non-human objects agency over their own representation. Contemporary practitioners Walead Beshty and Rebecca Najdowski have directly influenced this methodology through their research into how objects acquire meaning through their movement through space, and into how non-human representation can be negotiated with the non-human subject.

Although OOP does not prove an entirely resolute solution to the problems which plague photographic practice, it intends to provide the groundwork for further critique and exploration of the cultural and ontological implications which content with the medium.

NOTES

1 The term 'claim' is important here, as 'this is not simply a property inherent in a photograph, but a claim made for it.' (Gunning 2004, p. 42) Photography as a method of communication makes no claim to reality, but rather, the cultural understanding has come to argue it.

2 As critics have pointed out, using Peirce's semiotic theory on photography is imprecise and can result in the oversimplification of both photographic practice as well as Peirce's complex systems. Francois Brunet (2008) argues that Peirce uses the examples of photography as a guiding tool, as opposed to really exploring the intricacies of semiotics within photographic imagery. However, I do believe that it provides a theoretical grounding for us to deeply consider what can be considered objectively a representation of reality. What physical and spatial interactions need to occur for an object to be supposed as evidentiary?

3 There are many examples of words which no longer mean colloquially what they originated from etymologically. For example, 'explode' is derived from the same root as 'applaud', and originally meant to jeer a performer off the stage. (Further reading; <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/505181/25-words-don't-mean-what-they-used> Accessed 27 May 2022)

4 Choosing to contest light as the sole agent in photography could be seen as a fundamental flaw in my argument, however I would posit that in practice, elements aside from light can and do play a significant part in the process of traditional photography, anyway. For example, the humidity of the air (Song at al. 2016), the temperature of the photographic film (The Dark Room, 2020), or even human error in the manufacturing process, can all play a part in how light travels and exhibits itself. This implies that even within traditional photography, the recording of visual information involves the impacts of multiple external agents, and that by reducing our understanding to simply light alone fails to fully consider the plethora of relationships that inhabit the photographic process.

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