A Mirror With An Imagination

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University Wellington, New Zealand.

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Abstract

The photographic work *A Mirror With An Imagination* consists of photographs made in a way consistent with the vernacular photographic tradition. However, their appearance is quite different to what might be expected from that tradition. The lack of worldly context in the images means that they present to the viewer as possibilities, to be completed by the imagination. The reason for this approach is explained by reference to the partial disconnect between the photographer's intentions and the viewing experience of the audience, as described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981). An investigation into Barthes' thought leads to an ontological position espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre in *L'Imaginaire* (2004), in which he describes the photograph as a partial object with an ontological connection to its referent that nevertheless must be completed by the imagination of the viewer. This action allows for the subjectivity of the viewer to act upon the content of the photograph, as their particular experiences and memories influence what they add to the content of the image.

In reflecting on this I identify the theme of the contingent nature of our experience – the sense of the arbitrariness of circumstance and that many things that are might not be, or might be different – as a definitive factor within this subjective action. I also identify that the ontological relationship between world and photograph means that photographs innately express this contingency.

I then discuss making photographic work informed by these understandings, in particular the necessity of light in the photographic process and its strong relation to our imaginative metaphorical usage and also the idea of contingency. I continue to outline the choices made in producing this work with reference to the art photographic tradition; in particular the constructed work of Jeff Wall, indexicality as seen in Ed Ruscha and the Bechers, Andreas Gursky's engagement with art history and Hiroshi Sugimoto's conceptual use of light and approach to the sublime.

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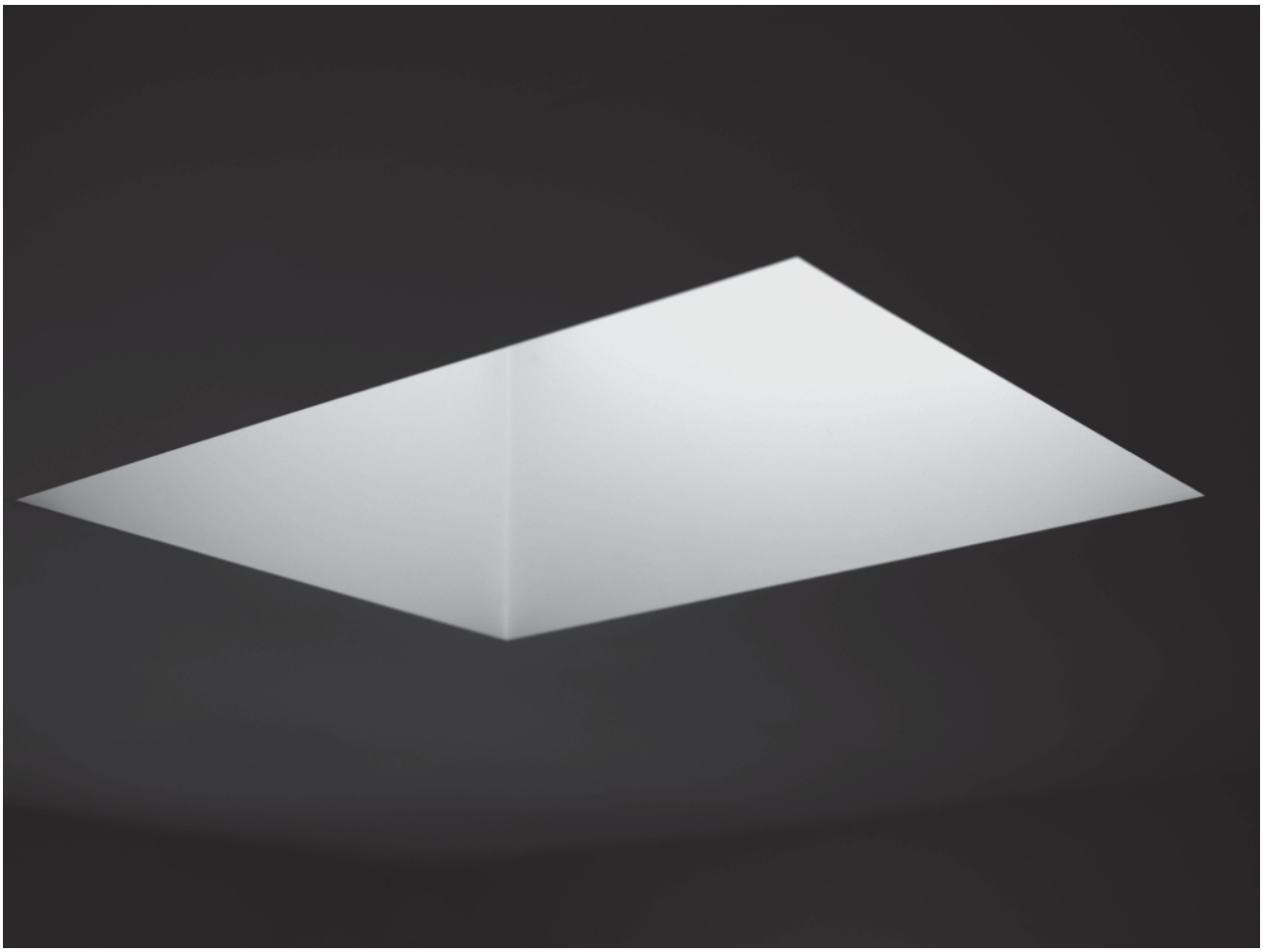

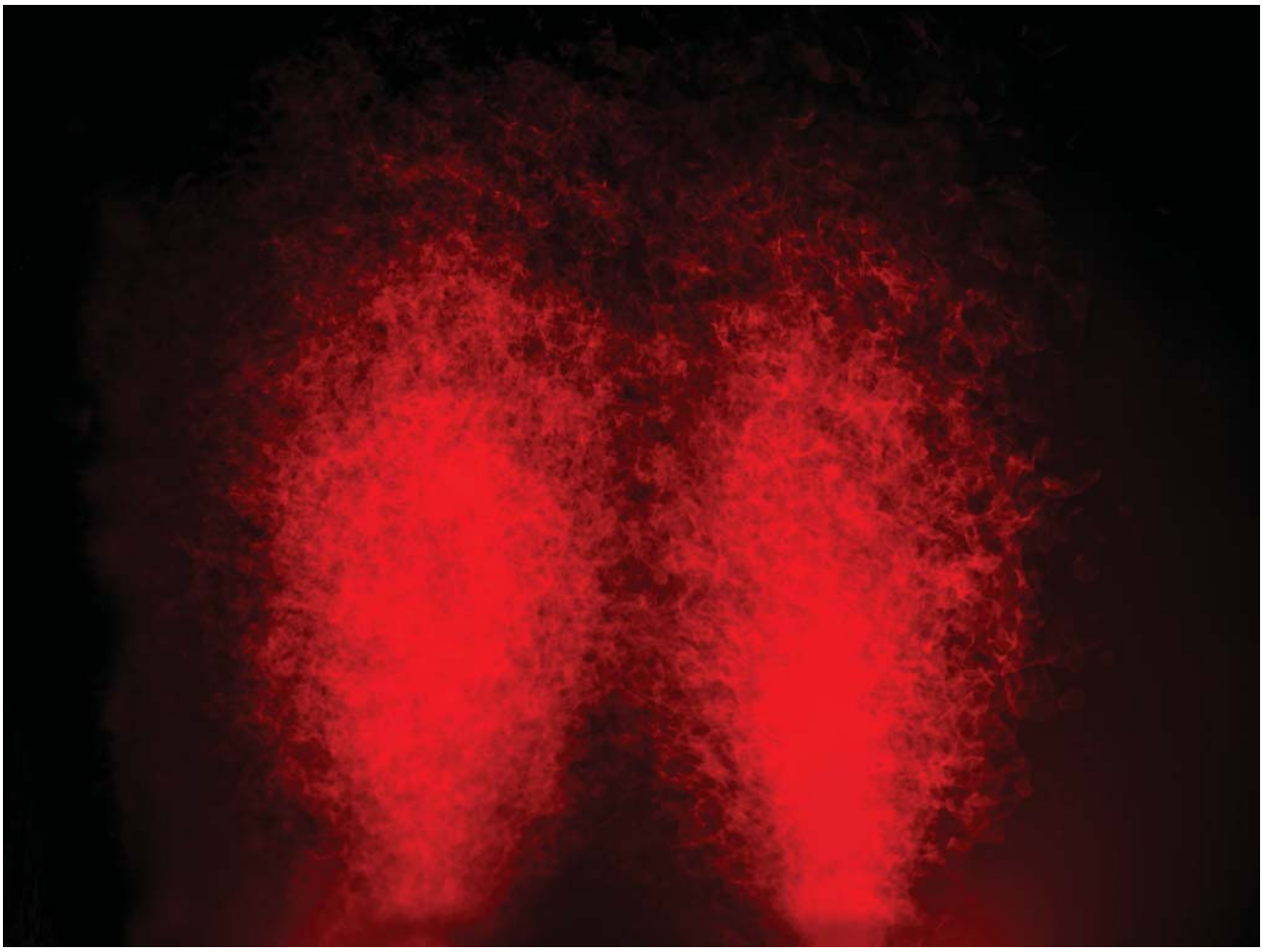

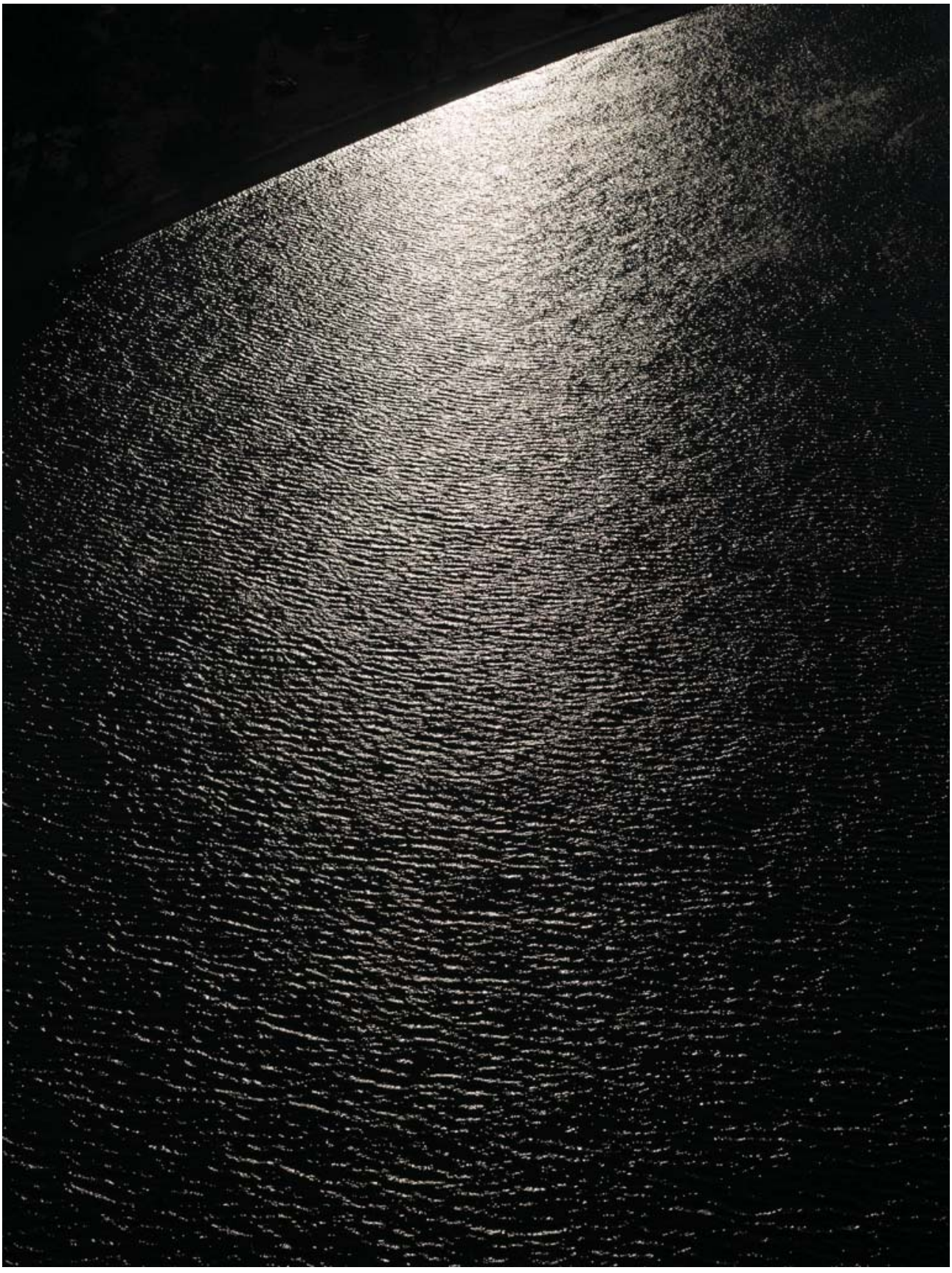

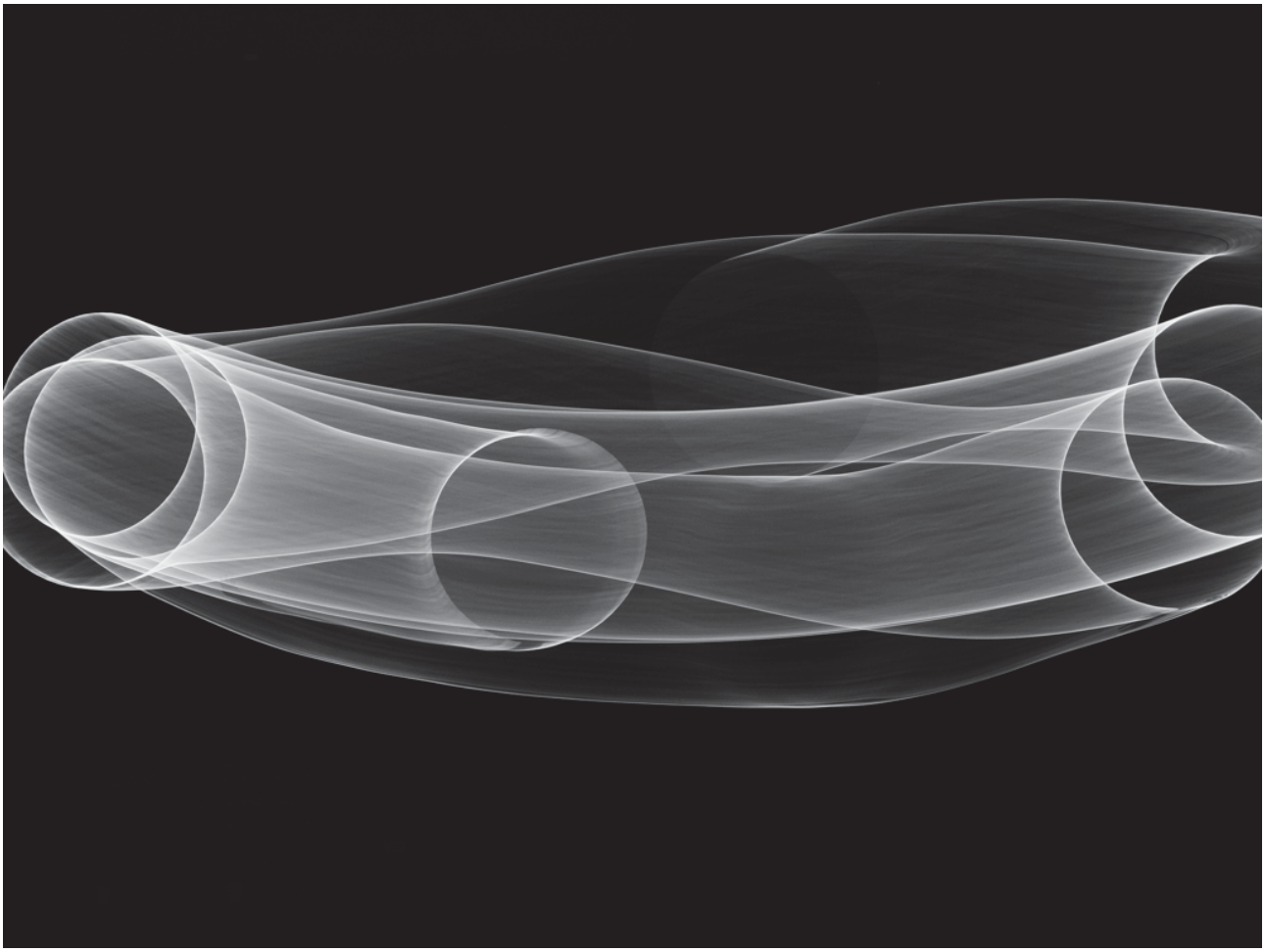

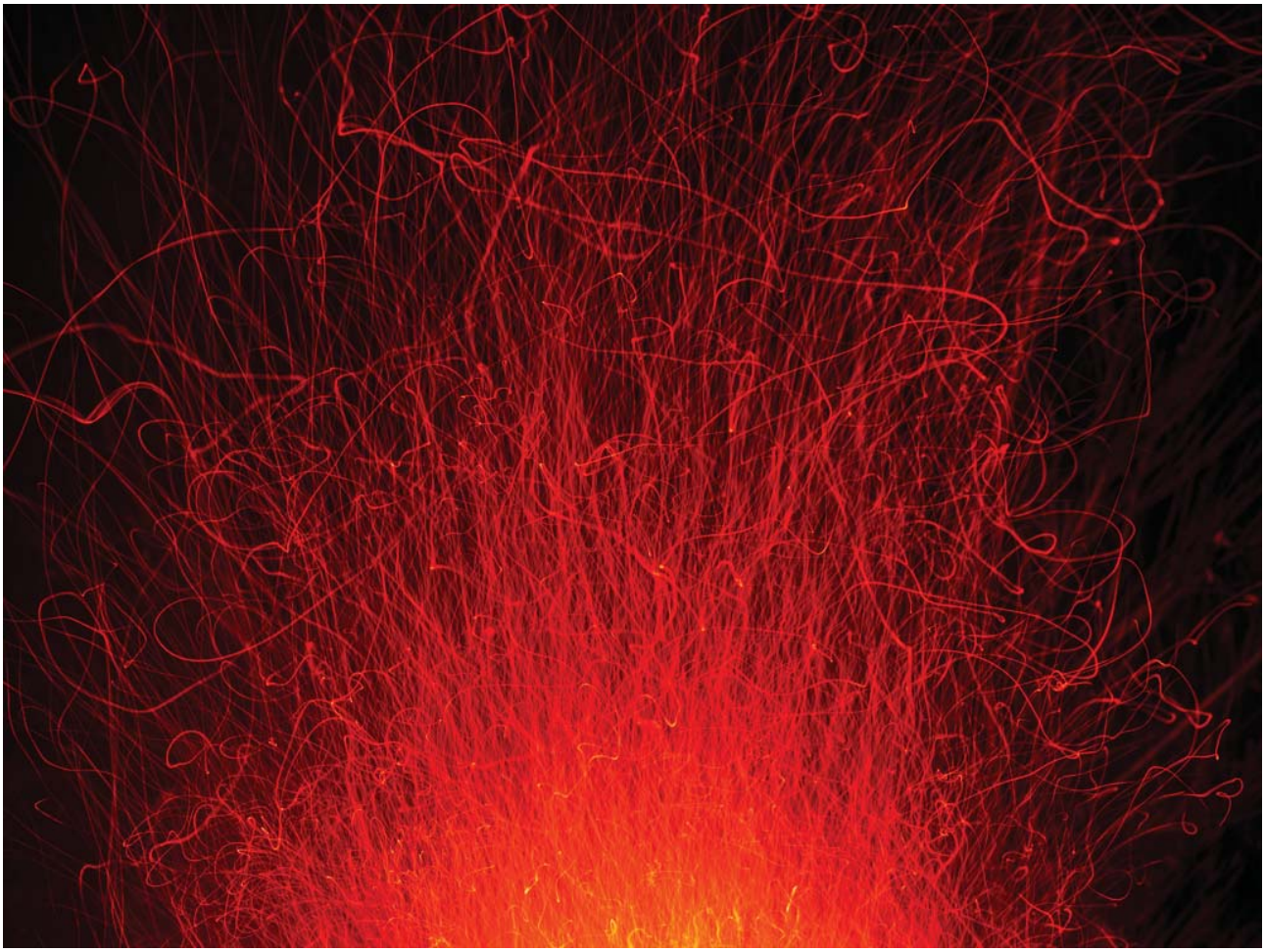

Introduction

The series *A Mirror With An Imagination* presents an approach to photography that I describe as my own idiosyncratic approach to vernacular photography. In the following I attempt to explain why I describe the work with those terms and further expand on the ideas behind my chosen approach - to illuminate what otherwise might be overlooked in the work. This research was born from a prolonged entanglement with Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981), a work familiar to photography theorists. In this text Barthes prioritises a subjective response to photographs in his quest to find the 'essence' of photography, but in doing so he marginalises the intentions of the photographer in a way that, as a maker of photographs, I find disturbing. Some of Barthes' thought no longer holds sway in a contemporary context, and other parts of it we might largely dismiss as too restrictive in describing photography (Elkins, 2009), yet I still find sympathy with aspects of his thought. I seek to circumvent Barthes' limitation of a people-based vernacular photography within which an experience of the 'that-has-been' is of primary interest to the viewer. Instead, I investigate how these experiences Barthes describes might instead be the result of an encounter with the contingent nature of the universe. I then describe how photography's ontological relationship with the world evokes this contingency and find that reading *Camera Lucida* in respect to the ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre aids me in understanding some of Barthes' otherwise mysterious propositions.

Emerging out of this investigation, my work differs in appearance to the kind of photographs Barthes favours in *Camera Lucida*, yet it works alongside that text and is sympathetic to much of his discussion. In the second part of this exegesis I describe the methodology of my photographic approach and how some of the decisions involved in my making are an attempt to retain the spirit of Barthes' project. The complicated relationship between this work and *Camera Lucida* suggests a tension between the photographer's intention and the viewer's experience, and aims to reveal other tensions within which the work also operates. I expand upon these apparent conflicts within the context of artistic precedents in the works of Jeff Wall, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha, Andreas Gursky and Hiroshi Sugimoto. The influence of these artists and their approaches allows for a discussion of the broader influence of art history in their works and mine, as I describe Gursky and Wall's engagements with historical painting. In describing my attempt to use light as a metaphor I look to Sugimoto's own use of light as a conceptual aspect of his work. Finally, I discuss Sugimoto's work in relation to the concept of the sublime and how this might frame an approach to *A Mirror With An Imagination*.

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Part One - *Studium*

I. *Nec studium, nec punctum*

Let us start by considering the images that make up *A Mirror With An Imagination.* How do they look? Already I give a clue as to my direction, by phrasing the question 'how do they look?', rather than what is perhaps the standard photographic question 'what is their subject?' What is often remarked upon about the medium of photography is its ability to disappear, its ontological connection to the world allows us to see through the photograph and experience what Barthes calls the "emanation of the referent" (1981, p. 80). We look through the medium of the photograph and see the world.

That activity is not so easy with these photographs. Many of them consist primarily of a dark field within which some luminosity emerges. In some cases the luminosity serves to illuminate something partially recognisable, such as a rope ladder, but the spaces the ladder connects, the brightness above and the dark underworld in which the perspective resides remain hidden and mysterious. Others are just as opaque; a rectangle of light again suggests a passage or the possibility of movement between an illuminated higher space and the darkness in which the point of view rests, but it appears harder to navigate. In others twin bursts of a corporeal red seem to burst like an exhalation against the same dark field, or we see a thousand erratic trajectories, hot with energy but their starting points and ends hidden from us by yet more empty black. Elsewhere there is the trace of an irregular pendulum motion, but we see only the motion and not the pendulum itself. In yet others luminous emergences out of thick shadows are replaced by a dense surfeit of texture, detail piled upon detail, but again the context is missing. The textured surface of something planar, perhaps water, is home to a myriad of sparkling contours, each suggestive of forces or movements operating on a micro and macro scale simultaneously. In another there is the appearance of a partially lit surface of a body of water, we might recognise the texture of water surface, rather than the body of water itself. Even in the images that don't emanate out of darkness, be it an array of silvery texture, the verticality of colour tones, or the pinned corner of a poster, we are not given enough context to place what we are seeing somewhere known to us.

The de-contextualising of these images - their partial abstraction from the knowable - is of primary significance and it is in relation to this that I would like to turn to the theoretical basis of *Camera Lucida* (1981). In this text Roland Barthes attempts a phenomenological analysis of photography and finds a duality of responses when viewing photographs. The first type of engagement he describes as the '*studium*' and this is a fairly conventional understanding of viewing a photograph; that when we view a photograph "we encounter the photographer's intentions" (1981, p. 27), which is simply to say that we see what they wanted us to see by the action of taking the photograph. When looking at a photograph in this way we view the content of the image within a field of context codified within the image and so our response is through "the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture" (1981, p. 26).

How might the viewer interpret the images in *A Mirror With An Imagination* in this way? It would not be correct to say that they are completely free of context. Nevertheless, it is the case that within this work there is the occlusion of context to a large degree - a sense of mystery or the unknowable - and so it is likely that this aspect then becomes the *studium*. The viewer looks at the images as photographs but if unable to access what they are 'of' when reflecting on what the work is 'about' then this mystery or puzzle of intention might

come to stand in place as the subject. [i]

While the examination of the *studium* is far from a simple exercise and can be engaging and rewarding, it remains secondary in Barthes' text to the experience he writes most extensively about: the '*punctum*'. His description of the *punctum* is passionate and suggests a transcendence of the *studium*, relegating it to the banal whenever the *punctum* is encountered. While the experience of the *studium* is rational and polite, the *punctum* "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (1981, p. 26). By the use of these emotive terms Barthes suggests a qualitative difference between these two modes of experience, but the key difference is that the *punctum* moves us in a subjective and emotional manner, quite apart from the more rational *studium*.

Barthes is careful in his explanation to highlight that his choice of the Latin term *punctum* is important because of its dual meaning as both a point of punctuation and a 'prick' or point of wounding (1981). The *punctum* is an element in itself to the viewer and yet it is always within the *studium* that it is found, it is a detail that punctuates the *studium* by way of its presence. However, the apprehension of this detail is not rationally explicable in the same contextual language of photographer's intent by which we may describe the *studium* (Prosser, 2005). There is an immediacy and sense of the personal to the *punctum* and yet it cannot be separated from the field of context the *studium* provides and which it sits amongst, thus Barthes describes the punctum as a 'partial object'. In relation to the example of Kertész' *Blind Violinist* (Figure I.) he writes "he could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object (how could Kertész have 'separated' the dirt road from the violinist walking on it?)" (1981, p. 47).

What Barthes makes clear is that where the *punctum* does occur, it is hugely compelling for the viewer - it shocks, disturbs and moves us – and it is the thing that photography does that other forms do not. However, Barthes' exposition of the *punctum* leaves little room for the activity and intentions of the photographer in controlling or evoking this experience. He describes the *punctum* as present in the photograph not in a way that the '*operator*' (as he dubs the photographer) could recognise and place there for the spectator to see, "the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful" (1981, p. 47). This enigmatic role of the *punctum* is controversial and it is easy to see why it has been widely dismissed, embraced and misapprehended in the critical writing since the publication of *Camera Lucida* (Batchen, 2009). As a photographer reading *Camera Lucida*, I found this confronting. I can fumble around with my *studium* as much as I want, but the essential and most powerful reaction to a photograph remains an outcome of chance. If someone is to be moved by one of my photographs in this way, it will be by some little detail I didn't even notice or think about at the time of making it. These distinctions, between the *studium* and the *punctum,* and also between the photographer's intentions and the viewer's subjective responses are the key provocations for me in launching my research trajectory. Figures II.-IV. show works made in this early period, when my reactions to Barthes varied from a whimsical quest to find Barthes' *punctum* in the found arrangements of pins (pricks) on a pin board, through to attempts to respond to this challenge by the mantra of Caravaggio, *nec spe, nec metu* (neither hope, nor fear). If I have no hope to propagate the *punctum*, then I might have no fear of its lack of presence.

I would like to pause here to attempt an answer to Barthes' rhetorical question - 'how might Kertész have separated the dirt road from the violinist walking on it?' Merely by composing his shot to include only the dirt road, or just the violinist, is one possible reply.[ii] Barthes' point seems to be that this would alter the *studium* of the photograph and so change his relationship to the road as *punctum*. Without the violinist informing the context of

'Hungarian village' as the intended subject matter, then Barthes' reminiscence around the dirt road and his own Hungarian sojourns is seemingly lost to him. But might any picture containing a dirt road of the right quality not trigger Barthes in this way? Does it have to be *so* close to his original experience? After all, I am reasonably certain that this dirt road in Kertész' picture (Figure I.) is not the exact dirt road that Barthes walked upon.

I suspect that a photograph of the right kind of road, in the right kind of light, might trigger Barthes' memory of his travels in Romania and Hungary in the same way, whether it is ostensibly about a violinist, or something else. It might even be the case that where the context is not ambiguous, that even if he recognises that the wider context of the photo is rural New Mexico, for instance, the right kind of road might serve as a trigger. If the emanation of the referent, so key to Barthes, is subjectively received then there is no reason to suggest this fallibility of response isn't possible. It is unclear to me from reading *Camera Lucida* just how important a role the *studium* plays in the emergence of the *punctum*. While Barthes describes it as a necessary relationship, not all of his examples reflect this and many of the *punctum* disturbances he describes in particular photographs seem to have nothing to do with the context of the photo whatsoever.[iii] It appears to me that the detail which provokes the *punctum* is a partial object, but its relationship with the *studium* is not necessarily intrinsically tied with the meaning we read within the *studium*, merely to do with its coincidence amongst it.

Returning to the work *A Mirror With An Imagination,* what is the possibility of the *punctum* emerging to the viewer in these photographs? The lack of apparent context identifiable produces a self-referential *studium* of being about a lack of obvious subject, but might the *punctum* yet emerge? It seems that the little observable details, things from the world that might rise up out of the scene and 'prick us', are also hard to come by in these photographs. I would be careful not to rule out their emergence completely, as the subjective and idiosyncratic nature of this type of response, coupled with the ontological nature of the medium, means that any detail like the knot in a rope ladder or the crease in the edge of a poster might serve in this way. But adhering strictly to what Barthes' has written, because the *punctum* is a partial object within the *studium*, its presence is more or less limited by the discernibility of the *studium* itself. The less of the world that is apparent to give the context of a photograph, the harder it would seem for a familiar detail to be present and emerge from it.

At first glance then, the viewer might consider these images to be about not very much and certainly not fertile ground for the emergence of the *punctum*. Perhaps they are, in a sense, nine photographs of Kertész' dirt road, separated from the violinist. Barthes might indeed dismiss them as uninteresting. He would not find one of his cherished 'looks' as no people are to be found and perhaps he would claim the artist has made an attempt to tame the medium, “to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it” (1981, p. 117). My instinct in making this work was that there is something going on in *Camera Lucida's* complicated relationship between maker, beholder, the world, photography and time, something that only seemed to become clear through making work, like a splinter that must be worked out from its place under the skin.

II. That-has-been

That Barthes does not fully explicate the distinction around the photographer’s intention and its shading of the operation of the *punctum* in Part One of *Camera Lucida* is possibly due to the imminent development of his idea of the punctum into something deeper. Despite the identification that his journey into the subjective was yet to yield him a universal

finding,[iv] Part Two is an increasingly personal rumination, centred around one particular photograph of Barthes' mother when she was a girl. This section is often overlooked because it is deemed too personal, Barthes doesn't even reproduce the photograph for us to see, “It exists only for me...at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound” (1981 p.73). However, I attest that this section plays a greater role than just serving as an example of the subjectivity of the *punctum* as described in the first half of his book, because it stretches further to place that subjectivity within a concept that is still universally applicable.

Despite connecting the *punctum* as a detail, or a punctuating point within the photograph, here Barthes further adds that the mode of the punctum effect is always temporal.

> *The name of Photography's* noeme *will therefore be: “That-has-been,” or again: the Intractable... what I see has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.* (1981, p. 77)

The *noeme* of the photograph then, is its connection to the past, the stubbornness with which it insists on the prior existence of its referent. Barthes' example of the photograph of his late mother as a girl suggests that this wounds us when the thing which represents the 'that-has-been', is no longer so, or its existence in the past in relation to its current representation is problematic for us as viewer.

Given this expansion of the *punctum*, I would like to re-examine the notion of the viewer's interaction with the intentionality of the maker. If the temporal aspect of the *punctum* is the definitive one, then it appears that what is crucial to Barthes is that the thing he is looking at in a photograph, the thing with the quality of 'that-has-been' which is disturbing to him, is also present here to him now, when looking at the photograph. But it was also present, in the past, to another who made the photograph. The temporal discontinuity between the maker and viewer suggests the possibility of a significantly different context for each when considering the thing in question, and presumably the greater the temporal separation the greater the likelihood of this is. This goes some way towards Barthes' position that the *punctum*-inducing aspect is probably outside of the maker's intention, but it doesn't follow that it is necessarily so.

Critical theorists such as Michael Fried have attempted to show that this temporal aspect of the *punctum* serves as an ontological guarantee against intentionality, the displacement across time demands that the photographer making the image could not possibly have known the later significance of the *punctum* detail, because at that point in time that detail was insignificant.[v] (Fried, 2008). Fried's interpretation is entirely aimed towards locating Barthes' thought within his own position of a Diderotian ‘anti-theatrical’ movement in contemporary art photography, but he concedes there is only one short passage within *Camera Lucida* that seems to support this position directly (2008).[vi] For this reason, Fried is forced to admit that he is using *Camera Lucida* for his own purposes and that even if he is correct about Barthes' intended meaning, Barthes was seemingly unaware of its significance in this respect. I have sympathy for Fried's position, but I also think that Barthes very likely knew exactly what he was doing in his text and that his meaning might be accessible with more investigation.

III. The Subjectivity of the Imagination

When Barthes writes that Bob Wilson's look holds him in the Robert Mapplethorpe photograph he discusses, he claims not to know why (1981), and it is hard to see what the temporal aspect, the that-has-been that is present in this fascination. Instead, it seems more

like a sense of wonderment that this thing, this other, is existent out there somewhere and that the photograph brings it seemingly directly before him. This shock, this prick, this mystery is a fascination with the contingent nature of ourselves and the universe, the direct contact with immense forces beyond our control, the sublime nature of contingency. This can be triggered by almost anything in a photograph and by their very nature, photographs are full of stuff that might serve as a trigger. When I use the word 'contingent' or 'contingency' here, it is important to be clear that I use it in its philosophical sense, where contingency is contrasted with necessity. A necessary statement must be true for logical consistency to hold sway, while a contingent statement could be either true or false, it carries its negation within it for it need not be true and it need not be false.[vii] Most, if not all, of what appears in any given photograph is contingent, because it is easily conceivable that it might have been otherwise in its appearance, its presence or in a myriad of other ways.

From what I make of *Camera Lucida*, the experience of such disturbances as Barthes writes about is necessarily subjective because our relationship with what is represented and its significance across time is unique to our individual experience. But I don't think Barthes' subjectivity is a solipsistic and therefore vapid relativism, but instead borne out of the inescapable fact that none of us leads an identical life. When Barthes says "I am a primitive, a child – or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own" (1981, p.51), I think that he leads the reader slightly astray with his metaphor. It is not from another's eye that we would need to borrow for the *punctum* to be translatable between persons, but their very consciousness, complete with its past experiences, thoughts and memories. The singularity of experience allows for the emanation of the referent across time in a photograph to connect with each viewer directly and in a singular way. Yet this action of subjective entanglement is available to everyone because of the contingent nature of our experience and in the actions of our universe. The contingency at play in our existence is what makes our experiences individual, but because we are all subject to this contingency, it also serves as a universal . So the notion of the *punctum* in the photograph does something very interesting - by it's very subjectivity it finds a universality - it unifies seemingly opposite things. It is the brute manifestation of contingency in a photograph that creates the possibility of the *punctum* effect and it is this aspect of the *punctum* that most interests me.[viii]

The temporal aspect of Barthes' *punctum* is simply a result of photography's ability to record this contingency. When people say that a photograph can 'freeze time' or 'capture a moment' what do they actually mean it is doing? What separates the contingent from the necessary is that it might not be the case, it is subject to change over time. In fact, that is the only way that time makes sense to us, we don't experience time itself, we only ever experience an ongoing presentness. The way that we mark time, is through the recognition of the alteration of contingent facts about the world. When a photograph freezes time what it is doing is recording the contingent facts present during the time of its making.

In his chapter of the Geoffrey Batchen edited *Photography Degree Zero* (2009) entitled *What do we want photography to be? A response to Michael Fried*, James Elkins also identifies the ability of photography to record the stuff of the world and how this might explain the *punctum*,

> *These ordinarily unnoticed forms can prick me, as the punctum is supposed to do. But more often they thrive in my peripheral vision like an infestation. They resist interpretation not so much because they are irrelevant to the production and dissemination of photographs, and certainly not because they are likely to be fragmentary and therefore illegible, but mainly because they tend to*

> *be boring; they are only available to be seen because the photograph has placed them there.* (2009, p. 176)

He further writes in disagreement with Fried's position outlined previously "peripheral stuff is a problem for the *punctum* as it is presented in *Barthes' Punctum*[ix] – not because it disturbs the argument but because it implies that the *punctum* is wider, and wilder, than accounts of vernacular photography can admit"[x] (Ibid).

This focus on contingency as the producer of the *punctum* experience is also, for me, the only satisfactory way to form a distinction between the intentions of the maker and the experience of the beholder. When we think of subjectivity as merely an extension of the collection of contingent facts which have made up a person's singular experience of being, then the emanation of the referent becomes both an inter-subjective experience (the *studium*) and yet also allows for a completely independent experience of those very same things presented in the photograph through the subjective action of the imagination. The ontological basis of this position are all to be found in the philosophical system of Jean-Paul Sartre and *Camera Lucida* is, after all, dedicated to one of Sartre's works – *L'Imaginaire*. Jean-Michel Rabaté, in his introduction to *Writing The Image After Roland Barthes* (1997) points out that Barthes had an allegiance with Sartre's work dating back more than thirty years and that there was a "curious convergence of these two major French thinkers who entertained deep and hidden affinities although they were associated with doctrines and movements as radically antipodal as existentialism and structuralism" (1997, p. 2).

In *L'Imaginaire* (2004) Sartre describes how perception is informed by our senses, so we can learn new knowledge from it, yet any object of perception remains incomplete because it is limited by our available perspective. In contrast, an imagined object appears to us as a totality, because we complete the picture with "a melange of past impressions and recent knowledge" (2004, p.90). The imagined object appears in a similar way to a perceived object, so we tend to treat it as if it were real, but we can learn nothing new from it because it is made up only from what we already know and is governed by our intention (ibid). When Sartre relates this to viewing a photograph, we get much the same action as in Barthes. Sartre describes looking at a photograph as an "analogon", an equivalence with perception and in this particular case we see past the physicality of the photograph (be it ink on paper, a digital screen or other form) to the thing it represents (2004).[xi] More than that, this seeing mimics perception but is in fact the action of the imagination. What this means is that the object in the photograph is completed by our imagination, it is imbued with that same "melange of past impressions and recent knowledge", and so our intention toward it is what makes it up into a total object, rather than the perspective-limited partial object it is in the actual photograph.

It is clear to me that Barthes is relying on this theory in *Camera Lucida*, evidenced not only by the dedication to *L'Imaginaire*, but also the shared terminology of "partial-object" and in statements about the *punctum* such as "whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there" (1981, p. 55). But what Barthes never discusses explicitly is how this fits within Sartre's wider ontological story. For Sartre, the imagination is what allows us to be ontologically free, the operation of the imagination outside of perception gives consciousness the ability to separate itself from the kind of unceasing perception of the world through the senses that apparently constrains other animals. The ability to negate what is present and imagine something other to that which we are experiencing makes possible our freedom of thought, and we retain this capacity in all of our experiencing. Furthermore, because the process of imagining relies on intentionality, and because it is possible to engage this at any time when experiencing the world, it follows that the world is constituted not from the outside into our consciousness,

but rather we constitute the world based on our intentions toward it. When applying this back to the observation of photographs, it becomes clear that the intentions of another, even the maker of an image, cannot dictate what I experience when looking at it. I can engage in an inter-subjective exercise in examining the intentions of the maker, but ultimately the objects within it emerge through my imagination, it is only by this action that the partial object presented reaches a totality, and this is necessarily of my own intention. I can inherit from the eye of another no more than I can *be* another.

Perhaps all that is left to be said about this is that Barthes might have made clearer the subjective operation of the *punctum* if he described it directly as the product of the imagination, brought to the image made by another.[xii] It is easier to grasp that the *punctum* cannot be placed in an image intentionally by another when we are aware that it is the result of our imagination engaging with that image and bringing our own experience to it by way of the intentionality of consciousness, which is definitively independent from the context of another. The emergent photographic technology was described by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1829 as a 'mirror with a memory' (in Price, 1994, p. 141), but based upon this discussion I would go further than this, it is a mirror with an imagination.

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Part Two: *Punctum* – An Idiosyncratic Approach to Vernacular Photography

The discussion so far is the context in which the present work was made, its *studium*, if you like; a provocation as to the subjectivity of audience response and its independence from the maker; the intrinsic contingency of the medium of photography both in its action and our engagement with it; and the lingering sense that what is might not be. This entanglement with Barthes' elusive text lead to frustration, but also to inspiration. My early malcontent with the *punctum* response as something that operates outside of the intention of the maker grew into a greater understanding of the subjective and inter-subjective responses to photographs. By examining the complete ontological picture, I have been able to understand Barthes' *punctum* as flourishing out of the mass of contingency in the world and is thus facilitated by the ability of the photograph to record this contingency. I feel inclined to agree with Barthes in this respect that photography does something unique in its form of representation, without necessarily buying in to his vernacular limitations identified by Elkins (2009), or even Fried's anti-theatrical movement (2008). Instead, this compels me to investigate this contingency in a speculative manner. The photographs in my work, sitting largely outside of a worldly context and therefore seeming to deny the beholder access to the maker's intention in the sense of a *studium*, require something from the beholder in the act of viewing them. In the following I would like to expand on the particular choices I made in preparing this work following on from these foundations.

The first point I would like to introduce is how this knowledge of the contingent nature of the photograph might affect our activity as photographic artists, to answer the question of how might it guide the choices we make in doing our work? Following on from that discussion, I introduce the possibility of an intentional blurring of the separation between perception and imagination. In this discussion I speculate that an uncertainty of *studium* leaves room only for a *punctum* like response, rather than eliminating its possibility. This produces the idea of the possibility of the photographic as metaphor, rather than metonym, historically a distinction between photography and other arts, as described by Nancy Shawcross in her book *Roland Barthes On Photography: The Critical Tradition In Perspective* (1997). I then move on to the idea of light as metaphor and briefly outline my choices around how I made photographs. Finally, I speak to the action of contingency as an equivalence to the uncontrollable sense of the sublime, and describe my pursuit of a photography of the everyday that strives to express this. These ideas and my choices are all discussed within the context of precedents within art history and more specifically, photographers within an art tradition.

V. Photography as Art – On the possibility of a synthesis of *studium* and *punctum*

There are several options for the artist, it seems to me, if the imaginative, contingent responses to the photograph that Barthes describes as *punctum* are too personal, too idiosyncratic to be able to predict, control or cultivate. Firstly, and as Barthes describes, the artist might tame photography from this madness of the *punctum*. To do so is “to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness” (1981, p. 118). The majority of images we see in fashion and advertising are a result of this kind of activity, the clean studio backgrounds, the skin smoothed to hide any pores, marks or imperfections - the very things that allow us to see it as someone's actual face. While such photographic control

was once the realm of only the successful commercial studio photographer, the accessibility of digital manipulation in our present age means that this type of sterilisation of photographs is more widespread than ever before. Even in Barthes' pre-digital times, the sanitisation of the *punctum* was becoming rampant - “this is what is happening in our society, where the photograph crushes all other images by its tyranny.” (ibid) Despite the ability of the kind of naturalistic photography that Barthes champions to innately express a sense of contingency, photography increasingly has the ability to gloss its subjects in a way that removes their worldly context.

The artist might engage in this type of polished image-making in the same way but for different ends; they have the licence to work against such trends, to subvert them through hyperbole, mimicry or other devices. This is evident in the work of many photographic artists, from the cinematic masks adopted by Cindy Sherman in her *Untitled Film Stills*, the artifice of Thomas Demand's photographed paper simulacra and in the work of Jeff Wall.

I would argue that the constructed image-making of Jeff Wall that Michael Fried champions under his own conception of the *punctum* as an ontological guarantee in the pact of artifice between the beholder and the maker (2008), fits within this type of use of photography, but in a fascinatingly complex engagement. Wall's work is of great merit because his control over the minutiae in his images is more reminiscent of painting than the contingency of the photograph, yet they appear as richly detailed photographs that evoke this contingency while simultaneously negating it. This synthesis of forms becomes rich with possibility and it is no wonder that Wall serves as a key example for Fried of photography's ability to continue the anti-theatrical tradition he identifies as reaching a crisis of representation in the paintings of Edouard Manet (2008). That Wall's work is so rich with art historical and literary references from *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* to *After “Spring Snow” by Yukio Mishima, chapter 34, 2000-05* and *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue* is another layer in this complexity, relating the world of the imagination back into perception. But his so-called 'near documentary' work such as *Mimic* (1982, Figure V.) and *Milk* (1984) work in a similar mode. They also tame the nature of photography as Barthes would put it, through their controlled making. Nevertheless, their naturalistic appearance as photographs of particular moments that read as miraculously fortunate timings for the photographer speak to the contingency of the *punctum*, even if they might not provoke it once we learn they are constructed. These works are influential on my own undertaking because of the way they directly engage with the question of the maker's intention and its influence on the viewer's response, though I have chosen not to use the method of constructing a scene to evoke it.

A different approach for photographic artists might be to embrace the madness of the form and make their own intention one of indexicality, whereby the contingency of the world is emphasized through the differences that appear in images that are otherwise strictly uniform in their subject. This approach was made famous by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose series such as W*ater Towers* (1988) and *Grain Elevators* (2006), despite being made over many years, use precise and consistent composition and light to show industrial objects of identical usage presented together in grid formation. As well as speaking to human industry and design, these works encapsulate contingency in that the small and seemingly irrelevant differences are emphasised. The differences between the objects that emerge when they are presented together are a result of the regional variance of their installation and for the viewer raise the question as to their significance. There is no answer to this question other than an acceptance of contingency at play. The *punctum,* as Barthes describes it as an emotive that-has-been disturbance, might not emerge for the viewer when looking at these photographs, but its action and its origin in contingency are

both present in the image. This dedication to witnessing contingency in the world also serves to be of great influence on my approach, though again I have sought an alternative method to the employment of indexicality.

Another artist who has worked in this way is Ed Ruscha. His self-consciously banal and deadpan serials such as *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966) and *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1969) evoke themes from Pop Art and Conceptual Art, but they also approach the subject of contingency through the use of photographs to catalogue the appearance of things. In response to these works we might ask 'why this street?' 'Why does he show us *twentysix* gasoline stations?' Although we can find a response within a cultural and art historical context, in doing so it is still hard to avoid the sense of pervasive contingency suggested through the arbitrariness of 'stuff' as it is presented.

These approaches all connect photography with its innate ability to suggest the contingency of the world [xiii] and engage with this aspect within the wider intentions of the artists. The form of these works is inclusive of this nature of the photographic identified in Part One. However, elements of their artifice mean the presence of the *punctum* experience as personal and moving in the way that Barthes describes it is perhaps an unlikely outcome for the viewer. The constructed nature of Wall's images, the objectivity of the Bechers and banality of Ruscha's series all work against the kind of emotive encounter with contingency that Barthes is fascinated by. They are, to use Barthes' phrase, taming the madness of the photograph in one way or the other.

What I sought was a way of connecting this availability of photographic contingency with the wounding aspect of it Barthes describes, so I needed to look closer into our psychological responses to a direct encounter with contingency. Where this concept becomes 'wounding', is when we apply it to ourselves, as it seems to apply to all matter in the universe. There is a sense of flux and impermanence that permeates all 'things' and recognising this holds within it the knowledge of our own mortality. That we are here now, but we might easily not be, if things had happened differently, and that one day we will not be. The sense of this might best be evoked by a beautifully symmetrical phrase from Jorge Luis Borges “If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time” (1999, p. 1028). This anywhere-ness and the knowledge of our part in it is troublesome for us. It is inextricably linked to our desire to find meaning in the world, to make meaning out of our lives, because, as Sartre describes “Nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being – like a worm” (1956, p. 56).[xiv]

Barthes claims that the photographer cannot lead us to the *punctum*, “...imitating Orpheus, he must not turn back to look at what he is leading” (1981, p. 47) and the mythic reference to Orpheus' encounter with death is significant because it is our own mortality that is at play. The temporal displacement of the referent experienced by the viewer is individual to that viewer, but the effect is the same - our own potential to become 'that-has-been', the sense that this thing which is-no-longer, this thing that appears with such reality in the photograph, could be *me*, that my current present-ness can be undone via the same intractable machinations of time. By seeing the dead, the past, any kind of that-has-been, we recognise that we might be the same, but we are also at the same time able to access these things through a photograph, to travel back and forth from a time before our birth to witness the existence of things now passed and to project forward into a time when we too have passed. Or as Barthes describes it “obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic ecstasy” (1981, p 119).

The question remains - how might we evoke contingency in the world and in the

photograph without constructing it, or indexing it? Taking a cue from Borges' 'anywhere in time... anywhere in space' as the mantra of contingency, my speculative response in making *A Mirror With an Imagination* is that by displacing the context of time and space from my photographic compositions, their appearance might take on the form of contingency itself. This action of de-contextualisation serves the double purpose of stripping away the *studium,* and this results in the viewer's encounter with the maker's intentions becoming fraught with uncertainty. By negating the *studium* in this way the viewer is emancipated from the intentions of the maker to some degree and so this serves a similar purpose to the anti-theatrical gambit championed by Fried, and it is intended that this allows for a greater possibility for a personal and imaginative interaction with the available content. I speculate that when faced with an unrecognisable partial object, the imagination still engages as Sartre describes in *L'Imaginaire* and completes the object with information from within its own "melange of past impressions and recent knowledge" (2004, p. 90). Because there is less information readily available from the analogon to start with, it seems to me that the subjectivity and imaginative possibilities of the responses might be amplified. I take delight in the multiple responses to these images, for each of them is valid to that person's experience and therefore has an assured place in the wider picture of contingency.

VI. Light as Metaphor

It is one thing to speculate that such an approach is possible, but yet another to create it photographically. The fundamental operation of photography is to record a set of contingent facts about the world over a particular duration, but what subject might be recorded that speaks only to contingency and not to another, more concrete context? It certainly would have been possible to adopt a camera-less photographic approach, to fit the current vogue, and introduce some kind of arbitrary or contingent method within a darkroom or digital process. Figures VI. and- VII. are examples of experimental work made along these lines, exploiting technological or optical interferences in regular photographic processes to give an appearance that is unrecognisable or disguised from its subject.

There was a sense that these experiments came too easily and I felt that by veering so far from the kind of photography that Barthes writes about, I was doing a disservice to the spirit of the project. While these images work towards my desired intention, I felt a stronger case would be made by adhering to the kind of vernacular photographic mode Barthes was so fixated upon. My goal then, has been to take a naturalistic approach to photographing, what I describe as a vernacular approach to image-making both in a tribute to Barthes' own limitation and also as an acknowledgement that there are many other forms of photographs that might operate and be made in different ways, such as the works just discussed by other artists, as well as my own. It seemed to me important that the everyday nature of contingency, our utter immersion in it, was an aspect of the work and so I sought it out in the everyday. This is not to say that the photographs that make up *A Mirror With An Imagination* necessarily correspond to what we normally think of as vernacular photography in terms of their appearance, but nevertheless, they correspond to the everyday in their invocation of the miasma of contingency in which we swim, as that is where they were found.

As an art audience we are used to an encounter with the inexplicable, with a puzzle to solve, as an opacity of intention is present in many works we see. This is, for the art world, just part of its continual process of sophistication. But it is for this reason that I never felt that there was one image that achieved what I wanted to independently of others. The mysterious lack of context in one image can always be attributed a particular meaning,

because any content at all in an image can be attributed a meaning through reflection on its formal qualities and how they relate to the history of the medium. By making a collection of images with varying degrees of inscrutability, any one interpretation available for an image might be undermined by the presence of another image that creates a tension with that reading. The variety within the series creates a spectrum of approachability which is, I think, necessary for it to detach itself from the beholder's skill at contextualising. This is why not all images take place in a dark field, not all are monochrome. It is why some are made up of objects people might at least nominally recognise, while others they might struggle to describe outside of their formal qualities. This is why some images have a sense of the dramatic, while others are more demure and seemingly impassive. The selection and display choices of the work all aim towards this outcome and attempt to hinder any attempted narrative interpretation.

The resistance to context and subject requires a paradoxical balance, as there is still the intent that the photographs unify into a picture of contingency that the viewer might connect with. In undertaking my vernacular project in pursuit of this I still felt that I needed a subject to look for, to make the exploration possible for me in a practical sense, even though it was obvious that the particular subject matter I would photograph was in many respects rendered arbitrary. While reflecting on this it occurred to me that fundamental to the form of photography was light. It is, of course, tautological to say that photography is about light; if you are going to make photographs about anything at all, then they are still going to be about light. For this reason, light was inescapable as a subject and I needed to use light for my purposes, to find a way to photograph that treated light as an aspect of the contingent.

To call these vernacular then, is to insist that these light-forms are what can be encountered out in the world. I posit that there is a drama and mystery to the world that is occasionally captured by vernacular photography and that this work is an abstraction or amplification of those aspects. The removal of context and attention to small dramas of light give the images a sense of modernism's priority of form over content, but this is not necessarily the case here. The content certainly nods to the form. The attention to the interplay between light and dark is an acknowledgement of the magnificent unity between those two opposites that makes photography possible. But there is more, the stated vernacular approach suggests a unity between these fundamental components of the photograph and with the subject matter of the vernacular, with everyday life.

The necessity of light to the photograph appealed to me in its symmetry with the contingent. Both are inescapable aspects of photography and yet both require their opposites for this to be possible. The photograph is notable because it renders invisible the necessary components of the world and makes visible the contingent.[xv] In order for a photograph to be made, we need a camera, literally a dark space, by which the entry of light makes a photograph. The making of every photograph requires balance between the opposites of light and dark and the tension between these, the drama that plays out between them, is what constitutes the formal qualities of any photograph. It seemed unavoidable, within the inner logic of my project, that this tension become a proxy for my subject.

Light, it might also be noted, is the ultimate contingent fact for us. Without the light of the Sun, without our planet's suitable distance from this source of energy, our existence would not be possible. It is a remarkable alignment of contingent facts that is required for humanity to emerge from the cold emptiness of space, but the central one is the present and very finite burning of the Sun. Blaise Pascal notes in *Penseés:*

> *when I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill and even can see,*

> *engulfed in the immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me? The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread* (1983, p. 36).

When reading Pascal I think not only of the silence, but also of the darkness of those same spaces. To consider the possible contingent alternative of this universe without our Sun, is to consider the ultimate possibility of self-negation.

If the intent is for people to encounter contingency in my photographs by bringing their own imaginative content to the images, then it seems propitious for the formal qualities of the images to work towards this. The tension between light and dark is suitably resonant in this way. Indeed, light and dark are near ubiquitous in their metaphorical usage, from mythology and creation stories, to literature, films and other arts. John Harvey, in his investigation *The Story of Black* (2015), identifies this in his concluding remarks regarding our conception of the Christian God's existence as the source and giver of life, reason and morality all symbolically unified in the concept of the giver of light, who yet exists in the absolute darkness from which He created the universe. It seems to me then, that by recording the drama between light and dark that I encounter in the everyday, I might produce images that were suitably open to subjective interpretation, but also ripe with metaphor.

This is a near-complete picture of my method, a somewhat subversive approach to vernacular photography where I photograph what I might encounter through an unconstructed and unmodified photography of the everyday, as I experience it. The techniques used to occlude the context from my images I chose to limit in a way that Barthes, in his pre-digital photograph milieu, might respect. Which is to say that I relied upon manipulations inherent in the traditional camera, lens and light sensitive media combination that have been consistent throughout the history of photography; monochromatic rendering, precise control of exposure length to limit or enhance what is visible, limited depth of field and selective framing or composition. To return to the by-now well-trampled example of the dirt road, I was putting myself in Kertész' shoes, but trying to photograph just the light, on the dirt, on the road, beneath the feet of the blind violinist, in Hungary.

Such images are not easy to find. My refusal to construct or even recreate an encountered or imagined light episode, in staying true to my search for what I considered to be the contingent in the everyday, meant that it was not easy to plan a shoot in the way that a photographer might normally do. I could not choose a location, go there at an agreeable time and make an image as foreseen. A sense of contingency as chance permeated the project in this way. It was up to me to look and through my own peripatetic looking, find a clue or hint of what I might be after. I would then attempt to turn this into a photograph, this sometimes happened in a straightforward way, but at other times involved the repeated return to a discovered scene, to make many iterations of an image until I felt I had succeeded. Figures VIII-X show a series of attempts before achieving the outcome of one of the final images in *A Mirror With An Imagination*.

Despite this difficulty, my method resonates with me because of this sense of chance, this stumbling upon what is for me a complete image out in the world, in the same way that Barthes seemed to stumble upon the detail in an image in his descriptions in *Camera Lucida*. I am aware that some of these choices of method might seem arbitrary, and despite

that sense of the arbitrary fitting with the wider project, one might be inclined to ask, what would it look like if you had made one of these choices differently? That is a legitimate question to raise when considering the work. *A Mirror With An Imagination* is representative of my own interests, both as a photographer and as a person. What has caught my eye and how I have chosen to record it is made up of my own personal history and it is unavoidable that this forms a type of *studium* in the photographs as a series. But each individual photograph, within that, is then representative of a *punctum*-like experience. Each one is a detail that has absorbed me, has emerged out of the milieu of my experience and provoked a response. The refinement of my working method has sought to retain the presence of this detail, while isolating it from the wider world in which it was encountered. Within this activity I speculate that there is a kind of equivalence with the subjective operation of the *punctum* experience of the viewer. As I have described above, Barthes insists that an actual overlap of *punctum* experience between maker and observer is unlikely, primarily due to our inescapably subjective experience. This tentative equivalence I describe is as close to bridging the gap of intention and effect as I can achieve, so it is my hope that within the presence of the work the viewer might find something that fascinates them also.

VI. Above and beyond

These *punctum*esque responses to the world that I sought out are influenced by a number of factors that might be worthy of discussion, because their influences can be seen in the resulting work and might help to explain its appearance further for the curious viewer. There is the influence of the minimalist movement in my thinking around the content of the work coming out only through its observation by a viewer, but the influence of some of the formal qualities of minimalism are also present in *A Mirror With An Imagination*. I think this is partly unavoidable given my adherence to the de-contextualising of subject which tends towards a spare or formal appearance in the photograph. There are photographic precedents to this that it would be worth acknowledging here, firstly in the work of Andreas Gursky and also in that of Hiroshi Sugimoto.

While Gursky's wider catalogue is often associated with themes of globalisation, of commerce and technology, it is clear that like Jeff Wall he is also working directly in response to art historical references (Fried, 2008). His now famous mural-sized prints provide a photographic answer to the scale of 19th Century landscape painting, while his inclusion of great excesses of detail is reminiscent of the Flemish Brueghels. But the formal qualities of his work is often times distinctly reminiscent of abstract paintings by Malevich, Newman or Noland, and the all-overness of detail in other images is seemingly so heavily indebted to Pollock that he has reproduced an entire work of Pollock's as *Untitled VI.* (1997). Also present is a preoccupation with the horizontal that is clearly influenced by the minimalist movement and particularly Donald Judd (ibid).

Despite introducing elements of enormous scale and the collation of detail in works such as *99 Cents* (1999) or *Albertville* (1992) that separate these scenes from their everyday appearance, the works declare their content to the viewer immediately (Maggia in Hapkemeyer, 2005). But many other examples of his work use techniques of photographic abstraction to a greater degree. *Rhein II* (1999, Figure XI.) achieves this outcome through the acknowledged removal of the 'stuff of photographs', which in this case would detract from the intended minimalist formal qualities. Within the photograph we can recognise a moving body of water, but aside from this it is reduced to a series of bands of colour and would be far less effective if the skyline were cluttered with the buildings present in the real scene. But there are other Gursky compositions that achieve a similar outcome using a

method very much aligned to the practical aspects of my own approach. One such example is *Dusselstrand* (1996, Figure XII.), an image whose frame is entirely filled with a non-slip rubber pool mat, giving it the formal quality of an endless field of alternating black and yellow stripes. For some viewers such a mat might be familiar enough for the subject to be identifiable, but for many others there is no available avenue into the photograph other than to remark on the effect of its formal qualities (ibid).

This tension between abstraction and the recognisable is essential to my approach and the variety within the series is designed to allow for both recognisable encounters and unrecognisable encounters, across the images and across different viewers. Like Gursky, I am also influenced in what is of visible interest to me by my own knowledge and fascination with particular movements within art history. When I am attracted to an encounter with light and drawn to photograph it as I have described above, this is often not just because it triggers a response to a sense of contingency, but also because it might possess formal qualities that are reminiscent of significant parts of my own visual history. While I have restricted myself from so directly referencing moments in art history to the extent that Gursky does, lest the series too readily become 'about' that for the viewer, some of the particularities of my choices are recognisably guided by an admiration for the formal aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and even the adoption of the Brueghelesque alien perspective as we see in some of Gursky's compositions. In selecting the final set of photographs there were images that I chose to exclude because they spoke to some of these influences, or even Gursky himself, in too direct a manner (see Figure XIII).

Hiroshi Sugimoto's work also serves as a precedent. His photographic engagements with representation in his *Dioramas* (2014) series speak to a complicated relationship between the viewer and the intentions of the photographer, but it is his conceptual engagements with time and light that are most significant. In his series of pictures made of cinemas such as *Castro Theatre* (1992, Figure XIV), the conceptual relationship between the duration of a film and the light in the resulting image has a disarming symmetry. The stated method is that the exposure of the photograph consists of the entire duration of a film, so that the cinema is lit in the final photograph by the light emitted through the showing of the film. However, this length of exposure and the constant movement on the screen means that the screen itself is blanked into a glowing rectangle of light, making the film itself invisible. The resulting photograph is then an inversion of what someone present in the theatre would see, as the surrounds of the cinema are too dim to perceive in any given moment during a film and the content on the screen itself is designed to be the sole focus.

This conceptual sense of the work is also present in Sugimoto's *Sea pieces* (Figure XV), another series of images showing iterations of the same category of subject and recorded in the same way. These long exposures of different sea views from around the world always appear in black and white and with the horizon precisely in the centre of the frame. Their abstract appearance and fascination with the horizontal evoke similar themes to some of Gursky's work and share his unusual raised perspective point, but their relationship with time is again most remarkable. As with the cinemas, Sugimoto uses a conceptual inversion of the properties of his scene to achieve his outcome. By making a long exposure of something never completely still, the ocean, the resulting photographs contain both evidence of the relentless movement of the water while also rendering it still. The calm, meditative quality of the works and the consistency of their appearance evokes that same Borgesian “anywhere in time, anywhere in space” that has served as my own inspiration. As Peter Weiermair remarks about Sugimoto “in accordance with Japan’s aesthetic traditions, (he) finds his theme in timelessness. Klaus Honnef, the photography critic, has remarked: 'What counts is not what has just now happened. It is rather that which is, is what was. In other

words: the endurance of the past within the present'" (in Hapkemeyer, 2005, p. 60).

It is clear to see the theme of contingency present in these works, not just through the iterative variations present in their Becherian indexicality, but also in their conceptual formulation which actively *excludes* the majority of contingent facts present in the photographed scene. It is also evident in Sugimoto's own statements; his artist text for the exhibition *Aujord'hui, le monde est mort [Lost Human Genetic Archive]* reads "today the world died. Or maybe yesterday. I don't know" (Ottmann, 2015, p. 12). The use of light and time is crucial to the conceptual workings of Sugimoto's photographs and their timeless quality is manifested as a spare or minimalist aesthetic that also contributes to their sense of the sublime. Sugimoto's meditative inversions and unifying of opposites - such as the dissolution of the demarcation between heaven and earth in his 'sea pieces' (Weiermair in Hapkemeyer, 2005) and placement of light in his 'theatres' – all serve to give an impression beyond our normal perception and of forces which dwarf human activity. Likewise, his non-photographic artworks such as his *Conceptual Forms* and *Mathematical Models* (2015) again offer themes of things existent either outside of, or through time, things bigger than us or beyond our control, though interestingly their subject matter of mathematical concepts speak directly to the necessary and so are contrasted with the contingency I've described. The sense of the forces governing our universe, the encounter with things bigger than us that is associated with the sublime is inclusive of the encounters with contingency prominent in Sugimoto's work and also in *A Mirror With An Imagination*.

The approach to contingency in my work is, by association with it as a force seemingly bigger than us and beyond our control, united with a sense of the sublime. Contingency, as the manifestation of a sublime force, seems to me to contain within itself both the calm properties of Sugimoto's work as well as the chaotic self-destructive energy of a Jackson Pollock. I think it can be both beautiful and ugly, and so I sought out a tension between these elements in my image making. Some feature the all-overness of a Pollock, the *de trop* of Sartre, while others speak more to the calm serenity of Sugimoto. My way of measuring success in the assessment of my own work was to see if the encounter with an image resulted not in a sense of the beautiful rendered out of the mundane of the everyday, but in both an ineffable quality and a desire to reach beyond the image to something else. A sense of the sublime thus became my final approach to the project. As with other aspects of the work, such as the visual artistic influences and the concentration on light as a formal quality, it is important that not every image in the series speaks too directly to the sublime, lest that be read too strictly as the intention of the work. Nevertheless, my fascination with the everyday as permeated by a sublime contingency and the ability of photography as a medium of recording this is, it is hoped, provocative of the experience of these ideas in the viewer of the work.

In the light of all of these ideas, it should be clear to the reader that in re-examining the photographs of *A Mirror With An Imagination* they are free to engage their imagination and speculate upon the meaning within the context of their own experience of the world. The sliver of a shadow on the edge of a poster might now take on a new meaning, is it a shadow of doubt? The beholder is free to speculate that they are seeing the edge of a planet from the distance of space, or a fingertip, or both. They might make a phenomenological response to the dual misty reds, a sense of embodied knowledge turns them into lungs or even a flush of rage. They might allow that the portals between light and dark remind them of the strange metaphysics of Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, or Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The array of texture and suggested movement in the scales of white and black might make them remark on the mixing of binaries, on the presence of grey, or the endless tension between good and evil in human morality. The sparks of a fire might

now speak to the nostalgia of camp fire stories but also of entropy or Shelley's P*rometheus Unbound*. All of these responses, and many others, are welcome.

When considering some of Barthes' examples in Camera Lucida, it is hard to imagine how the photographer might respond favourably to his' *punctum* as he experiences it. When I consider Barthes confronting Kertész and saying “Yes! That road beneath the gypsy violinist, it is *so* Hungarian village.” I can only imagine Kertész looking back bewildered and answering “well... yes... of course”. The *punctum,* as Barthes describes it, is poetry in another language. It is not translatable. This is why he does not bother to reproduce the *Winter Garden Photograph*. By bridging the gap between the maker's intentions and the viewer's engagement of their imagination, it is my hope to make work that empathises with the audience, celebrates the subjectivity of our different experiences without that forming a boundary between us, but instead bringing us together in the contingent situation that we all share.

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Conclusion

In *Roland Barthes On Photography: The Critical Tradition In Perspective* (1997) Nancy Shawcross points out that historically, photography has been associated with the metonym, it has been placed in a binary opposition to the metaphorical, where art and imagination hold sway. Even if photography's subsequent acceptance into the art world is no longer worth remarking upon, there is still a sense that photography's place in the art world is reliant on its indexicality, on its observance of the banal, or on its ability to project constructed reality as if it were not constructed. Contrary to this, my images are an attempt to bring the metonym and the metaphor together and to enable an imaginative and metaphorical engagement with the presence of light and dark.

Through an examination of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981) I came to be interested in how looking at photographs engages with the concept of the contingent in our experience and also in the way that the making of photographs is subject to the same contingency. What we might learn from an examination of this and from reflection on Barthes' elucidation of the *punctum* effect is that the imaginary resemblances of metaphor might fall over when the connection between photograph and subject are too secure, too direct (Shawcross, 1997). But this research perhaps shows why, when we encounter a photographer's intentions in a photograph, our ability to engage our imagination and make more out of the photograph than what we are given can be limited to remarking on small details which we think operate outside of the those intentions. It might be said then, that this is what *A Mirror With An Imagination* is about. Is the ontology of the photographic an obstacle to its metaphorical use, is the remarking on big themes of good and evil, life and death too much to bear in our observable, everyday, lived experience?

The work I have made attempts to learn from Barthes' impassioned analysis of photography and while at odds with many of his examples and parts of his discussion, I think it expresses something that he found in photography that resonates throughout our experience. It is only now that I close *Camera Lucida* for the first time in a while that I see and remember the Daniel Boudinet photograph that makes up the first page (Figure XVI.). This is the only image Barthes included in colour and the only image in the book he never mentions. I stare at it and feel something akin to what I feel when looking at my own photographs and, after some time has passed, a further strange feeling of a connection with Barthes across the temporal and mortal schism that divides us.

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Appendix

Images are my own unless attributed otherwise.

Figure I. André Kertész, *The Blind Violinist*, Abony, Hungary, 1921.

Figure II. *Pricks*

Figure III. *Discontinuity*

Figure IV. *Street Photography*

Figure V. Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982.

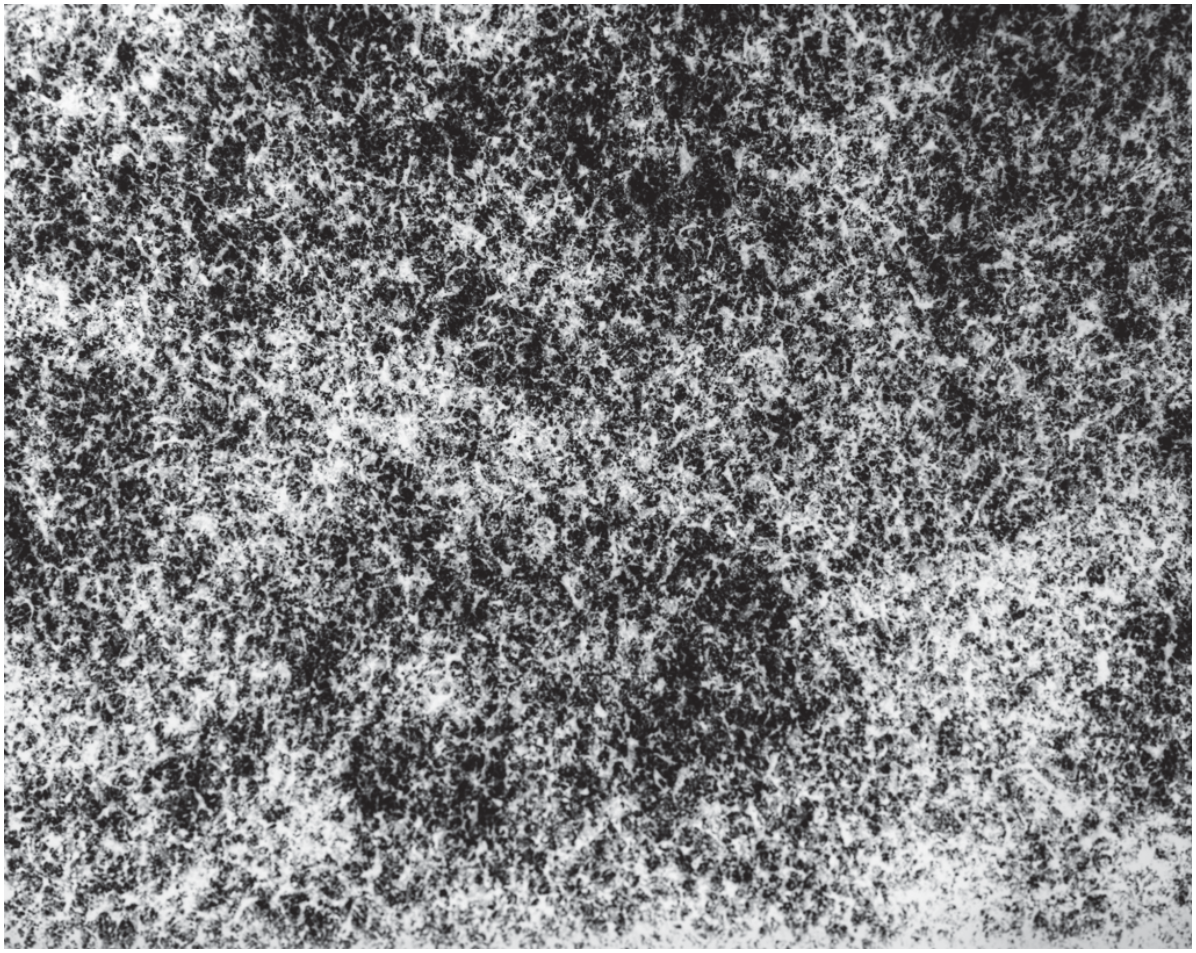

Figure VI. Silver gelatin photogram.

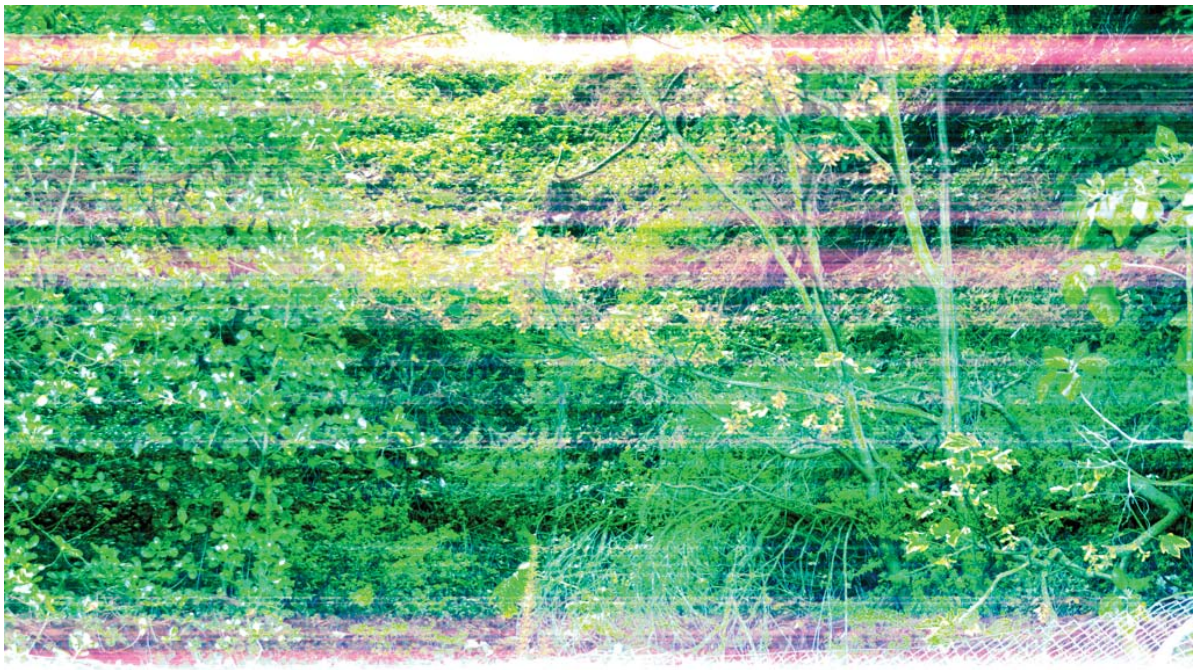

Figure VII. *Technological Intervention*

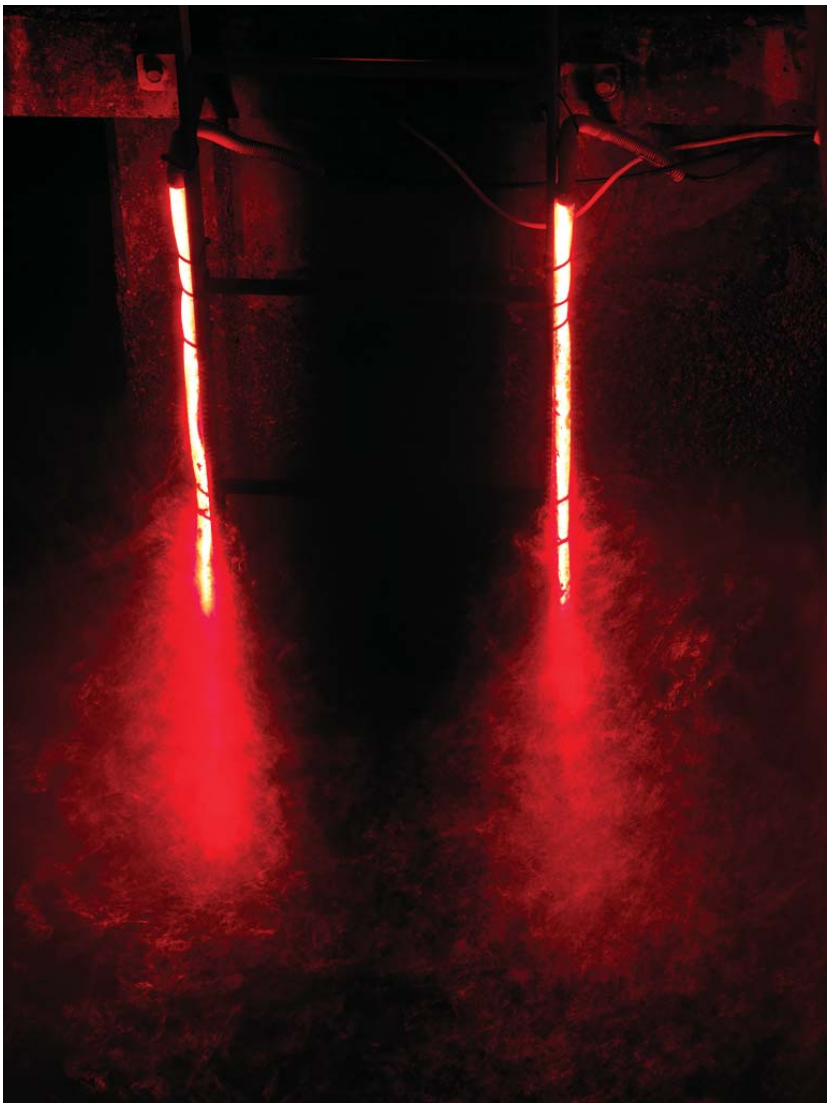

Figure VIII. *Red Study I*

Figure IX. *Red Study II*

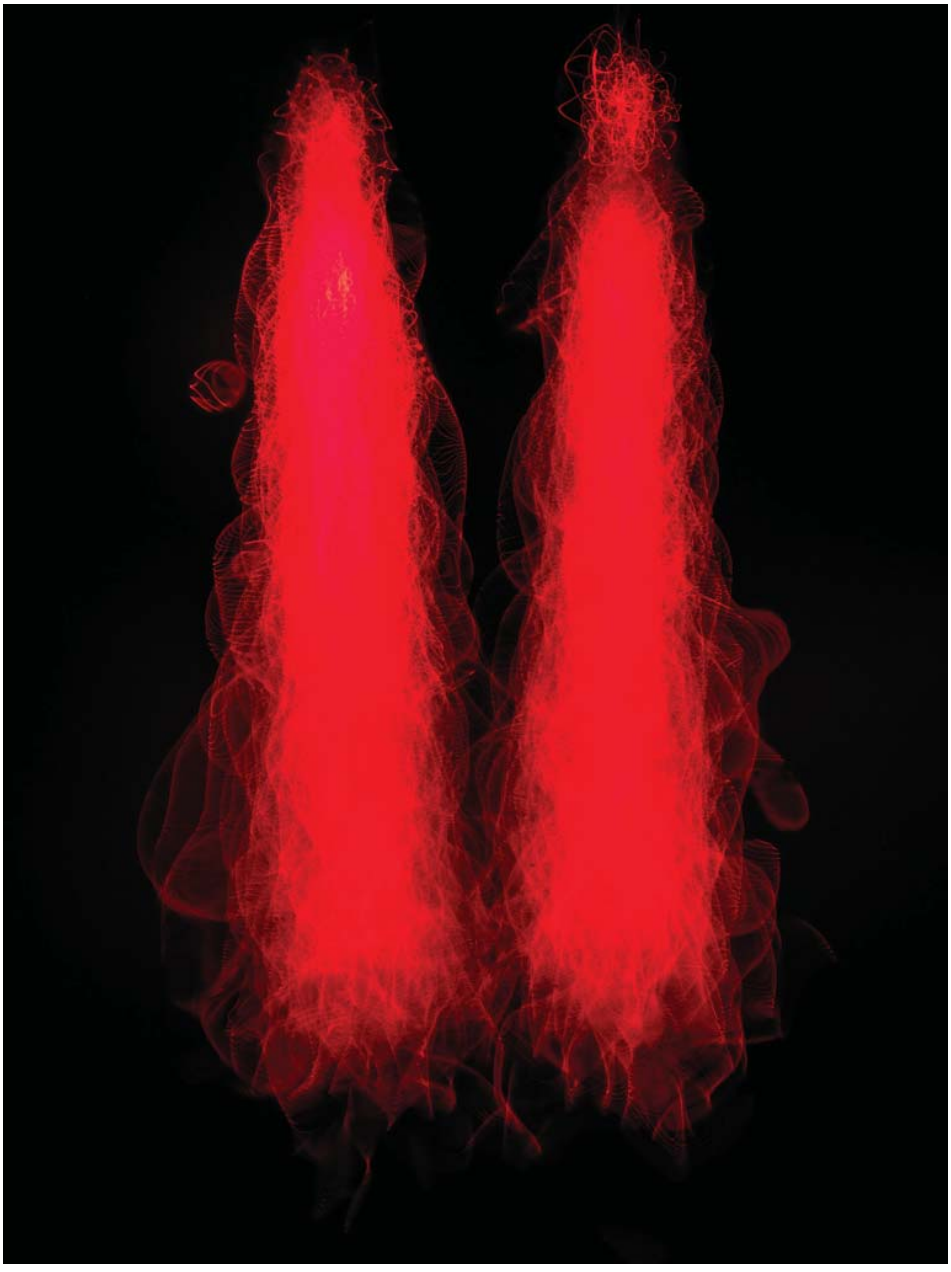

Figure X. *Red Study III.*

Figure XI. Andreas Gursky, *Rhein II.* (1999)

Figure XII. Andreas Gursky, *Düsselstrand* (1996).

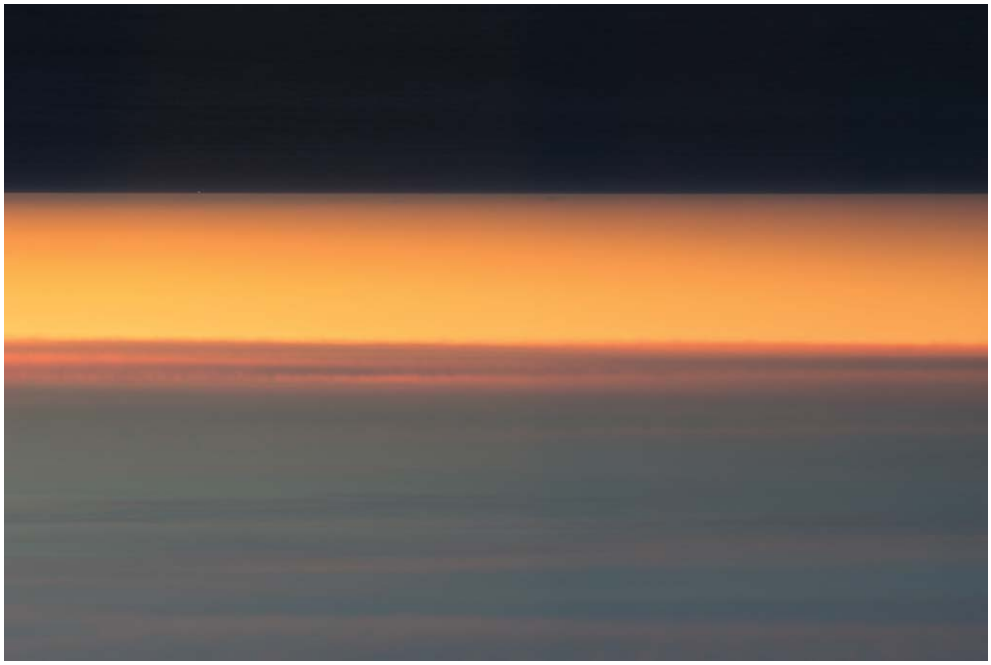

Figure XIII. *Blue, Orange, Grey*

Figure XIV. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Castro Theatre,* (1992).

Figure XV. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Baltic Sea, near Rügen*, (1996).

Figure XVI. Daniel Boudinet, *Polaroid*. 1979.

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[i] At first the viewer might be tempted to say that they are about light, but this is true of all photographs, a point I will return to later.

[ii] It is important to note that Barthes readily admits to not being a photographer himself, so his discussion never visits the extent to which the photographer has control over what their photograph includes. Control over framing, perspective, lens length and the resulting expansion or compression of spatial relationships, exposure and depth of field all serve to give some control over what is visible to the viewer of the final image. Further to this, post production techniques originally in the printing darkroom and now in the digital realm also give the photographer increasing control over what is removed or added to a composition. As consumers of photographs we are educated in this expanding ontological grey area of the faithfulness of the representation, but the action of the camera remains, in its nature, one that is biased towards inclusion. Because of this, the photographer only has nominal control over what might be present to the viewer, there is always, as Diane Arbus noted in the behaviour of her own photographic subjects, "a gap between intention and effect" (in Fried, 2008 p. 207).

[iii] For example the Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of Philip Glass and Bob Wilson, where Wilson's 'look' transfixes him but he can't say why (1981, p. 51), the discussion of Nadar's image of Savorgnan de Brazza (ibid) and James Van der Zee's *Family Portrait* (1981, p.43).

[iv] "I had perhaps learned how my desire worked, but I had not discovered the nature (the *eidos*) of photography. I had to grant that my pleasure was an imperfect mediator, and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognise the universal." (1981, p. 60)

[v] In his critical essay *Barthes's Punctum* in his book *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (2008) Michael Fried has made great effort to show that Barthes' "probably" in "the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so" (1981, p. 47) provides leeway for the photographer to make images that have the appearance of not being made-to-be-seen. The crucial point for Fried is that if the image doesn't have the appearance of being made to be looked at, if the subject does not appear to recognise or acknowledge the presence of the camera, then as a viewer we are able to join in the charade that we are observing a naturalistic scene.

[vi] The problem for Fried is that the same short sections about intentionality in *Camera Lucida* could just as easily be made into an argument for the position held by those that Fried describes as 'Literalists'. Unlike the anti-theatrical current whereby the constitutive elements of the work by the maker are made palatable to the viewer by their obsequious observance to not appearing only for the viewer's sake, the position of Minimalists as Fried describes it is that the meaning of the work is only made when the viewer experiences the work (2008). The work itself is not imbued with meaning by the maker. I don't think this is Barthes' intent, but it remains a problem for Fried's interpretation if his key passage could just as easily work towards an opposing argument.

[vii] While necessary facts about the world, that 2+2=4 for instance, do not change over time, contingent facts do. A contingent fact is one such as that 27 other people were on the bus with me this morning. It might easily have been different, there might have been just one person on the bus, or 24, but the nature of the world would not be different in these cases. If 2+2 no longer equalled four, then the whole nature of the universe would be different. So the fact that all bachelors are unmarried (to use a famous philosophical example) cannot change, but that a particular person, John, is a bachelor currently, can change if he were to be married.

[viii] While Barthes prefers the phrases of 'the temporal' and 'that-has-been' in the majority of his discussion, he does use the term contingency (or at least his translator does) several times in Part One. It appears in the leading sentences of two of his early sections, where he says "Since the Photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else (it is always *something* that is represented)" (1981. p.28) and then later "Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask." (1981, p. 34). He uses these sentences at the start of sections that deal with particular aspects of looking at photographs, without saying any more specifically about this sense of contingency, so it seems to me that these are a form of foreshadowing for his later speculations, if not wholesale assumptions. It might be surmised that his identification with the that-has-been as *punctum* is within this sense of the contingent and he is identifying something more acute with his temporal examples. But it seems to me that any moves he makes beyond this are overly reductionist for a project attempting to find the essence of photography.

[ix] The chapter by Fried in *Photography Degree Zero* (2009) which Elkins cites here contains an identical argument to the chapter in Fried's own *Why Photography Matters As Art Now As Never Before* (2008) that I have cited.

[x] Elkins is critical of Barthes for limiting his discussion to what he calls vernacular photography. He writes "Photography is domestic and domesticated in *Camera Lucida* because it is identified with what is called vernacular photography... Barthes is attracted to pictures of race, of mental debilitation, of romantically lost places and people, and above all to pictures of what he thinks are unusual costumes, demeanors and faces." (2009, p.175) Elkins makes the point that even vernacular photography can be expanded beyond Barthes' own narrow view and that certainly photography in general stretches far beyond what Barthes cares to discuss. He then cites numerous scientific uses and artistic uses well-removed from Barthes' sense of 'that-has-been' as evidence.

[xi] Thus his description of this action is essentially identical to Barthes' "emanation of the referent".

[xii] Perhaps Barthes thought this an obvious point and not worth stating explicitly, but the amount of critical analysis since the publication of *Camera Lucida*, much of which questions these aspects of the work suggests to me that it is not. In fact, excluding their fellow Frenchman Rabaté, very little of the responses to *Camera Lucida* make any meaningful discussion of the shared ground between Barthes and Sartre.

[xiii] This sense of the contingency of nature is not something that cannot be expressed by other art forms, but it is intrinsic to photography, because it emerges out of its very operation. When a painter sets out to paint a scene, even while they are painting, they might study it and make choices as to what they include and exclude. Even if they attempt to include everything visible in the finest detail, there is a fallibility at play, they might miss something. But more than that, there is an intentionality at play. When we look at Matisse's *Red Studio*, we are secure in the knowledge that everything which appears in the painting is representative of something Matisse chose to include. The chair would not be present if he did not intend it and implicit in this is the possibility that another chair might have been present in his studio at the time of painting, but he chose not include it. Photography operates differently. The ontological relationship between the photograph and the world results in a faithful rendering of what was present, within the technical limitations of the equipment. It is true, as of the realist painter, that some details may be too small to make out, or may be occluded by exposure, depth of field and framing. Nevertheless, each thing in the frame is there because it was visible to the camera, not because it was necessarily visible to and consciously included by the photographer. A photograph then, is in some ways emancipated from its maker in a way that a painting is not, so long as we believe in the authenticity of that ontological relationship. When a photograph is made, the frame is filled with Sartre's *de trop*, the stuff of the world rushes in to fill it up to the brim, it overflows with contingent matter. Implicit in our recognition of this contingency is the recognition that the photographer can't possibly have been able to take all this in, that unlike Matisse they never had the opportunity to include or exclude everything visible in the resulting photograph. There is a sense in which Fried is right, this effect might be lessened if we recognise that this stuff has been added intentionally, because we experience this naturalistically in the world, we expect to see it naturalistically in a faithful representation also. But Elkins is also correct that this contingent aspect of the world evident in photographs is "wider and wilder" than a vernacular or an anti-theatrical art photography can control.

[xiv] Sartre tackled this topic extensively in both his philosophical work and literary fiction. His most well-regarded novel *La Nausee'* is an extended narrative of the existential angst emergent in the protagonist due to a recognition of the *de trop* of the world, the too-muchness, and of his own part within it.

[xv] We cannot make a photograph of all bachelors, but we can make a photograph of John, a particular bachelor. But his presence within that image qua bachelor is incoherent without the invisible necessary concept, the subject of the photograph would not be possible without the necessary concept to inform its content.