

# *The Invisible World of Images. From “Nonhuman” to “Undigital” Photography in Joanna Zylińska’s Reflections*

**ABSTRACT.** Zawojski Piotr, *The Invisible World of Images. From “Nonhuman” to “Undigital” Photography in Joanna Zylińska’s Reflections*. “Images” vol. XXXI, no. 40. Poznań 2022. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 13–36. ISSN 1731-450X. DOI 10.14746/i.2022.40.01.

The article presents the theoretical views and, to a lesser extent, artistic practices of Joanna Zylińska, who in her artistic activity combines epistemological strategies of a researcher and theorist with her activities in the field of art. She develops in different manners an original project of philosophy as photography, or photography as a form of philosophizing. Posthumanist and post-anthropocentric inspirations and the inclusion of her reflections in a wider circle of a nonhuman turn constitute an epistemological framework of numerous statements devoted to the “photographic condition” in the age of dominance of digital technologies. The author argues that, in fact, photography has been a nonhuman practice since its beginnings, which is developed in her book *Nonhuman Photography*, preceded by the concepts of mediation and photomediation. In her latest proposals addressing the issues of the functioning of art in the era of algorithmic systems, the author develops the concept of undigital photography, which constitutes an extension of thinking about those manifestations of photography that are not of/by/for the human. The idea of “vision machines” (once proposed by Paul Virilio) takes the form of a holistic view of photography as a “medium of life,” which, unlike modernist descriptions of it as a “medium of death” (Roland Barthes), makes a significant contribution to both the theory and the history of photography. The synthetic presentation of Zylińska’s concepts is an attempt to describe and interpret the contemporary state of theoretical and methodological awareness in the field of contemporary image studies. It stems from the need to constantly reinterpret the canon of thinking about the medium of photography in the epoch of cooperation between human and non-human agencies in the area of pictorial production of images addressed to both people and machines.

**KEYWORDS:** Joanna Zylińska, photography, photomediations, nonhuman photography, digital image, undigital photography

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

all photographers today, I wanted to consider that maybe all humans are to some extent nonhuman, running on algorithms as much as exercising their own “individualism.” If not, then how come most people’s Instagram feeds or wedding photographs look almost the same? Again, it’s a certain provocation, you can call it an intellectual joke, but it’s a serious joke aimed at getting people to think about how we produce culture, and how we think about, but also with, machines.[1]

Joanna Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*

In a short self-presentation posted on her website, Joanna Zylinska outlines the foundations of her own research, which focuses on the issue of the constitution of humans as a species and a historical subject in combination with surrounding technologies. In particular, media technologies considered in a philosophical, theoretical-cultural and ethical perspective should be distinguished. Questioning the uniqueness of humans and situating them in the environment of non-human beings, taking into account thinking about the Anthropocene (or maybe already the Novacene), she devotes her attention to the issues of mechanically produced images, including, first and foremost, photography, which plays an important role in the formation of the human in the processes of constant mediation.

At the beginning of these considerations, it is worth emphasizing the specificity of her attitude as a researcher, and also as an artist, because Zylinska combines these two spheres of activity in a consistent way, trying to develop and implement an original form of philosophical and artistic reflections in which the weave of theory and practice is a distinguishing feature of her attitude as a thinker addressing the key issues of the epoch of expanding media technologies. She declares:

My method of working combines philosophical enquiry with artistic practice which involves still and moving images. I see this hybrid mode of enquiry as being more conducive to the interrogation of complex issues that need to be thought about, sensed and encountered as part of the same cognitive space. By looking from below, around and askew, I aim to offer a critical vision that refracts the current images of the world as we know it – and that offers a glimpse of a world to come.[2]

It is not surprising that, being already a recognized researcher of new media issues and working on the book *Bioethic in the Age of New Media*,[3] she began studying photography at the University of Westminster, which she graduated from in 2009 when the book was

[1] A. Dewdney, *Nonhuman Photography: An Interview with Joanna Zylinska*, <<https://unthinking.photography/articles/interview-with-joanna-zylinska>>, accessed: 25.10.2021.

[2] J. Zylinska, *Philosophy/Method/Practice*, <<http://www.joannazyllinska.net/my-philosophy/>>, accessed: 25.10.2021.

[3] Eadem, *Bioethic in the Age of New Media*, Cambridge MA – London 2009.

published. Practicing philosophy in her understanding also means practicing photography, or in other words, treating photography as a different/new form of practicing philosophy, creative and critical involvement in the usage of new technologies in order to be able to look at the issues of photographic mediation not only from the position of a theoretician distanced and devoid of practical competences but also of a photographic practitioner. It is a very conscious choice of research strategy, but also a choice of a particular methodological attitude which somehow reverses the vector dominant in contemporary activities, primarily of new media artists, who very often enter the areas of theorizing on the basis of their own creative experiences. Such conceptualization can take place both *ex ante* and *ex post*, but most often it is about building a kind of theoretical foundation for one's own artistic practice. In this case, the situation was different because here the "theoretician by education" undertakes "artistic" studies so as to be able to develop and expand her theoretical skills with practical knowledge of photographic tools and the effects of their work and, as a result, to be able to use the camera (or various media cameras) as a useful means of analyzing and interpreting the image in the digital epoch. "I started incorporating photography and photographic reflection into my own philosophical writings, as a way of philosophizing with a camera as much as with a pen or keyboard"[4] – claims Zylinska. Elsewhere, she adds that theory as a form of creative practice, the desire to express oneself and express one's own concepts in a medium other than just the word, is a kind of polemical position in relation to the limitations of contemporary humanist reflection.[5]

Therefore, it is not only a matter of expanding one's own activity to the area of artistic practices but about creating a kind of cognitive theory hybrid, in which it is no longer possible to separate the sphere of strictly artistic activities from the work of a theoretician of culture and media. In this sense, it is an innovative approach and results in original works, although most of all in the field of theoretical recognitions, because the artistic and aesthetic values of the author's projects sometimes seem to be debatable. Which, after all, can be considered an integral component inscribed in the formula of experimental hybrid reflection, one in which traditional academic discourse is somehow broken from the inside by non-discursive photographic (and film) practices being an attempt to challenge the hegemony of the word as the basic means to describe and interpret phenomena of contemporary technoculture.

In a conversation mainly concerning the book entitled *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*,[6] inspired by Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Zylinska emphasizes that her turn towards ethical reflections on human

[4] J. Lovejoy, K.P. Testa, *Beyond the Humanist Eye: In Conversation with Joanna Zylinska*, "The Vassar College Journal of Philosophy" 2019, no. 6, p. 83.

[5] A. Dewdney, op.cit.; J. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, Ann Arbor 2014.

[6] J. Zylinska, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, Ann Arbor 2014.

responsibility for the future fate of the human is not a normative vision designing scenarios of necessary political actions. An ethical perspective should precede the sphere of political action and determine its pragmatic dimension. Here, too, once again, an interpretation of her artistic activity appears, which she treats as a new means of expression for the philosopher and theorist of culture.

With my visual practice I am not attempting to just illustrate a theoretical argument but rather to give images and visuality the same valence that words have and to think about how we can philosophize with different media.[7]

Moving within the framework of Science and Technology Studies (STS) (as well as outside it), the author refers to the background of social theories, cultural studies and feminist discourses. This crossing of borders, transdisciplinarity and the search for a new model of creating knowledge about the world of the human integrally intertwined with technology are undoubtedly the hallmark of Zylinska's research strategy. When we read her "scientific essay" entitled *The End of Man. A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, we understand perfectly well that this formula is a kind of game with the convention of speech based solely on the foundation of the word. Zylinska explains it as follows:

Although this book uses a scholarly essay as its medium, it has been my ambition for a while now to try and outline a theoretical argument with media other than just words. In this case my photo film *Exit Man* offers an extension to my counter-apocalyptic narrative. *Exit Man* uses my own photographs drawn from a kind of "local museum of the Anthropocene" I have been building for several years, and supplements them with some archival images. It also features a voiceover, reworked from the key threads of this book. The reasons for attempting this distributed mode of thinking that spills beyond the covers of the book, or the lines of code of its digital file, are multifold.[8]

*Exit Man* is a photo film accompanying this publication, consisting of photographs taken by the author and various archival materials forming a kind of "private museum of the Anthropocene," which presents a counterapocalyptic visual story supplemented by voiceover narration presenting the key threads contained in the book in a concise way. The book and the photo film complement each other, refer to each other, constitute a kind of hybrid experiment at the junction of art, literature and philosophy. This small book can be read in both an online and a traditional form. It appeared in the Forerunners series: Ideas First, which popularizes works devoted to the most topical issues of contemporaneity. What distinguishes them in a special way is their form, which could be described as "grey literature,"[9] but not in the

[7] L.B. Valero, *Joanna Zylinska: "We need a new way of seeing the Anthropocene"*, <<https://lab.cccb.org/en/joanna-zylinska-we-need-a-new-way-of-seeing-the-anthropocene/>>, accessed: 25.10.2021.

[8] J. Zylinska, *The End of Man. A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, Minneapolis 2018, p. 61.

[9] See L.C. Roberts, *Eco-Thoughts: An Interview with Joanna Zylinska. Feminist Counter-Apocalypse, Now!*, <<https://believermag.com/logger/eco-thoughts-an-interview-with-joanna-zylinska/>>, accessed: 28.10.2021.

sense that is usually used in relation to this concept, i.e. to publications which are not peer-reviewed or appear in little-known publications, but those that transcend traditional academic discourse and constitute a kind of research and philosophical speculation located between science, art, literature, essay and criticism.

This kind of statement brings to mind Richard Rorty's famous "essay on Derrida," where he argued that "Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing."<sup>[10]</sup> It seems that this kind of thinking is close to Joanna Zylinska, who in subsequent publications experiments not only with ideas but also with various forms of expression, another example of which might be her booklet entitled *Perception at the End of the World*.<sup>[11]</sup> The work takes the form of an artbook in the textual and visual dimensions, in which video games are treated as a kind of research material and a starting point for further explorations related to the nature of perception, to search for answers to fundamental questions connected with the nature of perception, which is not only a visual act, but also a bodily one involving various senses. The haptic dimension of this experience directs our attention towards reflections that definitely go beyond the description of the video game users' experiences; it is a pretext for questions about the new situation of the recipient of images functioning in the digital world. In the context of photographic images, reflections on the evolution of the photographic medium, as well as on an attempt to redefine photography, also seem interesting.

Zylinska's photographic project *Flowcuts*, presented in the book, is an example of composite photographic compositions using screenshots from games. The book designer Felipe Mancheno appealed to both steampunk aesthetics and connotations associated with retrofuturistic convention, hence this book not only raises questions about the nature of perception, referring to the concept of "ecological perception" by James J. Gibson,<sup>[12]</sup> but also proposes a new way of reading as a form of vision and blurring the differences between verbal and pictorial experience. Let's just add that the idea is not new and there is at least one antecedent of this type of thinking about expanding the possibilities of expression within the traditional book, namely Marshall McLuhan and his *Medium is the Massage*.<sup>[13]</sup> Most often, however, it is forgotten that this groundbreaking publication was also impacted by another author, Quentin Fiore, a graphic designer who gave this publication its final shape. He was the originator of the idea to make this book a collage publication, where McLuhan's main ideas, proposed in

[10] R. Rorty, *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida*, [in:] idem, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)*, Minneapolis 1982, p. 92.

[11] J. Zylinska, *Perception at the End of the World (or How Not to Play Video Games)*, Pittsburgh – New York 2020. An interesting self-comment about this publication can be found in a conversation with the

author. See Z. Bukač, *GG Interview: Joanna Zylinska*, <<https://www.goodgame.hr/gg-interview-joanna-zylinska-english-version/>>, accessed: 28.10.2021.

[12] See J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, New York – London 2015.

[13] See M. McLuhan, Q. Fiore, *Medium is the Massage. An Inventory of Effects*, New York 1967.

his earlier books such as *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man* (1964), were presented in the form of text interpenetrated with images, graphics, illustrations and experimental typography in an innovative way arranging the visual shape of the text.

In Zylinska's project, the fact of considering images (screenshots) from games as a new type of photography taken from the "world depicted" created in a virtual environment seems to be particularly interesting. These images "saved" by players may be a kind of "extract" from a particular gameplay, yet can they really be treated as photographs? In this, somewhat paradoxical, way we approach the issues which Joanna Zylinska addresses in *Nonhuman Photography*, a book raising questions about the status of photography in the time of "vision machines," as Paul Virilio<sup>[14]</sup> would say, who, by the way, is actually completely absent from Zylinska's publication (except for one marginal footnote). It is a pity, because Virilio's philosophical speculations from before the era of intelligent systems, such as the facial recognition one, seem to be interesting intuitions *avant la lettre* announcing the fundamental issues considered by the author of *Nonhuman Photography*. Automation of perception, artificial vision, delegation of reality analysis to analytical machines, industrialization of vision, synthetic images produced by a machine for a machine, direct transmissions in the city, vision without looking, industrialization of the non-gaze, commutation of emission/reception instead of communication, optics of a closed circuit, mechanized perception excluding the ego of the perceiving subject – these are just a few of the slogan-mentioned associations with Virilio's reflections from more than three decades ago. The philosopher's exceptional insight was confirmed by the future, i.e. the current systems of seeing machines producing images on a mass scale for other machines, which in Zylinska's analyses are treated as photographic images, and this may lead to a fundamental question: Should the universe of images the author studies be really considered in the context of photography and photographic images?

These issues seem to be particularly important in the situation of recurring questions about the nature of photography after the digital breakthrough, which radically changed not only the technological but also the aesthetic context of discussing photography. It also seems that the search for the essence of digital photography as a new medium in opposition to traditional analogue photography is no longer as attractive and cognitively efficient as at the beginning of the expansion of digital photographic instruments, i.e. at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, although, of course, digital cameras appeared much earlier. Transformations of photography (from analog to digital) are well illustrated by the fundamental theses presented by Ingrid

[14] See P. Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, London – Bloomington 1994.

Hoelzl and Rémi Marie in the book *Softimage* and the short article expanding it and significantly entitled *From Softimage to Postimage*.<sup>[15]</sup> In a nutshell, the authors outline the evolution of the image from its representative functions (this is the domain of traditional images as hardimages) to treating it as a kind of software and not just the effect of specific cameras and software, i.e. a kind of program, operation, process, and not representation (softimage). The next stage of this transformation of the image is the post-image produced in the time of robolution and twilight of the anthropocentric domination of human vision and negation or undermining the hegemony of the human “point of view” by the posthumanist philosophy. And all this is the foundation of a new – “algorithmic” – paradigm of the image, which follows the “photographic” paradigm established in the Renaissance, the Albertian concept of the central perspective.

The algorithmic paradigm can also be described from another point of view as the end of representationism and reflection, which for years considered the issues of representation and indexability of the photographic image as fundamental problems of the theory of photography treated as a means of mirroring reality. Now, somewhat ironically, one could say that it is rather a crooked mirror. Yet this is a much broader issue, characterizing the Western model of knowledge, which has made representation the central epistemological figure being crushed today by the trend of non-representational theories. Let’s mention, for example, the publications by Nigel Thrift, Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, Candice P. Boyd and Christian Edwardes.<sup>[16]</sup> With regard to photography, it is worth noting that inspirations of this type lead to a critique of the traditional view of the photographic image, which narrows its understanding, confines it only to the issue of its optical dimension (light writing) and does not take into account the fact that photographic techniques are used in such different fields as medicine, antimatter research or cosmic radiation, as Daniel Rubinstein points out. He also claims that

Photography does more than represent reality – it modifies our conception of the real as solid and intransient into a global network of self-replicating nodal points. [...] Because to see photography in terms of the traditions of visual culture, with all their ocular-centric, perspectival,

[15] I. Hoelzl, R. Marie, *Softimage. Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image*, Bristol – Chicago 2015; *idem*, *From Softimage to Postimage*, “Leonardo” 2017, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 72–73.

[16] N. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory. Space, Politics, Affect*, London – New York 2008; *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, eds. B. Anderson, P. Harrison, Farnham – Burlington 2010; *Non-Representational Theory and the Creative Arts*, eds. C.P. Boyd, C. Edwardes, Singapore 2019. Such issues are presented in an interesting way by

Ken Lum, who analyzes specific cases of analog and digital manipulations constantly present in photographic activities from the very beginning of the photographic medium. Today, however, they seem to be a common daily practice of photographers, photo editors, publishers, as well as artists and amateurs. See K. Lum, *From Analog to Digital. A Consideration of Photographic Truth*, [in:] *idem*, *Everything is Relevant. Writings on Art and Life, 1991–2018*, Montreal 2018, pp. 213–223.

and representational baggage, is to ignore the fact that photography is not only an image, it is also a slice of the “real” that the age of present-day life experience is made of. The photograph is at one and the same time material, technological and visceral. It is not only a visual medium but also the possibility of grasping the sensual “now” of the information age.[17]

The need to try to create an up-to-date definition of photography in a shape corresponding to the evolution of this medium, not only connected with the phase transition from analog to digital technologies but also with the conviction that today a significant number of photographic images are created not for humans but, to put it more precisely, for machines that see or recognize images, directed Joanna Zylińska’s attention towards the proposal of an artist and theorist, Trevor Paglen. His project *The Last Pictures* (2012) was created in cooperation with the Creative Time agency and scientists working in The List Visual Arts Center laboratory at MIT. Paglen selected 100 photographs that would be a kind of visual information about our civilization, culture and history. His choice was consulted with scientists, art people, social activists and philosophers wondering about the shape of this archive of humanity. The images were saved on a silicon disk and placed on the EchoStar XVI communication satellite launched into Earth orbit (by the way, from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan) and will perform its functions, i.e. it will transmit TV signal and broadband Internet for fifteen years (from 2012), and later as thousands of similar objects will circulate for thousands, tens of thousands, millions of years in space. The choice of images may seem surprising, Paglen himself says that he did not mean to create a “great representation of humanity” or a kind of portrait of life on Earth. We can find there, for example, a photograph of Trotsky’s brain, paintings from Lascaux, a fragment of Pieter Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel*, a page from the Volapük dictionary, the Chinese Wall, *Study of Perspective – Eiffel Tower* by Ai Weiwei, a public aquarium in Nagoya, CCTV tower in Beijing, *Cat Piano* by Athanasius Kircher, traces of a dinosaur, the last futurist exhibition in St. Petersburg, fingerprints, an IBM computer, a Concorde plane, a white whale, a gas mask from World War I, Captain America (comic book page), and Tokyo seen from the air.[18] They are images directed to the future, but the question arises as to whom? Who or what will be able to see them,

[17] D. Rubinstein, *The New Paradigm*, [in:] *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age*, ed. D. Rubinstein, New York – London 2020, pp. 3, 5–6. A broader look at the crisis of representation in the era of computational photography and the dominance of algorithmic procedures can be found in the text: D. Rubinstein and K. Sluis, *The Digital Image in Photographic Culture. Algorithmic Photography and the Crisis of Representation*, [in:] *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture. Second Edition*, ed. M. Lister, London – New York 2013, pp. 22–40.

[18] I recommend taking a look at T. Paglen, *The Last Pictures*, Berkeley 2012, which includes, apart from this introduction, texts discussing this project being a collection “designed to transcend the Anthropocene and to transcend deep time itself. A collection of pictures designed for the time of the cosmos. A collection of pictures that very well may be the last.” Ibidem, p. xiii.

their ephemerality is similar to radio waves which in fact are their carrier? Are they images to be viewed by extra-terrestrial beings, or are they rather addressed to machines that will be able to read them?

Trevor Paglen emphasizes that traditional thinking about photography today is mostly anachronistic, although paradoxically the twenty-first century can be described as the “age of photography,” but with dominant machines that see the world and that serve other machines such as smartphones, QR code readers, cameras monitoring public and non-public spaces, facial recognition systems, tools for recognizing license plates, military air surveillance systems, and finally, registration sets working for Google Street View, to name just a few examples; and it should be remembered that there are definitely more of them in virtually every domain in which we function in both the physical and virtual world. Photography is now becoming synonymous with seeing, but this recording of visions is addressed to humans only to a small extent. We obviously cannot forget about millions of photos published every day on Facebook or Instagram, but they are also primarily read by machines. That is why Paglen proposes an extended (and at the same time extremely concise) definition of photography, treating it not as an image but rather as an imaging system producing ubiquitous photographs which are mostly invisible. “With a nod to Paul Virilio, I propose a simple definition that has far-reaching consequences: seeing machines.”[19]

So how do the vision machines that produce the images Paglen incorporates into the universe of photography work? I constantly ask myself whether it would not be appropriate to abandon this formula and call the effects of the work of these media cameras simply digital images? Machines perform automated work resulting in a certain class of scripts, i.e. the effects of image-forming systems creating their own “visions,” not identical to human vision, and, at the same time, characterized by a kind of their own “stylistics” stemming from the features that make up their program of action, defined algorithmic functions deposited in them (by people, obviously). It is no longer just a matter of a single photo in its visual dimension, but a file (literally and broadly understood), which is “surrounded” by metadata specifying its features, contexts, networked connections, palimpsest overwrites, references to other images and non-image data overlapping in the infinite process of linking, because the common binary matrix allows for constant convergence of visual, sound, graphic and verbal data. “Scripts,” specific styles of machine vision, only take into account human predispositions to see the world and objects present in it to a very small extent (if at all); they are programmed to produce visions for other machines which

[19] T. Paglen, *Seeing Machines*, <<https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2014/03/13/seeing-machines/>>, accessed: 30.10.2021. Let us add that Paglen’s texts are entries on the blog of Fotomuseum Winterthur (Switzerland), which featured articles of such authors

as Ariella Azoulay, Geoffrey Batchen, Claire Bishop, Sean Cubitt, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Abigail Solomon-Godeau – well-known and significant figures in the contemporary dispute devoted to visual culture, including photography.

are also beyond the scale/manner of human vision determined by the mechanisms of visual perception.

In this way, the geography of the photographic world constituted by machines created by people is changed, but the effect of their work becomes nonhuman in the sense that it is not primarily directed at people. Moreover, people not only cannot, but above all are not able to control this unprecedentedly expanding universe of images. Images, therefore, already live outside of us, beyond our control; they are independent beings that, once got off the leash of our domination over them, will always circulate in their own domain of freedom of action, because today it is about the activity of images, and not about their old/traditional function of representation, i.e. passive reflection of reality. They constitute reality today, Baudrillard's hyperreality and subsequent levels of simulation are now only a historical record of the state of the image(s) before they entered the state of automation and contact with other images through self-referential machines seeing and communicating beyond man, outside of human circulation and environment. Therefore, we can spread before them a wide field of reflection which makes the basis for the theory of nonhuman images out of these invisible (for us) images.

Programs such as DeepFace (Facebook) or FaceNet (Google) using neural networks and machine learning procedures (primarily deep learning) have achieved unprecedented effectiveness of human face recognition: in the former case, it is 97 percent, while in the latter it is over 99 percent, which brings them close to human capabilities, but is it really supposed to serve humans? This, of course, depends on how we want to use the possibilities of these programs based on the analysis of big data, so far such practices have been most often considered in the context of threats to the sphere of our privacy (if it is still possible to talk about such a thing at all), rather than of potential individual and social profits.[20] In order to be able to understand the operation of these complex systems of visual culture invisible to us, we must, as Paglen claims, acquire completely new competences, learn from the machines the new nonhuman vision, so that we can become equal agents operating in the environment of machines appropriating the visual culture of our time.

The point here is that if we want to understand the invisible world of machine-machine visual culture, we need to unlearn how to see like humans. We need to learn how to see a parallel universe composed of activations, keypoints, eigenfaces, feature transforms, classifiers, training sets, and the like. But it's not just as simple as learning a different vocabulary. Formal

[20] At the time of writing this text (November 2021) Facebook, or rather Meta – the new name of Mark Zuckerberg's company – announced that it resigned from using the facial recognition system. Facebook has collected a database of more than a billion scans of users' faces that will be deleted. But will this really

happen? According to Meta's concise announcement, it is not impossible that this technology will be used in future services. The question arises, what database will be used – a newly created or the theoretically "deleted" one?

concepts contain epistemological assumptions, which in turn have ethical consequences. The theoretical concepts we use to analyze visual culture are profoundly misleading when applied to the machinic landscape, producing distortions, vast blind spots, and wild misinterpretations.[21]

The above-mentioned end of the epoch of representation does not mean a complete departure from the possibility of photographic imaging which records the external shape of things. However, it is not the surface of the photograph anymore, it is what was recorded on the sensor as invisible to the human eye but recognizable by seeing machines that has increasingly constituted a new role played by networked images that are merely a conduit for mediation processes. After “new media,” it is the dynamic process of mediation, active cooperation of all human and nonhuman players functioning in technoculture that sets the framework for “mediation as an intrinsic condition of being-in and becoming-with the technological world.”[22] Let’s add Paglen’s statement to the above:

We no longer look at images – images look at us. They no longer simply represent things, but actively intervene in everyday life. We must begin to understand these changes if we are to challenge the exceptional forms of power flowing through the invisible visual culture that we find ourselves enmeshed within.[23]

The need to write the history of photography, but also the history of reflections on photography, seems obvious, although the ways of approaching this problem do not appear so obvious. This is pointed out by Ya’ara Gil Glazer[24] in an article published as a kind of initiation of a dispute devoted to contemporary “photomediations.” The text originally published in “Journal of Art Historiography” was reprinted in a book[25] which was part of a larger, primarily networked, project originated in 2013 and called “Photomediations Machine,” the idea of which can be treated as Joanna Zylińska’s next step in the process of developing her own concept of nonhuman photography. Probably it is not a coincidence that the volume editors decided to point out, even if not directly, that their publication is something of a polemic with the existing discourses devoted to historical changeability of photography, as well as to the necessity of revalorization of the new situation of photography in the time of new media and mediation. In short, it is high time we criticized classics such as Beaumont Newhall[26] or Naomi Rosenblum,[27] but, most of all, we should simply write a new history (and theory) of the photographic medium. On the website dedicated to

[21] T. Paglen, *Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)*, <<https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/>>, accessed: 3.11.2021.

[22] S. Kember, J. Zylińska, *Life After New Media. Mediation as a Vital Process*, Cambridge, MA – London 2012, p. xviii.

[23] T. Paglen, *Invisible Images...*

[24] See Y.G. Glazer, *A New Kind of History? The Challenges of Contemporary Histories of Photography*, [in:] *Photomediations: A Reader*, eds. K. Kuc, J. Zylińska, London 2016, pp. 21–47.

[25] *Photomediations...*

[26] B. Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1939 to the Present Day*, New York 1949.

[27] N. Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, New York – London – Paris 1997.

photomediations[28] we can find information that it is about searching for various relationships of photography with other media; the hybrid nature of this project enabled the publication of over two hundred photographs collected in open photographic repositories, which were used as a basis for creating a hypermedia structure of network publication constituting a sort of invitation to cooperate on and expand the entire project initiated by its founders, Kamila Kuc and Joanna Zylinska. The project also has its continuation and development in various additional versions in the physical space, which is generally intended to re-evaluate and remodel a traditional book becoming a network experience, but also a “networked” one on numerous levels, which refers to the idea of hypertext, like what is probably today rather abandoned experimentation, for example, in the area of hypertext literature.

Both the online version and the free access version of the book begin with Zylinska’s introduction,[29] in which she presents basic conceptual and methodological assumptions of the project, deriving them from the book published along with Sarah Kember, *Life After New Media*. Nowadays, it is the relationality, cooperation and coexistence of photography with other media that determine its essence, but we must remember that “photography changes everything,” as Marvin Heiferman claims. What is this everything? This is what we desire, what we see, who we are, what we do, where we go, what we remember.[30] After all, the digital revolution is not a question of the analog record being replaced by the logic of binary digital code (which seemed to be the main problem describing its “novelty,” especially at the beginning of reflections on it) but of the fact that images do not function as independent beings, because they are constantly networked, inscribed in the endless processes of building algorithmically controlled databases. Photomediations mean that, on the one hand, we are mediators ourselves, but also media, and, on the other hand, that the concept of the medium – as a medium isolated in its nature from other media and an autonomous, non-connective tool of data transmission – in no way corresponds to the current reality of ubiquitous, dynamic, constantly becoming, mediations. Mediation theory is simply a “theory of life.”[31]

In this way, the concept of photomediation became a natural starting point for reflections on nonhuman photography, because mediations take place not only between human, but also non-human (machine, algorithmic, object) causative forces. Bazin’s “embalming of time,” which is the operational efficiency of photography as a medium recording the image of the world, must give way to the vision of photography as a machinery for creating not so much an image of the world but simply the world. It is also a matter of reformulating the idea of the

[28] See <<http://photomediationsopenbook.net/>>, accessed: 4.11.2021.

[29] J. Zylinska, *Photomediations: An Introduction*, [in:] *Photomediations: A Reader*, pp. 7–17.

[30] M. Heiferman, *Photography Changes Everything*, [in:] *Photography Changes Everything*, ed. M. Heiferman, New York 2012, pp. 11–21.

[31] S. Kember, J. Zylinska, op.cit., p. xv.

“camera” (or apparatus, to refer to Flusser’s connotations also important in Zylinska’s concept) which can be treated as a tool for taking photos, although today it appears as only one of the elements of photographic machinery encompassing the issues of software, interfaces, post-production programs, applications, plugins, etc.

The project *Photomediations: An Open Book* discussed above is located on the web, and another original publication by Joanna Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, is accompanied by a website,[32] although it is not really a precise term, because the book (in the paper version or e-book) finds its augmentation in the form of audiovisual materials made by the author herself: the works *We Have Always Been Digital* (2009), *Park Road, London* (2011), *Active Perceptual Systems* (2014–2016), *The Vanishing Object of Technology* (2012), *iEarth* (2013), or by other artists and photographers. It should be noted that these works are mentioned in the book and it would be worth paying more attention to them, because they constitute the non-discursive manner of Zylinska’s reflections, in which she implements the idea of “philosophy as photography.” At this point, however, I would like to focus my attention primarily on the theoretical proposals contained in the book and refer to the diagnoses, analyses, findings and hypotheses proposed by the author.

Zylinska’s reflections can be inscribed into another turning point in the humanities, which is sometimes referred to as a nonhuman turn, and although these turns (linguistic, pictorial/iconic/visual, digital) often become only handy slogans defining certain tendencies within cognitive practices, they also indicate trajectories of interest and the search for new research areas. Richard Grusin, the editor of the volume of texts devoted to nonhuman turn, tries to outline the area of intellectual and philosophical inspirations for researchers dealing with the problem in question. These are Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, affective theories, animal studies, Gilles Deleuze’ and Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theory, brain science (including neuroscience, cognitive sciences, artificial intelligence), new materialism, new media theory, speculative realism, and systems theory.[33] I would add to this list object-oriented ontology, non-anthropocentric approaches to the human in the Anthropocene epoch and its various terminological varieties, such as the Capitalocene (Jason W. Morre), the Chthulucene and Plantationocene (Donna Haraway), the Anthroscene (Jussi Parikka), or the blue humanities. These are just some of the contexts for Zylinska’s concept of “nonhuman photography,” although not every one of these inspirations appears in the book in an obvious way; they rather constitute a field of references and the researcher’s mental background.

[32] See <<https://www.nonhuman.photography>>, accessed: 6.11.2021.

[33] See R. Grusin, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. R. Grusin, Minneapolis – London 2015, pp. viii–ix.

Although there are reviews of the book,[34] and the author presented her concepts in lectures,[35] in conversations and interviews, I have the impression that her interesting theoretical proposal has not received due attention, and certainly not in Poland. This may be surprising, because, in fact, interesting proposals for looking at photography that abstract from traditional perspectives and references, and attempts to search for a new language and terminology to describe a “new photography” are scarce. Although many texts on photography are still being written, most of their authors move in well-known areas of reference to classical photographic literature, whereas the search for a new theory to explain new phenomena is, paradoxically, not very common. Against this background, Joanna Zylinska’s proposals invite us to co-reflect and discuss. The author’s ambition was to go beyond the human-centric perspective that has dominated the perception of humans among other nonhuman beings, but also not to create a dichotomous opposition between the human and the nonhuman gaze. In this regard, she is in accord with Donna Haraway’s reflection when the latter claims that “only partial perspective promises objective vision.” The author of *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway drew attention to how much we could learn if we took into account other (than only human) points of view, taken literally (from below or from above), as well as more broadly, as other ways of seeing reality.

These are lessons that I learned in part walking with my dogs and wondering how the world looks without a fovea and very few retinal cells for color vision but with a huge neural processing and sensory area for smells. It is a lesson available from photographs of how the world looks to the compound eyes of an insect or even from the camera eye of a spy satellite or the digitally transmitted signals of space probe-perceived differences “near” Jupiter that have been transformed into coffee table color photographs. The “eyes” made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life. There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds.[36]

Zylinska follows this posthumanist and post-anthropocentric (and feminist, at the same time) line of reasoning, claiming that every vision is to some extent nonhuman, and moreover, these nonhuman

[34] See R. Coley, *On “Nonhuman Photography” by Joanna Zylinska*, <<https://mediatheoryjournal.org/review-rob-coley-on-nonhuman-photography-by-joanna-zylinska/>>, accessed: 6.11.2021; E.A. Kessler, *Joanna Zylinska. Nonhuman Photography*, <<http://caareviews.org/reviews/3507#.YA4dnxbdiMo>>, accessed: 6.11.2021; J. Davidson, *Joanna Zylinska. Nonhuman Photography*, “New Media & Society” 2018, vol. 20, no. 8, pp. 3084–3094; K.P. Testa, *A Review of*

*Joanna Zylinska, “Nonhuman Photography”*, “Vassar College Journal of Philosophy” 2019, iss. 6, pp. 76–79.

[35] Some of them can be viewed and listened to on the project website. See <<https://www.nonhuman-photography/book>>, accessed: 6.11.2021.

[36] D. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, “Feminist Studies” 1988, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 583.

visions are better, fuller not only in the optical sense but also in the ethical-political one.

The author suggests considering nonhuman photography on three different, yet interrelated, levels. These are photographs in which there are no people (depopulated landscapes, empty spaces, photographs of nature); photographs that were not taken by humans (modern technical images, created by such tools as motion control cameras; microphotographs; the effects of Google Street View work, but also fossils resulting from the action of geological “deep time”); photographs that are directed not to humans, but to seeing machines (such as QR codes or algorithmic machine communication modes based on photography). In short, they are photographs that are not of/by/for the human.<sup>[37]</sup> They constitute the iconography of the Anthropocene, although nowadays this concept is increasingly undergoing a re-evaluation, a very interesting example of which is the proposal of Andrzej Marzec presented in his book *Antropocień. Filozofia i estetyka po końcu świata*.<sup>[38]</sup> The author’s original proposal is based on the belief that the concept of the Anthropocene is not neutral, and that it is a category with a high exclusionary potential, preserving the perception of the human as a privileged entity in relation to other nonhuman beings and, in fact, maintaining the Enlightenment anthropocentrism. It is therefore necessary to weaken the position of humans, to put them into the shadow; such a change in the position of *anthropos* is a kind of equalization of their ontological status in relation to other, nonhuman entities that are brought from the “shadow.” When writing her book, the author could not have known Marzec’s concept, but it seems that it may constitute an interesting cognitive context for Zylinska’s ideas, it is a proof of certain tendencies developing in the area of contemporary posthumanist reflection.

Nonhuman vision is not in competition with human vision, but rather the result of the development of new media technologies which, along with humans, form a kind of assemblage composed of organic and mechanical elements acting jointly and separately within the framework of aesthetic and political strategies. While creating her concept, the author also made a critical reflection on the birth of photography as a new medium, proving that from the very beginning of its existence, a predilection for “unnaturalistic experiments” developed, which questioned representation as the basic function of photography. Zylinska repeatedly refers to the views of John Tagg,<sup>[39]</sup> treating them as the embodiment of the pessimistic vision of photography losing the possibility of representing both the “I” and the “eye” and an example

[37] J. Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, Cambridge, MA – London 2017, p. 5.

[38] See A. Marzec, *Antropocień. Filozofia i estetyka po końcu świata*, Warszawa 2021. See also B. Grygo, *Antropocień. O relacjach ludzi i nie-ludzi w filozofii*

oraz kulturze. Rozmowa z dr. Andrzejem Marcem, *UAM*, “PWN Nauka” 2021, no. 2, pp. 4–8.

[39] See J. Tagg, *Mindless Photography*, [in:] *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, eds. J.J. Long, A. Noble, E. Welch, London 2009, pp. 16–30.

of an old, modernist theory incompatible with the radically changing photographic, and more broadly pictorial, reality of today.

Rethinking the nature of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's first-ever photograph, *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826 or 1827), makes us revise many of the opinions that have been repeated for decades. It is from the observation made by Bill Anthes that Zylinska derives her key argument in putting forward the thesis that from its beginning photography has actually had a nonhuman nature, because it has not been a record of human vision, but a long-term process of recording a "machine vision" (in fact, a *camera obscura*). As Anthes writes:

The required eight-hour exposure produced a visual paradox: sunlight and shadow can be seen on two sides of structures at left and right – the "pigeon house" or upper loft of Niépce's home, and the sloped roof of a barn with a bakehouse in the rear. As such, Niépce's landmark image presages something that will be true of all the photographs produced in the centuries following his invention: the camera has recorded a view that, for all its apparent veracity, is a scene which the human eye could never see. [40]

One could say, paradoxically, that photography has never been human: in photos we have always seen a vision of a machine, which had little to do with the capabilities and needs of people. Nearly twenty years later, this was confirmed by Henry William Fox Talbot pointing out that the essence of photography, this "pen of nature," consists in the nonhuman light recording of images on paper made mechanically by the camera. Photography as an impression of the "hand of nature" has little to do with human vision. Photography is, in fact, a visual reconstruction of reality, not its record or "quotation."

What I miss in Joanna Zylinska's reflections is drawing attention to the fact that many of these devices, which often gain a very large range of autonomy and become independent of the human, nevertheless act as a kind of human agents. In these cases, one could speak of something like hybrid visions that come into existence as the effects of the work of the human and machine. It seems that a good example of such a hybrid vision might be drones as carriers of cameras and camcorders expanding the possibility of human vision. [41] What once was Dziga Vertov's dream when he created a cine-eye program, i.e. a camera that is able to see something "that [...] the eye doesn't see [...], the possibility of seeing without limits and distance [...], the remote control of moving cameras" [42] is today widely available. We can only add that the widespread availability of cheap drones has influenced the aesthetics of film language, which is expressed in the predilection for excessive usage of aerial shots bringing the effect of this nonhuman

[40] B. Anthes, *Theory: Light and Shadow*, [in:] R. Modrak, B. Anthes, *Reframing Photography. Theory and Practice*, London 2011, p. 112.

[41] For more on drones primarily used in military operations but also on a number of implications

related to their usage, see G. Chamayou, *Theory of the Drone*, New York – London 2015.

[42] D. Vertov, *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1984, p. 41.

vision. It should be remembered, however, that drones as vehicles for seeing machines are controlled by people, their nonhuman vision is somehow controlled by the human, and this can be interpreted as an example of a kind of cooperation between human and nonhuman operational action in the process of producing vision. If, therefore, we can agree with the opinion that “all photography bears a nonhuman trace,” [43] then, at the same time, it should be added that a significant part of nonhuman photography bears a trace of human interventions – sometimes more, sometimes less obvious. After all, the operation of machines producing images for other machines was designed by the human, and although to an increasing extent (for example, owing to deep learning) these complex systems are constantly increasing their vision competences, people remain their creators.

Nonhuman agency in photography is currently one of the most important problems, both practical and theoretical: the mechanical way of producing technical images is a constantly recurring motif in reflections on photography, but until Zylinska’s attempt we did not have a possibility to take a comprehensive look at nonhuman photography. The posthumanist perspective clearly present in her reflections on photography can undoubtedly be extrapolated to other areas of reflection on the condition of images in the time of dominance of digital procedures. And although there may be doubts as to whether many of the artistic projects referred to in *Nonhuman Photography* can be unambiguously inscribed in the context of strictly photographic activities, there is no doubt that today an unequivocal definition of what photography is and what it is not seems very complicated. After all, there is no question that paying attention to nonhuman players producing images forces us to rethink the issue of so-called “postphotography,” which for Zylinska is not very attractive cognitively and does not reflect the situation in which (human and nonhuman) photography can be considered the dominant medium of our time.

Numerous auctions informing us about the sale of photographs by artists such as Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman or Andreas Gursky only confirm that human photography today has a measurable market price, which is also an institutional confirmation of photography inscribed in the context of contemporary art. But at the same time, millions or billions of photos taken by anonymous providers of “feeds” for Internet portals testify to the truth of the belief that photography today has become the most important way not so much of recording reality but of communicating with other people. This photographic universe also involves machines producing/creating images without people, images not made by people or not addressed to people, although each of these nonhuman forms of photography is nevertheless contextualized by various references to the human, even if it is only one of many subjects and/or objects of the world of images perceived as a universe of human

[43] J. Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, p. 51.

and nonhuman causative forces functioning within the framework set by naturoculture.

So how to describe “posthuman photography”? Zylinska points out that the posthumanist and postanthropocentric view of human agency should be considered in terms of the agency of nonhuman apparatuses and machines producing visions different from those being focused in the human eye. According to her, the “photographic condition” is a constant negotiation of the situations of both human and nonhuman participants of complicated and complex procedures for creating visions and images, including photographic images. Although I am still thinking about applying the term “photography” to certain practices of seeing machines, their image-forming potential undoubtedly gives vitality to the idea of creating images that are the evidence and record of life more than of death, even if this life in the individual and global dimension is threatened today.

There is also another sense in which photography yields itself particularly well to zooming in on the “after the human” perspective. This has to do with its inherently nonhuman ontology and status [...], the human-driven practice conventionally known as photography is part of a wider “photographic condition.”[44]

If photography has always been nonhuman, and, at the same time, has been capable not only of mediation in which the human played an important role, then today nonhuman photography can also be a medium that situates the human in a spectrum stretching from fossils, through visions other than human, to cameras transcending the functionalized production of images addressed exclusively to humans. Each of these cases, however, is contextualized in relation to the human, it is the human, even in the perspective of the post-anthropocentric attitude to *anthropos*, who is the instantiation that makes the necessary re-evaluation of the situation in the environment of human and non-human co-creators of the “photographic condition.” It is humans who can, to use Latour’s term, “weave” various discourses and photographic practices, even if at present a significant part of them takes place beyond human will and control.

The idea of combining the analog with the digital, which is close to my thinking, appears in Joanna Zylinska’s latest reflections on photography and her concept of undigital photography. Being increasingly controlled by algorithms, soaked in their perverse logic, we still remain “analog machines,” and our internal “programs” use data obtained in a very traditional way, although the description of these procedures uses the language of cybernetic guidelines once proposed by Norbert Wiener. The tensions and interactions between the wet (analog) world and the dry (digital) universe do not have to lead to rivalry between these two domains, but rather to convergence and cooperation between them. In her latest book, devoted to art in the age of artificial intelli-

[44] *Ibidem*, p. 96.

gence,[45] the author addresses various issues, including ones related to a work of art in the era of mechanical creation, which is a reference to the tradition established by Walter Benjamin, or by a probably much less known concept by Bill Nichols, who analyzed the situation of “the work of culture in the age of cybernetic systems.”[46]

These intuitions and anticipations have appeared before, during an online lecture delivered during Krakow Photomonth in 2020, entitled *Posthuman Photography: Imaging the World in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*.<sup>[47]</sup> Zylinska said that the concept of digital photography is a kind of an intellectual play, but also a reference to the changes taking place in the situation in which we are in possession of tools such as the Lytro camera.<sup>[48]</sup> In short, it is a camera that captures not a single ray but the entire field of light, whereas after taking a “photo” which is, for example, blurred, in the post-production process you can make any changes by “manual” interference in its basic parameters. The concept of undigital photography, of course, is derived from the idea of computational photography, i.e. a whole range of photographic procedures that in fact negate the essential determinants of photography based on optical processes. Currently, vision does not have to be related to optics. First and foremost, it results from the work logic of the seeing machines that “see” beyond/above/without optical tools.<sup>[49]</sup> This decisively problematizes the issues of the integral connection of the photographic image with the function of seeing, especially human seeing. Nonhuman photography does not exclude the human from the area in which photographs are created, but it does provide autonomous areas functioning beyond human control and jurisdiction, and also gives voice to machines as nonhuman image makers that sometimes also serve people. Let’s just add that the Lytro camera, like many other tools of this type, has been virtually completely ignored by users and today we can list it among hundreds or thousands of other examples of dead media which in the past landed in the technological dustbin of history.

However, the concept of undigital photography as an exemplification of purely technological procedures is one thing, and its development in a conceptual project and a kind of thought experiment considering the functioning of photography in the age of artificial intelligence is another. The undigital approach to the phenomenon of

[45] See J. Zylinska, *AI Art. Machine Visions and Warped Dreams*, London 2020.

[46] B. Nichols, *The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems*, “Screen” 1988, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 22–46.

[47] See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noGWRx96rkU>>, accessed: 7.11.2021.

[48] See J. Zylinska, *All the World’s a Camera: Notes on Non-Human Photography*, [in:] *Drone: The Automated Image*, ed. P. Wombell, Montreal 2013, pp. 162–165.

[49] Joseph Nechvatal, artist and theorist, while presenting his project entitled *Odyssey Palimpsest* (2013–2014) stated: “I wish to suggest that in the realm of aesthetics, post-photographic frenzy is that use of the photographic image that both destroys lens-based image values and creates novel aesthetic values that allow for other intensities to flourish.” J. Nechvatal, *Post-Photographic Frenzy*, [in:] *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image*, p. 171.

photography is certainly an attempt to find a new key to the analysis of photography, which is increasingly considered in terms of post-photography, or, more precisely, post-image. In most photos currently taken, pressing the shutter is the only action the photographer has to do, but this may only be the beginning of the process in which the “photo” is really created. It is no longer just a matter of ‘photoshopping’, that is, transforming a digital image by means of Photoshop or another image editing program. Human agency and decision-making is increasingly restricted, but this does not mean that the complete automation of image production occurs. The human being is inscribed in the complex processes of the human-nonhuman compound functioning in conjunction with machines and nonhuman beings. Zylinska declares:

My concept of “nonhuman photography” thus arguably goes further (or deeper) than Paglen’s idea of “seeing machines” because it not only studies humans as seen by machines or machines that see things outside the human spectrum, but also because it understands humans as (non-Cartesian, embodied and entangled) seeing machines. Last but not least, it also reaches towards the geological past, with the universe positioned as a giant camera making photoimagistic impressions on a variety of surfaces, from rocks through to skin.[50]

Undigital photography – as a development of the idea and practice of computational photography, by moving away from the practice of objective recording of reality, and consequently from the idea of “light writing” – began a new stage in photographic practices and the discourse on photography as a medium based on light processes. The ontology of photographic images is now less important than their ontogenesis, to use an analogy taken from the language of biology: the way such images are created is more important than their living (material or immaterial) shape. Perhaps the best metaphor depicting undigital reality is the repeatedly invoked figure of MTurk (and used by the author in her own short photo film *View From the Window*[51]), or more precisely Amazon Mechanical Turk. The name, of course, refers to the hoax by Wolfgang von Kempelen, who in 1769 presented a machine for playing chess games, but in fact there was a hidden chess player inside it operating a mechanical arm and performing subsequent moves. MTurk is a kind of crowdsourcing service offered by Amazon, consisting in the use of cheap, dispersed labor, because, paradoxically, human work can be cheaper than the usage of algorithmic procedures. It also transpires that even unprepared employees lacking expertise can be much more effective in certain situations, for example, in terms of content moderation or data deduplication. The MTurks are also an example of artificial intelligence (AAI), and therefore a perfect embodiment of the idea of undigitality, because although they use digital instruments – they are analog themselves. One can only add that today to a greater or lesser

[50] J. Zylinska, *AI art...*, p. 107.

[51] See <<https://vimeo.com/344979151>>, accessed: 8.11.2021.

extent we are all MTurks, whether we like it or not, because big data are constantly fed by our data, which we generously offer to Facebook, Amazon or Google, obviously in return they give their “free” services.

During the pandemic, Joanna Zylińska decided once again, this time practically, to refer to Niépce’s *View from the Window at Le Gras*. She rightly observes that “Under COVID-19, the window thus became a symbol of enclosure and isolation, but also, especially when open, of longing, connection and care.”[52] However, she did it in a perverse way, because she hired a hundred MTurks, even though in the final version of the photo film *View From the Window* there is information that 98 photographs of nameless people were used, who received \$35 each in exchange for taking a photo from their own window. Let’s just add that Zylińska in the quoted text mentions Józef Robakowski’s production *View From My Window* (1978–1999). Unfortunately, she could not have referred to the excellent *Balcony Movie* (2021) by Paweł Łoziński, who for many pandemic months (over two years in total) filmed people passing under his balcony and engaged in dialogues with them. But that is a topic for another story. Zylińska’s intention was to show that although “artificial artificial intelligences” (MTurks) use digital technologies and simulate the work of digital machines, through a physical and symbolic “gesture,” as Flusser would say, of photographing, taking a picture, and this is always associated with using one’s own body as an integral part of the camera: they break the dominance of thinking dominated by binary code, our technologically universalized DNA.

The project includes references to both nonhuman photography, which was the first photo taken in history, and the concept of undigital photography. Could we use any traditional photographic theories to explain these phenomena? Do Susan Sontag or Roland Barthes tell us anything about this? Probably not, which does not mean that their classic texts should be put aside. In this context, Vilém Flusser’s ratings are definitely increasing, as he was a thinker who extremely acutely foretold the epoch of dominance of apparatuses and machines in the processes of image production, which I discussed elsewhere.[53] Undoubtedly, the concept of undigital photography gives rise to thinking about its situation in the time of artificial intelligence, but also of what Meredith Broussard called “artificial unintelligence.”[54] Writing about how

[52] J. Zylińska, *Views From the Window: Nonhuman Photography, Human Labour and COVID-19*, <<https://e-lur.net/investigacion/views-from-the-window-nonhuman-photography-human-labour-and-covid-19/>>, accessed: 9.11.2021. It may come as a bit of a surprise that the author in these reflections, as well as in earlier publications, completely overlooks this book: A. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window. From Albert to Microsoft*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

[53] See P. Zawojski, *Flusser, Media Theory and I. From the Genealogy of Thought*, “Flusser Studies”

2019, no. 27, <<http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/zawojski-flusser-media-theory-and-i-from-the-genealogy-thought.pdf>>, accessed: 9.11.2021.

[54] M. Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence. How Computers Misunderstand the World*, Cambridge, MA – London 2018. This is more crisply expressed in the statements concerning “artificial stupidity” formulated by various authors. See C.D. Asay, *Artificial Stupidity*, “William & Mary Law Review” 2020, vol. 61, no. 5, pp. 1187–1257.

“computers do not understand the world” in which we live, she draws attention to how our collective admiration for the possibilities of new technologies has resulted in the creation of a huge number of poorly designed digital systems. The idea of digitality, although Broussard herself does not use this term, can be treated as the key to a distanced and critical approach to digital technologies, which are never the final solution to our problems. If we understand this seemingly simple pattern, perhaps it will also be easier for us to build bridges between old analog technologies and new digital ones, also in photography. Because just as the effects of human and nonhuman operations in the field of, for example, production of visions should not be treated as a kind of opposition, competition and confrontation, so should traditional photography today not be seen as something anachronistic and only belonging to the past. Digital photography (including nonhuman and undigital) is not an absolutely new phenomenon which marks the only future of photographic images, although it is undoubtedly digital images that constitute and will determine the photographic universe of the future.

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