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## The Itinerant Image

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The Itinerant Image

by

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## Introduction

The camera has historically acted as an intermediary between subject and object. I am particularly interested in the history of the photographic medium as a process that has furthered the patriarchal objectification of women. The rigidity of the camera's singular directionality has tended toward reifying subject-object power relations, positioning the photographer, the male maker of meaning, as subject, and the female photographed as object, a "receiver of meaning"<sup>1</sup>. Implicit even in the language of the camera shutter, words such as "capture", "take", and "shoot", impose onto the object the violence inherent in these power dynamics. By aligning my photographic practice with the darkroom and the materiality of the photographic print, I am able to neutralize this history of violence and objectification of women by positioning myself outside the mechanics of the camera. This position serves to push forth my voice, a female voice, that has historically been underrepresented in terms of its own agency and subjectivity with regard to image making technologies.

In this essay, I first examine my work through the objectness of the photograph by considering the importance of the photogram as an act of building and materializing light independent of the tyranny of the lens. The forces enacted on the photograph from outside of the frame, a reflection of cultural value, give the image momentum and directionality that recirculates the male gaze into the collective subconscious, perpetuating a system that values the subordination of women. I then discuss my focus on the photographic image's mutability and mobility through the application of a laborious layering of photographic processes, both digital and analog in order to position myself as a woman and artist, a maker of meaning that is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

passive receiver of oppressive ideologies. Additionally, in an attempt to disrupt the traditional viewing experience of the image embedded in subject-object power dynamics of image capture through the lens, I utilize Hito Steyerl's ideas of "participating in the object,"<sup>2</sup> rendering the subject obsolete and detaching the image completely from the male gaze. The image's freedom to move without the subject and object distinctions already present in the making of images, allows space for an examination of the image without the extension of these oppressive values onto the viewer, which tend to imprint themselves and recirculate this system of male domination.

Finally, I discuss my past struggle with accepting photography as my artistic medium and fear of ascribing to the medium's history of patriarchal objectification, framing my position as both subject and object, instrument and player. Through the life of Clara Rockmore, who was both instrument and player in the history of her own medium, an electronic instrument known as the theremin, I experiment with stop motion animation and responsive electronics as a return to darkroom image making outside of the optics of the camera lens. Despite Clara Rockmore's vital contribution in pioneering the fingering technique of the theremin and popularizing the first electronic instrument, she is overlooked in spaces of technology that value the culture of electronic music, such as the internet. I found little available online other than images and a brief biography from a foundation website carelessly composed and unkept, in which her sister, also a celebrated musician is quoted as saying:

I'm very fortunate in having the wonderful Clara Rockmore as my sister, and it's a joy to perform with her. I forget about what instrument she plays, and in any case, it wouldn't make any difference to the way we work together<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Hito, Steyerl. "A Thing Like You and Me". *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Stemberg, 2012: 50

<sup>3</sup> "Clara Rockmore: Biography." *The Nadia Reisenberg & Clara Rockmore Foundation*, accessed March 4, 2017, [https://www.nadiareisenberg-clararockmore.org/clara\\_biography.htm](https://www.nadiareisenberg-clararockmore.org/clara_biography.htm)

Through her history I examine the dismissed contributions of women in the arts, focusing primarily in spaces of technology, and argue for a new kind of image as sound, redefining the medium of photography through a subversion of its historical infrastructure in the misuses and abuse of the female image.

## **The photogram**

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, in collaboration with his wife Lucia Moholy, explored the potential for the photographic process to realize new connections between the known and the unknown. Utilizing the photographic tools available to them, beyond just the proficiency of their intended functionality, they searched for the discovery of optical anomalies and hoped to surpass the physical limitations of human optics. In “Production-Reproduction”<sup>4</sup>, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Lucia Moholy consider the ways in which the mechanics of the photographic process could be reconfigured to enhance creative production by stating:

We have - through a hundred years of photography and the two decades of film- been enormously enriched in this respect. We may say that we see the world with entirely different eyes. Nevertheless, the total result to date amounts to little more than a visual encyclopaedic achievement. This is not enough. We wish to produce systematically, since it is important for life that we create new relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Reducing the photographic process to its principle incarnation and eliminating the variable phases of production allowed a focused examination of the materialization of light and its phenomenal qualities. For Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Lucia Moholy, the simplest articulation of this is light imposing itself on light sensitive paper and they named this light composed object

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<sup>4</sup> Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed Krisztina Passuth (Paris : Flammarion, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed Krisztina Passuth (Paris : Flammarion, 1984).

the photogram. They explain this new terminology and creative potentials by contextualizing the importance of light to photography in terms of other mediums and their devices. They state:

This course leads to possibilities of light-composition, in which light must be sovereignly handled as a new creative means, like colour in paintings and sound in music. I call this model of light-composition the photogram. It offers scope for composing in a newly mastered material<sup>6</sup>.

They insisted that in order to mine all the potential relationships that could be uncovered using these materials, “we must exploit the light-sensitivity of the photographic (silver bromide) plate: fixing upon it light phenomena...”<sup>7</sup> For Moholy-Nagy, experimentation with the photogram was the next step in optical discovery. Exploiting the plate was a way of utilizing the technical knowledge already in practice to exhaust all the potential possibilities of discovery that had surfaced in the development of photography and those that had yet to reveal themselves.

### **Resurgence of the photogram in the rise of Web 2.0**

The first decade of the twenty first century saw a distinct change in the interactivity of the internet bringing about the rise of Web 2.0 and an emphasis in user generated content online. The prominence of this technology began a cultural phenomenon that became a new space to colonize by the dominating bodies in power. The photograph, since its inception was a mobile object but found new momentum with the speed of exchange and endurance of this new user generated communication device. In 2008, Walead Beshty argues for the objectness of the photograph at a time when the digitization of images as JPEGs online was becoming standard

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<sup>6</sup> Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed Krisztina Passuth (Paris : Flammarion, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed Krisztina Passuth (Paris : Flammarion, 1984).

practice for many photographers and artists. He introduces his essay, “Abstracting Photography” with a description of the state of contemporary photography by saying:

The issue of what constitutes “Photography” as an ontological category has again gained currency, a rather surprising reinvestment in the medium specificity, especially when considered in the context of contemporary art, where professional divisions of aesthetic practices are more or less a thing of the past. Despite being vaguely nostalgic, and at worst retrograde, the urgent impulse to revive categorical boundaries signals a deeper critical dilemma facing devotees of the medium, for the drive to reconstitute a stable a practicable definition of photography is inextricable from the very real sense that the prominence of photographic discourse in contemporary art has receded.

At the time of this essay early digital cultural was becoming a prominent sociological force. The digital camera was not only ubiquitous but also approaching technology and quality in fidelity that made the transition from analog an appealing investment. Perhaps it was the onset of this transition from analog to digital or the fear of permanent digitization within the field that fueled a reconsideration of the photograph as object in contemporary art. Whatever the case, by 2005 artists began working with interest in the objectness of photography. In response to this transition, George Baker in the simultaneously patronizing and regrettably complementary essay, “Photography’s Expanded Field”, writes: that, “everywhere one looks today in the world of contemporary art, the photographic object seems to be an object in crisis, or at least in severe transformation”.<sup>8</sup> However, in a more complimentary affirmation Baker goes on to state:

If we could resist the object-bound forms of critical judgment and description, as well as the announcement of a medium’s sheer technological demise, we might be able to imagine critically how the photographic object has been “reconstructed” in contemporary artistic practice—an act of critical imagination made necessary by the forms of contemporary art, and one that will answer to neither technological exegesis nor traditional formalist criteria<sup>9</sup>.

Artist such as Walead Beshty, Eileen Quinlan, and Liz Deschenes began focusing on the objectness of the photograph returning to the principles of the photogram first venerated by

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<sup>8</sup> George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October Fall 2005, No. 114* (2005): 121

<sup>9</sup> George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October Fall 2005, No. 114* (2005): 123



Moholy-Nagy, that of an examination of light as subject, chemistry, optics and the material surface of the image. While these artists were grappling with the concerns of a disappearing material world, the photogram is for me a space outside the optics of the photographic camera to begin considering a reevaluation of the power dynamics inherent in the medium. As Moholy-Nagy sought to dig deeper into the tools of the medium by “exploiting the plate” for all its creative potentials, I believe that the photographic object has integrity in the contemporary era in its ambiguity of what defines it and I see a potential for resistance in its rapidity of movement, if harnessed, to detach itself from the influence of the male gaze.

### **Indexicality of the photograph**

The photographic image is often discussed with vernacular reminiscent of information or data descriptions. Objectively speaking, the photograph contains information that can be calculated, decoded and recirculated. This is especially true for the performance of a jpeg but is also attributed to the photographic object in its more direct relationship with physics and chemistry. In short, the photograph has a unique relationship to reality.

For Charles Peirce, this relationship was one of indexicality, rather than a relationship based on iconicity. Indexicality within the context of photography can be defined as, an image made in a likeness that is assumed to possess objectivity in its accuracy of representation. On the other hand the photograph as iconicity is the correlating relationship between the image of representation and its ascribed meaning. That meaning which is located in the cultural and historical affiliations of both photographer and viewer exists in a space that is first psychological and secondarily sociological thereby qualifying its translation of meaning between those spaces, temporarily and culturally as flexible in subjectivity. Additionally, this subjectivity possess within it

the potentiality to mislead in its decontextualization of the event of image capture and the time and space in which it signifies. The persuasive executions of photography in forensics and science and even advertising have had their foundations in the theories of indexicality in photography and the photograph's perceived objectivity. Pierce describes the indexical characteristics of a photograph by stating:

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.<sup>10</sup>

Even the terms by which Walead Beshty discusses the photographic object references a system of containment with finite determinable limitations in describing the photographic medium as the, "intervening substance through which images are conveyed".<sup>11</sup> However, Beshty's practice could be interpreted as refusal of indexicality in that the objectness of the photograph is the subject of the art object and is therefore neither index or point to point signifier. Despite these varied determinations of what a photograph can be defined as, the photograph as container continues to be a theme that resurfaces within photographic theory. The early deployment of the photograph as an aid in scientific research set the historical precedence of objective reproduction that has continued to plague its reputation as art while simultaneously misrepresenting the photographer and camera as passive actors to the prowess of technology.

### **Patriarchal objectification of women and the image**

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce. "What Is a Sign". Marxist.Org. May 2017.  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce1.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Walead Beshty. "Is Photography Over?". *SFMOMA*. 2010.  
<https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/photography-over/#section-walead-beshty>

The historical conventions of photographic aesthetics as developed by the canon primarily consisting of western male photographers, established a visual coding system for the way to best compose and develop an image. Manageable presentation of visual information allows easy access to the decipherability of the image. Predictability in composition and standardization based on singularity becomes a particularly loaded complication of photographic representation as the circulation of the photographic image gains momentum. The female body as photographic muse began early in the popularization of photography in the historical lineage of painting and sculpture. However, unlike the other media, the accessibility of images and prevalence of photography in 1920's and 1930's quickly colonized the imaginary of the western contemporary collective in accordance with these prescriptions of singularity, rendering the psychological disposition toward the female body as inherently male. Julie Jones states in regards to this movement in cultural history:

One important thing to bear in mind, while thinking about this period for women photographers, is that the proliferation of images in the 1920's and 1930's fully contributed to the advent of new forms of consumption and encouraged the cultivation of the cult appearance. Women were then omnipresent as models (objects) in this image world.<sup>12</sup>

The prevalence of the male gaze and its continued circulation imposes itself on the physiological and sexual development of the female identity and perpetuates the acceptance of the violence inflicted on women and others who do not prescribe to the established singularity, rendering any other positioning outside the male gaze as secondary. Laura Mulvey describes the function of woman in the patriarchal unconscious:

Woman (then) stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through

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<sup>12</sup> Campany, David Campany, Marta Gili, Julie Jones, Roxana Maroci. "Modern Women." *Aperture Magazine*, Winter 2016, 225.

linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.<sup>13</sup>  
The rhythm with which images move imposes itself on the construction of our realities.

This is especially true for the age of rapid circulation and image inundation that we currently reside in. Before being calculated and recorded, a body that sits in front of the lens is suspended in the reflection of the glass. When I sit in front of the lens is their space for resistance or am I still image before the shutter is released? The internet and advancement of cell phone cameras has created a historical precedence where the accessibility of photography appears egalitarian but emphasizes individuality and distance. The lens has become an instrument used against the female body, and among the collective conscious an instrument to occupy and distract as well as an instrument to pacify. I believe I too have been pacified, distracted, and configured in male gaze and I struggle with my acceptance to participate in photography and other technologies that promote a culture of image inundation and rapid image circulation because to participate in a medium that has always rejected my voice is to participate in the patriarchal objectification of myself.

The forces enacted on the photograph from outside of the frame, the forces that give the image momentum, directionality, and cultural value I believe can be redirected and used as a defense against the recirculation of the male gaze. The speed and stamina with which the photographic image moves in spaces such as the internet, generates the conditions that allow for the image to transform, mutate, and change. This momentum is the pivotal distinguishing characteristic of the photographic object and the tensions of this constant movement resists any singular definition of what constitutes its boundaries.

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<sup>13</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

In exploring the objectness of photography I began to think about the capacity for each image to contain within itself a unique record of movement. Markings, aberrations, fading and disintegration are a building of the images history of movement. Every new iteration of the image's body is a history of matter that is both lost and gained. For me, the photographic image, even those that are seemingly identical reproductions contain within it evidence of this itinerant behavior. Utilizing a layering of photographic processes such as traditional darkroom processes, digital imaging practices, scanning, home office printers, etc, I am disrupting this traditional viewing experience through abstraction of subject and accentuating this movement. Potentially, the movement of an image through these multiple processes can be visually signified by the deterioration of image quality, pixelation, and in some instances the disappearance or dissipation of the image entirely, leaving only a distressed photographic surface or container. Moving back and forth between analog and digital photographic processes, deterioration or bruising suggests the image's frequency of usage and thereby is representative of its cultural value as determined by the repetition and longevity of its circulation and building of that history. A specific performance of movement carried out by digital images is that of pixelation. As with the photographic object, the pixel contains within itself a finite description of the image's whole. In, "Defense of a Poor Image", Hito Steyerl states that, "the poor image is a copy in motion. It's quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image".<sup>14</sup> As the pixel becomes more prominent it overpowers the integrity of the image, the imagery becomes abstracted and its emphasis on singularity is disrupted, allowing space for diversity in movement while still referencing the system with which it circulates. Hito Steyerl ends her essay by stating:

The poor image is no longer about the real thing-the ordinary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion,

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<sup>14</sup> Hito, Steyerl. "In Defense of a Poor Image". *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Stemberg, 2012: 32

fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation.<sup>15</sup>

## **My work**

The resulting experimentation with these ideas in my practice/my work is a series of images entitled *Itinerant Image*. The final work is displayed as forty-eight inch by seventy-two inch archival inkjet prints. These images began with sixteen hour exposures on positive negative film that I scanned, printed, and rephotographed continuously until the image all but disappeared. Faint markings and subtle variations in white to yellow were all that remained in the building of artifacts and aberrations. The strenuous push through each process, building evidence and loss of discernable subject, abstracts the image from the generation that preceded it. Deterioration of image quality, pixelation, and in some instances the disappearance of a discernable image all together, represents both what is lost and gained through this movement. In an attempt to position myself as resistant of the male gaze, I deliberately manipulate and control the images movement. I often attribute this act of making to that of push processing in film development, a technique in which the film is overdeveloped in order to compensate for underexposure of an image effectively increasing the film speed. The intention is to render the subject of the image more visible. The final image is perhaps seemingly austere but its monochromatic quality is misleading. Through the acceleration of the image with “push processing” I am accentuating the process and movement, thereby accentuating my position as a “maker of meaning” not as passive receiver.

As a photographer, I am aligning myself with a history of patriarchal objectification that exists as a continual looping and reassertion of power dynamics inherent in the conventions of

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<sup>15</sup> Hito, Steyerl. “ In Defense of a Poor Image”. *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Stemberg, 2012: 44

subject and object relations in photography. When assuming the position of power behind the lens, I am simultaneously objectifying myself. My attempt to assume the role of maker or male with *Itinerant Image*, was an attempt to take back the gaze. However, without the complete eradication of convention, my making as a photographer is a continuation of the male gaze in its referential affirmation of gender conventions; subject as male and object as female. I wonder, am I responsible in perpetuating systems of power where women are consistently oppressed in any kind of making I engage with through the medium of photography? Julie Jones describes the failures of the modernist female photographers to 'seize the gaze' saying:

Professional women photographers didn't appear to change this type of objectification. When we study their pictures, it is very clear that searching for any sort of specifically female gaze, technique or subject matter is completely futile. Rather, they definitely used the same tools, moved through the same networks, and reached out to the same public as their male counterparts without playing on difference.<sup>16</sup>

By acting as photographer in this same vein, I am still functioning within the conventions of photography. I am using the same tools as my male counterparts and by not successfully putting forth a female gaze to circulate ideologies that dismantled subject and object power dynamics, I am continuing to promote conventions that favor a female position of subjugation.

Hito Steyerl suggests that to participate in the image rather than merely identify with it could perhaps abolish subject and object power dynamics within an image. She states:

The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked toward claiming autonomy and full subjecthood. But as the struggle to become subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Campany, David Campany, Marta Gili, Julie Jones, Roxana Maroci. "Modern Women." *Aperture Magazine*, Winter 2016, 225.

<sup>17</sup> Hito, Steyerl. "A Thing Like You and Me". *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Stenberg, 2012: 50

The piece displayed below *Itinerant image* was my first attempt at pulling the photographic image away from the wall, disrupting the traditional viewing experience of the photograph and rejecting traditional photographic conventions. Entering into the piece as maker, I neutralize the position of subject by conflating subject with object. There is no longer a male gaze imprinting itself on the image because the power dynamics have been equalized, rendering the male position as subject obsolete. By incorporating a performative making exercise in which I literally stepped into the image while making, I was attempting to participate in the image by becoming 'object without subject'.

Participating in the image for me was an insertion into the physical material of the image. As opposed to the passivity of the photogram, I was now including my physical body more intentionally in the making of this piece. The ripped and torn pieces of silver gelatin photographic paper, lay across a 120 inch by 169 inch unmarked bristol paper surface and are developed as monochromatic photograms at a variety of times. The photogram, in this instance, is a representative body of both space and time symbolic of the event of its making and life as an object. The monochromatic photograms are unattached to the bristol surface and do not overlap. By including space between each photogram I am emphasizing the moments that occurred before and after each event and the relationship of those events nonlinearly to one another. Considering once again the photograph as a container of time, the image in its entirety consists of events both seen and unseen; those that were materialized as object or body and those that were not. The impermanence with which the photograms remained unfixed to the surface was intended to represent a kind of fragility in their placement and visibility. A perhaps latent interpretation of this piece informed by my later works regarding the omitted history of thereminist Clara Rockmore, could be that the fragility of the events seen and unseen are commentary on the histories of women, minorities, and other marginalized bodies absent in



institutionalized education, especially within the arts and certainly within the medium of photography.

As I previously stated, the photograph as object contains within itself information that is calculable and manageable and the conditioning with which we interpret this information has been standardized. Disrupting the traditional viewing experience of the photograph, is a rejection of its predictable physical characteristics and a disruption of the image hierarchy built on an infrastructure established by a history of male photographers. I believe that I function within a history of women that utilize non-traditional image making in photography. Through experimentation with abstraction I began to consider my position amongst other women photographers such as Eileen Quinlan, Erin Shirreff, and Ingrid B. Olson. I interpret abstraction in response to photographic conventions as an instinctive act of resistance for many women artists, myself included. The indecipherable image does not require that it reveals itself upfront and therefore cannot be categorized or managed by the objectifying eye. The inability to move linearly from the original source material to the abstracted image is a scrambling or destabilizing force enacted on the viewer. Presenting myself as identifiable based on singularity is to be passive to convention and is therefore in accordance with the male gaze. The methods of abstraction that I began to experiment with utilized collage as a technique to break apart the image and reconstruct it in a less discernible way. I also continued to distance myself from the predictable physical characteristics of an image through the push processing technique or laborious layering of photographic processes that I had incorporated into my work previously. While fracturing and collage continued to be recurrent in my later work the act itself was still functioning for me within the conventionality of photographic image making. My intention was to disrupt the traditional viewing experience of an image, however but I began to consider that abstraction defined against convention was still functioning within convention rather than

dismantling it all together. In other words, “can working against the photographic conventions, in a medium that is still sometimes considered other, be viewed as an act of defiance?”<sup>18</sup>

In *StopFuckingW/Me*, I used stop motion animation video to continue to play with notions of participation and collage. I was thinking of the stop motion process both through my relationship to the darkroom and abstraction with collage, as a kind of building of a body or object. I considered the similarities of this making process to the darkroom in the manipulation of time in that the making process felt like a slowing of time. This video centers around the history of Clara Rockmore, the woman responsible for popularizing the theremin, an instrument played with electricity and that which requires distance of the body in order to produce sound. In researching this instrument online I found little information on her biography and had to rely primarily on imagery. The Clara Rockmore images that appear in the video are downloaded from the web, printed, scanned, and then developed in the darkroom. The inability for me to obtain an in depth biography of her life felt as though she was absent from the history of this instrument all together despite her contribution in creating the fingering method that is still used to play the instrument today.

The literal insertion of her hand into the playing of this instrument positioned her as player or maker however, the restriction of my engagement with her history through images alone felt like a subjugation of her as image, her body as instrument, and her image as object. I began to relate her simultaneity as instrument and player, subject and object, to my relationship with photography in the power dynamics connected to the lens. In, *Tunneling*, I use my image as a medium through which her history is transferred equalizing our positions within this simultaneity. *Tunneling* is a stop motion animation that once again centers around Clara Rockmore. The Clara Rockmore images that appear in the video are downloaded from the web,

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<sup>18</sup> Eva Respini. “On Defiance: Experimentation as Resistance.” *Aperture Magazine*, Winter 2016, 225.

printed, scanned, and then developed in the darkroom. Through the course of the video, her speaker blows and her body is fractured. The fracturing of her body approaches the physical limitations of the camera's ability to focus and meter and I began thinking of this fracturing as a kind of protest to the lens. The transformer and recurrent theme of electricity is a metaphor for Clara and my body, as water, is a conduit of her history. During the duration of the video I move from subject to object, sitting with Clara on the other side of the lens, our histories conflating. I began to consider what was lost and gained in the transmission of her electricity; a history of oppression and objectification, a history of invisibility?

Patriarchal objectification persists. The recirculation of the male gaze has consistently coincided with the migratory patterns of image movement in visual culture history. The transference of these histories of violence and oppression continue to connect one generation of women to the next. Presenting my body as medium through which Clara Rockmore can transfer is presenting my body as both loss and gain. In giving her voice a new body, I am conjunctively absorbing her history of invisibility.

According to Beshty, the photograph is inherently an abstraction of reality rather than indexicality because the act of transforming an object into image requires a reduction in dimensionality and therefore with the presence of the photograph there is also a presence of loss. Beshty states:

This is the apocalyptic becoming of the technological image in the form of the photograph, an inescapable conflation of the concrete with the likeness, an abstract gleaming dystopia where the real is a priori an image, and vice versa. It is the photographic act that comes to stand for this transformation of object into images, and it is the photograph as image, that renders this abstract transformation tautologically, and traumatically complete.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Walead Beshty. "Abstracting Photography". *Words Without Pictures*, New York: Aperture, 2010: 293

While the materialization of light is giving body to light the image displayed on the surface of the photograph is not reproduction but rather representation and it is this “traumatic” transformation that possess the image with an aurality of loss. In that space of aurality, Clara’s image as iconicity is weighted in a history of traumatic subjugation of women in which their existence was invisible until sexualized and then otherwise forgotten.

The aurality of loss present in her image is both of the violence of her becoming image and the historical ties of the objectification of the female body in photography. Furthermore, the circulation of her image without an in-depth biography or recognition of her contribution to the history of electronic music is symbolic of the epidemic of omitted histories of women contributors in the arts, reasserting Mulvey’s ideas of women as bearers of meaning not makers, “women’s desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it.”<sup>20</sup> The aurality gained through the materialization of light is both a representation of loss inherent in these histories of oppression but also an opportunity to assert one’s value in new form. Giving back Clara’s body and the return to objectness in the building of her body in the darkroom in, *StopFuckingW/Me*, was a perpetuation of the same objectification. Offering my body as a medium or conduit for her electricity to travel in, *Tunneling*, perhaps neutralized my position as photographer or male oppressor but utilized my image as a container to be filled accentuating my vulnerability to the trauma of passing generationally histories of oppression. In the installation of *Tunneling*, I pulled her image off the wall and gave it a new body that existed outside the history of photography and violence associated with the female image, seizing a space through which the traditional subject-object power dynamics of the medium could be dismantled.

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<sup>20</sup> Taken from Mulvey’s ideas of the paradox of phallogentrism in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975. The paradox for Mulvey exists in phallogentrism, or the symbolism of women as threat of male castration, relies on the image of women in order to reproduce the order of sexual imbalance in which male is active and woman is passive.

I placed an optical analog theremin in front of a projector. As the video, *Tunneling*, played the light that passed through the optical theremin produced sound in the form of a square wave that oscillated in frequency and vibration. The optical theremin became the medium for carrying Clara's image and the sound produced became the new materialization of her voice. In *Haunted Media* by Jeffrey Sconce, he discusses the "presence" inherent in electronic media:

grounded in the larger and more long-standing metaphysics of electricity, fantastic conceptions of media presence ranging from telegraph to virtual reality have often evoked a series of interrelated metaphors of flow, suggesting analogies between electricity, consciousness and information that enable fantastic forms of electronic transmutation, substitution, and exchange<sup>21</sup>

Clara's image becomes sound and therefore her light is given material to move again.

The mechanical square wave that the optical theremin produces is symbolic of the photographic image as a container of loss and gain through the continuous ebb and flow oscillation of sound. This was an especially important aspect of the theremin for me because it was additionally representative of the constant movement that I attribute as persistently present in my photographic practice and my anxiousness to not represent myself through photography as stagnant and transparent. My movement back and forth between analog and digital, abstraction and indexicality, subject and object, is constant and the photograph itself is itinerant both in the definition of image and in circulation.

Clara's theremin used radio waves, a kind of electromagnetic radiation similar to light. The manifestation of her image into the light of the projector is symbolic of her instrument. Unlike light, sound requires a medium to move. Having her image produce sound is a movement into a new kind of oscillatory body similar to the photographic image. Unlike light, sound cannot move in a void. It requires a medium or surface to move as the photographic

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Sconce. *Haunted Media: electronic presence from telegraphy to television*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009

object requires the same. In consideration of this, I am making an argument for new a kind of photographic image as sound. Clara's electromagnetic aura becomes sound and is given a new medium to move. The darkroom and the phenomena of the materialization of light is for me what distinguishes the photographic process and was the place responsible for inciting my fascination and affection for this medium. The building of the optical theremin became a place where clara's history was given visibility and the subject object power dynamics in photography were circumvented.

This lack of certainty with regard to what constitutes photography as an object of inquiry is, in all its abstractness, a mirror of the problem of theorizing the photograph: a clash between the apparent concreteness of the photographic referent and its slippery contextual play. Yet the term 'Photography', and all it implies persists beyond its supposed theoretical and practical disintegration, and with it a forlorn pastiche of critical theorization and aesthetic conventions repeatedly confront a metaphor for their own failure in the 'death mask' of the photographic image.<sup>22</sup>

Photography's insistence that it will not be defined, calculated, or manageable persists in its constant movement between definitions and refusal of a cohesive institutionalized categories. It is the medium's refusal of this and oscillatory humor that makes it the perfect place for me to situate myself in identifying with the medium and navigating its oppressive history so not to perpetuate the male gaze in my own art making.

My relationship to photography began at a time when the darkroom was disappearing and the terms by which photography was considered contemporary art was being reinvestigated. It was always a practice that existed outside of the mechanics of the camera perhaps because I responded so emotionally to the phenomena of materializing light and the slowing of time in the darkroom but also because the camera lens triggered for me an anxiety that I might perpetuate a history of patriarchal objectification. Perhaps the most important aspect in identifying myself as photographer is that the photographic image and the photographic

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<sup>22</sup> Walead Beshty. "Abstracting Photography". *Words Without Pictures*, New York: Aperture, 2010: 302

process are constantly in flux. As we move further and further away from traditional photographic processes, I feel there is space to reinvent the darkroom as the precedence has been set that the medium is malleable. The building of the optical theremin became for me the beginning of this exploration with what the signification of the darkroom is for my work and the ways in which I can simulate this sensorily because the darkroom is the place that photography distinguishes itself for me and is the center of my connection, to this multifarious and unsettled medium.

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