RESISTING REPRESENTATION : PHOTOGRAPHING DIFRACTIVELY

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ABSTRACT

This research project begins by asking, “can a photograph resist its representationalist apparatus?” It proposes that if the mechanisms of photographic representation could be used against photography’s inherent representationalism, an alternative way of seeing and being in the world may be revealed.

This question is approached through a material engagement with photographic processes that encompass studio and gallery situations. When difficulties were encountered attempting to overturn entrenched photographic representation, research led the project to adopt a diffractive methodology. First articulated by Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, a diffractive methodology is used to work with, instead of against, differences across disciplines. Key to this is an understanding of the constitutive role of the apparatus in the creation of knowledge including the performative role of the artist and viewer. Using the principles of this methodology I have devised a series of techniques aimed at disrupting and dispersing a photograph’s representational apparatus so that an alternative to representationalism may be revealed. These techniques are applied to the processes of studio based making as well as the presentation of photographs in a gallery.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that

(i) *the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*,

(ii) *due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used*,

(iii) *the thesis is 12,707 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.*

Vivian Cooper Smith
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Existence is not an individual affair” - Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

It is only possible to briefly touch on the myriad ways in which every person listed here has been involved in the making of this project but each has in their own way become part of the patterns that have emerged.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project asks, “can a photograph resist its representationalist apparatus?” This question is approached through a practice led material engagement with photographic processes using techniques derived from the principles of a diffractive methodology as outlined by Karen Barad. The outcomes of this research are photographic in form but suggest an alternative to the representational nature that appears so connected to the photographic process.

This paper will provide a conceptual accompaniment to the practical outcomes as well as detail the various divergences and convergences that made up the research process including, most importantly, how the notion of resistance eventually needed to be rethought. It will begin with a look at representationalism and how it pertains to the way humans have traditionally seen and understood the world. It explains how this applies to photography and outlines how a diffractive methodology presents an alternative to this system. It then explores the ways in which the principles of a diffractive methodology can be used to design a series of techniques for creating a collection of photographs. It culminates in a description and analysis of three exhibitions that have been created employing this methodology and which make up the practical output of this research.

Chapter One will give a broad overview of representationalism, its key concepts, apparatuses and the difficulties associated with the dominant position it holds in many social structures today. It will introduce the writing of Karen Barad whose considerations of quantum mechanics and resulting diffractive methodology offer an alternative to representationalism.

Chapter Two outlines how integral photography is in maintaining a representationalist system through its perceived relationship between the world and image. It describes the social ontology of photography and the important place it has in how the world is seen and understood, and suggests photography’s dual nature as object and image makes it an ideal site for exploring alternatives to representation. Finally, it introduces some key suggestions from François Laruelle, Vilém Flusser and Karen Barad on ways in which representationalism may be challenged or disrupted.

Chapter Three makes it clear that although a diffractive methodology is being offered here as an alternative to representationalism, the project only arrived at this conclusion through a journey of experimentation and research. This chapter details the steps taken towards the methodology and in particular two bodies of work developed through the research that were instrumental in getting there.

At the conclusion of Chapter Three this paper will pause the analysis of the research’s progress to detail Karen Barad’s diffractive methodology. I believe it is important to understand the thinking behind this methodology before then assessing its relevance and application to a photographic practice. Chapter Four provides this overview of the key scientific and theoretical positions of the methodology.
Chapter Five is broken into two sections that detail the main components of diffractive photography – the studio and the exhibition – and how an alternative to representationalism can be achieved by engaging and working with representation rather than through resistance.

The first section of this fifth chapter introduces the four studio-based techniques that have been derived from the principles of a diffractive methodology to create photographs. It shows how these key principles can be articulated through a material engagement with the processes of photography. Using several images developed through the process as illustrations, this chapter introduces the reader to the practical possibilities of the methodology and shows the development of an archive of images that make up the photographic outcomes of the project.

The second section of this chapter examines the role of the exhibition in continuing the principles of a diffractive methodology and how methods of presentation can be used to disrupt individual photographic representations. It highlights how when this method is applied to the creation of photographs, by necessity it must also be expanded to the mode of viewing them, the apparatus of the gallery.

Chapter Six concerns the two outcomes of this research project. Outcome One is a methodology for diffractive photography that inspires a series of techniques that are applied to the making of photographs within a studio. It will also be shown how this methodology can be applied to an existing archive of images. Outcome Two is as a self-generated archive of photographs created by the techniques of Outcome One in the studio part of the research. This photographs in this archive operate as interchangeable components in a series of photographic exhibitions (or arrangements). These arrangements make up a concise exhibition at Bus Projects as well as the expected final presentation of the project at the examination exhibition to be held at the Victorian College of the Arts.
1. REPRESENTATIONALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF THE APPARATUS

Representationalism is a way of understanding the world in which we live. It works through representation and effectively positions the world that we encounter as an object to be known, explored and exploited by an individual subject. Barbara Bolt describes it as “a system of thought that fixes the world as an object and resource for human subjects. As a mode of thought that prescribes all that is known, it orders the world and predetermines what can be thought.”¹ It is a system built on the separating of object from subject and a subjugation of the ‘other’ under the ‘one’. The determination of what is to be known/described/exploited is inherent to the process and it does so by dividing or differentiating the world into predetermined categories such as God/humanity, self/other, man/woman, real/imaginary and then describing the world according to these definitions. According to Karen Barad “[r]epresentationalism takes the notion of separation as foundational”.²

Representationalism assumes dominance over the world by claiming everything can be represented and that these representations are an accurate and truthful reflection of the object that they represent. They are governed by systems of definitions, signs, knowledge and interpretation. Representation is the tool to ensure representationalism is the preeminent system for understanding our world. It is the “vehicle through which representationalism can effect this will to fixity and mastery.”³ Representationalism is a foundational social construct that permeates all facets of life and does so because, according to Karen Barad “[r]epresentationalism separates the world into ontologically disjoint domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible”.⁴ It “supports social constructivist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs”.⁵

As a system of thought, representationalism is manifest through apparatuses of representation. These can be found throughout social and cultural spheres. Politics is representational, as is philosophy, science, art and the judicial system. Each one of these apparatuses operate under the basic premise that the world is divided into individual entities that are unknowable without some form of representation to illuminate or reveal their truth. Each apparatus accepts the fundamental assertion that the world must be divided and categorized so that it may be known and that these representations are the mediators of truth. It is only through these representations that we can know an otherwise mute and inert material world.

Central to this representationalist system is the role of the representational apparatus as a simple reflecting device – acting as a mirror to the object being represented. For example, in science, the apparatus of the laboratory is seen as a necessary tool to enable experimentation rather than particular entity in its own right.

³ Bolt, Art Beyond Representation. 13
⁵ Ibid. 802
As recent disenchantment with political representation makes clear, actualities of representation are never as clear cut as the system assumes. To presume an apparatus for representation is simply a mirror or transparent medium overlooks the role they play in determining the types of knowledge being produced. Through her discussion on the work of physicist Neils Bohr, Karen Barad asserts that “the apparatus plays a much more active and intimate role in experimental practices than classical physics recognizes. Apparatuses are not passive observing instruments; on the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena.”

According to Barad, representational apparatuses are an integral component in the making of knowledge but more importantly are “boundary-drawing practices”. She gives the example that the concept of position can only be understood in relation to an apparatus of fixed parts. In other words, if the representations derived from an apparatus are dependent on the nature of that apparatus and if knowledge of the world is only obtained through these representations then our understanding is limited by the very systems that we have constructed. Through her theory of agential realism Barad alerts us to the constitutive and active role of the apparatus but also to the assumed passivity of the observer – highlighting instead the “inseparability of the object and the measuring agencies”. She proposes the notion of intra-action to describe the entangled nature of these relationships, one that does not presume the pre-existence of individual entities but rather entities brought about through the process of measuring/representing.

This is counter to the prevailing dogma of representationalism and one that requires a radical rethink of our individual and collective abilities to perceive and understand the world in which we live. If we are to explore alternative ways of knowing the world what might they be? According to Henri Bergson, representationalism is only one of two ways we can know a thing or (in its collective form) the world.

The first depends on the viewpoint chosen and the symbols employed, while the second is taken from no viewpoint and rests on no symbol. Of the first kind of knowledge we shall say it stops at the relative; of the second that, wherever possible it attains the absolute.

Could it be possible to know the world in Bergson’s absolute sense? Is it possible to resist the system of representationalism that is so dominant today or find an alternative? Following Barad and Bergson, it is the aim of this project to look for an another way to see and know the world through an engagement with the processes of photography.

6 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway. 142
7 Ibid. 140
8 Ibid. 139
Representationalism is manifest through numerous social and cultural apparatuses – politics, science, art, the law amongst others. Each of these are implicated in the production of knowledge however one that stands out as perhaps the most literal iteration and key proponent of representationalism is photography.

Due to the technological processes involved and a historical narrative as ‘truth revealing’, the photograph occupies a privileged position in relation to representation. Despite the enormous diversity of photographic practices, photographs are consistently seen as representational images, reinforcing a representationalist system of knowing the world. As John Roberts states in the introduction to *Photography and its Violations*:

> ...photography in its various social-relational modes is one of the primary means through which individuals inhabit, experience, and reflect on the world in which they find themselves, but also, equally importantly, through which they experience and reflect on those worlds in which they don’t find themselves or don’t recognize themselves. ¹⁰

For Roberts, photography is

> a social relation between photographer, world, image, and user, [and] is an endlessly englobing and organizational process in which representations of self, other, “we”, and the collective are brought to consciousness as part of everyday social exchange and struggle. This is the social ontology of photography.¹¹

The availability of photography and its unique relationship to the world has meant our knowledge of the environment in which we live and those of others is mediated by the photographic apparatus. The world is known as the camera would have us know it. As Vilém Flusser argues, we see according to the rules of the camera and accept the concurrent distortions of reality.¹² This is despite the ongoing theoretical discourse within photographic circles over the nature of photographic representation which moves from those who argue photographs necessarily index something that ‘was before the camera’¹³ through to those who insist a photograph is an abstraction and as such cannot be relied upon to offer a truthful relationship to the world.¹⁴ In my opinion this is an intractable debate simply because photography fulfils the roles we set it – indexical or not – and regardless of whether it is operating in the way we think it is. The interpretive processes by which the photographic apparatus produces a photograph mean it only *appears* to create a truthful image of the world yet we continue to frame the world according to its ways of seeing.¹⁵ Photography’s representational apparatus ensures we only know the world through our images of it.

¹¹ Ibid. 5
¹⁵ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. 59
Strangely enough though it appears many remain sceptical of photography’s abilities to accurately depict the world. As Tirdad Zolghadr writes:

Photography is forever considered a monument to its own inability to reflect the real. Even today, as photos dominate the imaginary in so many new ways, from selfies to cellphone photojournalism and beyond, they all remain prisoner to the same old conversation about representation and betrayal, about testimony and/or the glories and pitfalls thereof.

Photography seems to occupy a vexed place – a confused middle ground between the world as we want to see it and the world as photography sees it. It is this ambiguous role that I believe provides fertile ground for research into the apparatus of representation and representationalism more broadly.

Photography is a medium that has been defined according to its technical means of production. This leaves it open to dispute when those techniques change, which they have consistently done since the medium was invented in the early 1800s. What has always remained however is a perceived relationship of the photograph to the world (even if this is not a purely indexical one). This perception is predicated on the representationalist premise of an anthropocentric separation between the natural world and humanity. Given this presumption, the reception of photographs rests largely on reaffirming this relationship through the recognition of the subject within the image. This is essentially a desire for representation and a kind of confirmation bias for representationalism. Photographs are asked to reveal the world to us and in doing so confirm the world as ours to observe, reveal and control.

Employing photographic representation as the model through which to rethink representationalism means an attempt to subvert the desire or expectation for representational photographic images. This attempt will need to navigate the ways in which ‘photographic seeing’ determines what and how things may be represented and how this alters our perceptual engagement with the world around us. Essentially this is an attempt to use photography against itself.

If photography is to resist representation how might this be realized? In his concept of non-photography François Laruelle proposes a photography that is “radically abstract, absolutely non-worldly and non-perceptual” – an immanent photography, with and without representation – “real without an external realism”. Vilém Flusser argues that human freedom can be found in the form of abstract photography created when photographers “play against the camera.” Although anthropocentric in his privileging of human agency, his notion that freedom resides within resistance to the apparatus of photography infers that new ways of knowing the world can be found when the representational apparatus is disrupted and expanded to include the agency of other contributors in the making of the image. These contributors

20 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. 80
21 Ibid. 82
would include the photographer, the photographic tools and materials as well as the object of the image – the subject matter. There is a correlation here to what Barad refers to when she discusses her expanded notion of the apparatus; one that includes all participants as having agency in the making of representations without privileging any one over the other. According to Barad “apparatuses are specific material reconfigurations of the world… [that] reconfigure spacetimematter as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming”.22 Following this one could say that each photographic apparatus is made up of a ‘specific re-configuring’ of photographer, camera, subject matter and other technical and human contributors who participate in the creation of the photograph by which in turn we then see the world.

So, could it be argued that to resist representationalism through photography one must embrace a non-perceptual abstraction, disruption of the camera and a material and situated engagement in the apparatus of representation? How would one do this and what would the results be?

A key reference for my research, Barbara Kasten is an inspiration to a wave of younger artists working with the materiality, technical apparatus and representational constructs of photography while also embracing the possibilities of new digital technologies and interventions into space and artifice. Lucas Blalock, Sarah Cwynar, Liz Deschenes, Noëmi Goudal, Darren Harvey-Regan, Leslie Hewitt, John Houck, Anthony Lepore, Lisa Oppenheim and Eileen Quinlan are just some of the artists that work in this field and who I have also used as touchstones during my research.

22 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 142
Barbara Kasten describes her own work in the following way.

I wouldn’t position this as abstract photography. There seems to be a need to identify subject matter and its place in the world. But that’s one of the reasons I make the work I do, so there is no recognizable subject and no representational value…I want it to have its own identity, its own being.23

In making work without a representational value Kasten does not reject photography – all her photographs are resolutely photographic – yet they speak with their own voice. These are photographs that present, rather than represent, and they show possibilities of a world seen/ experienced/lived differently. They may have their own being but this individuality is situated within their being-photographic. In other words, they resist representation but do not overturn or conquer it. They avoid a politics of negation, of simply replacing something old with something new or, more drastically, stepping outside of photography to reject representation outright.

As representational images, all photographs occupy the complicated ground of image and object simultaneously however within conventional understandings of photography their role as image remains privileged. By disrupting the direct representational interpretation of her photographs Kasten complicates and disorients this hierarchy of image over object. It is hard to know what her images are ‘of’ without relinquishing our notions of perspective and so as viewers we are forced to acknowledge the presence of the image-as-image; the photograph unclothed. This is a foregrounding of the photograph as an appearing presence; a form of poēsis – a bringing forth of that which is hidden24 however what is revealed is not the subject of the image but the image itself.

Developing a ‘radically abstract photograph’ or ‘working against the camera’ highlights the active role the photographer can play in the construction of the photographic image however given its dependence on technology and apparent automatism, photography is not known for its relationship to the artist’s hand. This is despite traditional darkroom processes being haptic and heavily dependent on the direct involvement of the artist’s body – dodging and burning areas of the print being one example. Barbara Bolt suggests such a handlability as a method to move beyond the limitations of a purely representational understanding of art. Drawing on Heidegger, she outlines a materialist approach to the making of work; showing “through the handling of materials, methods, tools and ideas in practice, that art becomes experience”.25 Bolt differentiates between an image that is simply an illustration or picture of the world and a materialist image that “invites us to go beyond the figure to the abstract frame-work that holds it all together, and us with it.”26 According to Bolt, “imaging provides the expansive force that

25 Bolt, Art Beyond Representation. 48
undoes representation”27 and this kind of imaging can be achieved through re-thinking the process or apparatus of photography. Rather than limiting photography to a purely automatic mechanical process, Bolt (following Stanley Cavell) describes it as a “complex articulation between the mechanical, the material and the discursive”.28 Framing photographic practice as an active site of bodily and material engagement offers a step away from an automatic and technologically derived photograph. A turn towards photographic making is a turn away from photographic representation. It is also a turn towards photography-as-material. Eschewing a need to reinvent the medium I am thinking and making through photography. By making overt the element of handlability in photographic making I am creating photographs that are “not of an action, but through an action.”29

Importantly this does not mean defining what or how the apparatus of photography is determined. The field of photography has always been nebulous and has embraced innumerable technological advancements over the last few hundred years. Any effort to define the essence of photography becomes mired in difficulty and so no effort will be made to do so. Instead I will be working with the concept of photography as a form of matrix within which techniques and materials exist as blurry vectors in horizontal non-hierarchical relation to each other. Within this structure, any absence or removal of elements does not destabilise the whole. Remaining within this fuzzy space of photographic practice allows me to explore the meanings of making and presenting a photograph without a need to specifically define the medium.

For this research, I have decided to concentrate on the use of the camera, the photographer, the photographic print, the viewer and the gallery as the key vectors within this matrix. I believe they are most relevant components of the photographic apparatus to my research as they allow opportunities for manual, haptic explorations into processes of photographic representation and exhibition and the possibilities for its disruption.

27  Ibid. 124
28  Ibid. 135
3. TOWARDS A DIFFRACTIVE METHODOLOGY

The path ‘towards’ assumes its own texture – a texture of movement that is not of linear progression, but that is not to say that it is non-progressive. It is a movement through fissures – timely openings – that act as openings in time, openings through time…understood here as the giving of new breath to old thoughts or as the examination of new thoughts through the breath of older writings. – Anita Paz

Over the course of this practice-led project various techniques of photographic ‘handling’ and making were explored. Concurrent to this was research into theories that offered a broader conceptual framework than purely photographic discourse. As will be shown, the result of these parallel pursuits was the merging of photographic making with the principles of a diffractive methodology as espoused by Karen Barad and Donna Haraway – photographing diffractively. The aspects of diffractive photography inspired by this methodology include a return to the image, disparity and diversity in subject matter, dismantling of singular perspectives, interruption and distortion, and performativity.

Before expanding on the principles of a diffractive methodology I wish to outline the evolution of this research and the path towards this methodology. I have chosen to detail the first three stages of studio work followed by an in-depth explanation of the methodology. Finally, I will describe how the practice and theory came together and show how the principles of a diffractive methodology can be employed to create photographs that offer an alternative to representationalism.

This research project did not begin with a diffractive methodology in place; relying instead on the thoughts of François Laruelle and Vilém Flusser as a first response to the problem of photographic representation. It was during studio experimentation and concurrent theoretical research that the potential of a diffractive methodology became apparent and only after several frustrations concerning subject matter and techniques. The breakthrough came with a realization that up to that point I had been simply attempting to represent my research ‘in’ the photographs – in other words my project itself was representational. It was at this stage that I shifted the research away from exploring photographic methods of representing ideas to a more embodied presentation. In this sense, the process of research and making together actualised a move away from representation towards something akin to theory-in-action. Central to this was ‘de-positioning’ the act of photography so it no longer adhered to a hierarchical structure that privileged the photographer ahead of the apparatus. Instead it was an encounter between equal participants. It was here that François Laruelle’s ideas of performativity and practice 31 chimed with Karen Barad’s diffractive methodology to open new spaces for photographic making. Outlined below are the three stages of studio practice that led to this conclusion.

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3.1 THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTER

This project was practice led and as such it progressed according to the experiments, mistakes, twist and turns that inevitably arise in a studio practice. The initial stages of research were mostly false starts and dead ends. The demands and pressure of an academic framework introduced a timidity to my work that took some months to work through. Concurrently, a wide reading list was developed that at times threatened to overwhelm the practical outcomes. The difficulty was always where and how to begin. Questions raised by reading were not being answered in the practical work and hesitant explorations in technique and images were manifest without any apparent direction or conceptual framework. Nevertheless the experiments continued and eventually crystallised around the thoughts of Karen Barad, New Materialism and the diffractive methodology. How this eventuated was a little serendipitous but ultimately the result of the research.

The project began with a photo-shoot involving a group of people in a studio who were asked to perform the actions of non-violent protest. These included sitting or lying on the ground, standing still in a group and wearing masks and face coverings. Although in hindsight this was misguided I was attempting to draw a correlation between these passive and indeterminate actions of civil disobedience with a ‘disobedient’ photograph which resisted its own representationalism.

Using these photographs as a form of image library I began by rephotographing them to disentangle any indexical relationship they may have appeared to have with the original photoshoot. Unfortunately I found the results lacked the representational disruption I was looking for. One day on a whim I picked up a broken glass crystal (the type used in chandeliers) and with the aid of a prolonged exposure, rephotographed a printed photograph through it. The result was a distorted, fragmented image that spoke of psychedelia or surrealism and resisted any obvious attempts to identify either the subject matter or the nature of the disruption. By deliberately holding the crystal in front of the lens I had interrupted the normal functioning of the camera and disoriented its standard way of seeing. I had relinquished some control over the process and enhanced the play of chance by participating (in a bodily sense) in the photographic event. Despite disrupting its ability to ‘see’, this process actually embraced the contributions of the camera. During the thirty second exposure I held the crystal in front of the lens meaning that not only was I unable to see what the camera was seeing due to the open shutter but my position as photographer had changed. I was no longer situated behind the camera but also in front and alongside it in an awkward embrace. The resulting photograph was the camera’s summary of this photographic encounter and the relationship I established between it and myself.

To test the effectiveness of this approach I presented the work to a small group of people at the Victorian College of the Arts. To accentuate the sense of disorientation contained within the images I deliberately introduced elements of this technique to the installation as a whole. Some prints were cut into sections; some images overlapped others and the proximity of the works to each other ensured that at every level there was a dispersal of the image. The intention was to resist the viewer’s eye and ensure it could not find any perspective or orientation to the images.
The responses from those who viewed the work suggested it was successful in inducing a sense of confusion and uncertainty as well as a difficulty in identifying the subject matter or a hierarchy of images; however why this was so was not discussed. Instead some expressed frustration at the obstruction caused by the fragmentation of the image and how this obscured a reading of what was ‘happening in the image’. I was surprised to find that the responses seemed to return to the nature or meaning of the depicted actions rather than any association the action may have had to photographic representation.32

32  Feedback from viewers at a student led critique on 15 August 2016 at Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne

Figure 3. Vivian Cooper Smith, Installation view – work in progress, 15 August 2016
Much of this initial feedback proved constructive to the development of the next phase of images. The viewers desire to understand what was being represented in the photographs drove their sense of frustration; however rather than consider the impulse to know and understand as an integral component to the work, the viewers (although not exclusively) concentrated on the representation.

3.2 DURATION AND THE PROLONGED PHOTOGRAPHIC EVENT

Opening up the field of immanence and inserting the photographic act allows for a bypassing of the linear understanding of a time of before or after, corresponding to the recorded event. – Stella Baraklianou

The use of long exposure in re-photographing the printed photographs allowed me to manipulate both the position of the crystal lens and the prints. It also prolonged the act of photographing, disrupted the ‘event of photography’ and allowed a greater role for chance in the making of the image. By not depicting any obvious movement within the images meant the long exposure remained unknown to the viewer, however it was integral to the way the images were to be viewed. The photographic encounter and thus photographic representation had been stretched or ‘plasticised’. What was seen in the photograph was no longer a representation of a moment in time but the camera’s summary of a sequence of actions.

Needing a solution to the problems caused using the human figure as subject matter in the first stage of this project I turned to readymade objects - utilitarian and everyday plastic products. This was a playful nod to the notion of a plastic encounter as well as a method of introducing elements of abstraction to the images. The diversity of items used (including plastic flowers, numbers, toys and plumbing components) resisted any narrative associations that the actions of the figures in the first sequence of images had elicited.

Figure 4. Vivian Cooper Smith, work in progress, 2016

Embracing the plasticity of the subject matter and photographic encounter resulted in a suite of works that were markedly more abstract than the earlier images. A selection of them were presented to a small group at the Victorian College of the Arts for feedback. In this instance, they were presented uniformly across the space; no effort was made to disrupt the integrity of each image. Among the varied responses were several that attempted to make sense of the images as a code or language however they were hampered by an inability to grasp the meaning of the images. To many of the viewers these photographs seemed meaningless, obtuse and with no clear focus or obvious compositional structure.³⁴

3.3 THE GENERIC AND THE MULTIPLE

The response from the ‘plastic’ works made clear there was a still some way to go in engendering viewers’ responses that were not couched in terms of the meaning or representation of each image. Exacerbating this problem was my use of a consistent subject matter. By presenting a suite of photographs of plastic objects I had inadvertently limited the reception of the work to what these objects represented. This was despite their apparent abstract qualities. To circumvent this I decided to embrace disparity and ‘the generic’ as subject matter.

In Uta Barth’s words she makes photographs “about looking, about visual perception as content in and of itself”.³⁵ She wants the viewer to become conscious of their own process of seeing and uses the photograph as an empty container or space in which they can project or move into. Barth uses the changing light and objects in her home to act as scaffolding for this investigation yet does not completely relinquish a recognisable subject in the manner of Liz Deschenes or Miriam Bhöm. Viewers can still identify elements such as the top of a couch, curtains or flowers in a vase, but given the incidental, fragmentary or peripheral position within the frame they introduce an element of confusion or dissatisfaction. By withholding apparent meaning from the viewer, Barth’s photographs avoid representational interpretation and instead ask the viewer to reflect on their own place and agency as viewers. This is achieved

³⁴ Feedback from viewers at a student led critique on 2 October 2016 at Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
through a sustained use of generic and repetitive subject matter including a tree in the series ‘nowhere near’36 and cut flowers in her ‘Untitled’ series from 200637. When asked how she chose a subject Barth responded that her choice of flowers was “a choice of no choice”38 such is their ubiquity amongst photographic images.

The everyday nature of these subjects mean they are neither universal or particular but could be described as ‘examples’. As Giorgio Agamben states “the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which however, stands for each of them and serves for all.”39 Concentrating my project on the human figure followed by notionally abstract plastic ready-mades had inadvertently worked against the key goal of the research; namely the creation of photographs that resist their representational construct. To do this I embraced the concept of the example or generic by employing the key tropes of photography – the landscape, the still life, the portrait and the abstract. It was my assumption that a group of diverse individual photographs that spoke of generalities rather than specifics could engender a conversation about perception and representation instead of narrative or symbolism.

In conjunction with this shift towards the generic was further experimentation in the techniques of a rephotography with a performative element. During a long exposure, small photographs were shifted and overlapped to produce images that alluded to techniques of collage or digital manipulation. Perspective and perceptual orientation were thrown off balance by the multiple images interacting within the frame. The effect was heightened using coloured lights reflecting off the surface of the photographic paper which obscured some areas while highlighting the texture of others. The use of generic images of a mountain range, a sunset on a bay and vase of roses defied immediate identification or ‘decoding’. While the use of overlaying images was immediately apparent it is not as readily determined where the individual images began or ended. As a result, the eye travels across the surface searching unsuccessfully for a perspective.

Building on this method, different combinations of images were used to defy any narrative interpretations and further fragmentation was added by using my prepared camera.40 The resultant images were fractured and repeated on multiple levels – almost to the point of patterning. As a result, the images were void of narrative content without becoming completely non-representational. Previous images were reworked and new ones introduced.

A large group of images were presented to an audience on 11 April 2017 at Victorian College of the Arts. To ensure all directions of the research were present, this exhibition combined the processes of both previous presentations and showed some work as singular images while others were grouped. According to the feedback, this method was not as successful as initially hoped.

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38 Uta Barth, The Long Now (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co, 2010). 21
40 Amongst several experiments that placed objects in front of the camera lens the one that was most effective was using a large crystal ball. By mounting it to the front of the lens it served as a kind of external lens through which the image became distorted, fragmented and repeated in the manner of a kaleidoscope. When discussing this technique, I will use the term ‘prepared camera’ to cover the various objects that were incorporated into the camera apparatus. This is also a reference to John Cage’s prepared piano techniques dating from the 1940’s.
however the ensuing conversation was insightful and suggested a breakthrough in overcoming the difficulties with subject matter and the representational strengths of the photographs.

Many of the viewers to this third presentation expressed their difficulties in accessing the work. They felt resisted and repelled – even rejected. The audiences’ desire for depth and perspective was not reciprocated leaving them unable to see beyond the materiality of the photograph itself. This was accentuated by my repeated use of light reflecting off the textured surface of the photographic paper. The use of recognizable content such as human figures alongside abstract images of the photographic paper seemed to nullify any narrative associations and it was noted that the photographs had moved away from simply pointing at a referent. Perhaps most importantly however was a suggestion that the crystalline and multi-layered form of the images could offer a politics of seeing differently. This was the first time this had been noted in response to the research and indicated that the images were beginning to operate in ways initially proposed in the research question.41

As mentioned earlier, these three stages of making and presenting were developed parallel to theoretical research that was at times broad and tangential before settling on Karen Barad’s diffractive methodology as its primary focus. Some techniques that were used originated through chance and inspiration (for example, the crystal) while others were inspired directly by texts (such as multiple perspectives). It is difficult to identify a moment when diffraction

41 Feedback from viewers at a student led critique on 11 April 2017 at Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
became the framework for the project however as this third presentation of work on 11 April 2017 was a public exhibition of the links between theory and practice it is from this moment on that the two components are to be read as necessarily interwoven.

Considering this I believe it is important now to examine the principles of a diffractive methodology and its significance to photographic representation before detailing the techniques derived from this methodology – photographing diffractively. After this I will return to the chronological development of the studio work, exhibition and the final outcomes of the research.
4. A DIFFRACTIVE METHODOLOGY

Developed by Karen Barad following Donna Haraway, a diffractive methodology was devised as an affirmative rather than oppositional approach to reading new and existing texts. The concept of diffraction moves our understanding of difference from “oppositional to differential, from static to productive, and our ideas of scientific knowledge from reflective, disinterested judgment to mattering, embedded involvement”. Barad’s explains a diffractive methodology as a “method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement.” Founded in feminist theory it is one that offers a useful methodology for thinking and making photography that does not operate through the separation and externality of representationalism.

A diffractive methodology is founded on interference patterns; that is the patterns of effects of difference rather than difference itself. An interference pattern is the result of two or more waves interacting with each other. For example, when two rocks are thrown in a pond the radiating ripples from one rock intersect with those from the other. The pattern formed is an interference pattern. Rather than concentrating on the essential natures of the two rocks and the differences between them this methodology looks at the results of differences intersecting.

Key to this methodology is the concept of entanglement and intra-action. Barad uses the quantum physics ‘two-slit experiment’ to discuss the entangled nature of humans and their environment. The experiment itself has demonstrated that the process of measuring the behavior of electrons as they pass through an apparatus changes their nature. Electrons are particles that can behave as a wave giving them an indeterminate state called superposition. They are particles and a wave simultaneously. An apparatus set up to measure the behaviour of electrons as particles must assume they are particles if it is to measure them as such. However, the act of measurement changes their behaviour – they do in fact behave as particles despite their previous indeterminacy. Once the measuring device is removed the electrons revert to their previously indeterminate state – particles behaving like a wave. Barad calls this ‘intra-action’ whereby bodies and environments are “integral “parts” of, or dynamic reconfigurings of, what is.” She says humans are neither “outside observers of apparatuses, nor independent subjects that intervene in the workings of an apparatus, nor the products of social technologies that produce them”. Rather humans are “part of the ongoing reconfiguring of the world”.

Applying this thinking to my project means accepting that the human/photography relationship is not one of separation but one of entanglement. This in turn resists any truth and representational claims of photography and subverts notions of automatism. Situating

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44 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: 170
45 Ibid. 171
46 Ibid. 171
the photographer, subject-matter (object) and camera apparatus in an ongoing process of re-configuring or becoming allows possibilities for the pulling apart of seemingly fixed binaries such as nature/culture or animate/inanimate entrenched within the system of representation.

Barad presents diffraction as an alternative methodology to counter the prevailing constructs of representationalism. Optical metaphors are a useful tool to understand the differences between the two. Representationalism works with mirrors, reflection and reflexivity – the image reflects the object. A diffractive methodology works instead with diffraction patterns – patterns of interference, patterns of difference.

As Barad explains:

…diffraction is not reflection raised to some higher power. It is not a self-referential glance back at oneself. While reflection has been used as a methodological tool by scholars relying on representationalism, there are good reasons to think that diffraction may serve as a productive model for thinking about nonrepresentationalist methodological approaches.47

Reflection operates within photography literally as well as metaphorically. Although not exclusively, many cameras use a mirror to reveal the image to the photographer through the viewfinder prior to the shutter release. Photographs in their social function are widely relied upon to provide evidence of the things we encounter – they are used as mirrors of the world and ourselves. Photographs as reflection ensures that representationalism and its mechanisms of opposition and division endure. Photographs as diffractions; as patterns of difference is a way to counter this prevailing construct.

Figure 7. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Dispersal (Back of Head)*, 2017

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47 Ibid. 88
5. PHOTOGRAPHING DIFFRACTIVELY

The effectiveness of diffraction as a methodology for rethinking photography became apparent through the process of research and practice outlined in Chapter Three of this paper. Practical experiments with methods of disruption, dispersal and distortion suggested theoretical pathways that led to the writings of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. Once this methodology was adopted the next task was to apply the principles of diffraction to the process of making and exhibiting photographs. I will first discuss the application of the methodology to studio techniques followed by an examination of how the principles of diffraction can be used in the presentation of photography within a gallery.

5.1 THE STUDIO

Through this project, I devised four techniques that were either inspired by or effectively literalised aspects of the diffractive methodology. They are (i) returning to and reworking existing images, (ii) collapsing multiple perspectives into singular images, (iii) using interruption and obstruction to disperse or disrupt the image, and (iv) foregrounding photography as a performative act. In keeping with a diffractive methodology these individual techniques do not exist in isolation but instead act together and although I have separated them into four processes the lines between them are blurred.

Returning to the image

Forming the foundation for every process is the principle of re-turning to or re-using already existing images (representations). Barad explains this not as a return to the past but a “re-turning as in turning it over and over again” in much the same way earthworms turn over the soil. “Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of
differentiating-entangling. As such, there is no moving beyond, no leaving the ‘old’ behind.”

As a reading methodology this means that an existing text is not discarded or negated but read ‘through’ contrasting or even opposing text to reveal the patterns of difference. In a photographic sense one could say this process disengages the photographic image from any time or spatial specificity. Further to this it troubles the notion of the singular point of view or frame; resisting attempts by the camera to fix its monocular vision on a particular place and time and destabilising photography’s entrenched relationship with memory and the past. Donna Haraway writes that “[d]iffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals.”

Importantly, a diffractive methodology engages with rather than rejects representation as to do so would be to re-enact the processes being overturned. In fact according to Frederica Timeto, Haraway “retrieves representation by means of the metaphor and methodology of diffraction” and that in doing so “she is pointing to the performativity of representations not only to show the co-emergence of meaning and matter, but also to affirm that it is always possible to materially intervene in the world’s becoming by interfering with existing representations.”

I believe this point needs some stressing. Until this stage in the project I had assumed that to find an alternative to representationalism through photography I would need to resist its overarching representational structure however it had become clear that this was also a representationalist perspective. What Barad and Haraway suggest instead is that by engaging with and working through existing systems and processes new ones can be formed. It is not creating an opposing apparatus that is important but working with and through the existing one to ensure the role of all participants is included and accounted for in forming the resulting interference patterns (knowledge). This includes myself in the studio and the viewer in the gallery. As Barad says an apparatus is boundary forming – the way we measure determines the results of our measuring. To resist representation is to draw a boundary that only serves to reinforce the prevailing structure.

Enabling a conversation about photographic representation through the use of photographic representation is difficult primarily due to the hold representationalism has over the way photographs are seen and interpreted. As outlined in Chapter Three, the particular use of figures or scenes ensured the viewers’ responses centered on what the images represented rather than the nature of representation itself. To rethink this automatic response I turned to generic or common photographic subject matter. It is these images that became the ‘existing representations’ referred to by Timeto and which were manipulated through the diffractive techniques outlined here. The subjects I used are landscape, portraiture, still life and abstraction. In one way or another each photographic outcome of this project could be described as falling within at least one of these categories.

49 As quoted in Dolphijn and Tuin, New Materialism. 51
50 Frederica Timeto, Diffractive Technospace: A Feminist Approach to the Mediations of Space and Representation (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2016). 5
51 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway. 140
Multiple perspectives in the singular frame.

A diffractive methodology began as a way of thinking through and reading multiple and sometimes conflicting texts that often only present a single perspective. The key to Barad’s methodology is that it allows for multiple perspectives without hierarchy. It opens the possibilities for the differences to work together to create something new – an interference pattern. It is affirmative and optimistic.

A photograph is conventionally an image resulting from a camera’s singular and relativist position. The image is a frame or perspective on the world situated before the camera. While many photographers have explored multiple exposure, mirrors and other techniques to disrupt this process52, the overwhelming majority of images remain ‘the snap shot’ and ‘capture’. A single perspective does not allow for difference, plurality or inclusion. It is necessarily exclusive and definitive.

As highlighted above, engaging with and disrupting photographic perspective or more generally, representation provided me with an opportunity to disengage the singular vision of the camera. Working with existing prints allows multiple images to be incorporated into processes of distortion, fragmentation, collapse and flattening. Using a prepared camera allowed the singular perspective to be interwoven and overlaid in ways that disrupted the singular frame of each individual photograph. When this was compounded using a long exposure it allowed individual prints to be moved within the frame or removed entirely. This introduction

52 Most notably the Surrealist photographers such as Val Telberg.
of movement to the process had the most profound effect on this project’s photographic outcomes. They appear to show neither a simple system of overlaying prints nor the distortion generally associated with the subject’s movement. Overall the disruption of photographic perspective engendered a kind of disorientation or de-spatialization of the photograph and its capacity to be viewed representationally. The way individual images could be discerned but not separated from the interconnected whole brought to mind Bergson’s concept of duration. Bergson described duration as akin to an unfolding melody where the listener does not hear each individual note in isolation but as part of an unfolding whole. When explaining Bergson’s description Craig Lundy writes “[w]hen a new note emerges in a melody, it does not so much ‘replace’ the previous note as form a continuity with it. This continuity is duration.”

The manual movement of photographic prints in front of a camera during an extended shutter release introduced ambiguity, dislocation and most importantly a rethinking of photographic time. The result is a photograph that could be described as “placed half-way between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’”.

**Thinking through interruption.**

As an optical phenomena diffraction differs from refraction or reflection. Reflection is a wave being reflected off a polished surface – reflexivity as with a mirror. Refraction is defined as the effect on a wave after it passes from one substance to another – a displacement or redirection. Common examples include a beam of light appearing to bend or appear distorted when it meets a body of water. Diffraction on the other hand is the effect observed when a wave encounters an obstruction or interruption. The best example is a wave of water that meets a wall with a gap in it. As the water passes through the gap it appears to fan out creating a half circle shape. The interaction of the wave with the wall and the gap in it creates a diffraction pattern. When there are two gaps in the barrier within reasonable proximity an interference pattern is created. It is the result of the two diffraction patterns intersecting and overlapping.

So the third technique inspired by a diffractive methodology involved the use of interruption. To use Barad’s term it is a kind of “physical optics”. By placing a barrier between the camera and the subject matter (in this case the re-worked prints) I mapped the resulting interaction. By photographing through this interference, I collapsed or flattened the multiple images into a singular frame. I experimented with different objects as the barrier including objects that blocked some areas of light reaching the camera, an object that revealed a spectrum of light as well as the use of a crystal to act as an external lens.

**Photography as performative making.**

The use of an extended exposure time and movement of the subject matter (in this case the existing photographic prints) involved a material engagement as well as a performativity

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55 Dolphijn and Tuin, *New Materialism*. 52
not readily associated with photography. A diffractive approach to photography means understanding the process of ‘taking a photograph’ as a performance of ‘intra-action’ whereby camera, object and photographer are in entangled state of becoming rather than an interaction between the (a pre-existing) world and camera guided by the photographer. This approach is predicated on Karen Barad’s mode of ‘performativity’, which involves a “moving away from the familiar habits and seductions of representationalism (reflecting on the world from outside) to a way of understanding the world from within and as part of it”.\textsuperscript{56} It is a knowing that “does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a \textit{direct material engagement with the world.”}\textsuperscript{57}

The diffractive process is a direct engagement with the representational act of making images. The studio apparatus that was set up complicated the conventional representational photographic relationship between object, camera and photographer. As a participant in this apparatus I was no longer simply an operator of tools but a tool as well. The images (interference patterns) that were formed were the result of working with rather than against the representational apparatus of photography in a performative and participatory way.

The studio based ‘photographic act’ was disrupted by each of the four processes outlined above, offering possibilities for a re-engagement with this act in a new material way. The interference patterns that arose due to the intra-actions of camera, object/image and myself as photographer resulted in new images that no longer operated as direct representations but instead came from

\textsuperscript{56} Barad, \textit{Meeting the Universe Halfway}. 88

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 49
a thinking and acting through photography. Quoting Barad, “[t]he move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/ doings/actions.”\(^{58}\) Barad’s notion of performativity offers a way to work with photography that acknowledges “practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world. Which practices we enact matter – in both senses of the world”.\(^{59}\) By situating myself performatively within the apparatus of photographic representation I am holding myself accountable and open with my place in the making of knowledge.

5.2 THE EXHIBITION

These four techniques and the studio apparatus outlined above were developed from the principles of a diffractive methodology however they only comprise the first stage of photographing diffractively. The second stage takes place in the gallery where Barad’s notion of ‘together-apart’\(^{60}\) and the effects of difference are employed as a guiding principle to the collection of images as whole. Within the gallery a new apparatus is created involving the images, the gallery, the system of representationalism and the performative role of the viewer.

The viewer and the site of the resistance.

The initial aim of this project was to see if it was possible to create photographs that resist the system of representationalism – one that orders our world according to predetermined categories and definitions. Due to its inherent representationalist nature, photography provides a unique place in which to situate this research however as the project developed questions arose as to whether resistance was the ideal goal. As has been shown, a diffractive methodology is well suited to rethinking photographic representation however it also reveals how the act of resistance perpetuates representational or binary thinking. Resisting is boundary forming. What has become clear is that an alternative to representationalism can be found by engaging with rather than rejecting representation.

Barad’s diffractive methodology encourages a rethinking of the apparatuses which we use to create knowledge. Barad argues that we come to know the world through the apparatus we set up to know it – apparatuses play a constitutive role in knowledge formation.\(^ {61}\) Following this logic then I could say that the apparatus of photographic representation has a determining role in not only the images made but the very knowledge we have of the world. Using diffractive processes in the studio highlighted the contingent role each component of the apparatus had – including myself as photographer. If we extend this thinking to the exhibition of photographs then it becomes clear that each component of the apparatus of presentation (including the viewer) is also constitutive of the type of knowledge or understanding created.

Henri van Lier has argued that due to the problematic relationship photography has with reality, the real and perception, the actual event of the photograph occurs in the mental schemas

\(^{58}\) Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” 802

\(^{59}\) Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway. 91

\(^{60}\) Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart.” 168

\(^{61}\) Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway. 140
that we bring to the photograph." For Lier the significance of the photograph is situated in the process of viewing. This is where “[s]ignification takes place between the poles of the sign or designated... between the designator (désignant) and the designated (désigné), a mental schema”. In this sense, the role of the viewer is a decidedly active one; one that determines the meaning of the photograph. When discussing a photograph of a bird in an issue of Parkett, Lukas Bärffuss makes the point that when “we use the word bird to identify what is represented in the picture, we are not describing what we see; we are describing something we have already seen. We compare this picture with another picture, and it is this comparison that we attempt to capture in the terms that we use.” One could also argue that to identify and categorise the bird in the photograph we must first identify the photograph itself as representational and capable of depicting a subject that we can recognize.

Making ‘sense’ of the photograph or identifying its subject matter is as much about our own subjectivity as it is about what is represented or not. In this way, the representational photograph acts as a trigger for our own associations to the subject matter and the presence or absence of a caption highlights the nuances of meaning that are reliant on this knowledge. As viewers who are actively identifying and categorizing the photographic subject, we are shaping the meaning of the image according to our mental schemas – our predetermined and representationalist system of knowing the world.

Positioning the photograph as reliant on a viewer for interpretation or identification is a system of representationalism not unique to photography. Tom Trevatt describes this as a structure perpetuated by the contemporary art world who positions the viewer/individual as an integral agent to the ‘meaning-making’ of an art work. He suggests that it began with Marcel Duchamp who offered the art object, with its necessary “art co-efficient”, to the viewer so that they may refine or complete it. Positioning the viewer as central to the making of the artwork through their spectatorial interpretations sets up an anthropocentric and representationalist hierarchy that privileges the human over the (art) object. It positions the viewer as active to a passive artwork thereby limiting the political voice and agency of the artwork. It renders it mute. Trevatt believes this system is actively pursued by the institutions that govern the art world. He says:

> [t]his is art’s political ambition, to produce a type of subject that can enjoy their own freedom within the experience of viewing art. Yet I would argue, this is exactly what predisposes the viewer to understand themselves as the pre-determined privileged figure within the relation. And thus confirms the dominance of subject over object, culture over nature and man over the object of the world.

In other words, positioning photographs as representational objects perpetuates the system of representationalism that ensures any autonomy that the photograph has is subsumed beneath

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62 Van Lier, *Philosophy of Photography*. 39
65 Ibid. 196
66 Ibid. 197
the dominant position of the viewer; with whom the meaning resides. According to Tavett, this prioritises the human subject, perpetuating a post-Kantian anthropocentricism and “occludes the truth of the art object: that its materiality, its “objectness”, is indifferent to our experience of it.”67 The art object/photograph is seen from the ‘viewpoint’ of the spectator and is understood through their interpretation.

Recalling Bergson’s systems of knowing, if we are to know the world ‘absolutely’ and without reliance on a viewpoint, symbols or representations we must rethink the system of viewing photographs that privileges the perspective of the viewer over the autonomy and presence of the photograph itself. In this sense, it is not enough to simply create photographs that disrupt an immediate representational interpretation if they remain objects of contemplation within an art institution that is stubbornly representationalist. In the gallery, the position of the viewer remains central for the meaning-making of the work. To find an alternative to representationalism it is important to acknowledge the apparatus that determines the photograph as a representational image as well as a representational object within the gallery structure, while also engaging the viewer as a participant within this system. To do this effectively the entrenched relationship the viewer has with the photograph must also be addressed.

**Together Apart – the effects of difference**

Collier Schorr’s photobook *8 Women*68 stands out as a study of representation and the difficulties in presenting images of the body; particularly the female body. The use of collage, drawing, rephotography and studio portraiture are presented as a multi-positional and disparate collection of photographic works that challenge a conventional narrative viewing. Presented in a book form the reader/viewer is asked to approach each image individually but always in proximity to others. It requires a cognitive engagement from the reader/viewer that disregards a narrative structure; leaning instead on the use of the body to connect the images. The differences between their process of construction add to the sense that this work is a meditation on representation and our perception of the world. The disjointed nature of the presentation eschews a passive reading and instead directly activates the viewer/reader’s perception.

Schorr has continued this technique of juxtaposition or ‘jump cuts’ into her exhibitions whereby methods of presentation collide and bounce off each other. Despite their differences and their clear position as individual images, they work together as one to engage and challenge our understanding of how images are made and the representations they enact. By accentuating the differences Schorr is in fact asking viewers to draw connections between them or more importantly observe the patterns or effects of their differences.

Schorr’s installation provides a clear example of a diffractive methodology applied to the presentation of photography within a gallery situation. Her use of difference across photographic techniques and presentation methods encourages a conversation about representation rather than the nature of the individual images. Despite this, Schorr’s images do share common ground in their subject matter – the human body and specifically women. This commonality ensures

67 Ibid. 197
we see the collective presentation as a study of the representation of women instead of simply representation in its more general sense.

Shorr’s exhibition and this particular installation image (see Figure 12) offered me a way of resolving the issues I had encountered when presenting my work on 11 April 2017 at Victorian College of the Arts.

From the studio to the gallery and back.

I will now return to the chronology I left off at the end of Chapter Three. It was clear from the feedback I received that viewers found the images I presented difficult and obtuse. People spoke of feeling rejected, shut out, even nauseated. Others noted they were forced to consider the images ‘as photographs’ and that there was no obvious ‘way in’ to the images. Some attempts were made to make sense of the images as representational signs in arbitrary relationships however the overall sense from the group was that the photographs were somehow detached from the process of being viewed. Only one person made the observation that these works were a kind of ‘internal seeing’ and offered a different politics of seeing – one independent of what was literally seen in the images.

This general response suggested I had in fact created photographs that resisted conventional photographic representation but that this had closed rather than opened possibilities for new ways of seeing. The photographs I had presented simply rejected the viewer. A diffractive methodology is one in which resisting representationalism is not simply a process of overturning
the hierarchy by reversing the active / passive positions. As Frederica Timeto reminds us this would only serve to maintain the status quo in an inverted dynamic. What I needed to do was introduce an active / active relationship instead by engaging rather than rejecting the viewer.

I believe this engagement can be achieved in two steps. Firstly, using diffractive processes to create photographs ensures their representational aspects are dispersed and difficult to identify; thereby complicating the desire for recognition brought by the viewer. Secondly, applying the same principles of a diffractive methodology to the selection of a diverse and incoherent subject matter as well as method of presentation will ensure the representationalist system so entrenched in the gallery is disrupted, drawing attention to the constitutive role of each component of the apparatus.

My presentation had failed on the second point. By grouping similar works together, I forced the relationships between them and suggested to the viewers that the underlying meaning was pre-determined and resided in the similarites of their representations. When this implied meaning proved difficult (or impossible) to discover the viewers seem to become passive – feeling rejected and confused.

With this in mind I returned to the studio and embraced an increasingly liberated approach to making photographs. The studio and photographic techniques I had employed to date were rethought and the photographs re-worked. The motivation was increasingly one of diversity, difference, disruption and ambiguity across subject matter, technique and most importantly presentation. The goal was to create a diverse collection of photographs that could act as interchangeable components for a series of arrangements or sequences. Recalling Bergson’s duration, in much the same way that musical notes can be arranged in innumerable sequences to create melodies, each specific arrangement of photographs would create a unique melody or interference pattern by the proximity to, and interaction with, the other photographs, the viewer and the gallery. This technique would ensure the principles of a diffractive methodology that had been employed during the creation of the individual photographs were also applied to the installation of the work in a gallery.
6. OUTCOMES

As a result of the studio-based research and an examination of Karen Barad’s diffractive methodology, I can identify two key outcomes of this research. The first is a methodology that guides the creation and exhibition of new photographic images. The second is a collection or archive of photographs made in the studio according to this methodology. Each photograph is formed through an apparatus that includes the photographic materials, camera, existing images, and myself as artist, and could be described as an interference pattern. Collectively these images can be used to form any number of different arrangements. When these arrangements are presented as an exhibition, a new apparatus is constructed that comprises the image, viewer, gallery or exhibition space, and the incumbent system of representationalism. One could also say that each specific arrangement embodies a “specific material reconfiguring of the world”\(^{70}\), the result of which could also be called an interference pattern, however this pattern resides within the viewer as a form of new knowledge or experience rather than any material manifestation.

As Barad makes clear, the nature of the apparatus and the components that it comprises have a constitutive role in the knowledge or interference pattern it produces—they are boundary forming.\(^{71}\) Furthermore the components are not pre-determined entities but are in a state of becoming through the apparatus. It is my assertion that each specific viewing of each specific arrangement of photographs embodies a new and different interference pattern. They could be described as the patterns of the effects of difference.

6.1 Outcomes One: A Methodology

As has been shown, a diffractive methodology and the specific techniques derived from it can provide the basis for the creation of photographs that disrupt ready representational interpretation. As interference patterns, these photographs could prompt conversations on the nature and structure of representation and representationalism. Through the course of this project, this methodology gave rise to the four studio techniques discussed in Chapter Five. They were applied to a set of existing photographs created specifically for this research using generic examples of conventional photographic subjects (landscape, portrait, still life and abstraction). The images that were created form the archive that has been arranged into two exhibitions detailed in Outcome Two. What has also become apparent is that this methodology is ideally suited for use on an existing collection or archive.

I was able to explore this possibility when, as part of the ‘Another Look: Contemporary Artists and the Collection’ at the Townhall Gallery in Hawthorn, I was invited to create work that responded to the gallery’s permanent collection. This collection included two and three-dimensional artwork as well as historical photographs of royalty and significant local people, the area and events. Noticing a bias towards gendered representations of power throughout the collection, I applied my diffractive methodology to the production of new photographs using images of figures (fictional or otherwise) from the collection who had challenged established norms. These new photographs became interference patterns arising from the intra-action of

\(^{70}\) Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway. 142
\(^{71}\) Ibid. 142
the studio apparatus, the existing image and myself. By disrupting the original representations I was able to draw attention to the choices made as the collection was developed through the life of the gallery and associated council. As a method of construction the chosen items from the gallery collection were photographed before being printed. These small working prints were then re-photographed using the diffractive studio techniques before being printed again at a larger scale and framed. Figures 13-15 below demonstrate the process through which one of the photographs was created. Figures 16-18 show the other images developed for the project.

Figure 13. Vivian Cooper Smith, *R.W.E Hooke* – working print, 2017

Figure 14. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Lady Macbeth* – working print, 2017

Figure 15. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Lady Macbeth and R.W.E. Hooke*, 2017
Figure 16. Vivian Cooper Smith, Edward, 2017

Figure 17. Vivian Cooper Smith, Joan, 2017

Figure 18. Vivian Cooper Smith, Mrs E.C. Rigby, 2017
6.2 OUTCOME TWO: AN ARCHIVE

The second result of the studio based research was an evolving archive of photographs created using the four diffractive techniques outlined in Chapter Five. By selecting specific groups of images from this archive any number of different photographic arrangements can be used to form an exhibition. Employing the principles of a diffractive methodology as a guide the images are not chosen for coherence across subject matter or appearance but rather for differences and the potential for engendering disruption to the representational structure.

The first of these arrangements was at Bus Projects in Collingwood, Melbourne between 30 August and 23 September 2017. The edited selection of images from the archive consisted of two framed single photographs and one framed diptych and they were presented under the name *The Insufficient Photograph* (see Figures 19-22). Despite the apparent incoherence in subject matter across the three works they all individually and collectively did not offer clear representational interpretation or understanding; remaining photographically insufficient.

The diptych titled *Still Life* (Figure 19), was made up of two photographs of an antique clock. Each image showed the same clock from the same angle with the same time on its dial. The only difference between the images was the colour of the background and lighting used. As representational images the clock referred to time and the photographic moment however this was disrupted through the same apparent instant being depicted in the adjacent image.

Alongside *Still Life* was a large photograph entitled *Interference Pattern #1* (Figure 21); its kaleidoscopic appearance showing the overlaid images of an owl figurine, lemons and fragments of colour. It was constructed through the manual replacement of images and objects in front of a prepared camera \(^{72}\) during a long exposure. The result was the interference pattern created by these objects and images.

The final photograph in this arrangement entitled *Mark #1* (Figure 20) was ostensibly an abstract image however on closer inspection showed a cross shape through its centre and blurred text in a pattern across its entirety. This image was created by photographing a coloured piece of photographic paper bearing the mark of my hand in the form of an etched cross. The paper was held up to a window to allow light to pass through (showing the manufacturers watermarks) while simultaneously being lit from the front by coloured light. The resulting image had a translucent appearance where both sides of the paper are revealed but without any conventional photographic representation. Instead the image was the result of a series of actions and processes acted out on the paper through my partnership with the camera.

These four photographs were shown in one arrangement and given their proximity and the size of the room were necessarily seen together. The studio processes outlined in Chapter Five ensured that the images (as interference patterns) did not behave as conventional photographs. The incoherent subject matter and disrupted representational structures ensured the viewer’s urge to ‘make sense’ of the images – an impulse governed by prevailing representationalist nature of both photography and the social ontology of photography – was disrupted. The

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\(^{72}\) A crystal ball as fixed to the front of the camera to act as an ‘external lens’.
representational insufficiency of the photographs did not outright reject the viewers impulse to make meaning but dispersed it across the group, creating an opportunity for new diffraction or interference patterns – new knowledge; knowledge that could be made and remade by and with every viewer who approached the arrangement. For example when considering this particular arrangement, the interference pattern created could have consisted of photographic representation, its relationship to notions of time and perception. Alternatively, the viewer may have found the difficulties of perspective alongside the abundance of colour, scale of the work and dimensions of the room resulted in a more bodily rather than cognitive experience – one where the ability to see and focus is brought into question.

The second arrangement drawn from the archive is to be presented at the examination exhibition to be held at the Victorian College of the Arts on 4 December 2017. I will exhibit nineteen images from the archive that will be formed into one large arrangement. Through a proximity to each other and a large amount of viewing space I anticipate they will be seen both as a group and as individual images simultaneously – together-apart. I expect the viewer will access the work in stages. Firstly, when seen from a distance the variation in size, colour, and framing will highlight the differences between the individual images rather than offer any immediate interpretation. Upon approach, it will become clearer to the viewer that there is also a great deal of diversity in the subject matter with some unusual juxtapositions occurring between adjacent works. Simultaneously what also should become apparent is the process or technique oriented similarities between works. Finally, when the viewer approaches each individual photograph they will be met by an image that does not operate in a conventional photographic way. As each image has been formed through the processes of diffractive photography they do not offer a singular viewpoint or representational interpretation.73 Given the difficulties in accessing them as photographs the viewer is asked instead to consider them in relation to each other, in relation to themselves as viewers and in relation the broader representationalist system of the gallery in which they stand. By situating the viewer, artwork and gallery within a relational apparatus I am opening space to consider the constitutive part they all play in the making of new knowledge – a new interference pattern.

73 Within the arrangement there will be two photographs that were not created using the four diffractive studio techniques. One of these depicts a person staring directly back to the viewer while wearing a balaclava mask hiding their identity. The second is a landscape showing a sunset over water. This image appears as a conventional landscape image except for the presence of a green dot - the result of solar flare in the lens - which alerts the viewer to the presence of the lens. Although these two photographs were not created following the four designated diffractive techniques they nevertheless are photographically insufficient and they operate diffractively within the exhibition as a diffractive methodology is an engagement with and a working through representation. Their presence accentuates the effects of difference in relation to the other constructed photographs and provide an alternate position from which to view and experience the group.
Figure 19. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Still Life*, 2017

Figure 20. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Mark #1*, 2017

Figure 21. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Interference Pattern #1*, 2017

Figure 22. Vivian Cooper Smith, *Installation view – The Insufficient Photograph*, 2017
CONCLUSION

On the surface the relationship between representation and photography (as with all the visual arts) seems intrinsic. The representationalist system of thought that governs these representations is so dominant it seems almost common sense, even natural\(^74\) and that to suggest another way to experience and understand the world is nonsensical. Despite this, artists and philosophers continue to grapple with this system that has so defined Western thinking,\(^75\) believing there to be an alternative.

This project set out with a goal to challenge this system by exploring whether it was possible to use photographic methods to create photographs that resist representationalism. Beginning by embracing ‘handlability’ and a practice led material engagement with photographic processes I have shown there are indeed possibilities for disrupting the conventional representationalist practices of photography however my original intention to resist representation proved misguided. My early work did in fact resist the viewer by not offering an opportunity for conventional photographic meaning making. This resulted in the viewers feeling rejected and any opportunity for new ways of seeing being revealed were thwarted. Drawing on the principles of Karen Barad’s diffractive methodology I then devised a new methodology for making and presenting photographs that offered an alternative to representationalism by engaging with and working through representation rather than trying to replace it. This methodology was manifest through a series of studio based techniques designed to disrupt the conventions of photographic seeing and to bring about images that could be described as interference patterns – the effects of difference. The resulting archive of photographs was then used to create two exhibitions comprising of photographic arrangements that embodied the concept of ‘together-apart’. By dispersing the viewer’s determining gaze and introduce diversity and disruption to the choice of images these arrangements explored the possibilities of creating interference patterns through the apparatus of the gallery. A commission from the Townhall Gallery in Hawthorn allowed me to apply a diffractive methodology to images drawn from an existing archive and showed how the resulting images also offer an alternative to the conventions of photographic representation.

Through an account of the journey the studio based research took I have shown that a material engagement with photography can reveal the apparatus by which it operates as well as highlighting the constitutive roles the various components of this apparatus embody. I have also shown the difficulties that can be faced when exhibiting photographs made through this method to viewers unfamiliar with the motivations and techniques of the project and that simply resisting their impulse to identify the subject or make meaning of the work is not effective in opening a conversation concerning alternatives to representationalism.
In summary and in answer to my question ‘can a photograph resist its representationalist apparatus?’ it is now clear that the question itself is representationalist and as with all apparatus it is constitutive of its own answer. To really move away from representationalism I needed to also move away from the notion of resistance itself and embrace a performative accountable engagement with representation and the making of knowledge. Throughout the project, I returned to the work of many artists, writers and thinkers who turn over similar ground. Collectively they have demonstrated that there is no one pathway and no one answer to the problem of representationalism. In fact, I am sure it is only through our many voices and the patterns of difference we form that we will find new ways to see and be in the world.
APPENDIX

Image from the Masters of Fine Arts (Research) Exhibition
Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia
5 – 10 December 2017
Dispersal (Back of head)
Digital C-Type Print
35 x 50cm
2017

Landscape with flare
Digital C-Type Print
70 x 50cm
2017
Group Portrait #1
Digital C-Type Print
72 x 100cm
2017

Obstruction with Spectrum
Digital C-Type Print
50 x 70cm
2017
Interference Pattern #1
Digital C-Type Print
107 x 150cm
2017

Still life
Digital C-Type Print
each 40 x 50cm
2017
Landscape #1
Digital C-Type Print
100 x 72cm
2017

Portrait
Digital C-Type Print
40 x 50cm
2017
Group Portrait #2
Digital C-Type Print
72 x 100cm
2017

Obstruction
Digital C-Type Print
50 x 70cm
2017
Interference Pattern #2
Digital C-Type Print
107 x 150cm
2017

Mark #1
Digital C-Type Print
40 x 50cm
2017
Still life with Roses #1
Digital C-Type Print
50 x 35cm
2017

Landscape #2
Digital C-Type Print
50 x 70cm
2017
Portrait with mask
Digital C-Type Print
72 x 100cm
2017

Obstruction with spectrum #2
Digital C-Type Print
50 x 35cm
2017
Landscape #4  
Digital C-Type Print  
100 x 72cm  
2017

Mark #2  
Digital C-Type Print  
40 x 50cm  
2017
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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