1 | Tricks learned after the crash

*I knew what my old City Editor on the St Louis Post Dispatch meant when he said: ‘Go out and get that picture!’*

— W.S. Burroughs

New York car accident

In the spring and summer of 1965, William Burroughs lived in a Manhattan loft apartment near Chinatown. This was a time when Burroughs was immersed in experimental media juxtaposition, cutting together written material with tape recordings and photographs, often culled from his perambulations around the streets of New York. He was in the habit of photographing traffic from above, on the iron landing of the fire escape at the front of his building. One day, an accident occurred just below and Burroughs descended to capture the aftermath close up with his camera. The pictures are conspicuously undramatic, remarkably unspectacular. In one, we see the crumpled hood and grill of a Chevrolet, but there is little other obvious trace of damage amongst the images. Police and passers-by stand around two or three other vehicles — including a Mack truck and a meat packers’ truck — perhaps involved in the collision. There is no obvious narrative sequence. It feels like a hot day. People wear light dresses, t-shirts and shirt sleeves, peering into vehicles, pointing, smoking cigarettes,

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walking on by. Burroughs seems as much concerned to impassively plot a singular time and space as to focus on any particular object. He records the *coincidence* of bodies, vehicles, words and images. Boy-Crest clothes truck... Kaminsky bros. safes... a garbage basket (‘Just a drop in the basket helps keep New York clean’) ... a coffee shop... jewellers ... sign for a luncheonette ... a pack of Parliament filter cigarettes on an advertising hoarding. He places himself largely at the periphery, on the sidewalk, moving behind the backs of spectators. There is nothing here approaching portraiture, little attention to faces. Burroughs occasionally moves in for a close-up of a truck’s front wheel and foot board, liquid (gas?) ominously spreading out on the surface of the road from beneath the vehicle. Some pictures are shot from a distance. In one or two, there is no evidence of the accident. One, perhaps shot from his own building’s fire escape, looks down upon the street — before or later? — and captures only the normal flow of traffic and activity.

Aside from ongoing media experimentation and giving a number of readings in the city, Burroughs was working flat out at the point at which these photographs were taken (‘no time to breathe’). He was exhausted, living in fear of rumours of plans for his entrapment by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. What drove him on, it seems, was a will to complete a ‘definitive’ book of methods. Conceived a couple of years earlier, in discussion with his collaborator, Brion Gysin, the book — with the working title, *Right Where You Are Sitting Now*, but later to be retitled, *The Third Mind* (it would not see publication for thirteen years) — appears to have preoccupied Burroughs most intensely during this period. In letters, he warns that it will be an elaborate and expensive volume, not least because of the inclusion of numerous photographic illustrations and montages. The book sets out detailed instruction in the practice of cut-ups, fold-ins, intersection pictures. It is effectively a manual, a ‘how-to book’, built up from the notion of an ‘army bulletin’ which will introduce the methods of

5 Burroughs, *Rub Out the Words*, 190.
‘the enemy’ and explain how ‘officers’ can appropriate, frustrate and combat them. Burroughs sent an extract from his early notes for the book to Gysin:

The area in which we operate is poetry, myth, creation — The enemy can not enter this area since they are precisely non-creative and operate through machine made copies — Officers must be poets and remember that the area of poetry must be constantly reinvented. That is why cut-ups and fold-ins form one of our most vital instruments — Not only does this method recreate our area of operations but it also cuts enemy supply lines…

The enemy — ‘Control’ — is a semiotic machine which cues and conditions human experience, controlling reality: ‘What you call “reality” is a complex network of necessity formulae…association lines of word and image presenting a prerecorded word and image track.’

There is, in fact, no such thing as coincidence. Incidents are cut out from the chaos of existence, created and falling together because they have been scripted that way. ‘Poetry’, in the broadest sense, is the pre-constitution of a universe. Our universe is mediated in advance, pre-written and pre-photographed. Control is an ‘Old Photographer’, master of tricks such as the ‘false click gimmick’. To get the portrait you want, assemble the relevant cues, take the photograph and then say ‘Smile!’, and then produce a ‘loud false click’. Your subject cannot prepare, cannot guard or present themselves as they wish. They do not realize they have always already been photographed, that the event of the click, in present time, is always late. Burroughs advises we pay attention — look and listen — what happens just before the click? What were you doing, thinking, feeling? We live a documentary, an edited life. Victims, we are acted upon, prone to the present (‘The first step in re-creation is to cut the old lines that hold you right

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6 Ibid., 119.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 121.
10 Ibid., 5.
where you are sitting now’). So, how do we take ‘evasive action in time’, how do we dodge the bullet of the pre-photographed present? We have to assume the worst is about to happen — keep your eyes open for ‘streaks’ of luck, be on the look-out for conjunctions of word and image, branching together from past, through present and into the future like ‘vines’: Remember that incidents provoke further and similar incidents. It’s a magical law. Control neatly effaces this occult operation, but its pre-photography can be opened up and disturbed by those astute enough to be able to exploit its vulnerabilities. Poetry, art, fiction — a sorcerous practice of word and image — can locate or create ports of entry, holes or spaces in the flow of scripted and edited words and images. It can dismantle and weird destinies. Here is the significance of the innumerable crashes, accidents and disasters appearing in the scrapbooks and texts produced by Burroughs: symptoms of what has been called the ‘hyperstitional’ construction of reality. The methods and techniques in The Third Mind are designed to liberate virtualities suppressed in the pre-constituted universe. The book is a manual for the production of a poetry of word and image, a weaponized fiction-photography to set within and against the dominant, self-effacing poetry or fiction of Control’s ambitions: ‘fiction acts as a Chinese Box — a container for sorcerous interventions in the world. The frame is both used (for concealment) and broken (the fictions potentiate change in reality)’.

Untitled (New York Car Accident) is a vehicle, a crash or concentrate within the moment which unfurls a hyperstitional power to scan and re-constitute reality, sending out vines or tendrils into an unknown future. A time machine. Such experiments were explicitly conceived by Burroughs in terms of time travel. His writings and interviews during the period in question are littered with references to J.W. Dunne’s reflections on the temporality of dreams (published as

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11 Ibid., 28.
12 Ibid., 161.
13 Ibid., 100.
15 Ibid., 278.
An Experiment with Time, 1927).\textsuperscript{16} For Dunne, human consciousness is fixated on a linear experience of time which enforces a relatively strict separation between past, present and future and privileges the actual and the present. However, when we dream we enter a virtuality in which everything happens at once, blended. We move more freely through time’s totality which explains the precognitive phenomena often associated with dreams. Like Dunne, Burroughs recommends that we record our dreams, date them, take coordinates and look for connections, intersections between events, names, numbers, places, in the past and the future. This is not prediction of future events as such, but rather to be understood as a movement within an associative network within which our existence is entangled, more a matter of media-ecological ‘possession’ than subjective foresight.

Years later, Burroughs will refer to this process, after Carlos Castaneda, as a ‘nagual art’.\textsuperscript{17} Castaneda’s books, which describe his initiation into the shamanic worldview of a Yaqui indian, Don Juan, distinguish between the ‘tonal’ universe — essentially, the predictable, pre-organized universe of Burroughs’s formulation — and the magical, ‘nagual’ universe, unknown, unpredictable, accessed through special circumstances in which the world can be ‘stopped’.\textsuperscript{18} For Burroughs, these circumstances typically involved a random factor, an accident, perhaps a crash or the blast of a shotgun. The artist should make an ally of the accident, but no single method is guaranteed to work for ever. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari shared Burroughs’s interest in stopping the world through the introduction of something alien into the ‘dominant atmospheric semiotic’, the ‘flow of interpretation, which ordinarily runs uninterruptedly’.\textsuperscript{19} Awareness can be transformed by means of the construction of ‘your own little machine’ — assemble whatever elements are necessary to launch your-

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Burroughs and Gysin, The Third Mind, 5, 133.
\textsuperscript{18} Carlos Castaneda, Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).
\textsuperscript{19} Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (London: Continuum, 2004), 153.
self from the ‘island’ of ‘all that’s organized and organizing’ into the inhuman intensities and becomings of the nagual.  

For Burroughs, Control is a voice mediated and commanding through associational networks — media ecologies and aesthetics — which tame and enclose the future. It produces and organizes experiential vectors ahead of time through its command of the cut, the edit. Against this, Burroughs devotes his efforts to an ‘army bulletin’ in which appropriate techniques and weapons are described. His whole career, in fact, can be seen as a series of dispatches to ‘officers’ in the field, agents operating immanently, speculatively and experimentally from deep within the War Universe of contemporary media ecologies. The crash is a crucial figure in Burroughs’s media experimentation. In and through the crash is revealed an inhuman, predatory Control Machine.

The crash is a phenomenon of time travel. To accelerate is to court the crash, and we live in times of acceleration. As Paul Virilio has argued, ‘we no longer populate stationariness…we populate the *time* spent changing place, travel time.’ The city, for example, increasingly appears as a ‘riddle’ (or a ‘glyph’, to use Burroughs’s preferred terminology), its walls and streets interrupted by hostile speeds. Where the city used to be ‘located in a specific place, at the intersection of roads’, now it exists ‘at the intersection of practicabilities of time, in other words of speed.’

War today must be of the system, the middle, taken to the immanent ‘outside’ from which life might be dislodged from its compromised host, the programmed human. War, as Burroughs knew, must be taken to the vectors through which Control exerts itself, a war for time-travellers, waged at the intersections. For Burroughs, as we have said, reality is a self-effacing informational edit or montage. It has to be attacked at the points at which its cover slips. It is in terms of this form of attack — exploiting deviations from the edit, rips within the ‘Reality Film’, as Burroughs has it — that Burroughs’s photography must be understood as *war photography*.

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20 Ibid., 179.
22 Ibid., 65.
Vectors are a matter of relations rather than identities and forms. McKenzie Wark, after Virilio, suggests that information moves at such speed today that Control finds its new terrain in an abstract communicational space-time, a ‘third nature’ that emerges with the enclosure of both first nature and the second nature of built forms by a media and communications layer. With vectoral technologies, the world is no longer framed in ‘static pictures…singular texts’ but rather edited into a ‘singular rhythm of cuts and ruptures’, a ‘continuous feed’. We now populate a space-time of information flows abstracted from territorial boundaries and the boundaries of subjects and objects. This, leaning on Deleuze and Guattari, is ‘the future of the rhizome made concrete: where every trajectory is potentially connected to every other trajectory’.

If we are to engage in war with the vector, Wark’s assertion that the forms of our ‘communicational interventions’ need to be rethought in terms of the practicabilities of time, of the informational edit, has a direct bearing on how we should understand Burroughs’s relevance in relation to photographic practice. The vector is beyond human command. It is a chaotic space, a mediatic space of possibility for weird, irruptive events which have to be mediated, stabilized, edited, reined in by dominant refrains and narratives at the same time as there is that about them which remains beyond mediation. Wark suggests that such events are crucial because they illuminate, like the ‘after-image’ left by a lightning flash, the shape of the vector, the very possibility space giving rise to the event. We will note, later, how Burroughs and Gysin ventured to contact and question Control, with some limited success dependent upon a temporary set of arrangements. If Control answers us today, however, it answers only as it betrays itself through weird events occurring within, and briefly illuminating, the aforementioned possibility space.

24 Ibid., 35.
25 Ibid., 64.
26 Ibid., 68.
New York City again. 1927, the early days of the war. It’s a surreal story, totally surreal. You’ve heard it before but it goes something like this: Lee Miller, 19 years old, sets out from her rented brownstone apartment — one of those nice places up on West 48th Street — and joins the crowd hurrying about on the street below. Only, she’s not really looking where she’s going, and steps off the sidewalk right into the traffic, right in front of an oncoming car. As it bears down on her (imagine it in slow motion if it helps) the driver of the car is yelling, honking his horn, other drivers doing the same, when suddenly, out of nowhere, and just at the last second, someone pulls her back to safety. Phew. This girl Miller, who’s only been back in the US a while after spending almost a year in Paris, is so shocked that she starts gabbling away in French to her rescuer. Best of all, it turns out that this regular one-in-a-million New York hero is none other than Condé Montrose Nast, the publishing magnate. Now, Nast has a bit of an eye for the ladies, if you know what I mean, but he’s really struck by Miller — that slender figure, that androgynous hairstyle, that chic French outfit — this is a girl who embodies the tempo of the age, he thinks. This is the girl he’s been looking for. So, right then and there, he signs her up as a model for Vogue, and within a few short months she’s on the cover.18

Miller’s crash exists only in the virtual. A concertinaed present throws out multiple future trajectories. In the familiar story, this one incident, this chance encounter, catapults Miller into a whole series of future events: in Nast’s Park Avenue penthouse she picks up photography from Edward Steichen; in Paris she hangs out with the likes of Man Ray, Jean Cocteau, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst and Pablo Picasso; in New York she runs a photographic studio popular with the glitterati; in Cairo she plans and conducts complex expedi-

tions into the Egypt desert; in Saint Malo, as a respected photojournalist, she digs in with the 83rd Infantry Division of the US Army; in Dachau she’s one of the first to enter the concentration camp after liberation, and in Munich, later that same day, she takes a bath at Hitler’s house. So many lives in one life. So surreal, right? No, not quite. Agent Miller knows better.

In case we forget, the surreal is not simply a synonym for something peculiar, something odd. André Breton would have something to say about that. For him, like Burroughs, the human sensorium offers defective access to the world. In Breton’s account, our everyday habits of thinking and perceiving are too narrowly confined to conscious reality, whereas surreality is an ‘absolute reality’ recovered in the dialectical resolution of contradictory states: internal and external worlds, unconscious dreams and conscious reality. Without any of the critical horror that marks out Burroughs and Gysin from the surrealists, Breton reveled in chance encounters and coincidence on the basis that the bizarre and seemingly incompatible juxtapositions produced in such encounters recuperate the lost psychic powers of the unconscious. They restore to the modern individual untimely connections that allow the world to be experienced in a different way. The invisible is rendered visible. Breton demanded that we ‘not lose sight of the fact that the idea of Surrealism aims quite simply at the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places...’

Amidst all this, there tend to be two versions of Lee Miller’s story. There is the story that confirms her credentials as surrealist artist in her own right, and not simply as muse and lover, not simply dirigible lips and metronomic eye. Then there is the story of a photographer whose advertising and documentary work is inspired by Surrealism but whose role within the movement itself amounts to that of con-

30 Ibid., 45.
servator, a chronicler of great men. Both take the form of fantastical Bildungsroman — a story we have heard before. In Miller’s case, though, the story is camouflage, a trick, a stratagem. Hers is not a surreal story.

Surrealism, which according to Breton could just as easily be called supernaturalism, in fact sought to domesticate real weirdness, to render it human, to reduce it to questions of the unconscious, to a reality that has been repressed but can be awakened.32 Where Burroughs is possessed, surrealism possesses. Where Burroughs glimpses a hostile entity, surrealism unleashes ostensibly emancipatory forces. Yet the surrealist’s principal media technique of psychic automatism ‘led to no new perspective’, and was swiftly replaced by artist strategies that were ‘individual and deliberate’.33 Such strategies suggest a retreat. Perhaps the surrealists had glimpsed something terrifying. At best, surreality is a tame weirdness, where the desire to liberate thought and perception, inspired by esoteric mysticism, is inhibited and constrained by a simultaneous desire to formalize and regulate such energies.34

In the roaring twenties, the desire to augment and enhance human subjectivity was expressed in various ways. For example, in 1927, a few months after Miller’s non-crash, and a couple of years before The Big Crash, the now celebrated Machine-Age Exposition was staged in a bare New York loft space. Alongside Man Ray’s rayographs, the event celebrated the construction of second nature (photographs of electrical plants, factories and warehouses, which sat alongside drawings of motor cars, models of aeroplanes, and machine guns), and showcased the infrastructure of an incipient third nature (photographs of broadcasting stations, set alongside radio sets). Curated by Jane Heap of The Little Review, the show was concerned with a certain kind of technologically mediated vitality, the much-discussed ‘tempo of the age’ that was transforming and accel-

32 Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, 25.
33 ‘23 Stitches Taken by Gerard-Georges Lemair and 2 Points of Order by Brion Gysin’ in Burroughs and Gysin, The Third Mind, 12.
erating human relations with technology.\textsuperscript{35} Charles Lindbergh’s flight over the Atlantic Ocean, completed at the time of the exposition, seemed to explicitly demonstrate such processes, though Heap was most directly inspired by the teachings of spiritualist G.I. Gurdjieff (whose life was punctuated by two near-fatal car accidents). In the exposition catalogue, Heap declares that the selected art works are ‘organizing and transforming the realities of our age into a dynamic beauty’, which is to say they are the works of artists who do not simply imitate or worship the machine but ‘recognize it as one of the realities’.\textsuperscript{36} Here, the increasing tempo of relations between human and nonhuman machine is understood to provoke a state of transcendence, technomystical enlightenment, machine-being.

For his part, Breton does at least come to acknowledge that the human may not be at the centre of all things. There may be other forms of agency in the world, he later muses, nonhuman ‘creatures’ invisible to human habits of perception: ‘Nothing necessarily stands in the way of these creatures being able to completely escape man’s sensory system of references through a camouflage of whatever sort one cares to imagine.’\textsuperscript{37} But ultimately, he remains caught in the paradox where any attempt to conceive the world-in-itself, ‘a world in some inaccessible, already given state’, becomes the world-for-us, ‘the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to.’\textsuperscript{38} Nonhuman vectors are anthropomorphized.

Though Miller escaped unscathed, that near miss on West 48th Street dislodged ontological and epistemological coordinates that were previously fixed. Her story, as it is usually recounted, is a tale of ‘many lives’, a story in which Miller continually reinvents herself, in front of and behind the camera, moving through different worlds, responding to people, places and events. We might, though, read

\textsuperscript{36} Jane Heap, \textit{Machine-Age Exposition Catalogue} (New York: 119 West 57th Street, 1927), 36.
\textsuperscript{37} André Breton, ‘Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not’, in \textit{Manifestoes of Surrealism} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972 [1942]), 293.
her story as one of mediation, a story of ruptured and entangled subjectivity where humans and media technologies are inseparably joined, part of the same process. We might recognize it as a story that confirms we are media, that we are physically and ontologically bound up with the technological environment: ‘As we modify and extend “our” technologies and “our” media, we modify and extend ourselves and our environments.’

Technology is the force of mediation that brings forth the world, the force through which we become with the world. We are in a process of coemergence with technology, always already in relation to it, always already, in a sense, outside ourselves. The nonhuman is the condition of possibility and condition of impossibility of the human. We evolve creatively, we are made and unmade technologically, technopoietically, and we ought not to conceive of ourselves as autonomous controllers of such a process of creative evolution. Accordingly, a story of mediation demands that we scrutinize more closely the very notion of mediation. In their recent attempt to do just this, Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark begin by problematizing the tendency, in media and cultural theory, to presume successful communication. They focus instead on the ‘insufficiency of mediation’, noting that ‘every communication harbours the dim awareness of an excommunication that is prior to it, that conditions it and makes it all the more natural.’

Theirs is a ‘theory of mediation as excommunication’, a theory adequate to thinking the worlding processes of media beyond the human.

Miller, we might say, developed her own sensibility to such processes, and to their instabilities. Rather than offering a privileged position, this sensibility comes from an understanding that it is impossible to separate oneself out from one’s various relations, particularly as these relations become ever more intense. Perhaps, in this story, the virtual trajectories of Miller’s non-crash become actualized elsewhere: excommunicated in the air crash experienced by her lover,


Argylle, shortly after buzzing the ship that carried Miller from New York to Paris, or in her visit to an Egyptian village where, ‘unfortunately I ran over a man or something... if you hit anyone out here in the country, you are expected to beat it — in fact the Consulates always say HIT AND RUN’.\textsuperscript{41} Hit and run, for Miller, is a trick, a stratagem for life in an ever more intensely mediated world. Her story is surreal only insofar that surrealism points to the way that processes of mediation work, enables a practical exploration of how things operate, and hints at what media does. This practical exploration means taking a hit, or in Burroughs’s terms being pre-photographed, which is to say, being unconsciously activated, primed toward certain behaviour. Crashes, accidents in the darkroom, etc., allow brief glimpses at these programmed affordances — as Burroughs put it, ‘[a]ll photographers will tell you that often their best shots are accidents’ — but nothing systematic can be learned from or developed in response to such occurrences.\textsuperscript{42} They remain, at best, the material of ‘operative constructs’, and must be experimented with in the context of different practices, used in relation to different techniques and technologies.\textsuperscript{43} More seriously, ‘the pragmatics of a stratagem always risk misfiring’, the effects of crashes are real, even if they are not yet actual.\textsuperscript{44} Sometimes you just have to run. Burroughs: ‘old photographer tricks and tricks don’t always work. (My jujitsu instructor used to say: “If your trick no work, you better run.”)’\textsuperscript{45}

Into the ditch

Around mid-day on the 15th October 1908, as reported in the local Evening Courier, F.T. Marinetti, driving along the Via Domodossola in the industrialized outskirts of Milan, swerved to avoid a cy-

\textsuperscript{41} As she sailed away from New York to Paris in 1929, the year of The Great Crash, her lover, Argylle, piloted his biplane so close to the sundeck of the ship that he could release a flurry of roses to mark her departure. The aviator crashed the aircraft later that same day (Burke, \textit{Lee Miller}, 383). For Miller’s letter to her brother in which she obliquely notes the car accident, see Penrose, \textit{The Lives of Lee Miller}, 65.

\textsuperscript{42} Burroughs and Gysin, \textit{The Third Mind}, 29.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{45} Burroughs and Gysin, \textit{The Third Mind}, 28.
clist and overturned his vehicle in the ditch running alongside the road. Two other drivers (apparently from the factory from which Marinetti’s car had been very recently produced) stopped to assist. Neither Marinetti nor his passenger, a mechanic friend, was seriously injured but the car was severely battered. Marinetti would have attracted attention with this expensive acquisition. Few could aspire to the purchase of a four-cylinder Fiat Isotta Fraschini ‘Gran Lusso’ (Grand Luxury). In a photo, taken before the accident, he sits proudly at the wheel, the car in profile. After the accident, photos capture a bemused crowd gathered to inspect the wreckage at the bottom of the ditch, curious children crouching on the muddy bank for the best view. In his fictionalized retelling of the event, installed as a convenient origin story at the beginning of his ‘Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’, published widely in Italy and beyond in 1909, Marinetti describes the slow extraction of car from ditch, in the process of which bodywork and upholstery were shed. Miraculously, he reports, the frame of this ‘great shark that had been washed up and stranded’ remained in working order. Together with this harder, leaner, lighter monster, Marinetti had been reborn (‘O mother of a ditch, brimful with muddy water!’), ready to accelerate from the crash site with a new aesthetic, a new poetics of speed and cult of the machine.

In the introduction to the manifesto, we are told how Marinetti and his ‘lads’, after a long night of debate, ‘trailing out age-old indolence back and forth over richly adorned, oriental carpets’, were roused, at dawn, by the racket of vehicles in the street, to leap into their own ‘panting beasts’ and to tear insanely towards the violent conception of their movement in the muddy ditch. The manifesto extols the virtues of the racing car, famously rendered, by its speed

48 Marinetti, ‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’, 11, 12. Berghaus comments, in a footnote (427–28) that his salon was ‘filled with Oriental clutter, which had been brought back from Alexandria in Egypt, where his family had lived for thirty years’. 
and noise, ‘more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace’.\footnote{Marinetti, ‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’, 13.} This is reckless life, ‘life at the double’.\footnote{Ibid.} The art and poetry proper to it ‘must be thought of as a violent assault upon the forces of the unknown with the intention of making them prostrate themselves at the feet of mankind’.\footnote{Ibid.}

According to Christine Poggi, Marinetti later circulated the idea that the crash occurred on the 11th October, rather than the 15th, ‘because eleven was a significant number for him. There were eleven points in the first Futurist manifesto, and most manifestos were dated the eleventh of the month’.\footnote{Poggi, \textit{Inventing Futurism}, 274.} Everything revolved around the explosive, accelerant potential of the manifesto as form. This famous crash which marked the birth of a certain brand of modernist radicalism writ large the claim for the ascendance of a new order of reality from the ashes of the old, an order of speed. Just as, it seems, cars and cyclists cannot reasonably coexist amongst the velocities of the modern city, and just as the indolence of the bourgeois interior cannot survive the bracing winds of technological progress, so new — \textit{faster, sharper} — literary and poetic forms would arise which would be incommensurate with the sluggish and turbid rhythms of tradition.

In 1911, Marinetti was employed as a war correspondent in Libya, covering the Italo-Turkish war for a Paris newspaper. His experiences of battle cried out for a novel use of language, a poetry tantamount to combat which would be capable of an invigorating communication of the violence of modern life by its very material embodiment.\footnote{John J. White, ‘Iconic and indexical elements in Italian Futurist poetry: F.T. Marinetti’s ‘words-in-freedom’’, in \textit{S\textit{ign}er\textit{y}}, ed. C. Jac Conradie et al. (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2010), 137.} Put simply, thrown into an experience of great intensity by war or disaster, one learns to communicate quickly, briefly, forcefully. One communicates strictly what is required and does away with niceties. Although Marinetti conceded that journalists, politicians, philosophers and so forth were bound to make sense to their readers by recourse to syntax and punctuation, the poet should know no
such constraint and, in fact, is duty bound to liberate words, to get to the heart of the matter. The poet will thus convey life’s analogical bedrock, telegraphically, that is, with the same economical rapidity that the telegraph imposes on reporters and war correspondents in their summary reports. Sensibilities are shifted dramatically by new forms of media and transportation, notably with respect to speed and rhythm. The poet must respond, celebrating ‘multiple and simultaneous consciousnesses in the same individual’. The poet must ‘make connections between things that have no apparent connection, without using conductor wires, but rather condensed Words-in-Freedom’. In this situation, poetry, he decreed, ‘must be a continuous stream of new images’ — only the orchestration of a ‘tight network’ of words and images can ‘gather together all that which is most fleeting and elusive in materiality’. Such a poetry shrugs off the yoke of psychologism and anthropomorphism. It sets out through, for example, the dismantling of syntax and of individual words, the refusal of punctuation, of adjectives and adverbs, the liberal application of startling onomatopoeia, typographical experimentation, to body forth inhuman ‘molecular life’:

take care not to bestow human feelings on matter; guess rather what its different determining impulses will be, its compressive and its expansive forces, what binds it, what breaks it down, its mass of swarming molecules or its swirling electrons.

Marinetti’s rebirth in the muddy matrix of the ditch, coupled with his insistence on cultivating a vibrant form of expression immanent to, resonant with, ‘molecular life’, seems, at first glance, to speak to contemporary approaches in ‘new materialism’ such as Jane Ben-

55 Ibid., 121.
56 Ibid., 123.
nett’s theorization of the non-human agency of a ‘vital materiality’. However, Marinetti was committed to a modernist radicalism which had ruptured with the past, comprising an embrace of technology such that human limitations could be overcome. ‘We are not joking,’ he will write in 1910, ‘when we declare that in human flesh wings lie dormant’. Marinetti attempts to speed the advent of the ‘day when it will be possible for man to externalize his will so that, like a huge invisible arm, it can extend beyond him, then his Dream and his Desire, which today are merely idle words, will rule supreme over conquered Space and Time’. Against this commitment to a radical break and an ultimate conquest, we would rather commend a view beginning with unmitigated entanglement of the human with the ‘catastrophe’ that is matter, with inhuman media ecologies. In the twenty-first century, human experience is entangled with media networks which increasingly operate beneath conscious perceptual awareness. As Mark Hansen argues, agent-centred perceptual consciousness cedes to a pervasive environmental sensibility. In contemporary media ecologies we are compelled to come to terms with our pre-personal embeddedness and continuity with the world.

This sensibility is to be found in Tom McCarthy’s re-staging of Marinetti’s crash in his novel, C. The novel’s protagonist, Serge Carrefax, ensnared in oppressive circumstances, ‘decides he’s got to make things move’ and races out of London fast enough that he can ‘re-find the stasis in the motion’. It is as if he has penetrated a ‘projected image’ which in turn penetrates him. The air, the space, the colours through which he passes ‘become material’ and, when he flips his car over into a ditch and is immured inside the vehicle — ‘my own crypt’ — the very dirt penetrates him, earth inside his mouth.

62 Ibid.
64 Tom McCarthy, C (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010), 235.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 236.
Waking in hospital, he embraces this passive immersivity as if a willing ‘minor character’ in an endless film. To go into the image (into the ‘Reality Film’, as Burroughs puts it) is to become spectral, networked, immanent to the materiality of media ecologies. McCarthy’s hermetic re-staging of Marinetti’s origin myth places the emphasis on descent, entanglement and encryption rather than birth. Marinetti does stress dirt and materiality — he rises from his ditch foul, stinking — but where he is singled out and lent strength by the sludgy encounter, launched into a heroic future, for McCarthy, the ‘real disaster’ is the insignificance of our disaster. As Nieland comments, ‘progressive medial inevitabilities are revealed to be technofantasies. All that is inevitable in the novel is entropic movement into the earth, the subterranean, the burrow, the underworld…what Serge, near the novel’s end, calls the “real disaster”, which is just the loss of human “catastrophe” itself — its “rubbing out” in inhuman, geological time.’

The life of McCarthy’s early twentieth-century protagonist is the pretext for an archaeology of media in which the human is fatally entangled with the catastrophe that is matter. Burroughs’s New York car accident was bound up with a conception of the camera as a scrambling device which expresses the power of time travel, the attunement of the present to zones of futurity — a ‘paraphotographic’ (as we will say) synchronicity through which typical patterns of recognition are processed intro transformative encounters (or, in Burroughs’s terminology, ‘intersection pictures’). McCarthy conceives photography in somewhat similar terms, suggesting that to talk about the medium’s past or future, or those of the world, makes no sense, since these categories belong to the linear timescale of Enlightenment. But we’re talking endarkenment here; unshaped plasma in which pixels drift, collide and separate in prehistoric or pre-figurative frenzy; noxious fluid mulch where pasts,
futures and presents, all composted, lurk as potentiality and immanence — that is, as fiction.\textsuperscript{70}

This predilection for encryption and obscurity — photography as a negativity and dark virtuality redolent of weird fiction (and there will be more to say about fabulation and the weird as we go along) — is of a piece with McCarthy’s reflexive explorations, in his fiction and with his comrades in the International Necronautical Society (INS), of the form and function of the avant-garde manifesto and artistic communication and the aesthetics of transmission and mediation more broadly.\textsuperscript{71} Carrefax’s crash spurns the form and force of Marinetti’s manifesto. It completely undercuts its urgency in failing to rush to the new, the next.\textsuperscript{72} In fact, in the wake of the crash, Carrefax reverses Marinetti’s direction of flight and, where Marinetti and his family moved from Egypt to Europe, Carrefax travels from Europe to Egypt to work for the British army on a ‘theory of telegraphic immortality’ and to become embroiled in an archaeological dig.\textsuperscript{73} Just as, with his work for the INS, it is death rather than the Future which is the abiding concern, so here, ‘McCarthy suggests the manifesto’s impossibility, the impossibility of change, new, and now’.\textsuperscript{74}

However, perhaps there is still something in the manifesto, something that can be squeezed from its brevity, its speed. Perhaps this is better thought through the dispatch, the ‘summary report’ or the how-to manual for officers in the field. Even though the ‘lazy meme’ of the Future must surely be interrogated in the light of the insight that the new, like the now, is ‘always already mediated’, always pre-photographed, there is, again with Burroughs, something that we

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
might ‘feel our way toward: the breach, the sudden, epiphanic emergence of the unplanned, the departure from the script’.\textsuperscript{75} The crash, the disaster, the catastrophe, is a crucial figure for the contemporary age and its media ecologies. It is, we believe, intimately bound up with the flash and cut of photography. However, the crash is temporally strange — weird. It is of the Endarkenment’s version of time rather than the Enlightenment’s version; backwards and immanent, failing to progress, proper to ‘entrenchment’ rather than unobstructed flight.\textsuperscript{76} In Burroughs’s War Universe, the properly endarkened form of communication might be, we hazard, the dispatch. A different kind of molecularity of word and image to the networks imagined by Marinetti, the risky dispatch from the lost, dark middle which reeks of crisis, disappointment, resignation and abandonment — is anyone receiving? — might itself be constitutive of, as McCarthy says, channelling Burroughs, ‘a new catastrophe to counter the ongoing one’.\textsuperscript{77} A critical horror, perhaps.

\textbf{Nova crash}

So far the crash has triggered encounters with manifestos of method, communiqués on that which is desirable to communicate, on that which can be communicated. Crashes and non-crashes have invoked movement, they have aroused progress, they have activated radical breaks, rebirths. Now, though, we find ourselves in a situation where communication is silenced. The crash resigns us to defeat, to our doom.

\textit{Defeat: Suffering various ailments — duodenal ulcer, hernia, the effects of a heart attack — and, at the age of sixty-six, routed at the Eastern Front, Marinetti retreats to Lake Como. There, at dawn, in the Hotel Splendido, he succumbs to a second heart attack. Mussolini affords him a state funeral, but as Il Duce’s Fascist state turns against its own people Fascism is collapsing too.}\textsuperscript{78}

\begin{flushleft} \textsuperscript{75} McCarthy, Critchley et al., \textit{The Mattering of Matter}, 267, 276.  \\
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 269–70.  \\
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 273.  \\
\textsuperscript{78} Ernest Ialongo, \textit{Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: The Artist and His Politics} (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 296–98. \end{flushleft}
Resignation: In the aftermath of the end of the Second World War, Miller spends a year moving around Eastern Europe, searching in vain for new coordinates, stimulation. Eventually, skin drained of colour, blistered lips, bleeding gums, she begrudgingly returns to England and marries the ‘friendly surrealist’ Ronald Penrose. The rest of her life unfolds in a fug of whisky and Benzedrine, self-loathing and misery. She retreats into cookery, rarely taking photographs.

Doomed: In his latter years, holed up in Kansas, Burroughs all but gives up writing to focus instead on painting. The cut-up ultimately proves a dead end, it fails to overcome the forces it is targeted against, forces that will inevitably destroy the planet.

One of the collages included in The Third Mind assembles two existing cut-ups, both of which compose material in relation to a fragment of printed text: ‘NOVA EXPRESS’. This is, of course, the title of Burroughs’s experimental novel, published the year previously, in which he confronts the visceral forces of Control as rendered in the guise of the Nova Mob. Both of the media collages mimic a newspaper layout. In the first, the bold text ‘NOVA EXPRESS’ appears beneath a photograph of a train crash, an image that is itself placed beneath words that identify this fictional section of a newspaper as one that records disasters and crimes. A column of Burroughs’s own typewritten text runs along the left side of the collage and announces, ‘you are reading the future…’

It may be tempting to interpret this collage as a comment on the train wreck of historical progress, as a Burroughsian counterpart to Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus, an image famously described by Walter Benjamin as depicting the ‘angel of history’ surveying the wreckage of the past as it is propelled backwards into the future. Indeed, Burroughs articulates an explicit concern for humanity’s accelerated trajectory toward planetary catastrophe. The novel Nova Express opens with ‘last words’, words from a planet on which forces of control have moved ‘to sell out the unborn’. As he put it, these last words ‘are not

premature. These words may be too late.\footnote{Ibid.} The Nova Mob operates through vectors of control that manipulate and provoke anthropogenic destruction. All of his work, Burroughs says elsewhere, is directed against forces ‘bent, though stupidity or design, on blowing up the planet or rendering it uninhabitable.’\footnote{Cited in Miles, \textit{William S Burroughs}, 429.} In this sense it might also be tempting to conceive derailment as the result of revolution, with Burroughs’s experiments contributing to what Benjamin called ‘an attempt by passengers on the train — namely, the human race — to activate the emergency brake.’\footnote{Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, 4:402.}

Yet, as Oliver Harris argues, the tendency to scrutinize the content or message of this collage (the tendency to be preoccupied with the train) overlooks the importance of its form or medium.\footnote{Oliver Harris, ‘The Future Leaks Out’, in William S. Burroughs, \textit{Nova Express: The Restored Text} (New York: Grove Press, 2014).} In Harris’s account, there is something specific about Burroughs’s concern with speed, and this is revealed in the second of the two collages. Here, the word ‘express’ is deliberately cut from the banner of British newspaper the \textit{Daily Express}, a consequence of Burroughs’s obsession with the communicational trajectories of third nature. For him, ‘NOVA’ designates the new(s), the speed of communication, the processes of technological abstraction that, nonetheless, have utterly material consequences. Third nature is inscribed in — and inseparable from — both first and second nature. Third nature inhabits and pierces the body. Here lies the real motivation of Burroughs’s ‘last words’ — to invoke a heretical mode of communication targeted at its own negation. Rather than seeking to apply an emergency brake, Burroughs summons a different kind of break, a departure from what Galloway, Thacker and Wark call ‘the community of believers’, an excommunication that does not mean exile from the conventional system of communication, even though it means he is incapable of participating in its established rituals.\footnote{Galloway, Thacker and Wark, ‘Execrable Media’, 15.} Expelled by circumstance from such communication, Burroughs’s ‘intermediary status’, his middleness, allows him to conduct experiments with the processes
and procedures through which history is made, and the future trajectories with which we are integrated.  

This is because, for him, Nova is nothing new. Though Control effects an alien invasion of the human, it is an ancient force, an originary inhuman vector of the human, humanity’s originary endarkenment. In *The Beginning Is Also The End*, a short text written in 1963, Burroughs presents an interview with Mr Martin, The Man of A Thousand Lies, the leader of the Nova Mob and representative of an alien power that requires human hosts for its survival.  

Mr Martin recounts how he was brought to earth by accident, in a crash, half a million years ago: ‘My arrival here was a wreck. The ship came apart like a rotten unders vest.’ Control as an ancient alien, present for so long it has become invisible. Here the question of control is at the centre of what it is to be human. To be human is to be infected with the word and image virus of control — to be parasited and to be a parasite. We are media. The human is a site of inhuman mediation. As Mr Martin makes clear, the ancient invasion of the human takes place by means of seeding a ‘prerecorded film’ in the human body, ‘virus negatives’ that await development in the human darkroom. It is, Mr Martin says, ‘a simple operation’, one that does not impose power on human activity but mediates the conditions within which such activity emerges, meaning that such activity is encouraged to unfold in ways that seem natural, aesthetic. As Mr Martin delights in telling us, this means that humans ‘cannot think or conceive in non-image terms’ precisely because any process of thought is pre-photographed, as he puts it, a product of ‘my biologic film which is a series of images.’ Any attempt to conceive the world-in-itself is reduced to a world-for-us. The natural state of the human is one based on addic-

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87 Inspector Lee describes Mr Martin as the leader of the nova mob in *The Ticket That Exploded* (William S. Burroughs (London: Fourth Estate, 2010 [1962])).

88 William S. Burroughs, ‘The Beginning is Also the End’, in *The Burroughs File* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1984), 62–66. All quotations in the paragraph are from this source.
tion — once a single virus negative has been developed an aesthetic pattern is established, human activities become ‘drearily predictable’, they conform to a programme: ‘It should now be obvious that what you call “reality” is a function of these precisely predictable because prerecorded human activities.’

Yet this addiction occurs in both directions. The entity ‘Mr Martin’ is so named for the sake of communication. It has no self beyond the human hosts to which it is addicted: ‘I am reality and I am hooked, on, reality.’ Blinded in the crash that brought him to earth, Mr Martin has cultivated human culture as a device through which to explore the possibility of escape. Human culture is a probe-head, the negative nerve endings of Control, a means for exploring possible trajectories: ‘What you call the history of mankind is the history of my escape plan.’ On occasion this arrangement threatens the stability of control, there are ruptures in the aesthetic, non-natural breaches in nature. Certain individuals — Rimbaud, Tzara, numerous others whose names we will never know — ‘got too close one way or another’. But as Mr Martin makes clear, he has ‘ways of dealing with wise guys… Tricks I learned after the crash.’ The Nova crash begets the generative power of the negative.89 The zone of the accident, and every accident that follows, is momentarily charged with indeterminacy, an absence that teems with present potential, a force that can be carefully mediated. Movement along particular trajectories is encouraged, aestheticized, while movement along others is inhibited, made to perish. The virus of mutual addiction maintains a state of dynamic stability.

The force of the negative dominates that most mythologized episode of Burroughs’s life — the viral possession he claims led to the accidental shooting of his wife, Joan, in 1951. In September of that year he had just returned from Mexico, overwhelmed with a ‘feeling of doom and loss’ when an attempt to shoot a glass balanced on Joan’s head went tragically awry.90 Burroughs later maintained that it was this event which initially propelled and later continued to shape his writing: ‘the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invad-

89 McCarthy, ‘Science & Fiction’.
er, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle’. 91 He had encountered this Ugly Spirit previously, long before the shooting, when struck by the strange feeling of ‘something in my being that was not me, and not under my control’. 92 Writing became a way to search for trajectories of escape, a war against controlling possession, a confrontation with the spirits that worked through him.

By 1959, the year in which he and Gysin discover the cut-up, Burroughs was preoccupied with ‘incredible discoveries’ involving a dark force that had taken up residence in his life. In correspondence from that year, he describes a particular vision: ‘I looked in the mirror and saw my hands completely inhuman, thick, black-pink, fibrous, long white tendrils growing from the curiously abbreviated fingertips as if the finger had been cut off to make way for tendrils...And Jerry, who was sitting across the room, said: “My God, Bill! What’s wrong with your hands???”’ 93 This vision of himself as a tendril-monster is supplemented on other occasions when, staring in mirrors, he turns into something else, something nonhuman. Others detect it, staring at him in restaurants. 94 But, at the same time, his friends comment on his ‘growing invisibility’. In effect, Burroughs withdraws from communication at the same time as he communicates something from beyond. Arrested on drugs charges, police fail repeatedly to photograph him — when the pictures are developed, there’s nothing there. 95 He is a vessel of both communication and ex-communication. Burroughs describes the horror of something communicating, coming into visibility through him, while at the same time, as medium, he is self-negating, passing into imperceptibility. We are not just media, we are weird media; in Thacker’s terms we see both more than we should and nothing at all. It is not positive knowledge of something coming through which we can reconcile with existing rational explanations, but rather the revelation of a gulf, an abyss between realities which is silent and opaque, which is not for

91 Ibid., 18.
92 Ibid., 16. Here he is referring to an incident that occurred when looking at Egyptian hieroglyphics.
94 Ibid., 418.
95 Ibid., 419.
us. It doesn’t come across and speak — rather the ground drops away beneath us and we are at the limit of the human confronting a force which does not reciprocate, which is indifferent. This is the pure communication of a self-negating mediation in which senders and receivers dissolve and there is only the seething, horrifying middle.

Embedded in such horror, it is necessary to formulate a stratagematic mode of writing about media and photography that can be thought in terms of what McKenzie Wark calls ‘low theory’. It is low because it is unhelpful, because it is ‘negative’, because it is used to reveal ‘the void between what can be done and what is to be done’. Thacker similarly argues that the dominant mode of philosophy, and by extension media and cultural theory more generally, serves three main functions: a therapeutic function, a descriptive function, and a hermeneutic function. It helps us live better lives, it provides a truthful account of the world, it endows the world with meaning. However, for Thacker, like Wark, there is another kind of philosophical writing that does not simply aim to ‘help a person understand something’. Indeed, he points to the importance of writing that, by any conventional academic assessment, is ‘unhelpful’, a low theory that ‘works against the presuppositions of grand, systematic philosophy, composed as it is of fragments, aphorisms, stray thoughts.’ Such writing has ‘a subtractive rigour’, what Nietzsche called the rigour of the ‘unfinished thought’.

This book offers a low theory of photography in the form of multiple ‘dispatches’. How might we define the dispatch? In journalism, a dispatch is a hastily composed report that responds directly to events of the present. Here, its urgency is dictated by its hopelessness. The dispatches that comprise this book are written without the triumphant advantage of historical reflection, without the opportunity for detailed analysis. Dispatches are fragmented, they refuse the logic demanded by synoptic perspective. There is, then, a sense of futility

to the dispatch, it is written without the usual belief that communication will reveal some kind of order or meaning. Indeed, these dispatches do away with the pretence that the ‘world’ is ‘real’, just as they refuse the notion of an inaccessible reality, a presupposed world. Instead, they seek to communicate the world’s unreality, even though they are communicated with the understanding that such efforts will always fail. Dispatches are operative constructs, tricks, stratagematic theory for producing intersections with an inhuman outside. In this, the dispatch is a bleak but necessary response to an indifferent world, to a middleness in which any-action-whatever has little determinable effect on the reality film.

Dispatch also suggests something functional and operational. To dispatch is to complete a task, to conduct something expeditiously and efficaciously without ceremony. It is suggestive of something procedural, technical, immanent to the vectors of mediation. Nietzsche’s aphorisms, for example, can be described as dispatches. They are the result of experiments with early typewriter technology, experiments that led him to declare, ‘Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts.’

Thirty or so years later, reflecting on his experience as a wireless correspondent, Marinetti wrote excitedly of new communications technologies that prompted a ‘complete renewal of human sensibility’, that prompted a wireless imagination. It was the speed of such technologies, he insisted, that fully worked over the human. The wireless dispatch — a message sent in times of war, from the front line — expressed the newly ‘rapid rhythm’ of human life in which subjectivity was increasingly distributed and multiplied.

The dispatch is an exercise in decoding and scrambling subjectivity, forming relations with what Burroughs called ‘external coordinates’.

One of the most well known collections of dispatches was also written on the front line, even though they were reworked a decade

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98 Nietzsche cited in Friedrich Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 200.
100 Marinetti, ‘Destruction of Syntax’, 144.
later. Michael Herr’s dispatches from the Vietnam War famously provided source material for *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*. In Herr’s writing, where observation is never separate from participation, life on the front line is also never unmediated, never separate to ‘movie-fed war fantasies’ experienced by soldier and correspondent alike.\(^{102}\) The chaos and routine of war are both futile and seductive, traumatic and glamorous:

You don’t know what a media freak is until you’ve seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads... A lot of correspondents weren’t much better. We’d all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult.\(^{103}\)

As he makes clear, the war correspondent is predisposed to rationalize these connections, to disentangle the visceral material reality of war from its anesthetizing immaterial representations in various media forms. It is the correspondent’s job to understand the connections between image and event, between fiction and reality, and having gained such an understanding to communicate the real experience of war to an audience back at home. But what Herr discovers is that, as hard as a correspondent might try to pierce through processes of mediation and expose an apparently real war, there was only ever a chaotic middle, a space and time that set ‘your vision blurring, images jumping and falling as though they were being received by a dropped camera...’\(^{104}\) In such a war, conventional journalism could only take the world’s unreality and ‘turn it into a communication pudding...’\(^{105}\)

The dispatches gathered in the chapters that follow operate negatively, they result from a dark intuition of something present but non-

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103 Ibid., 212.

104 Ibid., 213.

105 Ibid., 220.
empirical. They are heretical in that the sanctity of the photographer is polluted, indeed the photographer exists only insofar as they are a mark of possession, rendered here in the form of what, after Deleuze and Guattari, might be called conceptual personae.\textsuperscript{106} Collectively, they fabulate a different kind of photography, one in which the camera produces negative flashes that glitch the human and eventuate something other. This is photography’s role in a War Universe.
