3 Cut! The Imperative of Photographic Mediation

"What Is Photography?" Yet Again

As the event of mediation is, like time (or, indeed, life itself), both invisible and indivisible, any attempt at its representation must ultimately fail. In this chapter, we offer a challenge to representationalism by looking, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, at a form of media practice that is most readily associated with representationalist ambitions: photography. Our aim is not so much to raise familiar questions regarding photography's truth claims and its supposed "indexicality"—that is, the relation the photographic image allegedly maintains to an object it is said to represent. Rather, we are interested in foregrounding the productive and performative aspect of photographic acts and practices that are intrinsic to the taking or making of a picture. With a view to this, we propose to understand photography as an active practice of cutting through the flow of mediation, where the cut operates on a number of levels: perceptive, material, technical, and conceptual. The recurrent moment of the cut—one we encounter not just in photography but also in film making, sculpture, writing, or, indeed, any other technical practice that involves transforming matter—will be posited by us as both a technique (an ontological entity encapsulating something that *is*, or something that *is taking place*) and an ethical imperative (as expressed by the command: "Cut!"). The key question that organizes our argument is therefore as follows: if we must inevitably cut, and if the cut functions as an intrinsic component of any creative, artistic, and especially[1] photographic practice—although this is still only a hypothesis—then what does it mean to *cut well*?

This study of the cut as an inextricable accompaniment of mediation will be enacted as an encounter between the two philosophical traditions that are shaping the argument of this book: the vitalism of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze on the one hand, and the *différance* of Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler on the other. Yet,

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as explained earlier, this philosophical encounter will be of interest to us only in so far as it will allow us to move the debate on media and mediation on, not as an exercise in philosophical point scoring. Contrary to Bergson and Deleuze, we will see photography as more than a series of frozen "snapshots." *In introducing a distinction between photography as a practice of the cut and photographs as products of this process of cutting, we will also aim to capture and convey the vitality of photographic movements and acts*. If, indeed, "To live is to be photographed,"[2] then, *contrary to its more typical association with the passage of time and death, photography can be understood more productively in terms of vitality, as a process of differentiation and life-making*. It is, paradoxically, precisely in its efforts to arrest duration, to capture or still the flow of life—beyond singular photographs' success or failure at representing *this* or *that* referent—that photography's vital forces are activated, we will claim.

To see this process of cutting in action, in the final part of this chapter we will look at practices that use "the cut" as both a subject and a method. Focusing on the photographic series *Oblique* by the Australian artist Nina Sellars, we will raise some broader questions about visualizations of the open and wounded body in the current media culture. Specifically, we will be interested in interconnections and symbolic transactions between widely distributed media images of open bodies in franchised TV makeover shows such as ABC's *Extreme Makeover* and MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*, and gallery-destined photographs of what we can call "mediated pain." Through this, we will aim to identify points of convergence between art, philosophy, and science, as well as trace some of the ways in which creative practice can alter reality by intervening in it on a material level. The way "the cut" is variously exercised by the artist, the surgeon, and the philosopher will become a focal point for a discussion about photographic mediations.

Life Will Find a Way

New York fine art photographer Joel Sternfeld's images from his *Walking the High Line* series (2000–2001)[3] depict what looks like an abandoned railway track amid an urban landscape, with thick vegetation of all sorts—grasses, shrubs, trees, wildflowers—enveloping the metal and wood of the line. The color palette of the photographs changes depending on the season when they were taken: from verdant green through to autumnal brown and snowy white. The images could be said to encapsulate the oft-cited line by Dr. John Hammond, the owner of Jurassic Park, in the sequel to the eponymous movie: "Life will find a way." The High Line itself is a multilayered space. Opened in 1934, this elevated railway line had been designed for the delivery of milk,

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meat, and other raw and manufactured goods to the stores of Manhattan, a purpose it served until 1980. In an interesting remediation of the city's history, geography, and architecture, it has now become an urban park, providing a unique vista of New York City from the height of thirty feet while also staging an ongoing encounter between the living and the technological. This encounter is itself mediated by a series of image- and sound-based artworks, with Richard Galpin's "Viewing Station" offering a particularly striking take on the space (figure 3.1). Consisting of a viewing device and a large white rectangular board containing a number of cutouts (figure 3.2), it encourages walkers on the High Line to see this particular corner of Manhattan otherwise, through a series of incisions and cuts that transform the familiar view into a modernist abstraction.

It is particularly apposite that a specially commissioned piece by Galpin should make its way into the High Line, given the artist's long-standing engagement with

Figure 3.1
Richard Galpin, "Viewing Station" (2010).
Photograph by Joanna Zylinska.

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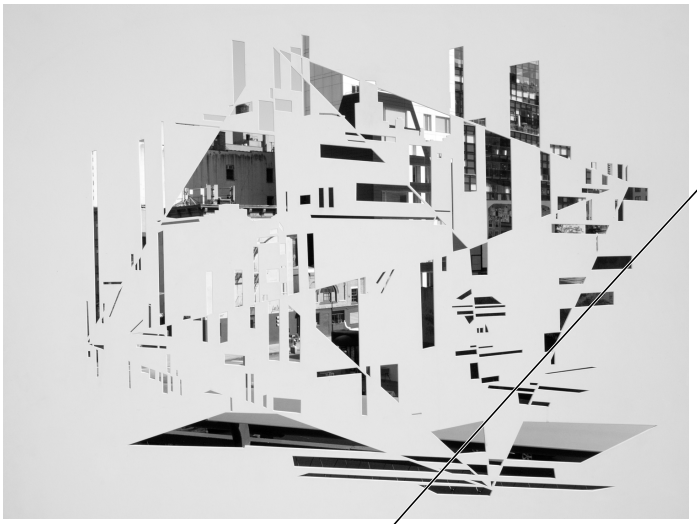

Figure 3.2
Richard Galpin, "Viewing Station" (2010)
Photograph by Joanna Zylinska.

reimagining city spaces through a series of interventions and cuts, going back all the way to his "peeled photographs" from 2001 ("Esso," "Beyond This Point," "Signs, Blinds, Fabrications"), but also evident in his more recent "Splinter" works (2009–2010). Significantly, they are cuts made "at one remove," so to speak, as Galpin slices with a scalpel into photographic representations of urban spaces, peeling away "the emulsion from the surface of the photograph to produce a radical revision of the urban form."[4] In "Viewing Station," he alters his established process, with the High Line itself—both as a location and a familiar photographic representation of it—becoming a space of incision from which to see things in a different light. In this way, the High Line also becomes a site of what in this chapter we want to term "photographic mediation," whereby an act of making cuts is taken on, and foregrounded in the photographic process, for aesthetic as well as ethical reasons.

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Photography fits perfectly into this dualist schema, due to its uncertain ontological status: it is both an act of carving the world into manageable, temporarily stabilized two-dimensional images of it and a set of institutions and conventions that arbitrate over doing things with a camera in a variety of different contexts. However, photography is more than the sum of solidifying acts and stabilized objects. Mobilizing the thinking on time, movement, and creation by two philosophers who did not have many positive things to say about photography—Bergson only ever talks about "snapshots," which stand for him for compromised attempts to give form to duration, and Deleuze is clearly much more interested in cinema—we want to look more closely at this elision of photography from the materialist philosophy of duration in search of a more productive engagement with "the photographic cut." We also want to explore the inherently creative potential of photographic practice, as something that exceeds the realm of human creativity. Hollis Frampton articulates this potentiality of photography, realized in the act of making cuts, in the following terms:

> The photographer's whole art may be seen as a cutting process. The frame is a fourfold cut in projective space. The selection of a contrast curve of a given slope and shape, and the mapping of bright and dark zones on that curve, are clearly operations that cut the intended from the possible. If I am making a color print and, at a certain point, decide that it must be lighter, more green, higher in contrast, then I am making a threefold cut in an unmodified field of fifty-five possibilities.[8]

There is always more to photography than a series of photographs already in place: its potentiality includes all the photographs "not yet taken," all those cuts "not yet made." In making incisions into duration, in stabilizing its flow into graspable entities, photography is inherently involved with time.

Most people's everyday experience positions them as collectors of memories, viewers of moments of captured temporality, and producers of such moments. Arguably, over the last half century, photography has become so ubiquitous that our sense of being is intrinsically connected with being photographed, and with making sense of the world around us through seeing it imaged. As David Bate points out, "If I wish to travel, a photograph of my face is required to indicate my identity in my passport, without which it would be hard to go anywhere. I am likely to have already seen photographic images of my destination before I have even been there."[9] Yet even though photographs are indeed ubiquitous and even if their primary mode of functioning is that of recording (the passage of) time, and of introducing a differentiation between the now-time and the-time-that-once-was, this relational, dynamic aspect of photography arguably gets lost among the plethora of photographic objects and artifacts. This problem is exemplified in Barthes's position as presented in *Camera Lucida*,

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whereby his search for the essence of his dead mother in the Winter Garden photograph, which supposedly represents her (and which we never see), "supersedes, and overlays, his search for the essence of photography. It leads him to replace photography with the photograph, memory with *the* memory, virtual existence with actual existence, and, ironically, perhaps, (her) life with (his) death."[10]

Intuition and Time

However, if we are to think about photography in terms of mediation—whereby mediation stands for the differentiation of, as well as connection between, media and, more broadly, for the acts and processes of producing and temporarily stabilizing the world into media, agents, relations, and networks—we need to see the ontology of photography as predominantly that of becoming. The best way to understand becoming is arguably through a Bergson-inspired concept of intuition. Becoming as an inherent condition of photography must be differentiated from narratives about photography's alleged transformation, evolution or even death in the digital age, that is, about photography "becoming different from what it once was." Narratives of the latter kind are premised on separating one aspect of a phenomenon—a technical one—and then extrapolating its role to that of a determining factor in the development of a medium. Yet, as argued in chapter 1, it is both false and reductive to propose such a cause-and-effect model of understanding digital media, whereby technology is treated as a mere instrument, a discrete entity that can be said to have one-way "effects" on other entities, rather than as an environment or a field of forces. This latter understanding of technology from the midst of its force field, as it were, can first of all be intuited rather than grasped cognitively. After Bergson, intuition stands for more than mere feeling or inspiration: it is a form of knowing through practice. The concept of intuition is close that of instinct, which can be defined as "the unconscious bond with reality that provokes bodily action and reaction in all animals."[11] In humans, instinct is supposed to have subsided just as intelligence has developed. For Bergson, intuition offers a means by which to return each to the other.

Bergson's turn to intuition is an attempt to recapture this not quite yet atrophied instinctive mode of relating to reality that does not posit a prior separation between the knower and its objects in the way the intellect does, but which rather presents knowledge to us "from within." For Bergson, "the intellect aims, first of all, at constructing. This fabrication is exercised exclusively on inert matter, in the sense that even if it makes use of organized material, it treats it as inert, without troubling about the life which animated it. And of inert matter itself, fabrication deals only with the solid; the rest escapes by its very fluidity."[12] The problem with the intellect is that it

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"cannot, without reversing its natural direction and twisting about on itself, think true continuity, real mobility, reciprocal penetration—in a word, that creative evolution which is life."[13] It is therefore incapable of recognizing any real novelty, or what Bergson calls "absolute becoming." Indeed, the intellect is "awkward the moment it touches the living."[14] It can only grasp what it already knows; it only knows "the repeated." Although the intellect has a "natural inability to comprehend life,"[15] instinct and intuition (whereby intuition for Bergson is a form of conscious or refined instinct) are "molded on the very form of life."[16]

The Ghost in the Cinematograph

The intellect's manner of functioning is mechanistic: it "represents becoming as a series of states, each of which is homogeneous with itself and consequently does not change."[17] In other words, the intellect cuts up reality into fragments, which it then passes off as truthful representations of this reality. Bergson explains this working of the intellect in our attempt to make sense of the world as follows:

> Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself. Perception, intellection, language so proceed in general. Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us.
>
> We may therefore sum up what we have been saying in the conclusion that the mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind.[18]

For Bergson, the cinematograph as a machine for animating still images becomes a metaphor for the wrong or false kind of perception, as its mode of working is premised on the forgetting or overlooking of duration. (The cinematograph will later be redeemed by Deleuze as offering precisely an insight into duration, although Deleuze will remain in agreement with Bergson about the latter's critique of the elision of becoming from the process of looking, a process which is focused only on "states." Photography for Deleuze is just a form of "molding"; it is a way of conserving immobility, and the cinematic image is a "mobile section" or a "modulation."[19])

It may seem from this argument that our intellect can understand photographs but cannot understand photography; it can understand media but not mediation. However, Alexander Sekatskiy makes an interesting observation about what it is that Bergson actually sees as passing through the cinematograph of our mind, and about the

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ensuing misreadings of this passage in many commentaries on photography and cinema. He suggests that the "photographs" that Bergson is talking about "are not photographs: they are much more like film-stills. By mixing up the incommensurable temporalities of photograph and film-still we fail to distinguish between images of perception and images of memory. Within the duration of cinematic time a still photograph is a completely lifeless, alien object, and by the same token, a film-still is dead when it is placed among photographs."[20]

Before we raise some further questions about such a (misguided, it seems) reduction of photography to a mere illustration of what is wrong with our perception of the world and propose to explore photography's own intrinsic movement and lifeness, we would like to take a closer look at this recurrent use of the notion of "the cut" in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*—a term that subsequently returns (as *découpage*, or "cutting") in Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* as well as Deleuze's own *Bergsonism* and *Cinema 1*—as this term will later be mobilized into our proposal for an alternative understanding of the ontology of photography and of the effects it can have. Bergson tells us that "our mind, speculating on it [space] with its own powers alone, cuts out in it, a priori, figures whose properties we determine a priori"[21] and that "while the organized being is cut out from the general mass of matter by his very organization, that is to say naturally, it is our perception which cuts inert matter into distinct bodies."[22] Arguably it is precisely the dialectical relationship between flux and stasis, between duration and the cut that organizes the conceptual and affective universe for us. Bergson seems to be saying as much when he claims that "things are constituted by the instantaneous cut which the understanding practices, at a given moment, on a flux of this kind, and what is mysterious when we compare the cuts together becomes clear when we relate them to the flux."[23]

Although it may initially seem that neither Bergson nor Deleuze are particularly enamored of the practice of the cut, we want to suggest that the cut actually occupies a more ambiguous role in their writings, establishing itself as a fundamental structuring device for their respective yet intertwined philosophies of perception, imaging and temporality. For Deleuze, in a similar way to Bergson, intuition is a "problematizing method" that leads us to undertake "a critique of false problems and the invention of genuine ones."[24] (As stated in chapter 1, this designation of "falseness" with regard to those problems refers to the fact that these are "nonexistent problems," "badly stated questions," or "badly formed composites"[25] but not to any intrinsic moral valorization of them.) Indeed, for Deleuze intuition itself is premised on the act of cutting: it works through "*differentiating* (carvings out and intersections), *temporalizing* (thinking in terms of duration)."[26] So, paradoxically, in order to deal with cuts, intuition needs to

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Totally disagree and how does this tie in with the screenshots I take?

make cuts; in order to traverse carvings out and intersections, it must carve out and intersect. This is to say that the only way we can grasp process or time, even if we are to forgo purely *intellectual* understanding and rely primarily on intuition, is through its entanglement with what Bergson calls "solids."

Eadweard Muybridge comes to mind as a photographer who experienced the stoppage of time and who made a memorable cut into the temporal process. We are not referring here to his famous photographs of a galloping horse with all four of its hooves off the ground, as they only confirm what Bergson told us about time and duration through his explication of Zeno's paradox. (Like Muybridge's horse, Zeno's arrow seems motionless during the whole time it is moving. Yet it is only each subsequent point that the horse/the arrow passes through that is motionless; the horse/the arrow never finds itself *in* the point of its course. Our erroneous perception—be it photographic or "immediate"—reduces indivisible movement to a sequence of static states.)[27] Instead, what we have in mind is the moment of arrested passion, suspended perception, and interrupted duration when Muybridge killed his wife's lover: an (at least partly apocryphal) frozen frame that Frampton has described as "*Man raising a pistol and firing*."[28] We learn as much from Derrida's response to Bernard Stiegler in *Echographies of Television*, when Derrida suggests that "to speak of a technical process and indeed of its acceleration, mustn't lead us to overlook the fact that this flux, even if it picks up speed, nonetheless passes through *determined* phases and structures." Derrida goes on to admit that what bothers him about the word "process" "is that it is often taken as a pretext for saying: It's a flow, a continuous development; there is *nothing but* process." He then insists: "No, there is not *only* process. Or at least, process always includes stases, states, halts."[29] Though Bergson, and Deleuze after him, would perhaps not be averse to such a pragmatic recognition of the need to stabilize—after all, Bergson himself acknowledges that "the truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change,"[30] which can be seen as a restating of the chicken-and-egg dilemma—it is nevertheless on the flux and duration that both he and Deleuze focus their call to attention. Yet, what if we were to pick up on Bergson's (entertained, engaged and then quickly dismissed)[31] pragmatism and turn it into a critical force? What effect could this have on what we think about duration, temporality, and photographic cuts?

A Categorical Imperative to Make a Cut

We want to suggest (with Bergson and Deleuze, but perhaps also against them) that this call to intuition can be understood as a call for a temporary suspension of the

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method of knowing—that is, carving—the world. This is not to offer instead a kind of "go with the flow" method or attitude, but rather to postulate the need for what could be termed "differential cutting"—which is another name for "cutting well." Further, if cuts are inevitable and if cut indeed we must, then photography can be seen as a transintuitive practice of *working through the cut*, of re-cutting and re-cising things "for good measure." *It is precisely in the gap between photographs as media objects, and photography as a practice of mediation that aims and fails to capture the passage of time, that an ethical imperative presents itself to us*. This imperative entails a call to make cuts where necessary, while not forgoing the duration of things. Rather than being reduced to a technique for providing false renderings of the world which is ultimately unstable and moving, photography can be said to lend us a helping hand in managing this duration of the world. Yet is this not to invest photography with too much ethical weighting, too much responsibility, and hence too much agency? Are we not expecting it to carry out the work of technology (i.e., *tekhnē*, bringing-forth, or creation) but also of safeguarding the novelty of what it has created?

Karen Barad's notion of "the agential cut" developed in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* can provide us with some ideas on how to engage with the agency of matter and how to raise ethical questions in a world which is relational, durational, constantly becoming. Drawing on Niels Bohr's work on quantum physics, Barad develops a philosophical position that remains attentive to "matter's dynamism," recognizing as she does that matter is "an active factor" in any ongoing and further materializations of the world.[32] Her theory is therefore not about what we can do *to* the world and how we can act *on* it, but first of all about how we intra-act *with* it. The concept of intra-action postulates a more dynamic model of emergence of and with the world, whereby "the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate" and the particular concepts become meaningful only in an active relation. Intra-action thus points to the inherent performativity of matter, and of the relations it enters into on many scales. To the theories of performativity studied in media and cultural studies via the writings of Austen, Butler, and Derrida, Barad adds the knowledge of physics.[33] Her work deserves attention due to the serious effort she makes to work through science, while not losing sight of philosophical and cultural debates. Driven by a conviction that "scientific theories are capable of providing reliable access to the ontology of the world,"[34] Barad also remains aware of what we could call human singularity (not to be confused with human superiority!) that emerges as a result of her "agential cut." She goes on to argue that "the fact that science 'works' does not mean that we have discovered human-independent facts about nature."[35] The agential cut becomes for her a material-conceptual device, whereby a distinction is introduced

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between "subject" and "object" within the larger material arrangement. In other words, "the agential cut enacts a resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy. . . . Crucially, then, intra-actions enact *agential separability*—the condition of *exteriority-within-phenomena*."[36]

Commenting, after Bohr, on the use of apparatuses in physics experiments, she recognizes that they are not "passive observing instruments; on the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena."[37] If we apply this to photography, we can see how the camera as a viewing device, the photographic frame both in the viewfinder and as the circumference of a photographic print, the enlarger, the computer, the printer, and the photographer (who, in many instances, such as CCTV or speed cameras, is replaced by the camera eye), are all active agents in the constitution of a photograph. In other words, they are all part of what we understand by photography. Indeed, Barad points out that causal intra-actions within the world "need not involve humans"—although the semiotic designation of a set of these practices and actions as "photography," and the cultural valorization thereof, does.[38] The role of the agential cut, enacted by human and nonhuman agents alike, is to divide photography into photographs, but then to reconnect the latter to its beyond: that is, photographic duration whose stabilizations into artifacts are only ever temporary. (They are also, to cite Bergson, "useful.") As Barad points out, "cuts are part of the phenomena they help produce."[39]

If the cut is indeed "enacted rather than inherent," and if its task is to enact "a resolution,"[40] then we can see how this kind of agential cut has both an ontological and an ethical dimension: it is a causal procedure that performs the division of the world into entities, but it is also an act of decision with regard to the boundaries of those entities. Naturally, only some of these de-cisions will be true *ethical* decisions in the sense of having been made by (or with) a human agent, but the majority of them will have moral consequences. What we mean by a "true ethical decision" here differs from the position on agency in traditional moral philosophy, whereby an ethical decision is made by a transparent, self-contained, liberal subject who is capable of evaluating the available options and making a rational choice from among them. For us, a decision is always to some extent arational, made by the (inhuman) other in me, and necessitating a leap of faith beyond the scope of available options. To answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, "What does it mean to cut well?" we thus want to suggest that *a good cut* is *an ethical cut*, whereby an in-cision is also a de-cision. Cutting well therefore means cutting (film, tape, reality) in a way that does not lose sight of the horizon of duration or foreclose on the creative possibility of life enabled by this horizon.

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The Vitality of Photography

Again, photography has an important role to play in this process of cut-making because of its proximity to life itself—which, for Bergson as much as for Deleuze, stands for duration, time, and movement. Deleuze writes, "Movement is . . . explained by the insertion of duration into matter." He then goes on to suggest that duration "is called life when it appears in this movement."[41] Significantly, Deleuze also identifies an ongoing process of differentiation occurring within this flux of life, of life becoming other than itself, of cutting itself and into itself. The inherently technological process, whereby *tekhnē* stands for bringing forth and creation, is therefore not just an aspect of human becoming, as it was shown in chapter 1, but also of life itself. Life itself is technical because it is (potentially) creative: it carries within itself propulsion for movement, for change, for the creation of differences. Photography is in a privileged position (even more than cinema perhaps) to capture this flow because it takes on and reveals, instead of concealing, the agential cut which is involved in transforming matter into objects. In this, it *produces* life forms, rather than merely recording them.

Claire Colebrook explains this process of creative becoming in and of life by drawing, interestingly, on the concept of image production or "imaging." She writes:

> All life, according to Bergson and to Deleuze after him, can be considered as a form of perception or "imaging" where there is not one being that apprehends or represents another being, but two vectors of creativity where one potential for differentiation encounters another and from that potential forms a relatively stable tendency or manner. The intellect is on the one hand a deterritorialization of the organism, for it creates a series of concepts, quantifications, units and measures—including a uniform clock time and a number system—that will allow it to extend its range of action and movement beyond the immediate present, and beyond its own life. On the other hand, the organism is also a *re*territorialization that folds back upon itself, quantifies and measures itself.[42]

Photography's mode is not therefore primarily that of perception; it is rather that of intermittent duration, of incised movement and captured time. It is in this sense that photography can be described as having a lifeness. What we mean by this is something more than the lifelike effect of animated photographs in digital photo frames or on Flickr photostreams. Photography apprehends duration in an instant; we can therefore say that it intuits time by cutting through its solidifications. We see photographically when we intuit things, when we grasp things in an instant, in the blink of an eye. "Intuition gives us fleeting access, which is just like the opening and closing of a shutter," to the movement of things.[43] Drawing on Colebrook's argument, we would

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thus like to make a second, reverse proposition: all life is photographic. This is to say that life goes beyond and contests representation: it is a creation of images in the most radical sense. Photographic practice as we know it is just one instantiation of this creative process. It is a way of giving form to matter, one that is situated between the three daughters of chaos Deleuze and Guattari wrote about—science, art, and philosophy—in a hybrid category of its own.

However, if indeed all life "can be considered as a form of perception or 'imaging,'" we should perhaps also take heed of Stiegler's proposition outlined in his essay "The Discrete Image" that "*The image in general* does not exist."[44] Drawing on Derrida's deconstruction of the linguistic sign, Stiegler argues that the mental image and what he calls the image-object "are two faces of the same phenomenon." And thus, "just as there is no 'transcendental signified,' there is no mental image in general, no 'transcendental imagery' that would precede the image-object."[45] Also, just as there is no signifier without the signified, there is no photography without the photograph, and no mediation without the media. Arguably, both "the mental image" and "the image-object" come postperception; they are both products of the cuts made into the flow of duration—but cuts enacted in different media (mind vs. emulsion-covered acetate, say). Bergson is not unaware of the incessant and necessary production of such images. However, what his theory of temporality does is turn our attention toward what we could call a missing horizon of reality, and away from an excessive focus on the outcomes of the "fragmentation processes."[46] As shown earlier, Bergson is aware of the practical, useful side of producing these solids, but warns us against losing sight of the incessant transmission of matter on the way. By losing sight of it, says Bergson, we lose sight of the inherent creation of life, that is, its potential to generate things ever new, and thus remain confined to the realm of the "repeateds." In a similar vein, Stiegler acknowledges that "there is neither image nor imagination without memory,"[47] whereby memory is, incidentally, another term for duration and movement, both for Bergson and Deleuze.[48] So the question becomes not so much whether duration or flux is "better" than stasis when it comes to understanding life and ourselves as living beings (as some crude applications of Bergson or Deleuze in media, communications and cultural studies sometimes seem to imply) but rather how to ensure that the agential cut, which is inevitable, is enacted "well." How should one cut in a way that does not lose sight of the horizon of duration or foreclose on the creative possibility of life enabled by this horizon?

We should note here that for Stiegler, there is also no such thing as pure perception (unlike for Bergson, for whom intuition *is* pure perception). Especially in the digital age, our perception is dependent on a number of "intermediary prostheses," argues

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Stiegler, with what he calls analogicodigital technology transforming the very way we see the world, and are in the world. What Stiegler calls "the systematic discretization of movement," which he identifies with the emergence of the analogicodigital image[49]—that is, an image that foregrounds rather than conceals the decomposition and synthesis of both light and time—contributes "to the emergence. . . . of another kind of belief and disbelief with respect to what is shown and what happens."[50] He argues: "Digitization . . . introduces manipulation *even into the spectrum*, and, by the same token, it *makes phantoms and phantasms indistinct*. Photons become pixels that are in turn reduced to zeros and ones on which discrete calculations can be performed. . . . the *this was* has become essentially *doubtful* when it is digital."[51] Although questions can be, and indeed have been, raised as to whether the analog image did maintain a less problematic relation to the past, the *it was*, the notion of the analogicodigital highlights this uncertain and unstable "knotting" of life, and hence of time, while signaling its discontinuity, or discreteness, *in* time. It also promises us "another intelligence of movement."[52]

Interestingly, in the reiteration of his tribute to Derrida's deconstructive thought in the closing pages of his essay, Stiegler makes a rather Bergsonian point when he says: "life (*anima*—on the side of the mental image) is always *already* cinema (animation—image—object)."[53] This is a position we know well from Deleuze's *Cinema* books as well as Hollis Frampton's idea of "infinite cinema," which, in its focus on the appearances of the world, supposedly precedes the invention of both the camera and the cinematograph. Sekatskiy provides a poignant summary of this evolutionary narrative of cinematic development, a narrative which has gained some currency in film studies over the last two decades: "Moving images are more primordial than still images. We should not be surprised therefore by the speediness with which cinematic effects became embedded in dreams, memory and imagination. If the movie camera is a prostatic [prosthetic?—SK and JZ] device, a contact lens for the imagination, then we must accept that it is hardwired to the very core of our being: its proximity to internal apperception makes the rejection of cinematic fantasies practically impossible."[54] But then, mimicking the scientific jargon of this narrative, Sekatskiy goes on to challenge its inherent logic by drawing, in a truly Bergsonian manner, on our "real-life experience." He writes: "In fact the opposite has occurred. Lazy human reaction has got into the habit of following a guide, of entrusting the 'change of images' to the light-beam of the film projector: this has led to a degeneration of our imagination. It is a different matter in the case of the still photographic camera. Despite a long period of mutual adaptation between the film camera lens and human vision, there is still a marked difference between still photography and human vision."[55]

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We are less concerned here with ascertaining the scientific accuracy of this assessment of the status quo (just as we are not as interested in the neuroscientific interpretations of our mind as supposedly cinematic in its "nature"). Instead, we want to treat Sekatskiy's proposition as a philosophical provocation, one that can help us redeem what is being elided in the narratives about the primacy of cinema as both a cultural form and natural imprint, whereby photography is only seen as "a filmic *ersatz*,"[56] and in those rhetoricophilosophical transitions from photography to cinema as presented earlier. This provocation points to the creative potentiality of photography—a dimension that Bergson and Deleuze are in search of in their respective studies of duration, but that they overlook in photography itself. In its physical two-dimensionality, its anchoring in the index (no matter how much of a fantasy this anchoring is), and its existence in the mappable parallel trajectories of art, commerce, and everyday amateur practice, photography becomes a safe zone in which one can take on the chaos of the world. Stored in family albums, on social networking websites such as Flickr and PBase, in data banks and art galleries, it allows us to explore the liquidity of culture without drowning in its fast-moving waters. It is also in this sense that we can talk about photography's vitality, or "lifeness." This is not to suggest that its analog and digital products partake in the processes of self-organization, self-replication, and autonomy in the same way that other forms of so-called artificial life do. It is rather to acknowledge that both in its amateur and professional forms, photography "is capable of carving out new passageways in life, and of life, by moving us, and making us move, in a myriad ways."[57]

The Artist, the Surgeon, and the Philosopher[58]

In the process of worldly becoming, Bergson suggests, "the living body cuts out other bodies from the flow of life."[59] The *Oblique* series[60] by Australian artist Nina Sellars performs the vitality of photography by instituting an operating theater of darkness and light: a hybrid space of surgery and performance that we are invited to enter through nine large window-like images (figure 3.3). In *Oblique*, surgery becomes a theatrical act. It brings back the long gone world of public autopsies and surgeries which used to be held in anatomy and operating theaters for the benefit of medical students but also for the interest and pleasure of wealthy citizens. Yet *Oblique* is more than just an "edutainment" show for those who still remain intrigued by the human body and the processes of its transformation. The artist actually joins the team of surgeons in instantiating a series of cuts and incisions herself, by means of which she brings forth a unique event: a material-visual operation on an apparently disembodied arm and a seemingly displaced ear.

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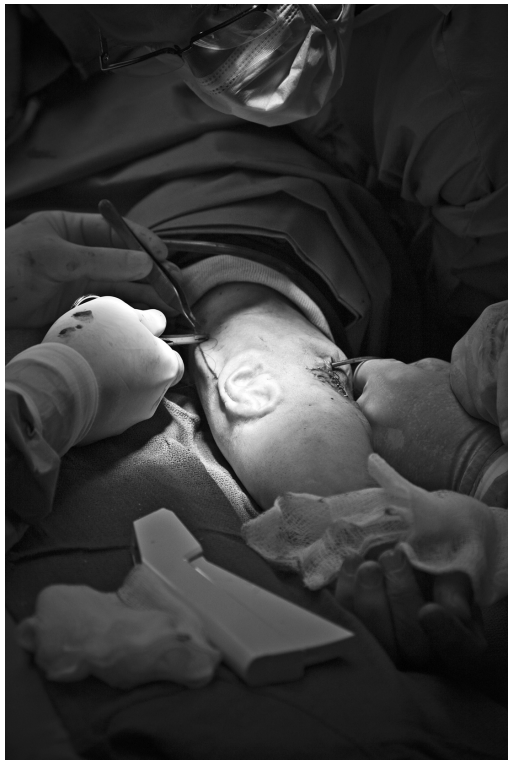

Figure 3.3
Nina Sellars, *Oblique* (2008).

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Photography is mobilized on a daily basis to participate in multiple processes of mediation—from those instantiated by the symbolic exchange which is at work once the viewer is faced with the images, to those second-level ones, activated once the photographs enter the media circuit of galleries, publications, TV news, and the Internet. Sellars's photographs allow us to look at bodies in the process of being remade somewhat obliquely, and thus tell a different story from the one offered by the sensationalized and commercialized representations of the open body in mainstream media. Indeed, there is something unique and singular about an encounter with Sellars's unusual (meat) cuts in a gallery space. Herself an experienced prosector as well as a mixed-media artist, Sellars revisits the age-old practice of barber-surgeons, marginal figures within the history of medicine who were nevertheless instrumental in the radical opening up, on both a physical and conceptual level, of the human body.

With *Oblique*, a photographic art project which entails enclosing, freezing, and carving the body into a particular form, Sellars repeats the surgeon's master "cut" with a click of the shutter, which frames and fragments the body spectacle at hand. Arguably, the cut functions as an inherent part of any photographic process, with the photographer freezing, slicing, and carving out a certain instant from the reality surrounding her. Comparing the photographer to the butcher—who, "using only a knife, reduces a raw carcass to edible meat," but does not "*make* the meat, of course, because that was always in the carcass; he makes 'cuts' (dimensionless entities) that section flesh and separate it from the bone"[61]—Frampton seems to suggest that the photographer *makes "cuts" rather than "photographs,"* in-cising the meat of the world in an attempt to give it form. Cutting thus becomes a "component of a practice," to use Victor Burgin's term.[62] It is a creative in-cision that is also a de-cision, because it gives shape to the world; it makes it into this or that. Frampton seems to concur when he says, "The photographic process is *normative*."[63] Yet the psychic symbolism of art as a metaphorical process of cutting the world, with all the connotations of violence, pain, and pleasure this process entails, frequently remains unacknowledged in many artists' work, as well as in broader debates on indexicality, referentiality, and representation in photography. This material process of cutting has perhaps been more explicitly acknowledged in the practice of film making, both during the shooting stage, when the director shouts "Cut!" to end the filming of a particular scene, and in postproduction, when tape had to be literally cut and spliced together. The digital era's "cut and paste" technique of word processors and other editing programs, such as Apple's Final Cut Pro, has made "the cut" more visible across media platforms and practices: film, photography, graphic design, and writing.

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One must of course be careful not to impose moral equivalence between all practices of cutting—for example, slicing someone's face with a knife in a street attack, remodeling a client's face in a cosmetic surgery situation, or metaphorically "cutting" an aspect of reality with a still or film camera. A desire to carve and hence adjust the world according to the "perpetrator's" wish or whim is arguably inherent in all of these gestures. However, even if cutting inevitably entails some degree of violence, our attempt to "cut well" can perhaps be guided by what the philosopher of ethics Emmanuel Levinas has termed "good violence." According to Levinas, violence is constitutive of subjectivity: indeed, the subject can emerge only in response to the intrusion of alterity (i.e., difference). It is "the shock with which the infinite enters my consciousness and makes it responsible"[64] that provides the horizon for an ethical event (even it not guaranteeing that the subject will behave ethically). Such violence is by no means equivalent to violations of identity in war or crime. The reason we can describe it as "good violence" is because "it brings about some good: the responsibility of the subject which is established in this violent act, and which is made ethical—i.e., responding, exposed to the alterity of the other—in its foundation. . . . Our subjectivity is thus always already born in violence, it is a response to what we cannot comprehend, master, or grasp, to what escapes our conceptual powers."[65] The doubling of "the cut" within Sellars's own body of work—from that of the surgeon's scalpel, making incisions in the arm which functions as a focal point for the images, to that of the artist's camera, carving out a moment in space and time while also cutting out this particular operating scene for us in a certain way so that all we can see is an arm, a few pairs of hands and a shaft of light—creates theatrical tension between medical and artistic intervention. Forcing an inevitable question—"Why is someone having an ear constructed on their arm?"—it also introduces a gap between necessity and ornamentation, between lack and excess.

We can imagine Sellars's *Oblique* to be an amplified restaging of Rembrandt's famous *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*: the chiaroscuro color template and the anatomic curiosity of the photographs easily encourage such a comparison. But there is another, more fundamental level at which Sellars puts her "cut" to work. In Rembrandt, the audience—gathered around the operating table to examine the muscle structure on the cadaver—consists of darkly clad gentlemen, curiously poring over the body specimen. There are no cutting instruments, only an open book, as there is going to be no dissection as such: the cadaver will have been prepared in advance for the "lesson."[66] The audience is thus participating not only in a hands-on anatomy class but also in a metaphysical moment of literally trying to grasp "the other side"—to touch death with their hands. Something very different happens in *Oblique*. The

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close-up photographic technique cuts out not only the audience that may or may not have been gathered around the operating table on which someone is having an ear implanted on their arm—a rather unusual bodily intervention that implicitly asks for an audience because it is in itself a form of spectacle. It also excises the surgeons performing the procedure, turning the operation into an other-bodied dance of hands and arms (figure 3.4). The audience, of course, does not disappear from this spectacle altogether. In the age of makeover TV and ubiquitous plastic surgery—ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, FX's *Nip/Tuck*—the spectators are already part of the picture, regardless of whether they are represented in the actual photographs. Indeed, viewers of mediatized body makeovers are not just watching the transformation of others but are also themselves actively taking on their bodily wounds and corporeal metamorphoses. Such an audience is almost beyond representation: it far exceeds the select few—be it the attendees of the anatomy lesson in Rembrandt's painting or regular visitors to art galleries—to include all the transnational media viewers, exposed to twenty-first century anatomy lessons via franchised shows that turn the surgeon's cut into popular entertainment.[67]

In psychoanalysis, the cut symbolizes castration, which Slavoj Žižek, in his interpretation of contemporary bodily modification practices translates into a desire to disentangle oneself from authoritarian ties imposed by what he calls the big Other, and an effort to reestablish a certain kind of individualism outside the constraints of the symbolic order.[68] Sellars's project literally cuts across this fantasy of individualization. What Sellars therefore offers us with *Oblique* is a series of TV screens that are subversively hung as mirrors. Ron Burnett suggests that "viewing is about the desire to enter into the screen and become a part of the images and to experience stories from within the settings made possible by technology."[69] Watching the surgery, we are also getting a glimpse into our own desire for the cut of the other, for his or her suffering, but also for the ultimate transformation and closure that sews up the cut and heals the (psychic and real) wound. The visible surgical tools and the implied camera equipment function as cutting devices for a self on the way to individualization via self-incision and self-revelation. The cut is thus always agential, even if the agent is multiple and not even human.

In the early 1990s, French artist Orlan broke the taboo against the public opening up of the body with her plastic surgery project, *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*. She staged her operations in art galleries, with the camera capturing every cut to her face, the detachment of the skin from her head, the slow coming apart of her "mask." Yet Orlan's performances have now been overshadowed by the far gorier and far more detailed exposition of the surgeon's cut in TV makeover shows. What is more, the

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Figure 3.4
Nina Sellars, *Oblique* (2008).

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radicality of Orlan's project has been overcome by reality TV's reduction of "the cut" to a mere stage on the way to "the stitch," that is, a supposedly more accurate representation, offering a fantasy of arriving at the fullness of one's being. Sellars, in turn, seems to be embracing "the cut" as a positive condition of one's insertion into the world. The way she casts light and shadow in her photographs does allow us to see an open body, but it also prompts us to look obliquely at the processes of its constitution. Rather than trying to overcome or suture the wound all too quickly, her images dwell on it, repeatedly, obsessively. In this way, they foreground what Parveen Adams has called "the emptiness of the image, not the triumph of completeness that the dominion of the image seeks to induce."[70]

We could therefore suggest that Sellars's project involves the staging of an anatomy lesson for the media age. It is a lesson in which the processes of image production have become much more mechanical, and in which agency has been redistributed among different, human and nonhuman agents—including cameras, large-format printers but also cannulae, sutures, and scissors. *Oblique* therefore provides a glimpse into the originary technicity of the human, where *tekhnē* actively brings forth humanity, rather than being only a promise or a threat to it. Significantly, in Sellars's anatomy class, the surgery is distinctly direction-less. Unable to trace the master hand of the surgeon, we are exposed instead to the medusa-like network of cyborg-like, featureless, latex-gloved hands. As in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, the body is the center of each image here, but what we are looking at with *Oblique* is a disassembled body, a body with organs in wrong places, an arm with an ear. Perhaps what these images actually depict is some sort of multilimbed mutant surgeon—a self-mutilator who is folding upon himself in a bizarre act of self-creation (figure 3.5).

The rich visual connotations opened up by the *Oblique* images are nevertheless anchored by the exhibition's subtitle. We learn from it that these are in fact images from Stelarc's *Extra Ear* project, in which this well-known Australian performance artist had an ear constructed on his arm, with a view to exploring what he terms "alternate bodily architectures." By using this performance as raw material for her work, Sellars playfully mobilizes the strategy of remediation: she is trying to "achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation"[71] on the level of the photographs' content, while also foregrounding the mediation processes via their screen-like framing. In doing all this, she draws on the cinematic technique of montage, remediating a classical painting that she then multiplies into a kind of film strip. Even if we agree that Sellars's work is a way of holding up a mirror to our own narcissism, our makeover culture-fuelled desire to see "beyond the surface" of the other, or a screen for the projection of our fantasy for completeness, her project

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Figure 3.5
Nina Sellars, *Oblique* (2008).

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Figure 3.6
Nina Sellars, *Oblique* (2008).

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also resists and undoes this tendency toward narcissistic incorporation. In the matte texture of their paper, the tenebrist tonality of their surface and the materiality of their box frame, Sellars's photographs possess a nonhuman agency of their own, which they unwittingly activate to take away what Victor Burgin calls "our command of the scene." Burgin writes: "To remain long with a single image is to risk the loss of our imaginary command of the look, to relinquish it to that absent other to whom it belongs by right—the camera. The image then no longer receives our look, reassuring us of our founding centrality, it rather, as it were, avoids our gaze, confirming its allegiance to the other."[72]

In allowing ourselves to witness Sellars's surgery scene, by being exposed to the gaping hole in the arm, the spectators are participating in their own undoing, in letting the undoing happen to them, in seeing themselves as part of mediation. The images play with metaphysical depth, promising a closure they cannot ultimately offer. This is where their victory as images lies but it is also a moment when the look can return to the viewer—who, as a reward for giving up on the desire to master it, and to stop the passage of time for ever, will be presented with his or her own temporary restoration. The pleasure of looking at *Oblique* is thus ultimately the pleasure of survival, of getting over "the cut" (figure 3.6). It combines the horror evoked by the object of desire—the other's body, the car, immortality itself—with the narcissistic reconfirmation of the self that has not been cut open, and that can breathe a sigh of relief while saying: "This is not me, I haven't been cut." But it also provides a safe entry point for consciously taking on the self's experience of mediation and fragmentation, with any potential psychosis being transformed into art. Jacques-Alain Miller suggests that any enunciation of the "I" position is always at the same time an act of suturing, of patching over discursive and corporeal instability, somehow against all odds. Naturally, art is not the only terrain on which such a remedial work of recognizing and working through the inherent instability of the "I" can take place. Yet stagings of an open and wounded body in projects such as Sellars's *Oblique* and Orlan's *Reincarnation* offer a safe platform for temporarily taking on and reliving someone else's corporeal and psychic wounds, while learning to perform the work of self-suturing. Devoid of the sugary redemptive promise of TV makeover shows, photography and imaging of this kind—presented within the relatively safe confines of the gallery, the art book, or art video footage—cuts well both through our narcissism and our anxiety, without leaving us out there to bleed to death.

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