In 2012–13, the Vancouver Art Gallery mounted a major exhibition of the work of Ian Wallace: *Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Painting and Photography*. In conjunction with the exhibition, a series of public conversations between Wallace and other artists was organized. What follows is the text of Victor Burgin’s contribution to this series, in which he explores what it may mean to speak of the “intersection” of painting and photography.¹ The idea of the “virtual” is central to what Burgin had to say on that occasion but, for reasons of time, it was left largely unexplained. For publication here, Burgin has added a summary postface in which he outlines his understanding of the concept.
Specificity

**BY THE 1960S,** many artists of the generation to which Ian Wallace and I belong had come to see painting as a practice of significance only to the art market, with little other relevance to contemporary society. Photography, however, is encountered throughout everyday life. In newspapers, magazines, advertising, “social media” and so on, it plays a fundamental role in the formation of the ideas, beliefs and values according to which people live. To work with photography, therefore, is unavoidably to engage with a significant aspect of the sociopolitical process. To work with photography in museums and galleries, however, is no less inevitably to confront the question of the legacy of painting. To speak of the **intersection** of painting and photography implies that a prior question first be answered: What is it that these entities are in themselves, before they may be held to intersect? In the 1960s, such a question was most likely to be answered with reference to the **specificity** of each of the two practices. In essays written between 1940 and the early 1960s, the American art critic Clement Greenberg argued that an artistic practice progresses through its attention to that which differentiates it from other art practices: its “specificity.” For Greenberg, what distinguishes painting from other arts is paint itself, applied to a plane surface. He consequently judged the material substrate of painting, its “medium,” to be the basis of its specificity, and condemned figurative painting for compromising the flatness of the canvas: “Content,” he wrote, is to be “avoided like a plague.” In the only article Greenberg wrote about photography, he said that the specificity of photography resides in its ability to tell a story. As other arts also fulfill this function, we may assume he was speaking of what distinguishes photography from the purportedly “content-free” Modernist painting he championed. The critical hegemony of Greenbergian Modernism was broken in the mid-1960s with the advent of Minimalism. At that time, the fiercest opponent of Minimalism was Clement Greenberg’s follower, the art critic and historian Michael Fried. Fried has more recently revived the same arguments he used to defend Modernism against Minimalism to champion contemporary forms of photographic pictorialism. Not the least of the historical ironies here is that the general acceptance of photography in the art world today is due almost entirely to the widespread use of photography in the “Conceptual Art” that evolved out of Minimalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s—in a variety of photographic practices united only in their common indifference or hostility to pictorialist aesthetics. In extensively borrowing from painting—from conventions of “genre,” through compositional schemas and such modes of presentation as large physical size—neo-pictorialist photography is by definition indifferent or hostile to the considerations of specificity essential to Greenbergian modernism.

It might be argued that “postmodernism” has since consigned the modernist criterion of specificity to the trashcan of history. For me, however, it remains a powerful idea with wide-ranging applications. I think immediately of its place in the writings of the French philosopher Louis Althusser, which emphasize the specificity of the political in the variety of its instances. Feminism, for example, has taught us that there is a politics of the kitchen, a politics of the bedroom, and that the specificity of the political in visual art may lie not in the representation of politics but in the politics of representation. The specificity of photography, however, cannot be defined in the terms in which Greenberg first defined the specificity of painting: “medium-specificity.” In an essay written some fifteen years ago, I observed:

If, according to Greenberg, the medium of painting is paint, applied to a flat support (canvas or board), then it might most strictly
follow that the medium of photography is photosensitive emulsion, applied to a flat support (glass or acetate). But such a definition would evict the camera itself from the scene, reducing photography to, literally, photo-graphy: drawing with light (as in, for example, the "photogram").

As a consequence, I argued that the specificity of photography lay not in its medium but in its apparatus—the still camera—and, most especially, in the speed of this apparatus in registering the fleeting appearances of the world. It seemed to me at that time that the genre of "street photography" best exploited the specificity of photography, in that it produced results that no other art form could replicate. Today, an air of anachronism hangs about the expression "still camera."

Photogrammetry and Perspective

It no longer needs to be argued that the digital convergence of the once distinct technologies of film, photography and video has dissolved the previously categorical distinction between still and moving images—the fact is obvious to any owner of a mobile phone. The most revolutionary event in the recent history of photography, however, was not the arrival of digital cameras as such, but rather the broadband connection of these cameras to the Internet. In this present context, I am not thinking of such things as the political agency of participant-observer footage shot on mobile devices and distributed on the Internet. What I have in mind is, rather, the imaginary agency of "photogrammetry," the derivation of metrical attributes of objects from photographs. At the launch of an early photogrammetrical technology in 2006, the presenter demonstrated how the software was able to produce a coherent navigable space from thousands of random snapshots assembled by typing "Notre Dame Cathedral" into the online photo-sharing application Flickr. More recently, computer-imaging researchers have built 3D simulations of the public space of entire cities from "crowd sourced" images found on the Internet. Rome was not built in a day, but five hundred computers working in parallel upon some 60,000 Flikr images constructed a model of Dubrovnik in twenty-two hours. These and similar technologies, most prominently those used by Google Earth and its counterparts, are constructing a parallel world in the virtual space of the Internet—a "mirror-world" of potentially global extent, with historically unprecedented implications for the social and political imaginary.

The new photogrammetrical technologies apply electronic computation to principles of optics and projective geometry known since classical antiquity. In his catalogue essay "The Modernity Thesis and the Crisis in Representation," Ian Wallace writes: "For more than five centuries painting was ... the primary technique for pictorial representation ... the fundament of the logos of Western rationality." This is true, but I would wish to add that the now radically changing nature of our image environment has thrown into relief a more primal basis of Western rationality as embodied in pictorial techniques, one that runs unbroken through both painting and photography—I refer, of course, to the perspectival system of representation. A short history of photography in the age of computer imaging may remind us that the instrument one may buy in a store is a historically contingent application of the optical principle of the propagation of light in straight lines, and the geometric projection of points on these lines upon a plane surface to represent a three-dimensional object in terms of two-dimensional space. The essence of the camera is immaterial, residing in optical, geometrical and mathematical principles that are independent of their physical, and now computational, forms.
Apparatus

Because the distinction between still and moving images is no longer definitive, because cameras are nodes in the Internet, because the camera has dematerialized—for these and other reasons, I may no longer argue that the specificity of photography is in its apparatus. Today, the specificity of photography is in its apparatus. If this sounds confused, blame the English language. French has different words—appareil and dispositif—for the two meanings of the English word “apparatus” intended here. I derive my own understanding of apparatus as dispositif mainly from the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In questions put to him in 1977, following the publication of the first volume of his History of Sexuality, Foucault was asked to explain what he meant by the word “apparatus” (dispositif) when speaking of the “apparatus of sexuality.” He replies:

Firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions ... the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.7 (my emphasis)

Foucault goes on to say that the apparatus is articulated within systems of power and the “epistemic”—the shifting grounds of what counts as legitimate knowledge in a particular society at a particular time.8 If we were to identify the components of the photographic apparatus in Foucault’s terms, we might begin by making lists under some of the categories he identifies as constitutive of the apparatus. For example, under “discourses,” we would enumerate the various bodies of speech and writing that take “photography”
Ian Wallace
Abstract Drawing Hotel de Née, Paris, February 2, 2010 [III]

Photolaminate on acrylic on paper
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CITRIONA
JEFFREY'S GALLERY VANCOUVER

as their object: technical, historical, sociological, philosophical, curatorial, critical, journalistic and so on. Under “institutions,” we would list not only such entities as the Royal Photographic Society, the Photographers’ Gallery in London and photography departments in art schools and universities, but also such things as the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize and other instruments of legitimation. Foucault’s category “architectural forms” would include the various types of structures within which photographs are presented, such as billboards and plasma screens, art museums and galleries, magazines and newspapers, and the Internet. It is obvious to common sense that photographic discourses, institutions and so on, all converge upon a singular common object that has given rise to them all: “photography.” But this putative singularity is, in fact, a mutating techno-socio-phenomenological jigsaw incapable of forming coherent pictures without discursive framing. It is the apparatus alone that now produces “photography” in its various specifications, including, of course, the category “art photography.” It is the apparatus that today manages the historical contradiction between the idea of photography as a vehicle for pictorialist aesthetics, and the understanding of photography as a part of the integrated image environment of the society of the spectacle.

In addition to the work of Foucault, another source of my understanding of the apparatus in the sense of dispositif is in the writings of Bertolt Brecht. By “apparatus,” Brecht means every aspect of the means of cultural production, from technology, through publicity and promotion, to the financial and political elites that bankroll and control the various cultural institutions. Brecht speaks of what he characterizes as the “muddled thinking” of artists and critics alike in respect of this apparatus. He writes:

Imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them ... leads to a general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus by its suitability for the work. People say, this or that is a good work; and they mean (but do not say) good for the apparatus. Yet this apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day ... an innovation will pass if it is calculated to rejuvenate existing society, but not if it is going to change it....

As the expression has it: “We get the art we deserve.” But whatever our view of the determinations of the art apparatus during the boom years of unregulated finance capitalism, we may agree that there is always more to photography than meets the eye. If we accept that photography is a way of talking as much as it is a way of making, then we need periodically to consider if the former is keeping pace with the latter.
I have already mentioned the de facto erosion of the distinction between still and moving images in everyday life. Writing in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin saw the coming of cinema as accompanied by a demand for the invention and elaboration of the concepts that would be required in order to understand the new regimes of the image that cinema would bring. The philosopher and film theorist David Rodowick has since given sustained attention to the regime of the cinematic image in the context of digital technologies. In certain contemporary art works—works that are undecided in their relation to stillness and movement—Rodowick finds the intimation of what he calls “a future memory of cinema, an anticipatory power but also an interrogative one that investigates not only what the image has been but also what the image is becoming.” He identifies what he terms “a naming crisis” in respect of such works, as it is not yet clear what we should call them. To work with the digital image is inevitably to feel close to the everyday image space of the Internet, but to work with the projected image in the space of the gallery is to be no less close to painting. Time-based projected image works in the institutional setting of the gallery are seen under conditions specifically different from either the theatrical setting of cinema or the domestic setting of television. As it is accepted that viewers will enter and leave the projection space at indeterminable intervals, the time of projection in a gallery setting is therefore dual. Although it is possible to enter a movie theatre after the film has begun and leave before it ends, it is normally assumed that the duration of the film will coincide with the duration of the spectator’s viewing of it. In the gallery, it is normally assumed that these two times will not coincide. Most works made for the gallery are therefore designed to loop, with no particular “beginning, middle and end.” In all, the conditions of spectatorship are analogous to those of painting, where the relation to the work is one of repetition, or, more accurately, reprise, and where the ideal viewer is one who accumulates her or his knowledge of the work, as it were, in “layers”—much as a painting is created.

Production/Reception
My detour through still and moving photography has led me back to the intersection with painting, the place where my own work intersects with that of Wallace. Having arrived at the same historical intersection, the two of us may appear at first sight to have taken quite different paths out of it. I began by observing that, for some of our generation, the impulse to work with photography was motivated by the wish to engage with the material mode of production of the popular imaginary, the mise-en-scène of dominant beliefs and values. Today, the material mode of production of the popular imaginary is rapidly mutating, and our
inherited assumptions about what an image is must be reconsidered. My own journey through painting and photography has led me to work with digital projection based in photorealist computer modelling. My writing is also now largely concerned to rethink photography in relation to our present “new scene of world history.” The last of Walter Benjamin’s notes on his “Conversations with Brecht” reads: “A Brechtian maxim: ‘Don’t start from the good old things but from the bad new ones.’” That which is new, however, can only be judged new in relation to what is no longer new. What we call the “present” is an amalgam of actual perception, memory images and anticipated futures in which past and present mix in fantasy. Ian Wallace’s work at the intersection of painting and photography reminds me of this. In her catalogue essay on this work, Daina Augaitis refers to “Wallace’s three primary subjects—the worlds of the street, the museum and the studio.” In the work reproduced on the catalogue cover, these worlds collide. A zero degree of photographic mimesis, the unvarnished record of a fleeting appearance of the street—metonymical representative of everyday life—is inserted into the staging of a moment in art history where neither mimesis nor the street were ever supposed to intrude: the time of minimalist painting. The woman standing at the intersection on the cover of Wallace’s book is a time traveller, or it is the apparatus of monochrome painting that has travelled in time to stand at the crossroads alongside this citizen of the early twenty-first century. I have argued that photography as we have known it, like cinema as we have known it, is waning, fading into the long history of Western pictorial representations based on the system of perspective. By virtue of this very same argument, I must acknowledge that the spectre of painting—as practice, institution and apparatus—continues to walk the mirror-world that algorithmic cameras are building for us. If I were asked to say in a word where my own research and practice crosses that of Wallace, I would point to that intersection of perception as memory that Henri Bergson named the virtual.

Postface: Virtual Image and Virtual Space
My understanding of the word “virtual” is located at the intersection of three “islands of knowledge”: those of technology, psychology and sociology.

Image
1. In popular usage, “virtual” is widely understood to be opposed to “real” (e.g., the “virtual reality” of illusory computer-generated environments). The meaning of “virtual,” as I understand it, however, is not opposed to “real” but, rather, implies a dual reality: virtual images are real in that they may be created, searched for, accessed and interacted with (e.g., on a computer screen); the image are not real in that they have neither a material existence nor a determinate position in physical space (e.g., a photograph in a wallet or a painting on a wall).
2. A virtual image is neither simply a material entity nor an optical event, an imprint of light on the retina; it is also a complex psychological process. It is in this sense that the image is defined as essentially “virtual” in the phenomenological perspective that Gilles Deleuze derives from Bergson. Here, for example, to put a word together with a picture, still or moving, is not to establish a hierarchy between categorically distinct entities—the one censoring, illustrating, explaining, denouncing or otherwise supplementing the other—but rather to juxtapose two autonomous virtualities in an encounter that engenders further imaginary chains.
3. The environment of virtual images is “virtual” in the classical philosophical sense of a potency not yet actualized. Aristotle gave the example of the oak’s virtual presence in the acorn. Analogously, the field of virtual representations—exemplified by but not confined to, the Internet—is a constantly
shifting (parametrically and procedurally variable) realm of unrealized social and political potentials.

Space
In the prevailing Western view, there are objects, and there are empty spaces between them. The virtual image, however, is continuous with the space it occupies, as a local event in an infinite algorithmic continuum. I understand “virtual space” as:

1. The space in which computer-based virtual image practices take place is both real and not real: it is an infinite navigable space within which positions may be specified (e.g., localized in terms of x, y, z coordinates), but it is not constrained by actually existing geophysical space (e.g., as expressed in terms of latitude, longitude and elevation)—albeit the former may be brought into alignment with the latter (e.g., Google Earth and other photogrammetrical representations of “on the ground” reality).
2. Just as digital technologies have broken down the absolute distinction between still and moving images, so the differentiation between real space and psychical space is being eroded. For example, a professor of mathematics and information science describes her work on software that allows the user to create animated scenes in 3D space on the basis of mental images alone: “to observe objects that are barely mentally discernible [sic], to sketch their movement even before their forms are really precise, then to progressively refine their contents to arrive at a finished work.”
3. The continuities of physical and psychical space have their analogue in the political sphere. For example, for Hannah Arendt, the essence of the polis resides in no particular physical location; it is not to be defined in terms of buildings and streets. The polis is, rather, a virtual “space of appearance”: “Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.” At the inception of the twenty-first century, new, volatile spaces of appearance have emerged in forms of political gatherings in cyberspace, virtual constituencies that may be projected onto the ground in the form of assemblies and insurrections.

Intersections: Peinture et photographie: une réaction à une exposition d’Ian Wallace
En 2012-2013, la Vancouver Art Gallery a monté une grande exposition consacrée à l’œuvre d’Ian Wallace, qui s’intitulait Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Painting and Photography. Dans le cadre de cette exposition, des conversations publiques entre Wallace et d’autres artistes ont été organisées. Le texte qui suit est la contribution de Victor Burgin à cette série, dans lequel il explore ce que pourrait signifier le fait de parler d’une « intersection » entre peinture et photographie. L’idée du « virtuel » jouait un rôle central dans ce que Burgin avait à dire à cette occasion mais, pour une question de temps, elle a été laissée en grande partie inexpliquée. Pour la présente publication, Burgin a ajouté une postface sommaire dans laquelle il met en lumière sa lecture du concept.