Conspiracy Thinking: Towards an Ambiguous Theory of Photography

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Exercise: Take a picture of someone wearing a tinfoil hat.

Framing statement: In his 1927 story "The Tissue-Culture King," Julian Huxley wrote about a machine designed for mass telepathy, built as an experimental mind control apparatus to help control a growing population.[1]

To protect themselves from the radiating influence of the telepathic broadcast, the inventors of the machine wore aluminum hats, specifically designed to protect their minds from the voice of the apparatus, and by extension from the commands of algorithmic surveillance. The story has since been taken up by conspiracy theorists, psychologists and media scholars as an example of the possibilities and dangers of living in a technologically-mediated world in which the boundaries between truth, persuasion, and passionate falsities have become (perhaps purposefully) blurred.

What is perhaps the most compelling thing about a tinfoil hat, however, is not

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1   Julian Huxley, "The Tissue-Culture King," *Amazing Stories*, 2:5, 1927, 451-459. https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v02n05_1927-08_017/page/n1/mode/2up

the truth or falsity of the claim that it protects the mind. Much more interesting is the possibility that it by wearing such an accessory one claims one's mind as one's own. It seems a silly thing to say, but in a world filled with advertising, marketing, and propaganda, the mind may be a more contested site than we think. Literally. The idea of the tinfoil hat then stands as a metaphor for psychological precarity, acknowledging a certain vulnerability of mind that might otherwise be taken for granted. If only influence could be so easily avoided. While there is no certain way to reconcile the layers of conspiracy, spectacle and conjecture that surround the tinfoil hat as an apparatus and a metaphor, one way to keep the inquiry alive is to simply engage with the metaphor itself.

Guidelines:

This project asks participants to engage with the story of the tinfoil hat, with particular attention to the ways in which the hat becomes a metaphor for social and technological engagement. To participate, take a photograph of a person wearing a tinfoil hat. Think about the different parts of the picture—the location, the shape of the hat, the light (and other frequencies) that are touching your subject—and how those variables might represent some of the metaphoric power of the concept.[2]

2. An archive of images contributed to this project can be found at www.tedhiebert.net/tinfoil.php. Ongoing submissions accepted.

Photo: Brandon Kan, Tinfoil Hats, 2021.

Tinfoil Hats

Five men stand in a room, connected by tinfoil tubes. Well, four men stand in a room connected to a fifth man who stands in the center, a provocative center of attention. There are few signs to indicate whether he is speaking or listening but one thing is sure—his demeanor shows signs of labor and intention. He is connected and so are those sat around him, and however they are connected, it is on purpose.

Something interesting happens when the connections we nurture and sustain with others are literalized, made hyper-evident as literal connections that come with material attachment and consequences. It can seem to mistake hard wires for the soft or the wet but what if relationships and connectivity and network signals of broadcast and receive were taken literally as things in the world—as actual and tangible and material points of connection and interchange? This is an image about community and channeling and attunement and trust and power and empowerment and more.

And I stop, caught in the feeling that I am also somehow connected to the image. Are these tinfoil wires contained within the image or are they metaphors in some way for my relationship to this situation too? I look at the picture again and I feel sucked in—like there is some kind of conceptual attraction that keeps me engaged in the possibility that I too am part of this network. Or maybe its just desire—a social network given visual form in such an eloquent way as to make me want to also sign up or sign in, to be registered, or simply to be seen.

Yet as soon as I say this to myself I am back on the outside—unseen. Private thoughts are being shared, collective worlds are being generated. And I am on the outside, watching, but not quite noticed. I know the story of tinfoil as a way to block signals but I'm caught here by what seems to be exactly the opposite fantasy—a world in which technologies of blockage are creatively re-channeled towards the formation of relationships and community.

It might just be a performative joke—a picture staged for the camera—but I don't think so. And whether the tinfoil is just a prop or an actual technology here is maybe a nuanced and not-so-important distinction since the connectivity of the situation speaks more loudly than any particular informational content one might project onto the moment. More important than what they are saying is their capacity for speech—and more important than what they might be communicating is the fact that they seem connected, and I by contrast seem to be a disconnected but interested observer. Caught on the outside of someone else's secret.

Attunement

In 2005, a group of graduate students at MIT—Ali Rahimi, Ben Recht, Jason Taylor and Noah Vawter—ran a series of frequency amplification experiments on tinfoil hats, looking to see whether the rumblings of conspiracy theorists had any truth to them and if aluminum foil could really provide a shield between the mind and the world of electronic signals looking to harvest private thoughts. In theory, the aluminum foil creates a rudimentary Faraday cage around the brain, capable of deflecting predatory scans and other forms of mind control, a theory that provides some explanation for how a ridiculous fashion accessory might actually serve a serious purpose. To do so they built three different varieties of aluminum hats, put them on, and proceeded to scan the hats as well as their own brains for frequency modulations as they blasted their heads with various electronic signals: sweeping

ranges from AM radio to RFID, television to radar, microwaves to cellular, communication satellites to government exclusive frequency bands, and using a high-end network analyzer and a directional antenna to measure and plot the results. [3]

In an interesting plot development, the study found that wearing a tinfoil hat actually *does* serve to protect the head from a significant number of frequencies, particularly those in the range of radio waves (which is curiously the frequency band also talked about by Huxley in his story). This wasn't the only discover they made, however—ironically, these aluminum headpieces also seemed to amplify certain *other* frequencies—those associated with exactly the bandwidths most feared by conspirators—allocated to government agencies and mobile phone corporations:

> *For all helmets, we noticed a 30 db amplification at 2.6 Ghz and a 20 db amplification at 1.2 Ghz, regardless of the position of the antenna on the cranium. ... Conclusion: The helmets amplify frequency bands that coincide with those allocated to the US government between 1.2 Ghz and 1.4 Ghz. According to the FCC, These bands are supposedly reserved for "radio location" (ie, GPS), and other communications with satellites. The 2.6 Ghz band coincides with mobile phone technology [4].*

Admittedly, this study reads as much as a graduate student prank as it does a serious gambit of science—the kind of wonderful play that someone with access to advanced technology might engage just because the opportunity presents itself.

3. Ali Rahimi, Ben Recht, Jason Taylor, Noah Vawter, "On the Effectiveness of Aluminum Foil Helmets: An Empirical Study," 2005. Accessed 1/2023 via Archive.org at https://keys-duplicated.com/~ali/helmet/
4. Ibid.

And while results seem unambiguous, the question of how one engages (or dismisses) the results might vary widely. For myself, I find especially compelling the idea that the tinfoil hat may actually amplify specific frequencies of signal associated with GPS and cellular data—frequencies much more important to the 21st century than those radio waves that concerned Huxley and others. And I don't care if it's true or not—it's the idea of taking the experiment seriously that catches my attention most seductively, as if to turn conspiracy theory into a participatory form of active and purposeful thinking.

Conspiracy thinking? Isn't that what happens when I test an absurd hypothesis only to find that the device worn to protect myself against government mind-readers actually instead seems to make my thoughts more accessible to a technical surveillance system? And isn't it just a perfect reversal for an age in which the destiny of privacy is to be shared online in those most familiar of social media spaces where profiles are populated by vulnerability—intended perhaps for peers and loved-ones but unapologetically harvested by corporate bots for the purposes of remarketing and data accumulation. **Tinfoil Hats** starts as a refusal but becomes a form of attunement, a broadcast amplifier for new forms of digital being.

An excess of privacy

The destiny of privacy is to be shared—otherwise it would not be a thing—a truly private form of privacy would have to content itself with the incommensurable constraints of subjective living. Thus things private belong not to the order of data but to the category of secrets. Importantly, secrets need not be true or even shared to hold their power—their seductive sway has most to do with the perception of incommensurability withheld, a teasing

or a challenge that operates at the level of a promise. This promise, according to Jean Baudrillard is the operational logic of digital culture, bypassing the order of communication by engaging directly with the hyperreal—the more real than real that is bound not to informatic accountability but to the secrets I tell myself, bound to the integrity of simulation.[5] But, perhaps, secrets also operate at the level of what philosopher Johnny Golding calls "radical mattering," disregarding information as the impact factor of interpersonal exchange.[6] Beyond the reality of the situation, relationships form and experiences are shared, despite the seemingly solitary nature of a world governed by the principles of secrecy.

The provocation:

What if Johnny Golding's theory of "radical mattering" were adopted as a

horizon of accountability for the postmodern, in general, and the hyperreal, in particular—not by resolving them but by making friends with the predictive logics so seductively rendered by Jean Baudrillard? This would be to betray Baudrillard by exactly not acknowledging the distinction between the simulation and the real and instead siding in favor with the immediacy of relational engagement.

The short form:

Johnny Golding is a political philosopher who examines questions of identity, technology, and art with an eye to charting strategies for creating futures differently or otherwise. For me, Golding's conceptualization of "technologies of otherness" are paramount to my seduction with her thought—strategies for rethinking a relational approach to philosophical living, inflected by the eloquent concepts of radical mattering, and friendship.[7] Thinking through and beyond the post structural categories of

5.   Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, Brian Singer, trans., London: MacMillan, 1990, 7.
6.   Johnny Golding, "The Courage to Matter," in *Data Loam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft*: *The Future of Knowledge Systems,* Johnny Golding, Martin Reinhardt and Mattia Paganelli, eds., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 452.

7.   Sue Golding, "A Word of Warning," in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, Sue Golding, ed., London: Routledge, 1997, xii-xiv.

Photo: Andy Miah. (CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)
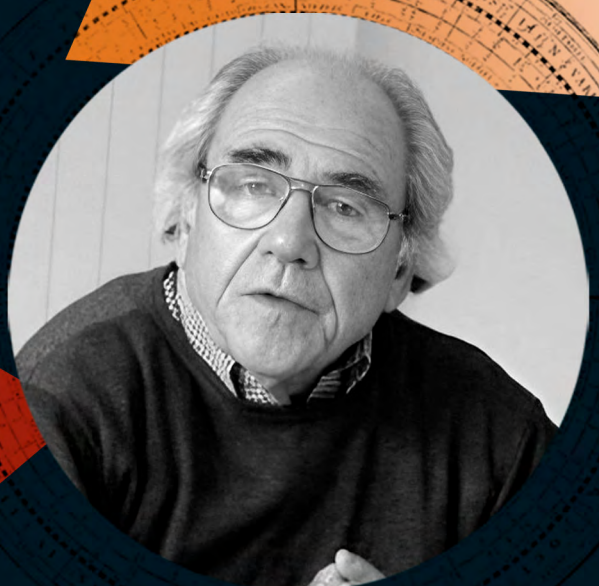
deconstruction and difference, Golding seeks ways to mark difference as a new form of philosophical accountability, making difference matter as the true horizon of living in a deconstructed world.[8] In this, and against theories of enlightened knowledge or redemptive understanding, I take Golding as a prophet of attunement, a thinker of relational politics for the ways that engagement and encounter turn into experiences that matter—a sort of philosophical UX for an age of predictive living.

Jean Baudrillard is French philosopher perhaps best known for his theories of simulation and the hyperreal and his argument that in digital times it no longer makes sense to think about the real.[9] Baudrillard, from my perspective, might also be the philosopher most responsible for the popularization of "post-truth"—a hallmark of postmodern thought and (for different reasons) the bane of contemporary 21st politics. But for me, the seduction of Baudrillard's thinking has nothing to do with truth; for me the question always comes back to the stakes of the experiential moment. The seduction of the virtual only matters within a horizon where something like life is nonetheless still happening, true or post-truth, or not. In this, Baudrillard for me is the last and best of the postmodernists, insisting that the horizon of technological living is not one of logic but of seduction and calculated gambles.[10]

What I am proposing then is to take seriously Baudrillard's declaration of the end of the real while insisting on Goldings

politics of identity and lived experience as the necessary conditions of lived encounter.[11] Privacy—overrated or not—is the key currency of digital living, not bound to data points or verified information but to the power of affective sways and seductive interaction. Privacies surround us at all turns, on social media, in the news, in the paparazzi trends of the day—all vying for attention, often exaggerating, amplifying or disregarding the question of the real altogether. And within this circulation of simulation and simulacrum what matters is not the promise of truth but of—strange as it might seem to suggest—the promise of connectivity, maybe even the possibility of friendship.

The conspiracy of the real

Reality is dead says Jean Baudrillard, not because it has vanished but because of an excess—there is too much reality, too many realities, multiplied and conflicting and conjectured and imagined and staged and simulated. So many realities that the very idea of a reality principal has ceased to be meaningful in any significant way.

Let us be clear about this: when we say that reality has disappeared, the point is not that it has disappear and physically, but that it has disappeared metaphysically. Reality continues to exist; it is its principle that is dead.[12]

But how is it that reality can continue to exist without a principle that makes it possible? That multiple realities can co-exist means that despite appearances to the otherwise, there is no longer a singular horizon of accountability through which reality might be seen or apprehended. That is seems otherwise-for Baudrillard—is more of a conspiracy than a relation, ren-

8. Ibid, xiii.
9. Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*, Christ Turner, trans., New York: Berg, 2005, 17, 27.
10. Baudrillard, *Intelligence of Evil*, 87.

11. Golding, "A Word of Warning," xiii.
12. Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 18.

dered and sustained by the ecosystem of technical ideology and virtual solutions. "The simulacrum is not that which hides the truth but that which hides the absence of truth."[13] And thus is born the post-truth era, out of the impossibility of any singular truth to which all lived realities can be held accountable. The conspiracy to end all conspiracies—what could be more insidious than to replace the very concept of reality itself with a technical construction called reality?

Now, I have always loved Baudrillard for his particular mode of succinct but ambiguous articulation, an observation that concepts reverse themselves when taken to extremes. His politics of philosophy work in service of a "production of vertigo."[14] Like intelligence: "When the hypothesis of intelligence cease to be *sovereign* and becomes *dominant*, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes soverign."[15] Like the real—rendered redundant by the proliferation of post-truth truths, requir-

13. Ibid, 32.
14. Ibid, 215.
15. Ibid, 179.

ing new modes of consent to be formed.[16] Like the image too—made ubiquitous to the point where all vision becomes accountable to the photograph. But it also strikes me that there is another version of this story, in which the disappearance of dominant modes of truth-saying and a skepticism towards the smooth and impenetrable logic of evidence-based argument, actually might serve as mechanisms for a different sort of world-building. For, when the real is replaced by the real, the consequence is the counter-intuitive conclusion that realities can be replaced, not just by a technical double but by whatever idiosyncratic version of the story can be lived in a sustainable way. For I'm caught by the fact that—despite the disappearance of the real—I still wake up in the morning, autopilot my days, have some semblance of something that might be called experience, if not existence. And it's at that most mundane level of subjective living that I continue to find the highest stakes of Baudrillard's thought—the moment where instead of an argument to be believed, his ideas become a challenge to reconcile with the lived moment.

What is left is no longer the idea of truth but that of a sustainable (personal or collective) narrative—what matters is not the reality of the situation but the community that forms around it. For, if we gamble against truth and reality—in their dominant and full-spectrum, technical forms—a strange sort of permission opens up to rethink the world, indeed to create the world differently. It might be called a simulacrum but it is no less lived for the fact that it cannot be comprehensibly reduced to documentation and evidence. It is a gamble but perhaps the only alternative to the smooth operations of technical logic

16. "When truth and reality were made to take lie-detector tests, they themselves confessed to not believing in truth and reality." Ibid, 87

is to install a double, a metaphysical secret agent that wagers itself not on evidence but on something else. Not intelligence (in the informational sense) but intelligence (in the espionage sense).[17] Not conspiracy but a form of conspiring, a post-simulation imagination that posts simulations precisely because to double the world at least opens it up to options, to differences, to alternatives. That they are not real is only a problem if one still believes in reality—that they might be imaginary is only a problem if one does not believe in the materiality of the imagination. Baudrillard calls it a "lucidity pact":

> *What binds us to the real is a contract of reality. That is to say, a formal Werner's of the rights an duties attaching to reality. But what we long for is a complicity and dual relation with beings and things—a pact, not a contract. Hence the temptation to condemn this contract—along with the social contract that ensues from it. Against the moral contract that binds us to reality we must set a pact of intelligence and lucidity.[18]*

If Baudrillard's lucidity pact is to be taken seriously, what it amounts to is a purposeful attempt to live within the simulation—which is to say a gamble on the complexity of collectively formed and material living rather than an essentialist refusal of technological context. Thus, To Baudrillard's "lucidity pact" I would add an emphasis, on what he calls "complicity and dual relations" requiring that this pact be made not only with oneself but with others. Against inherited realities, a conspiring to re-make them differently. It is not an argument. It is a commitment—a pact or gamble coupled with an intent to hold ideological space and duration. Less a metaphysical proclamation and more a form of dwelling.

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17. Ibid, 47-49.
18. Ibid, 45-46.

Van Goph's right ear

Baudrillard was a better philosopher than he was an artist but there is one of his pictures that I always loved—*Sainte-Beuve*—an image of an old chair draped in red fabric that had clearly been inhabited in an extended ways such as to leave an imprint of the body that occupied it.[19] In some ways it's a ghost story but I think perhaps more importantly it's a picture of something ambiguous but still present because of, and despite, the vanished body. In this picture I see hope—that even within the lucid simulation of existence, marks are left, relationships made, impressions formed. For me, it's an image of dwelling, of space held and life lived and space occupied by bodies, changing or impressing upon the world around them in some ways. And it makes me realize that even algorithms change through their interactions with me—customized as they are to receive many facets of input. Virtualities adapt in response to my patterns of inhabitation. That my actions in the world—real or not—might leave impressions of this sort is an interesting kind of thought. Without knowing whether there is any truth to the idea or not, I want to believe that this was Baudrillard's chair, and maybe that's why I like to dwell on it too—not exactly sitting on the chair, but on the image, in a way that somehow sustains its inhabitation.

I'm stuck on the idea that dwelling is important because seems to be all that is left when the world of appearances is reduced to post-truth simulation. Dwelling is also one of philosopher Johnny Golding's "eight technologies of otherness" which act as strategies for thinking otherwise in an age of prefabricated ideas and solutions—thinking against reason because reason no longer reasonably represents the complexity of lived nuance. She asks:

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19. Jean Baudrillard, *Sainte Beuve,* 1987. Giclée print on cotton paper, 90x60cm.
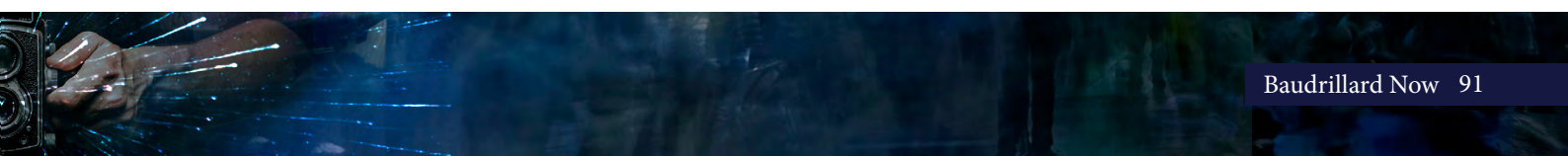
> *What if it were to be admitted that the usual, empty phrases - like to the so-called 'deep and violent cut' of meaning, truth, death, indeed identity itself: the 'who are we' and 'what are we to become' f science and of life - have collapsed under their own bloodless, sexless weight of self-reflective reason?*[20]

Golding's critique is aimed at the generic construction of identity and the ways in which dominant ideologies foreclose on the possibilities of difference and otherness. For Golding, "self-reflective reason" is not the solution but part of the problem, and there is a "certain something" needed to negotiate the resulting terrain to expose

Dwelling for Golding is not a rigid concept but one that links concepts of home to those of attention, asking us to understand the stakes of thought for how it links place to care, commitment to comfort, and to the absolute uniqueness of the moment—suggesting dwelling as a way of thinking about inhabited time as a way of celebrating difference: "'difference' [as] something to be grasped, invented—that is to say inhabited—in all its glorious manifestations, productions, changes without recuse to a totalizing picture of reality.[23] But to inhabit differently is also to attend to difference in an attentive kind of way: to see differently, or in Golding's case to hear differently. Less about seeing the picture

> *"When the hypothesis of intelligence cease to be sovereign and becomes dominant, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes soverign."*
> *Jean Baudrillard*

the friction between selves and their self-reflective constitutions, lived realities that stand somehow against the total simulations of Baudrillards virtual prophecies.[21] Her solution is to propose a different order of technology, not anchored in digital its at all but rather "eight technologies which are themselves nothing more or less than relations, 'techniques,' or techno (in Foucault's sense): the everyday strategies we use, wittingly or no, to make all the we-selves into me-selves."[22] Conceptual markers of different ways to constitute meaning, Golding proposes curiosity, noise, cruelty, appetite, skin, nomadism, contamination and dwelling as anchor points for thinking the materiality of self in an age of virtual, digital, and ideological simulacrum.

and more about listening to what isn't there anymore. Golding suggests another metaphor of absence, not an inhabited chair but "Van Goph's right ear" for situations like these, calling back to the story of the self-tormented artist who violently cut his ear in a desperate attempt to call out to the world.[24] In this story, Golding finds a form of phantom phenomenology that decries tools of technical apprehension in favor of other ways of empathizing with the world: "no lie (nor truth): only the radical geography of a fiction, continuous in all its dis-continuity.[25]

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20. Golding, "A Word of Warning," xii.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid, xiii.

23. Johnny Golding, "Fractal Philosophy (and the small matter of learning how to listen): Attunement as the Task of Art," in *Code Drift: Essays in Digital Culture*, Arthur & Marilouise Kroker, eds., Victoria: CTheory Books, 2010.
24. Ibid.
25. Sue Golding, "Curiosity," in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, 23.

Yet something bothers me in this: an aversion to celebrating the pain of others. It is a space that is not mine to claim, unless it is first shared intentionally. But in an interesting twist, it turns out that Van Goph actually cut his left ear, not his right—and the self-portrait that Golding meditates upon is a reflection painted by the artist looking at himself in a mirror. It's important because the painting makes it public, and Golding's reference to the "right ear" makes it clear that she is speaking about the ear of the painting—not the ear of the man. It may seem like a minor distinction but for me it matters greatly. The representation gives permission to engage, to adopt the ear as metaphor—indeed to listen. This ear is one we are thus invited to put on (to inhabit, through his painting), listening in different ways, as a result. Following Golding then, I put on Van Goph's lost ear as if it were a mask or a filter for hearing (or exactly not-hearing) the world differently.

Horseplay

The idea of dwelling on a painting or an image may not be the most intuitive line of thought, given that both visual forms share the pretense towards a directional bias that casts the viewer as a passive recipient of a finished object. Yet, the push against the status of finished objects is what sustains the stakes of engagement—otherwise there is no reason to engage. However, such a move away from a representational analysis of the image is, by necessity, to adopt a relational posture towards the camera, some form of dialogism or reciprocity that can acknowledge the beginnings of a new story being told. It is a political gesture in that it refuses pre-established truths or meanings and instead prioritizes relationships and context, subjectivities, ambiguities, with all the mess and vertigo such a repositioning entails.

In a beautiful essay on her personal relationship with a horse, Johnny Golding meditates on what it means to construct friendship across species boundaries, emphasizing that relationships of this sort are built on a form of engagement that unseats the dictates of logic and common sense in ways that— at times—can seem almost magical.[26] Friendship, for Golding, involves (among other criteria) a "certain kind of attunement, a certain kind of reaching out, a certain kind of response, a certain kind of respect, and a certain kind of play."[27] But most importantly, friendship cannot be made in isolation[28]: no more categorical differences (between human and animal, perhaps also between human and image) but a mode of engagement that plants itself firmly in the generative spaces of new kinds of story-telling, and thus new forms of truth-making,, "to invent anew by supposing 'it could be otherwise' and then figuring out what and how this 'otherwise' might become real alive, take root and flourish."[29]

Now I'm not sure that Golding would appreciate my desire to link her experience with Manhattan (the horse) to the that of the camera, the tinfoil hat or conspiracy, but I like to think that she would appreciate the spillage from conspiracy thinking to the idea of conspiring with others towards a different iteration of the future. At stake, for me, is the framework for building friendships, community, allegiances, which—erroneous or not—is generative of a certain possibility for realigning thought

26. Johnny Golding, "Friendship," in Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 267.
27. Ibid, 262.
28. Ibid, 263.
29. Johnny Golding, "The 9th Technology of Otherness: A certain kind of debt," London: Royal College of Art Research Repository, 2013, 6.

in relationship and response to the circulations of technical living. Conspiring together towards different forms of lived encounter.

But think about that in the context of photography. What if a photograph was a horse? It might be Trojan if that helps make it easier to imagine., but I actually think it's more powerful if it's actually just a horse—an actual horse that one might actually ride if—like Golding—one were able to build enough trust and reciprocity to make it viable to do so. It takes effort. And at stake is the idea of riding an image, of actually having to attune and adapt to a picture—perhaps by considering photography through the lens of animal studies, or indeed as an object of friendship, inflected deeply by the imaginary but accountable to the care that makes the relationship matter.

> *Friendship is neither a gift bestowed nor an object of contemplation. Quite the reverse, friendship entails an economy of logic and gift exchange built of a wholly different order, imbued with a certain kind of attunement (listening), a certain kind of reaching out (event), a certain kind of response (-ability), a certain kind of respect (fullness), and a certain kind of play (-time), all diffractively generated without a single string attached. It is strictly born from the senses, and more than that, from a kind of exquisite, erotic, inhabited logic of the senses. … It [friendship] only exists as an entangled encounter of embodied exchange.* [30]

No first-causes; just awkward co-existences until some kind of common territory can be built. Golding calls it "horseplay,"[31] a kind of "superpositional empathy"[32] that "enables a certain mind-

fulness to emerge, one that sidesteps reason without being unreasonable, one that sidesteps logic without being illogical."[33] From this perspective photography is a muddy practice, not one tasked with clarifying the image of the world but of making more ambiguous the circulations of relational engagement

Conspiracy Thinking

Don't take my word for anything in this essay—it could all be a conspiracy and I could be complicit in the circulation of an imaginary solution to the challenge of paradox in a digital age. But whether my word is good or not is not what is at stake since there is really nothing radical in words. Instead, its the relationships that words are capable of forming that matter—that "radically matter"—as artifacts in a system of affective and post-truth circulation. "You tell the stories you need to believe," says novelist Rebecca Brown, and I think she's right.[34] Though, in the same breath, I ask myself what it means to say she's right and realize it's a story I need to believe. And I like the idea that I might conspire with an image towards a different story than it might tell on the surface—not a didactic re-accounting of an inherited world but a collaborative re-telling of a future world apprehended in the blurry peripheries of vision. The kind of story that one can't see if one looks directly at it, but which manifests more presently when seen out of the corner of one's eyes, felt more than seen, intuited more than evidenced.

Tinfoil hats, as a participatory project, is a constructed photographic moment but it is also a request to engage in a moment of self-reflective ambiguity—asking what stories we need (or want) to believe. Whether there are invisible sig-

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30. Golding, "Friendship," 262.
31. Ibid, 267.
32. Ibid, 272.

33. Ibid, 266-267
34. See, Rebecca Brown, *You Tell the Stories You Need to Believe,"* Chatwin Books, 2022.

nals blasting me from the sky is not what is at stake. It is more about posture—a question of whether I see room for myself to act as a co-conspirator of the futures being shaped and sustained around me. **Conspiracy thinking** is a creative strategy for post-truth community building. Such communities may tend towards ambiguity since they are not premised on deductive argumentation or clearly annotated lines of documentation. In such acts of conspiring, one moves away from the photograph as a marker of a historical moment and towards ambiguous new constellations of relational possibility. "The peculiar role of photography is not to illustrate the event, but to constitute an event in itself. … to do so it must also remain in a sense a stranger to itself."[35] It's as easy as putting on a tinfoil hat.[36]

35   Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 99.
36   This essay is an excerpt from the monograph *Photographing Ambiguity*, forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press.