For the idea uniting the initial series of essays on photography in this issue, I wish to extend gratitude to Matthew Witkovsky, organizer of the 2012 Clark Art Institute conference “Photography as Model?”; and to Susan Bielstein, executive editor at the University of Chicago Press, who kept alive the idea of a publication of this conference and then allowed it ultimately to come to fruition and to be extended here.

While some of the presentations from 2012 were reserved for other publications, three of the essays in this issue were first delivered as lectures at the “Photography as Model?” conference (the texts by Witkovsky, Moyra Davey, and myself); one was commissioned by Witkovsky in the event’s wake, from an artist present at the conference’s proceedings (Walead Beshty). The other essays that follow, and the artist project by James Welling, were not a part of this original endeavor but have been placed in dialogue with it here. For the collective project of bringing in some of these further essays, I wish to thank Hal Foster, Devin Fore, and Rosalind Krauss.

I hope that I may be forgiven the potential solipsism of quoting from a now-classic text by another fellow editor. But the methodological gambits of Yve-Alain Bois’s *Painting as Model* (1990) served as the direct inspiration for Witkovsky’s questioning of the present state of photography discourse. In the eponymous essay (on the work of Hubert Damisch) that caps the book, Bois asks:

... is painting a theoretical practice? Can one designate the place of the theoretical in painting without doing violence to it, without, that is, disregarding painting’s specificity, without annexing it to an applied discourse whose meshes are too slack to give a suitable account of painting’s irregularities?

In Witkovsky’s conference one imagined a similar set of questions being posed now for photography, a call to arms against imposed and overarching meta-theories of photography as a medium, or false totalizations of its practice as an art. Indeed, Witkovsky’s thought experiment sought to avoid what Bois once protested against

as “broad examinations of ‘the pictorial,’” moving instead, “in each instance” of photographic analysis, to “the formulation of a question raised by the work of art within a historically determined framework, and the search for a theoretical model to which one might compare the work’s operations and with which one might engage them.” 2 Substituting “photography” for “painting” in Bois’s formulation, we face in this framework an “approach that presupposes a rejection of established . . . categories (and indirectly an interest in new groupings or transverse categories), a fresh start of the inquiry in the face of each new work, and a permanent awareness of the operating rules of [photography] in relation to discourse.” 3

Witkovsky wondered whether photography history and photographic studies might provide “models” for art history (rather than the other way around), heterodox and incompatible models that would open up new disciplinary questions—different from the painterly, sculptural, or architectural concerns around which the discipline was formed. He asked whether certain specific photographs could serve as “models”—which here does not mean as an exemplar or a perfection (the “model” photograph, as one speaks of a model student, a model teacher), but rather that contingent and provisional organization of specific forms, materials, and histories that any study of “photography” in general needs to confront as opposed to repress. And the conference itself sought to model a series of heterogeneous positions, moving from avant-garde or New Vision photography to contemporary art, from documentary projects to simulacral or constructed histories, from investigations of the idea of the photograph in literature to its embodiment in artistic projects in the form of the illustrated magazine or photo book, from forgotten institutional frameworks for the photograph to its lost physical procedures, from specific histories of the photograph in the Soviet Union, or Cuba, or Weimar Germany, articulated differently across vast distances in geopolitical domains.

To be clear: The interest of Witkovsky’s photographic engagement with Painting as Model has little to do with the increasing hegemony of an idea of “painting” in the feeble aesthetic imagination of much contemporary art photography and its attendant criticism today. While painting surfaces as a major concern in several of the contributions to this issue, we are not celebrating “painting as model” for photography in this sense at all. To my understanding, the ideas put in motion here would instead inspire a contestation of the increasingly reactionary and totalizing discourse of the “Western Picture” that surrounds the art photograph today, a fraught celebration of the pictorial destiny of photography, indeed a New Pictorialism, in which the so-called tableau form and the idea of photography as art triumph over all other possibilities—for the understanding of photography, for our forms of engagement with its historical practice, and for the ideas such practice can still generate. We have been witness to what could be called a neoliberal

2. Ibid. Again, Bois is speaking here directly about the methods and lessons of the writing of Hubert Damisch, but indirectly, one might claim, about the methods of his own book in which this essay appears.

3. Ibid.
retrenchment around the pictorial, around the nonspecificity of the photograph as Picture, in academic discourse on photography that seems a direct reflection of the imperatives of the market. It is a development that threatens to sweep aside more photographic specificities in its totalizing dynamic than even the potential losses entailed in the much vaunted and misunderstood technological shift from the analog to the digital. Specificity is the crux: The heterodox models, contradictory institutional destinies, and incompatible formal logics of photography explored here herald other possible futures for photography, even for the limited domain of photography as art. In other words, we have not moved through almost two centuries of photography history in order to realize a new mode for the creation of surrogate paintings. “Photography as Model” would explore entirely other trajectories that are in play.

It is equally clear that the frame of “Photography as Model” would move against the vehement “ontological” turn in recent writing on photography as well—or in events and journal issues, like the “Photography and Philosophy” rubric embraced by the online publication *non-site.org*, and embodied by now in multiple issues of this platform and a recent LACMA-sponsored symposium. The “pictorialist” turn in contemporary art photography and the ontological aspirations of its criticism most often go hand in hand. And this ontological turn seems one of the most paradoxical twists in photography’s recent fate, as we witness the unfortunate setting in motion of the idea of unifying a set of forms and practices that will allow of no such philosophical totalization. Philosophy has a word for the motivations behind such an endeavor; it is that experience of reaction that goes by the name *ressentiment*. The ontological discourse, it must be admitted, often defeats itself—meaning, as in the contributions of figures like Michael Fried or Walter Benn Michaels, that it is in the overcoming of the so-called “ontological” specificities of photography (its indexicality, its inherent automatism or mecanicity, its complication of authorial control) that these writers seek to locate the new aesthetic achievements of the photograph. We face a set of claims that seek to reinstate precisely the artistic, subjective, and political values that photography has long helped to overthrow—artistic mastery and an ideological sense of intentionality, full authorial agency and control, aesthetic autonomy and the consequent desire for an utter separation of the photograph from the world and from its objects, from the “real” that photography was always thought to carry along with it. To all of this I would instead say: The thinking of theoretical models—multiple and often contradictory—lies far from the ontological drive to unify photography as a practice (as “art”), as a medium, or even as a subjective “desire,” that we witness in so much writing on photography now (often from figures emerging from disciplines and domains with little connection to the complex and variegated field of the history of photography itself).

“Discontinuity and difference need to be argued for,” Witkovsky concludes in the essay that initiates this issue. “They need to be put on display, for they break the homogenization of a totalized contemporary art system and remind us that the
field of art, if it is to be inclusive, must be grounded in incompatibilities.” While I have no desire to make an example of Welling’s artist project in this issue (the ramifications of which go far beyond this methodological debate), we seem to see such discontinuity and difference foregrounded in each and every work of the artist’s ongoing *Chemical* series—a selection of new works from which is presented for the first time here. For this is a body of work that bears down upon an activity we might associate with painting—brushing and pouring “pigment,” or rather liquids, across a surface—but in the specific forms and historical materials of analog photography. Mediums meet here not to fuse but to clash, their collision the occasion for a movement of both painterly and photographic activity in different, unheralded directions. And Welling’s is a peculiarly “blind” activity, a form of photographic production severed from the lens, cut off from the optical reign of the camera that one could claim finds its apotheosis in the digital image, freed from the noisome smell and potential misfires of photographic chemicals and their baths. We return to a practice based in the camera-less image called a “chemigram,” and a seemingly infinite series of differential effects produced by the interaction of the papers and the chemicals of photography itself, by the dyes of the chromogenic surfaces that the artist chooses, and the free play of the old developers and fixers, given over to chance and accident both. And yet it is as if, faced with these camera-less chemigrams, with images sundered from that photographic experience of light and its passage through the lens, we still witness a pure field of light and darkness, perhaps now the almost cosmic scene of their incandescent origin. Prioritizing the chemistry over the optics of photography, Welling’s *Chemical* works paradoxically seem to reach for and grasp at something like the condition of the “luminous” itself. This only seems possible to see in the works as we register their transformational logic, with photography grasped materially and as a process—but a process that has always been one that involves a fundamental experience of mutation, of chemical reaction, of material transformation. In *Chemical*, as photographic liquids open onto an optical experience of both light and darkness, effulgence and void—as the chemistry of photography produces its own optics, a particular visuality—we directly experience difference and heterogeneity as a certain logic of the photograph, and one that cannot possibly be totalized.