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The photographic surface: between substances and spaces

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The
PHOTOGRAPHIC
SURFACE

Between
SUBSTANCES
and SPACES

CAROLINE *von* COURTEN

The
PHOTOGRAPHIC
SURFACE

Between
SUBSTANCES
and SPACES

PROEFSCHRIFT

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de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
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volgens besluit van het college voor promoties
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COLOPHON

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH
Joris Jansen, *10 x 0.5D* from the series *Kosmos*, 2011.
C-print, 24 x 32 cm.

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PREFACE

“Images are significant surfaces” (2005 [1983], 8). Not long after I had decided to research the material and theoretical nature of the photographic surface, I encountered this opening statement of Vilém Flusser’s book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (original title *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 1983) – and it struck me anew. Is not photography but one big surface? Does this mean that our engagements with photographs are solely surficial? How are surfaces significant to images? Many paths of thought unfolded from Flusser’s sentence; some are pursued on the pages of this dissertation.

The extent and significance of surfaces as an approach to images was, back then in 2012, at an early point in my research, beyond my imagination. Having worked as curator and editor for various photography institutions in The Netherlands, and with an academic background in Visual Culture (BA) and Photographic Studies (MA), I was focussed foremost on the visible aspects of photography. The context of this research was provided by the NWO-Science4Arts program that funded a joint research project in which I had participated: ‘Photographs & Preservation. How to save photographic artworks for the future?’ (2012–2017). This context was refined under the attentive gaze of my peer researchers Monica Marchesi (PhD, and paper conservator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) and Bas Reijers (PhD in analytical organic chemistry) to a focus on the smallest indications of material interaction in photographic artworks. That subject made me curious about what shapes our photographic understanding before and after an image rises from surface. Hands-on (or, more accurately, gloves-on) examinations of several photoworks (hybrid photographic works of art) from the collections of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, De Pont in Tilburg, and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, led by the wonderful, all-knowing expert in photography conservation Clara von Waldthausen, transformed me into a material thinker.

The initial subjects of this research project were photoworks that showed signs of material photographic degradation, due to their hybrid composition with other superimposed or mounted materials. This soon evolved to concern other photoworks that did not (yet) reveal their interactions with their environment through such visible indicators of photographic deterioration. Because of this, my argumentation extends to general and ontological reflections on the photographic surface as a porous plane that absorbs and repels during its genesis and over its lifespan. Despite the fact that it did not yet show visible signs of deterioration, I argued that Tacita Dean’s photowork *Crowhurst II* (2007) should be one of the case studies. This huge and impressive photowork was undergoing treatment by Von Waldthausen in her Fotorestauratie Atelier in 2012, during the time that I was taking her ‘Identification of Modern Photographic Processes’ course. It was my second encounter with this photowork, which had left a different trace years earlier, in 2009, when it blew me away in an exhibition at the Museum De Pont in Tilburg. Strokes of photographic paper depict, at an almost life-sized scale, a centuries-old tree in black-and-

white. Dean painted the hinterland white to ‘sculpt’ the tree out of its surroundings. Pinned directly to the wall without frame or glass, its imposing materiality has a mesmerizing effect beyond the purely visible. Its surface shapes our primary encounter. It hits us viewers, ourselves bodies of surfaces, through the palette of surficial senses that connect with inner sensations. For the human body as for the body of a photowork, the surface is the pivotal point of elemental duality: inner and outer, back and front, visible and invisible. It is explored and taken in by our whole body, and so my elaborations and philosophical investigations are heavily influenced by the phenomenological tradition.

My point of departure is always the photowork’s being in continual relation with people, environments, and time. I soon learned that chemical reactions are the main causes of changes to the photograph, throughout its existence. They eventually become visible on its surface. Changes to unstable photographic prints are a serious threat to the photowork for the museum curators and conservators with whom I collaborated. I needed to acquire a profound understanding of the material condition of photography in the light of the shifts of the twenty-first century. Today, photography is omnipresent, but far less rooted in actual chemical and material creation. Ultimately, I sought answers as to how the changes of the photographic surface are inherent to the condition of the medium. Should they be taken into account in this approach to photography?

Changes to the print do not take place solely on the surface of the print. They can also arise within the print, which is why its literal depths became as important to this study as the print surface. My analysis of photographic layers takes the reader on a journey into the cosmos of photographic materiality, hoping to emerge with shifted ideas and new horizons. I dedicate this dissertation to anyone who has fallen for the intriguing (and sometimes unpredictable) magic that surrounds chemical and material photography: the viewer in the exhibition space, the photographer, the artist, the darkroom specialist and hobbyist, the curator, the conservator, the critic, or the academic.