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The photographic surface: between substances and spaces

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Chapter 3



The PHOTOGRAPHIC SURFACE INTERFACING *with* SPACES

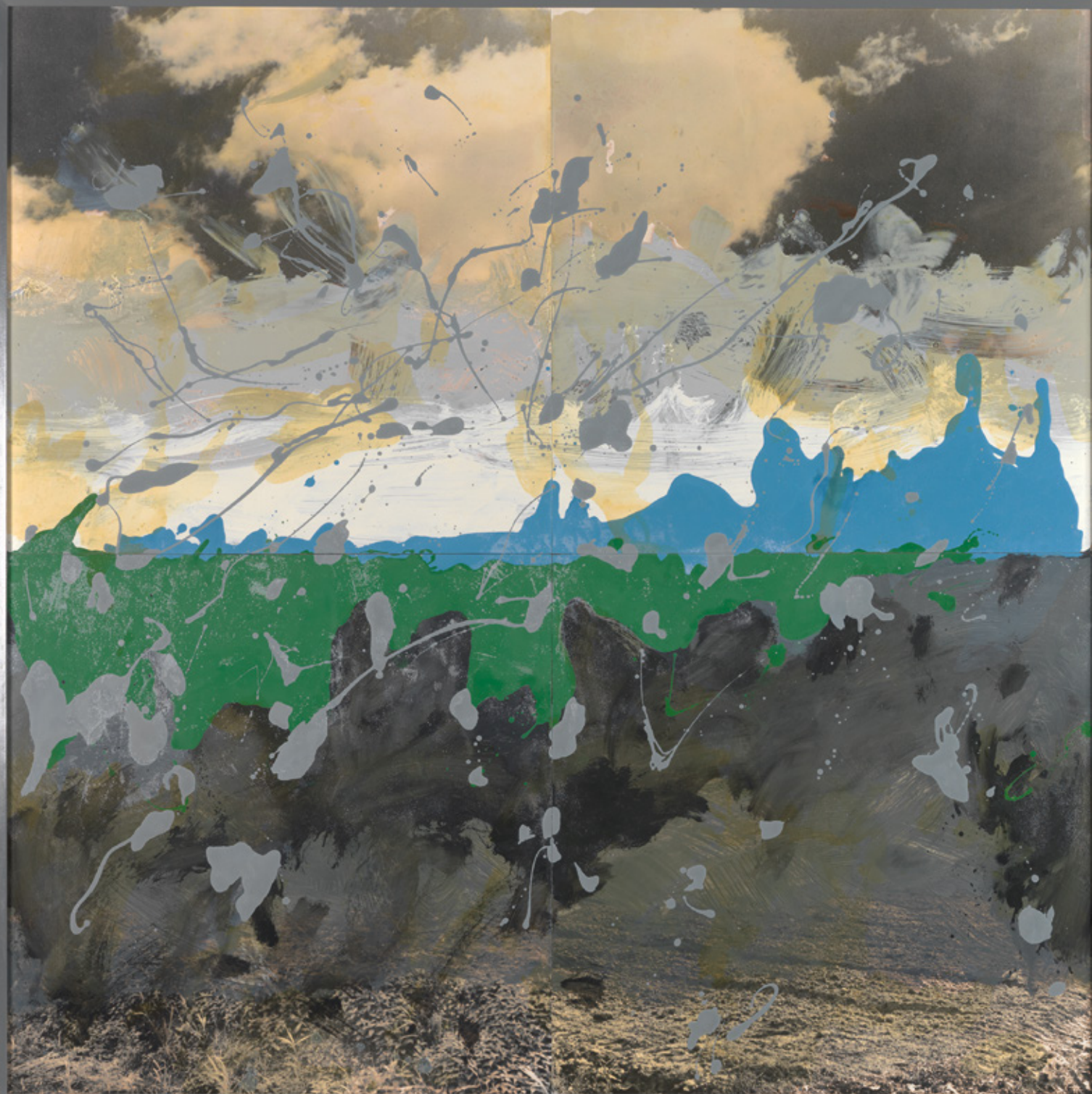


FIGURE 3.1. Ger van Elk, *Dutch Grey*, 1983–84. Alkyd-based paint and varnish on gelatin silver prints on resin-coated paper adhered to a foamcore support, 167.7×167.7×7cm. Kröller-Müller Museum Otterlo, The Netherlands.

Over three decades following the genesis of Ger van Elk's (1941–2014) photowork *Dutch Grey* (1983–84), several visual elements came to the fore that were, initially, neither intended nor predictable. In the early 1980s, Van Elk created an abstract vision of a Dutch landscape by painting and dripping oil-based alkyd paint in several colours on four black-and-white photographs (mounted in a square of a total size of 167.7×167.7cm, two by two next to each other) (fig. 3.1). These new visual elements are striking to the viewer who look at this photowork today, forty years later: orange-brown oxidation and heavy silver-mirroring on certain parts of the black-and-white photographs (fig. 3.2). Silver particles 'inside' the print have migrated, and thus a wholly new, unintended, layer of matter has built up on top of the photographic surface. These moving particles make the viewer aware of the layers of the photograph that lie behind its visible surface – we come to see that the photographic surface is a functional interface. Seeking to establish the specifics of this transformation of the surface, and the effects it has on perception, this third chapter poses the following questions: How does the thickness of the photowork determine the photographic surface? As the photographic surface acts as an interface between substances and spaces, between the visible and the invisible, how does this affect our perception of the photowork? My use of the term *interface* refers back to the original definition of *Webster's Dictionary* in 1882, "a surface forming a common boundary between two bodies, spaces, phases" (as quoted by Seung-hoon Jeong in his book and dissertation *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media* (Jeong 2013, 10)).

Readings in new materialisms and conservation studies are as relevant here, as are texts from media, photography, and art theory. These intellectual contexts are drawn together with my own visual and material analyses of *Dutch Grey* and several other photoworks. The chapter focuses on the deeper material structure of the photowork and aims to extract meanings from the physical constitution and behaviours of the various layers. This aim extends beyond the conventional conception of a photograph, poignantly characterized by French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch in his 'Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image' (1978):

A photograph is this paradoxical image, without thickness or substance (and, in a way, entirely unreal), that we read without disclaiming the notion that it retains something of the reality from which it was somehow released through its physio-chemical make-up (Damisch 1978, 71).

Damisch emphasizes that although we are aware that the photographic image emerges from a physical and chemical reaction, we deny that these substances can influence the image throughout its existence. The reality, as I will show, is that the thickness of the photograph is essential to the appearance of the photographic image throughout its lifespan. The multi-layered photowork, in particular, commands a reimagination of this idea of a flat surface. We need to bring an awareness

of the physio-chemical make-up to the dominant and singular understanding of this "paradoxical image", to acknowledge the true thickness and substance of each and any photowork.

I am drawn to new materialism studies as a theoretical framework in which the primacy of matter shapes theories. Political and feminist theorists Diana Coole and Samantha Frost introduce various approaches in their edited volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010). Contributions deal with "changing conceptions of material causality and the significance of corporeality" (Coole and Frost 2010, 2) to theory. This book offers a valuable entrance to materialist thinking and will aid my clarification of the relevance of this approach to my own study. Invisible layers of materials and processes shape the photograph's surface in predictable and unpredictable ways, and this calls for a framework that can affirm "matter's immanent vitality" (2010, 8). When we look at the visible marks of degradation processes on the surface of a photograph, we can explain what reactions and movements might have taken place there – but only to a certain extent and only with some guesswork. Preventive measures (such as the regulation of temperature, light, and humidity in a museum or archive) aim to minimize these 'unintended' material changes. Of course, these regulations derive from conservation science studies and address the sensitivity of the photographic material. However, if we want to get at how the photographic material is entangled with other substances and with the passage of time, new materialisms studies offers a valuable vantage point.

Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus no longer as simply passive or inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature (2010, 10).

The first part of this chapter investigates the photographic surface-as-interface as a form of landscape. This is a landscape that unfolds when the photowork is looked at closely, both from the common frontal perspective (as when mounted on the exhibition wall) and from a bird's-eye view (as when the artwork lies horizontally in artists' and restoration studios). I regard the photowork not solely as a vertical image but also as one that is horizontal. In general, the photo itself – digitally printed or chemically developed – comes horizontally into existence either out of the printer, or in the developing and fixing bath. For as long as we regard it in this flat position, it is a processed or worked field of ink drops, silver particles, or dyes on paper. The sides that are usually considered to be the front and back of a photowork can equally then be understood as to be the above and below. This is the context for my attention to the notion and character of the horizon as represented in *Dutch Grey*. The horizon separates the visible and invisible; it is subjected to the position of the person who perceives it, or the other way round: the person's view is determined (and framed) by the horizon. As boundary between the visible and the invisible, I associate the horizon with the photographic surface, which interfaces

between the viewer and the material layers beneath it, especially when tilted. This makes the subject matter of *Dutch Grey* a compelling starting point from which to explore the visible and invisible aspects of the photowork's matter, and our relation to these aspects.

The first section asks how the photowork's surface acts as 'horizon-interface' between visible and invisible substances. I will discuss the horizon as a literal and a conceptual phenomenon, to understand the horizon-aspect of the photographic surface. By taking this approach, ultimately, I can show how my material thinking is closely related to my conceptual and theoretical thinking. Edward S. Casey's *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* has been especially helpful to my understanding of the general representation of landscape. I am interested in how Casey's approach might be applied figuratively in the context of photoworks to apprehend the geography (surface and depths) of the photowork as a form of landscape. Casey examines how place is (re-)configured through the two practices of painting and mapping. Both practices have shaped my own research – Ger van Elk's 'landscape painting', and the Science4Arts research team's 'condition mapping' of *Dutch Grey* – and I am drawn to Casey's approach because I seek to understand my subject physically as well as conceptually.

During the condition mapping process of *Dutch Grey*, the Science4Arts research team, led by photo conservator Clara von Waldthausen, tried to extract as much visual information as possible on the characteristics and condition of this photowork.¹ All observations are noted and attributed to the relevant part or area of the photowork, hence the term *condition mapping*. The subsequent phase involved the chemical analysis of material samples (including paint abrasions and crystals found on the painted and varnished surfaces) in order to discern their composition in a non-invasive manner.² My analysis of this photowork focused on its visible aspects. However, my attention extended across the visible borders of the surface as I worked with conservators and chemist Bas Reijers, all of whom were concerned with the various layers of the image and the possible chemical interactions between these layers.

The second section of this chapter focuses on these invisible aspects of the photowork, depths that are hidden behind or 'underneath' the surface. This is the work's *subsurface*, to borrow a term from geology. I make a theoretical and material approach to this invisible 'inside' of a photowork, in alignment with the concept of the horizon as something that separates the visible landscape from the invisible. One key question arises: how can we relate to the invisible thickness of the photowork? An element that is initially considered invisible could turn out to be visible in the respect that it materially determines surface appearances. The notion of depth plays an important role here, and I consider both the depiction of depth within an image, and the material depth of the photowork. The photo-theoretical concept *blind field* is regarded in the light of the photowork's material, to help us see and understand the entanglement of matter and image. As I renounce the oppositional approach between meaning and matter, I shift emphasis to their intertwining, a process for which feminist scientist and philosopher Karen Barad coined the term *intra-action*. As a prominent

figure in new materialisms studies, and with a training in theoretical physics, Barad is particularly relevant in the context of my own work here. Her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) appears intermittently throughout as theoretical guideline.

The chapter's third section brings together the spaces of the surface, the interface, and what I call the *extraface*. Whereas the first part of the chapter focuses on the surface's landscape and the second on the invisible interface underneath (the subsurface), this final part brings into play both pictured space *and* viewing space as *extraface*. Building on previous arguments, the photographic surface separates the spaces of the here-now and the there-then. This last section brings the mediating and interfacing force of the photographic surface to the fore. It is driven by the following question: How does the photographic surface mediate between different spaces and time frames? My treatment ranges across a field of theoretical texts which consider the interfacial character of the surface. These texts come from image and photo theories (Emanuel Alloa and Roland Barthes); and from studies of the materialities of photographs and photo archives (Elizabeth Edwards is the most prominent figure).

The arguments of this chapter cumulatively form a new valuation of the (internal) body of the photograph. This includes the hidden and initially overlooked material thickness that characterises the photographic surface, and therewith shapes our understanding of the photographic object and what it is depicting at the moment that we interact with it.



FIGURE 3.2. Detail of *Dutch Grey*, 1983–84. Silver mirror on photographic surface.

THE *Photographic Surface* AS LANDSCAPE

On first seeing *Dutch Grey*, it is difficult to discern whether the four square photographic sheets that form its basis are four separate photographs, or a single photograph that has been cut into pieces. More than half of the image's surface is covered by paint, which obscures the evidence. When looking more closely, the vertical joints of the silver gelatin prints reveal that the single photographic prints are slightly mismatched. The horizontal joints of the photographs, however, are hidden beneath the alkyd paint. Only the upper part of the photowork is largely uncovered, depicting a clouded sky, and a selection of the lower part, showing some details of farmland. So, in theory at least, Van Elk could have constructed this singular landscape by combining separate black-and-white images of a sky and of farmland. This led to question myself: what was it that caused me to assume that Van Elk has created a landscape vision in the first place? Non-figurative over-painting hides more than half of the photographic image and the whole is thereby rendered a hybrid landscape, lying somewhere between abstraction and figuration. Van Elk's applications do not accentuate the vertical line, but he has drawn emphasis to 'a' horizontal line by dripping blue and green paint across the middle of the photowork, around the joints of the photographs. Apparently, the clouded sky, the farmland, and the horizontal line in the middle of the photowork, are sufficient to indicate the vision of a landscape, in combination with the colours he has used (white and blue alkyd on the upper two photographs and dark grey, black, and green on the lower two). He highlights a horizon in his landscape vision and simultaneously obscures any traceable photographic presentation of a natural horizon. In the following, I will demonstrate how Van Elk's recurrent attention to horizons can be understood as a visual entrance into the invisible matter of some of his photoworks.³

THE HORIZON IN AND OF THE PHOTOWORK

The horizon of a landscape, an encounter between sky and earth, manifests as two entities. Throughout Van Elk's career, as he highlighted and questioned the phenomenon of the horizon in a range of works, its 'actual' physicality became less and less concrete. The only reference-point for a landscape's horizon appears to be the viewer's position within that landscape. It is then a matter of perspective and perception. Only when photographed or painted can this immaterial horizon materialize as a division line within the image frame. In the tradition of Dutch landscape painting since the seventeenth century, this line has, naturally, been prominent, given the fact that the country is famously flat. As Van Elk undertook deep and long-term research into art history in Los Angeles and in Groningen, he was struck by the paintings of the seventeenth century. They led him, as an artist, to "re-configure, re-compose, re-assemble and re-pair" their genres (portraiture, landscape, and still life) as Jacinto Lageira has formulated poignantly in his contribution to an edited collection of essays on Van Elk (Lageira in Bloemhevel

2009, 212). Indebted to this historical tradition, but pushing away from simple parody or pastiche, Van Elk worked with and through the artificiality and construction of historical representations. In the same collection, Dutch art historian Carel Blotkamp has characterized these historic paintings as painted collages. The individual elements are composed together in such a way that they create an illusion of reality, as exemplified by the flowers that come together in historic painted still lifes, which would not, in reality, blossom during the same period (Blotkamp in Bloemhevel 2009, 104). In the painted photoworks, Van Elk 'stitches' separate image elements together and magnifies their interstices to such an extent that the total appearance of a landscape, a portrait, or a still life, is *at once* confirmed and dispelled. His conceptual strategy thereby involves a practice of technique and framing and also a process of image selection. It is difficult to say whether the four silver gelatin photographs of *Dutch Grey* which, in Van Elk's assemblage, make up an imaginative constructed landscape, are individual images of clouds and farmland, or whether they were taken from one and the same situation.

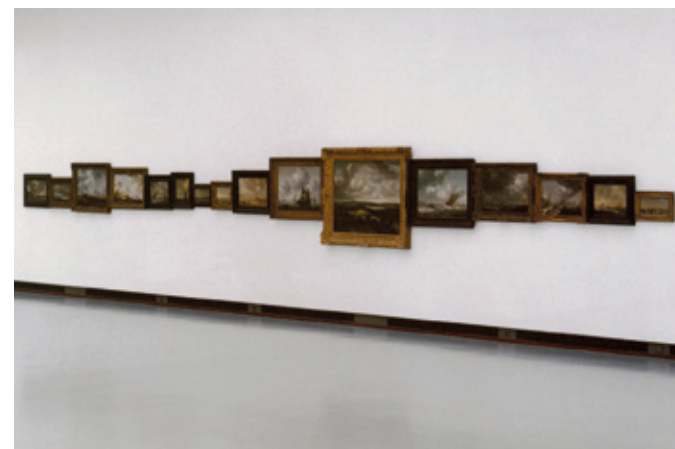


FIGURE 3.3. Installation view of *Hollands Landschap* at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, The Netherlands, September 25–November 28, 1999.

Dutch Grey is one of the first (if not the first) hybrid photoworks in which Van Elk elaborates on the phenomenon of the horizon in landscape paintings. When compared to the many photoworks and installations that came after, it is his most subtle work on this subject. In 1999, for instance, upon invitation from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, Van Elk installed a selection of paintings from the museum's collection as a kind of paraphrase of the Dutch landscape. He hung seventeenth-century land- and seascape paintings side-by-side, so closely that their frames were touching, in such a way that a single horizon line ran continually across them (fig. 3.3). A second group of nineteenth-century paintings was installed opposite, in a similar continuous line – but upside down, disorienting the viewer. Interestingly, Edward Casey has compared the depicted horizon(s) of a landscape painting with the image's frame. Both are physical bounda-

ries that terminate the spatiality of the (represented) landscape while “adumbrating something beyond the immediate presentation” (Casey 2002, 234). As ‘landscape’ cannot be captured within the restrictive frame of a painting, it is a subjective contemplation on the presented fragment that offers an opportunity to transcend the frame’s physical limitations. Van Elk’s installation in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen demonstrates very literally this extension beyond the singular frame. The paintings’ horizon becomes the reference point and common outline for this work. Using horizons from the past, Van Elk establishes a new horizon in the exhibition space. In an installation shot, this line appears to coincide with the average eye level, at a height of 160–165cm (the rule-of-thumb when hanging paintings or photographs). One could therefore question whether the horizon or the viewer is the reference point? Or both, in continuous reversal?

In his posthumous book, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) (original title *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 1964), phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that the horizon always encompasses the “see-er”. The person who perceives the horizon is automatically implicated in that horizon: “he who sees of it and is in it” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 100). This statement overrides the ontological opposition between viewer and viewed, instead consolidating their entanglement. Merleau-Ponty approaches the figure of the horizon as a means of creating an awareness of one’s reflection relative to one’s position in the world. He writes: “For it is the horizon of the world that secretly guides us in our constructions and harbors the truth of the procedures of reflection by which we pretend to reconstitute it – a first positivity of which no negation of our doubts could be the equivalent” (1968, 51). He elaborates on this figure in the fourth and last part entitled ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’, taking up Edmund Husserl’s thoughts on the horizon:

When Husserl spoke of the horizon of things – of their exterior horizon, which everybody knows, and of their “interior horizon,” that darkness stuffed with visibility of which their surface is but the limit – it is necessary to take the term seriously. No more than are the sky or the earth is the horizon a collection of things held together, or a class name, or a logical possibility of conception, or a system of “potentiality of consciousness”: it is a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity or visibility in general, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being (1968, 148–149).

Two aspects of the horizon, as it is described in this excerpt, are crucial to my study. The horizon that holds together the visible and the invisible, embodying or (more precisely) representing their entanglement. And the inclusion of the *see-er* (to use Merleau-Ponty’s term): his/her/their senses, movements, and (un-)consciousness. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no single horizon, but many horizons that constitute the framework of our perception and reflection. These hori-

zons (as they overlap) set in motion the interplay between what is visible and what is invisible. More so, for Merleau-Ponty the horizon is the (invisible) backdrop, the ground from which visible figures stand out, and through that, it is what structures visibility, as Gail Weiss explains in her essay ‘Imagining the Horizon’ (Weiss 2001, 250–251). Her essay pursues an argument concerning the political implications of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the horizon for a liberatory praxis in the context of New Critical Theory, however, in this context she also offers a comprehensible entrance to Merleau-Ponty’s “horizontal” thinking. Referring to his essay ‘Eye and Mind’ (1961), Weiss writes:

On Merleau-Ponty’s account, the painter re-creates the reversible or chiasmatic relationship between visibility and invisibility that she or he experiences on canvas, so that we, the viewers, can become reacquainted with how these relationships structure our everyday perceptual experience (2001, 251).

In this essay Merleau-Ponty takes the painter and his work as a case study, arguing that the painting “[...] gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible [...]” (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961], 127). Consequently, the painting embodies a horizon both ontologically and materially. It is then also the canvas (or in my case the photographic surface) that itself manifests as horizon, that which we are seldom aware of and that which, in turn, determines our experience of the (photographic) artwork.

Leaving the realm of the visible, a phenomenological approach to the horizon can be relevant to any hermeneutical situation. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer uses this concept to create and acknowledge an awareness that our understanding and interpretation always emerges from, and takes place within, a particular horizon which is determined by our prior involvement or engagement with the context, our history. Like the ‘natural’ horizon, the horizon of understanding is susceptible to change and is never static. Moreover, understanding is the process of a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), which results from a dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted. This process never achieves hermeneutical completion, it is as ongoing as the shifting horizon.⁴

The notion of the horizon is a core concept of phenomenology, which in turn intersects with other philosophical traditions. Likewise, the horizon of my analysis is here limited to Van Elk’s photoworks, but it links up with studies that offer broader perspectives on this more-than-perceptual phenomenon, such as Saulius Geniusas’s *The Origins of the Horizon in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (2012). My detour into the meaning and relevance of the horizon here aims at a more thorough understanding of our own subjectivity and position in the encounter with a photowork’s thickness and depths. In consequence, we encounter the photographic surface as an interface in the form of this thin horizon line that parts the visible landscape from the invisible beyond.

[...] Landscape is also a creature of surface as well as depth, of visibility as well as invisibility, of image as well as world, of nature as well as culture. It can be just as well painted as mapped. In addition to being perceived, it can be actively imagined (Casey 2002, 274).

When examining *Dutch Grey* we (the team of paper, painting and photo conservators, the chemical scientist, and myself) viewed the work from many different angles so as to make a thorough observation of its condition. *Dutch Grey* lay on a table in the conservators' space, with the team encircling it as they accumulated many kinds of information, in a non-invasive manner, for the condition mapping report (fig. 3.4). It is likely that the mounted photographs were lying in a similar fashion – flat on a table or on the floor – when Ger van Elk painted and dripped the colours onto them. The team inferred this from the distribution of the dried paint, and the inference was confirmed by a film in which Van Elk is seen at work in his studio creating a similar photowork, with a slightly different title: *Dutch Gray* (1984; 35.5×42.5×162cm) (fig. 3.5).⁵ This visual surface analysis was part of a conservation process that is commonly used to identify possible defects at an early stage, and to decide which aspects deserve deeper study and determination analysis. From a bird's-eye view, the photowork's material appearance was studied as a kind of landscape, built up in various layers of photographic paper, alkyd colours, and a varnish. The intention here was to discover 'new' (unintended) features of the work. Anomalies and characteristic marks were detected and then located or 'mapped' in the photowork, in the final report by Clara von Waldthausen. The research team approached the landscape as something that draws attention to what lies beneath, as is poignantly described by Casey in his epilogue:

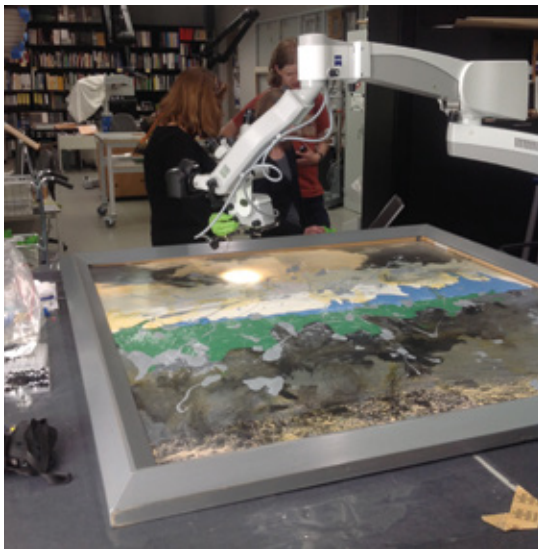


FIGURE 3.4. Condition mapping of *Dutch Grey* in the atelier of the conservation department at Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Clara von Waldthausen and Bas Reijers, June 4, 2013.

Rather than expanding outward over the earth and across its very surface, landscape here sinks down into the earth's in gathering depths. As one geographer has put it, "visible landscapes are like icebergs: only a small proportion of their real substances lies above the surface." If landscape as prospect constitutes a world on the earth – on its own double-sided surface – landscape as refuge draws us into the earth itself (Casey 2002, 273).

By underlining the double-sidedness of landscape, Casey presents it as the pivotal point between a world *on* the earth and the inside (*into*) of the earth. This yin and yang of world and earth can also be found in Martin Heidegger's philosophical inquiry, *The Origin of the Work of Art*. This has been a key text for art theory, much discussed and analysed. However, its close bearing on *Dutch Grey*'s subject matter, and on the conception of the photowork surface as a form of landscape, suggests to me a new reading. In approaching his key question – what makes the artwork an artwork (its "work-being") – Heidegger introduces a relation and tension between earth and world. Although in diametrical opposition, in the artwork these concepts of earth and world are both inextricably linked and in constant "strife". World is "grounded" on earth. Earth on one hand "rises up through world" and on the other tends as "sheltering and concealing" "to draw the world into itself" (Heidegger 2002 [1935–36], 26). World is more "in being" (beyond the tangible and perceptible), which he describes as follows:

Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. *World worlds*, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being (2002 [1935–36], 23, emphasis in original).

The "work-being" of an artwork lies in the fact that it "sets up a world" by "setting forth earth" (2002 [1935–36], 22–24). I am aware that I am walking a fine line by drawing Heidegger into my argument here, for at least two reasons. One is that he does not intend to pair his idea of earth with the artwork's material; the other is that his notion of earth is "essentially self-secluding" (2002 [1935–36], 25). Because of this, an analysis of the concealed (material) parts of the photowork (as is coming up in the following section) would be doubly doomed. Heidegger explains:

It [earth] shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth shatters every attempt to penetrate it. It turns every merely calculational intrusion into an act of destruction. Though such destruction may be accompanied by the appearance of mastery and progress in the form of the technological-scientific objectification of nature, this mastery remains, nonetheless, an impotence of the will. The earth is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and preserved as the essentially undisclosed, as that which withdraws from every disclosure, in other words, keeps itself constantly closed up (2002 [1935–36], 25).

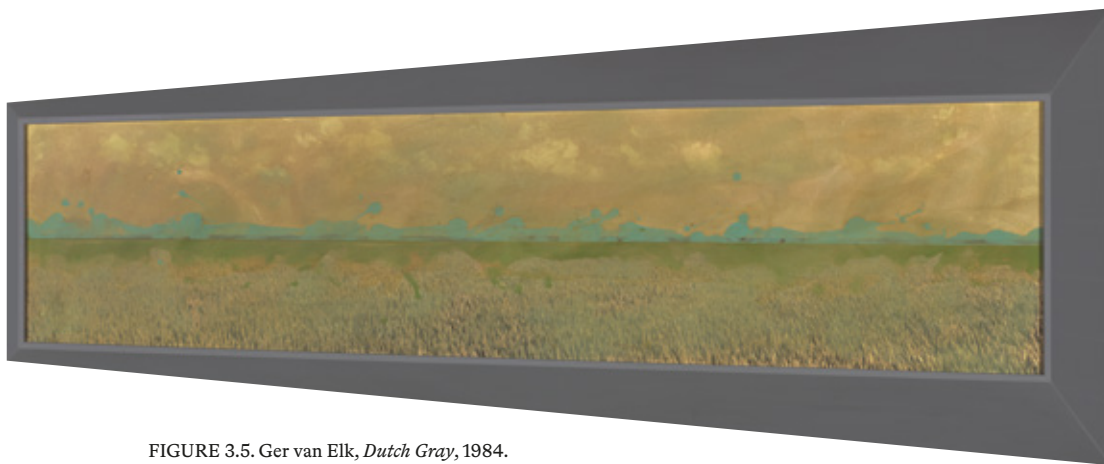


FIGURE 3.5. Ger van Elk, *Dutch Grey*, 1984.
Paint, plastic, black and white photograph and polyurethane on panel,
35.5×42.5×162cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Because Ger van Elk covers the photographs with several layers of alkyd colour and varnish, he obstructs visual penetration into the photographic depiction of a Dutch landscape. That is, he secludes the photographic representation of a landscape by creating a new landscape both in the image and of the material. The photographic depiction is not sufficient to express his idea of Dutch landscape. Covered areas remain unexplained, and exposed areas don't give away much information on place or time. Photographically, the features that rest here are tilled ground and clouds. Earth and air.

Heidegger's notion of the "work-being" of an artwork, coming through the analogy between world and earth, can nonetheless offer a new perspective on Van Elk's *Dutch Grey*. This photowork "sets up a world" by "setting forth earth". The artist expressed his idea, but this vision of Dutch landscape only truly comes into being when it is looked at. The photowork sets up a vision of a Dutch landscape by covering over most of the pictorial and material aspects (and therewith details) of the photographs. To substantiate my claim here, I will make a brief detour into the characteristics and associations of landscape photography and painting, and how the form shapes our perception.

Edward Casey distinguishes between the artist's experience of the landscape painting as a *focus memotius*, something that is remembered first-hand, and the viewer's experience of a *focus imaginarius*, something that can be imagined via the artist's perception and memory (Casey 2002, 82). The commonality between these two *foci* is their subjective nature. However, when we look at Van Elk's photowork, Casey's clear distinction blurs. The artist often goes beyond a mere representation of a landscape he has seen. Even the landscape paintings of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors who Van Elk admired were, on occasion, *foci imaginarii* in the sense that they were more 'virtual' – depictions of imaginary spaces rather than remembered places. In this context, in contrast, a landscape photograph looks very much like a *focus memotius* for the photographer (and sometimes also for the viewer), as it refers to a specific locus.

With the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, places and landscapes could be photographically surveyed. David Bate, writing on landscape photography, has explained how this new "photographic vision" created a kind of "scientific realism" (Bate 2019, 125). This led to a new geographical imaginary for mapping purposes, and reshaped perceptions of place, as Hilde van Gelder and Helen Westgeest have explained in the context of "topographic photography" (Van Gelder and Westgeest 2011, 120–121). They also argue that this kind of landscape photography aimed "to turn unknown spaces into familiar places", and for this, the naming of photographs was as essential as taking them (2011, 124). Van Elk's photowork obstructs the photographic presentation of a concrete, specific, or singular landscape so as to express the artist's idea of a greater landscape, given geographical context by the work's title. He is not interested in pointing to a time and place. Van Elk covers most of the silver gelatin photographs' transparent surface, and renders it to opaque ground. When Heidegger refers to the process enacted by an artwork's "work-being", of setting up a world by setting forth earth, he understands the gesture of "setting forth earth" ("die Erde her-stellen") to present the earth as "self-secluding" ("das sich Verschließende") (Heidegger 2002 [1935–36], 25). The *concealing* nature of earth (on Heidegger's terms) is presented mimetically here in the opaque paint that covers the photographs. In that, this combination *reveals* the common ground of the Dutch landscape – its flat horizon – across all kinds of (artistic) visualizations spanning the centuries.

In his epilogue, entitled 'Landscape Experienced and Re-presented', Casey comes to the conclusion that landscape is [...] something situated at the intertwining of earth and world: at (and as) their "common outline." [...] Neither as deepgoing or reclusive as earth nor as ascendant or illuminated as world, neither self-secluded nor self-shown, landscape is the pivot of the two together. It is where earth and world meet, their shared surface (Casey 2002, 272).

When I focused on *Dutch Grey*, laid out horizontally on the table, and contemplated its surface as a metaphorical landscape, it occurred to me that this surface was the common outline or interface between the visible depiction (from which this Dutch landscape vision arises) and the invisible matter of the object's substructure. When overpainted, the photographic surface became just one of the many layers that make up the work's material landscape. To picture what I am gesturing at here, think of the bare sedimentary layers of a canyon wall, revealing the strata which (invisibly) form a landscape. *Dutch Grey's* landscape is an accretion of heights and planes of different colours and paints, all built on top of the photographic surface and covered with a varnish veil. To a certain extent the chronology of Van Elk's colour applications can be retraced by close and deep looking (which was part of the condition mapping process). Using a brush, he first painted a mixture of white and light grey alkyd, then a mixture of grey and black or white and black; and then just white, and finally black. After that he started dripping blue and green paint, then layered dynamic grey drippings all over. Due to the time-consuming drying process of the alkyd paint, one

has to infer that spaces of time interposed between the applications of the different colour layers. As one of the final actions, he added a transparent glossy varnish (polyurethane) as finishing layer, brushed and dripped all over the work. This varnish, after years, remains transparent but has now turned yellowish. As we run through this cross-section of the various elements and layers of *Dutch Grey*, it is clear how each contributes to the whole, but in no way do they reflect the photowork individually. In the first chapter of *Representing Place*, Casey underlines that any representation of landscape is a difficult, if not an impossible endeavour, because of landscape's omnipresent and complex appearance. He describes landscape as:

Composed of particular objects – of animate and inanimate entities, of discrete shapes and colors, of distinctive configurations of many kinds – it exceeds any of them. Indeed, it even exceeds their totality. In this respect, landscape is an instance of what Sartre calls a “totality detotalized” and Jaspers “the encompassing”: it is something that, while being experienced as a single whole, is nevertheless not reducible to the sum of its parts (a “totalization”) (2002, 6).

In their article ‘Photography and painting in multi-mediating pictures’ (2009), Van Gelder and Westgeest refer to the argument of the American art historian Douglas Crimp, that picture-making is always a “stratigraphic activity” of multidimensional layering (Van Gelder and Westgeest 2009, 125).⁶ Crimp may not intend a literal material interpretation of the photowork's stratigraphic constitution as I do. He considers the “appropriation” of, or cross-reference to, other pictures, as layers of an artwork that lie “underneath” it, or more precisely precede it. Nevertheless, I argue that making a photowork is equally a process of material layering. It entails an accumulation of references to stages, spaces, *and* other images. These sedimentary layers must be considered if not uncovered when we seek to understand the photowork's “structures of signification” (Crimp 1979, 87 as quoted by Van Gelder and Westgeest 2009, 125). This will be the main concern of the next section. These layers usually lie beyond the horizon of our perception, and consequently beyond the horizon of our expectation, as we graze the photowork's surface.

3.2.

‘UNDERNEATH’ THE *Surface*: THE SUBSURFACE

The surface of the black-and-white photographs is the foundation of *Dutch Grey*'s landscape. However, the matter that shapes this landscape is inherent to the layered depths of this surface, which materially determine and constitute this photowork. The question is, how can we relate to those aspects of the photo(work) which we do not see? Are we inevitably blind to them? I will begin my consideration with the material layers of a silver gelatin photograph. This is always a composite object consisting of at least two essential layers, the support, and the binder. In *Dutch Grey*, the support layer is fibre-based paper, but it can be made

of other materials such as glass, polyester (plastic film), or resin-coated paper. The binder layer is the emulsion, most commonly gelatin, which holds the image-forming substance – the final image material – made up of silver particles. If the paper is coated with baryta, this adds a third layer. A baryta layer helps to brighten the image,⁷ and also to prevent paper fibre chemicals from transfusing the binder layer. Under the microscope, in a cross-section of these three layers, the baryta layer appears as a white stripe in the middle, separating the paper support from the emulsion layer (fig. 3.6). The photographs in Ger van Elk's photowork have this extra baryta layer and also a fourth layer: the super-coating or overcoat. This is a clear, hardened gelatin layer that lies on top of the emulsion or binder layer. It offers extra protection from physical damage and so it is commonly used for high-quality exhibition prints (for display and archiving purposes).

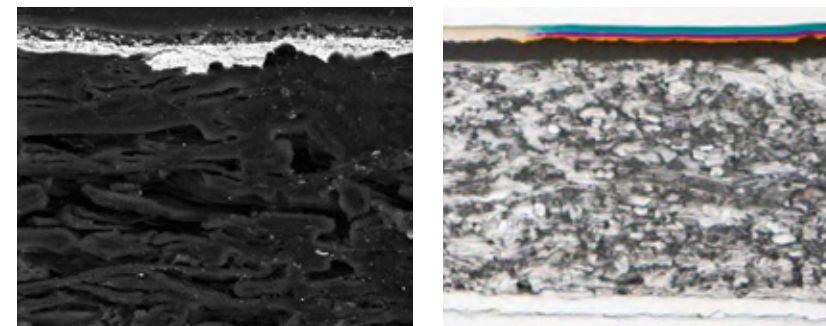


FIGURE 3.6. Cross-sectional micrograph of a silver gelatin print with white baryta layer.
FIGURE 3.7. Cross-sectional micrograph of a chromogenic photograph.

When flipping *Dutch Grey*, during the condition mapping process, we encountered four colour photographs that appeared to be mounted on its backside. These chromogenic prints have been reverse lined, using a double-sided adhesive, to a foam core. On the front, the silver gelatin prints were glued to this core before they were overpainted. The random images of the four chromogenic prints on the verso suggest that they were left over from some previous use of the foam board (fig. 3.8). Apparently, when putting together the basis of *Dutch Grey*, Van Elk recycled this foam board. By tilting and flipping the photowork, we receive here, at multi-angled perspectives on the whole object, a sandwich of multiple layers.

An imagined complete cross-section of *Dutch Grey* (fig. 3.9), which is only indicative, would enumerate eleven layers of alkyd paints and varnish (1–11) and the four layers within the silver gelatin print (layers 12–15), as well as these further (unexpected) layers of double-sided adhesive (layer 16), foam core (layer 17), another double-sided adhesive (layer 18), and the several layers of the chromogenic photographs (layers 19–25; fig. 3.7).⁸ As we gain an awareness of the multi-layered object that may linger inside this ‘simple’ photowork, a question arises: how can we develop a theory that will engage with its invisible thickness?



FIGURE 3.8. Verso of *Dutch Grey*, 1983–84.



FIGURE 3.9. Imagined cross section of *Dutch Grey*: varnish (1), layers of the alkyd paints (2–11), four layers of the silver gelatin print (12–15), double-sided adhesive (16), foam core (17), double-sided adhesive (18), paper base including the backing of the chromogenic photograph (19), solid-liquid interface (20 & 21), yellow layer (22), magenta layer (23), cyan layer (24), protective layer (25). Not included are the three thin interlayers with UV absorbers and scavenger between the layers 22 and 23, 23 and 24, and 24 and 25.

As mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the interior and exterior horizons of things.⁹ He bases this argument on Edmund Husserl's conception of the horizon as "a collection of things held together" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148–149). In the previous section, we focused on the exterior horizon of *Dutch Grey*. We turn now to its interior horizon, the subsurface. This interior horizon can be addressed via Husserl's thought, as a kind of inner consciousness that reaches out to the exterior horizon that is delimited by the surface. Merleau-Ponty states that the apprehension of a horizon of objective appearances does not prevent Husserl from arguing for a "potentiality of consciousness", a subjectivity that determines the matter of the object (ibid.). In this context a question arises as to whether we can allot any subjective agency to the invisible layers that shape the sensible, objective appearance of a photowork like *Dutch Grey*.

THICKNESS OF FIELD IN THE EMULSION

I take as my point of departure the parts of the silver gelatin prints in *Dutch Grey* that Van Elk did not cover; neither with alkyd paint nor with varnish. These unvarnished islands clearly reveal the degradation of the photographic print. In these places we see the fading of the silver, heavy silver mirroring, or a yellow-brown colouration. The image areas that are hidden beneath and therefore protected by the wooden frame expose this difference in condition (fig. 3.10). They are not oxidized to the same degree as the 'naked' parts of the photographic surface. Technically speaking, the oxidation was caused by the interaction of the (unprotected) silver gelatin prints with oxygen molecules in the ambient air, which caused a new layer of colloidal silver to form on the surface. What we witness is a surface phenomenon but it is one that concerns the whole thickness and consistency of the emulsion layer. How can we understand this interaction between air and silver particles – with the photographic surface as interface – from a theoretical perspective as well as from this chemical point of view?

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter* (2007), Karen Barad proposes a new way of thinking about causality in which the object/subject differentiation is left behind. Her suggestion can offer an interesting approach, in the context of my study, to our perceptions of markers of degradation. Barad draws on her background in theoretical quantum physics (through the writings of Niels Bohr), and considers the insights of this discipline in the context of her feminist studies and philosophy. She argues that individually determinate entities do not exist (on an atomic level), and introduces the neologism *intra-action* to describe this new way of approaching causal activity. If measured, it is through intra-action that entities can be determined. Barad writes, "I introduce the term 'intra-action' in recognition of their ontological inseparability, in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which relies on a metaphysics of individualism (in particular, the prior existence of separately determinate entities)" (Barad 2007, 128). Barad does not characterize this intra-activity as a matter of cause followed by effect. It is through the constant intra-activity of air and gelatin surface that the phenomenon of the silver mirror can appear. The gelatin's consistency changes in proportion



FIGURE 3.10. Detail of *Dutch Grey*, 1983–84. Brown/red colouration of the silver gelatin photograph in comparison to the photograph's edge, usually covered by the frame and therefore not discoloured.

to the relative humidity and temperature of the air (as we discovered in the first chapter). As a corollary, in a hydrolysed gelatin layer the silver ions (of the developed silver grains) can migrate more easily to the surface, where, floating, they react with oxygen molecules. When conceiving the photograph's surface as inseparably entangled with ambient air, we can understand that the boundary between the one and the other is indefinite, because of the gelatin's varying states of porosity.

It will be useful here to recap the idea of the surface as horizon, especially with Casey's characterization of the horizon as boundary in mind. He writes "*A boundary* (in contrast with a strict border [...]) allows for the interfusion of both sides, the inside and the outside, of the place or region that it nevertheless serves to delimit" (2002, 123, emphasis in original). The sides "meet" in the boundary. For Casey, the horizon is a type of boundary that is even "more fully" a meeting place, as sky encounters earth. "As such, it is a full-fledged place, a crossroads of the elements in which the elements themselves commingle" (ibid.). Having said this, in the same fragment he contrasts the horizon with the outer framing (of the painting, the map, or in our case of the photowork) – this framing disconnects entities and thereby disrupts the "profound continuum that exists between places that exhibit (on walls), present (on surfaces), or represent (in pictorial space)" (ibid.). More and more, I am tempted to argue that the surface as the visible landscape is

not something that shapes the photowork, but rather something that *is* its inner constitution – its "earth" – everything that lies between surface and backside. Its thickness is relevant to the external appearance of the work and it embodies the 'material depth' that we are looking for.

To understand the impact of the photowork's thickness on this notion of depth, we must return to the emulsion layer and examine the image particles that are spread throughout it. As briefly addressed in the first chapter on visual photographic textures, image particles are stacked on one another to different levels or heights in the emulsion layer(s) and this is what creates an impression of 'film grain'. What is often erroneously referred to as the film grain appears in fact to be the accumulations of silver particles (in the case of a silver gelatin photograph), spread through the full thickness of the gelatin. (This common error is noted by conservator Timothy Vitale in his article on the subject, also covered in the first chapter.) The particles stacked at different distances (in micron) from the human eye can be translated or perceived by the viewer as the grains of the photographic depiction. Consequently, we even can speak of a material depth of field in the gelatin (fig. 3.11), and I call this *thickness of field*. In comparison, ink drops – the image-forming substance of an inkjet print – are evenly distributed on the same level:

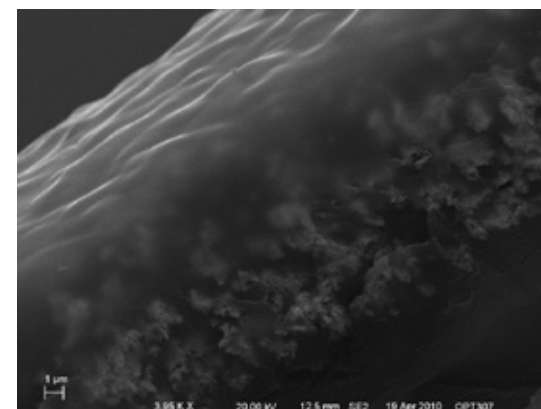


FIGURE 3.11. Silver particles dispersed throughout the gelatin layer of a silver gelatin photograph. OPT407: Electron Microscopy by Shu-Wei Hsu, University of Rochester, Materials Science Graduate Program, Spring 2010.

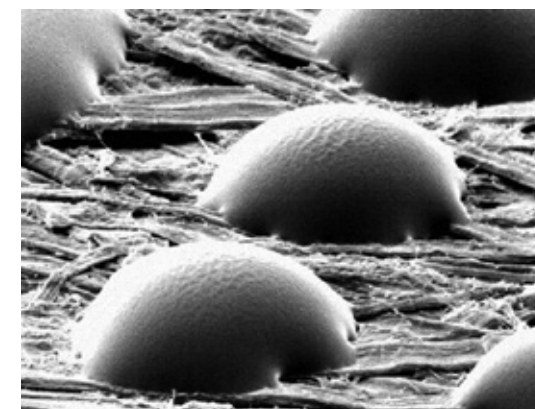


FIGURE 3.12. SEM photograph of phase-change ink drops on the surface of a bond paper.

on the surface of the paper. An SEM (Scanning Electronic Microscope) image of phase-change ink drops on the surface of a bond paper (fig. 3.12) clarifies this fundamental difference between film- and print-based photos.

When I quoted Damisch at the beginning of this chapter on "the photograph without thickness", I used his notion of a "constitutive deception of the photographic image" (Damisch 1978, 71), as something that separates the image from its substances, so that I could (re-)unite image and substance in the course of my own argu-

mentation. What I did not mention is that Damisch opens ‘Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image’ with the following description of photography: “Theoretically speaking, photography is nothing other than a process of recording, a technique of *inscribing*, in an emulsion of silver salts, a stable image generated by a ray of light” (Damisch 1978, 70, emphasis in original). Clearly, he distinguishes between his own understanding of photography (as the act of creating an image with the help of photo-chemical processes) and the resulting object as something that presents as a photographic image on the assumption that it is ‘stable’. As previously highlighted, this notion of a stable photographic image is highly questionable in relation to the material’s lifelong behaviour. Although within the studies of *Bildwissenschaft* there are many approaches to the image as something that appears and can be imagined beyond and therewith independent of its material source, I am doubtful as to whether this understanding can ever be applied to photoworks.¹⁰

When Damisch describes the photographic event as inscribed light, this event is not very precisely characterized as a process. Even Van Lier takes lacing and engraving to be the photographic themes par excellence (Van Lier 2007 [1983], 15). Engraving implies that something is cut or chased into a surface. Photo-graphy’s suffix, deriving from the verb *graphein* (writing, γράφειν), is inherently misleading, suggesting as it does that light leaves a mark *on* the surface. Even if we regard the emulsion layer as the photograph’s actual surface, the light’s ‘marks’ are left *within* the gelatin. Hence, it is not the photographic surface that displays the image, but the emulsion’s layered depths.

BLIND FIELD IN THE DEPTH OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

The photograph’s thickness appears to be crucial to image display, but how does this material depth actually determine the image? One could argue that this microscopic *thickness of field* is beyond the human visual range and should therefore be considered invisible. Even with that, how might our theoretical approach take on its material awareness? The concept of the *blind field*, which has been widely used to address the invisible parts of a photograph, can be useful for us here. *Blind field* (originally *champ aveugle*) is an expression that first appeared (in the photographic context) in Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*. It refers to that which takes place in the spatiotemporal surroundings outside the photographic frame. Barthes draws on an article on cinema and theatre by André Bazin, in which Bazin describes how the character who has left the visual field of the camera can continue ‘to live on’ in a hidden part of the setting. At first glance, Barthes argues, the photograph does not offer the continuity with the world beyond the frame that Bazin describes (Barthes 1981, 55–57). A few years later, film theorist Christian Metz described the blind field as a “projective off-frame”, that is, a product of the imagination – the viewer’s subjectivity “dreaming the shape of this emptiness” (Metz 1985, 87). In his essay ‘Photography and Fetish’ (1985), Metz describes the photograph as “[...] the ‘in-frame,’ the abducted part-space, the place of presence and fullness – although undermined and haunted by the feeling of its exterior, of its borderlines, which are the past, the left, the lost [...]” (ibid.). He claims that the off-

frame in a photograph can never come into the frame, it is forever excluded. Metz’s conceptualisation of the off-frame implies that the blind field cannot be found *in* the photograph and this has led to further interpretations of the off-frame as the space *around* the photo (Van Gelder and Westgeest 2011, 38; 125), or as that which invites the viewer to “re-install” the isolated photograph in a spatiotemporal continuum (Scott 1999, 163; 191). In contrast, I seek here to extend the off-frame dimension of the blind field into the very depths of the photograph itself, and into the material *behind* the photowork’s surface – thereby reconceiving the blind field as a physical part of the photograph that is present in its own invisible matter.

Van Elk’s *Conclusion* series (2008–2012) can clarify the point I am making here, though these photoworks are not comparable (technically and/or materially) to *Dutch Grey*. For this series, Van Elk almost entirely overpainted rectangular canvases on which colour photos of urban and rural landscapes had been printed. He chose a monochrome acrylic colour for each photowork, which derived from the palette of the respective photo. The photographed landscape can be seen only from the sides of the canvases (where the stretched textile is folded around the edges of the wooden frame), and in some cases in a



FIGURE 3.13A. Ger van Elk, *Conclusions I - New York "Dark Grey"*, 2008. Acrylic paint on photograph on canvas, 96×102×4.5cm. Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



FIGURE 3.13B. Detail of *Conclusions II - Vejer de la Frontera "Blue"*, 2008. Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

small stroke on the front (figs. 3.13a & b). Van Elk's conception, or rather, his interrogation of the concept of the painted horizon, is embodied here on the surface of these photoworks. A monochrome layer of paint literally and physically lies between the photographed landscape and the exhibition environment. If the term blind field is usually applied to the borders of the frame and everything off-frame, here, by contrast, the image as a whole is a monochromatic void, while the sides designate a sense of place by revealing parts of the photos.

This conversion relocates the blind field to the centre of the canvas. The paint refers to the subject matter (through the choice of colour), but what is more prominent is that it conceals the photo. This 'present absence' of the photo is what gives rise to my extension of the concept of the blind field into the (invisible) dimension of the photowork's thickness and depth. The argument is equally valid for *Dutch Grey*.

Barthes's blind field has been mostly considered in relation to the framing of the photograph as the 'around'. It stands for the invisible scene just beyond the picture frame, which can encompass almost any direction – except the depth of the photograph, as this particular field appears already to be evident in the photograph, it arrests attention and draws it away from the 'behind' (of the photographed objects as well as of the material). My extension of the term blind field relates to how the image is embedded in its spatiotemporal context, but it also acknowledges this material continuum. It directs attention to a different form of spatiality and temporality, one that emerges as meaningful for the image and must be sought in the photograph's depicted depth and in the material thickness of the photograph.

When Merleau-Ponty delves into the depths of a painting in his essay 'Eye and Mind' (1964) (original title 'L'Œil et l'Esprit', 1961), he names the subject of his enquiry the third dimension. Though he and Edward Casey both refer to the depicted and suggested depths of a painting, their discoveries take different paths. Merleau-Ponty comes to the conclusion that depth itself is not visible in the picture:

I see objects that hide each other and that consequently I do not see; each one stands behind the other. I see depth and yet it is not visible, since it is reckoned from our bodies to things, and we are [as Cartesians] confined to our bodies. [...] I do not really see depth or, if I do, it is only another *size*. On the line from my eyes to the horizon, the foreground forever hides all the other planes, and if on either side I think I see things staggered at intervals, it is because they do not completely hide each other (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961], 133, emphasis in original).

The depth is obscured by the foreground, which I understand in this context to refer to (the horizon of) the painting's surface. Merleau-Ponty does not perceive physical depth, only size, and he describes the picture as a flat thing. In contrast, Casey explains how external and internal horizons bring the viewer's attention to the things they enclose (as does the frame) by creating a "framed depth". He describes the entire scene as:

[...] it includes the various internal horizons that surrounding objects constitute vis-à-vis a thematized object around which they are arranged. Such discrete horizons create a nonrecessive depth in relation to this focal object. They are lateral in status and in this respect resemble the frame of a picture – only now the frame is *inside* the pictorial space as a whole and creates a special form of framed depth (Casey 2002, 235, emphasis in original).

Merleau-Ponty implies that depth is not visible in the painting as it is inherently framed and flattened by the foreground. Casey, in contrast, argues that depth *is* represented, along the many other horizons within the plane of the picture. He does not arrive at the conclusion that the painting's surface can, itself, be seen as a horizon. Nonetheless, in the preceding 'Interlude' chapter, he ascribes *place* to the surface: it is "the place of the painting itself", which exists as a "third thing" between the actual landscape and its representation (2002, 121). His treatment here will have my full attention in the last part of this chapter.

Merleau-Ponty comes to the conclusion that any depth exists only between the spectator's participation "[...] in a Being without restriction, first and foremost a participation in the being of space beyond every particular point of view" (1993 [1961], 134). To discern depth, he takes into account the viewer's presence as a participant within the enviroing space. The position of the viewer in relation to the *Conclusion* photoworks is crucial if we are seeking to describe what is actually seen: either a plain square with a rippled textured canvas (up front), or a photo printed on canvas (from the side). The viewing position, which is dependent on moving from one side of *Conclusion* to the other, exposes how the (indeterminate) horizon comes into being with and through the variable position/participation of a viewer in space. In an upfront encounter, the monochromatic colour field is 'our horizon'; stepping aside, we become aware of our horizon shift (*Horizontverschiebung*), and in so doing we become aware that the canvas' surface is itself a horizon.

In the *Conclusion* series, a monochromatic picture plane flattens perspective, while the indicative photographic sides invite the viewer to take a sidelong look. From there, the painted front appears as

a line of division between the photowork and the exhibition space – it is the photowork’s horizon. Despite its abstractness, the horizon of the *Conclusion* series appears more concrete than that of *Dutch Grey*. However, the same effect is present in *Dutch Grey*, with the difference that here, the painted surface layer is not only the horizon of the photowork, it also (because it depicts a horizontal line) prevents the viewer from discovering other possible (physical) horizons. For example, we have the individual borders of the four silver gelatin photographs, some of which disappear below paint within the assembly of materials – think of Casey’s comparison between the frame and the horizon. *Dutch Grey*’s painted horizon renders its viewers blind. We use the midline, where blue and green paint converge, to deduce that there is another midline running in the same place across the concealed photographs. As we do this, we ‘fill in’ the blind field of the photographs, which lies underneath the paint layers and we assume a relation or continuity between the photograph and its overpainting.

What we assume to be invisible to us – the interior horizon of *Dutch Grey* – forms the exterior horizon of the photowork to such an extent that we cannot characterize it as invisible so much as a matter of our own blindness: an unawareness of the photograph’s status as an inherently multi-layered object whose *thickness of field* actually creates what can be seen in the image. The intra-action (between the inside and outside of the photowork) that I have demonstrated is continuous with the spaces and times of the *extraface*, that which encircles the photographic surface and which is subject of the next section.

3.3. THE PHOTOGRAPHIC SURFACE AS *In-Between*

The purpose of this last section is to distinguish between *what* the surface interfaces with (which spaces, places, periods, persons, understandings, and so on), and *how*. I turn here to the photographic surface as the focal area for the viewer of a photowork. This surface is in relationship with the original image source (views of Dutch landscapes, photographed by the artist), with Van Elk’s paint additions, with the viewing space, and with the viewer. The photograph is touched throughout its whole existence, sometimes more indirectly and metaphorically, sometimes directly and physically, as the first two chapters have explained. My attention shifts now to the *extraface* – the space(s) in which all these interactions happen. As a broad subject that is worthy of an entire dissertation in and of itself, I limit my study here to the *extraface* of *Dutch Grey*: that which surrounds and surrounded its surface. This concerns foremost the different physical spaces that designate particular periods and moments, but I also bring in the pictorial spaces of figuration and abstraction. The question arises: how does the photographic surface mediate between these different spaces and time-frames? And what are the consequences for our viewing perspective?

THE EXTRAFACE: HERE-NOW AND THERE-THEN

The material world of *Dutch Grey* begins with four silver gelatin prints, or more precisely, the negative(s) of those prints. As these silver gelatin prints are only encountered behind or underneath layers of paint, it is tempting to receive the photographed landscape fragments as though from a distance. They emerge as something that is ‘there’, while the abstract overpainting, which shares our space, is ‘here’. The mediating capacity and character of the photographic surface once again becomes apparent when we detail this tension between absent and present spaces as it manifests on the interface of that surface.

In a paragraph on indices and indexes, Van Lier describes how “[a]ll photographs effectuate a terrible tension between what is near and what is distant, between the present and the past” (Van Lier 2007 [1983], 19). His argument points to the moment when photons hit light-sensitive film in relation to the moment that the photograph is viewed. The former moment is when the indices, which refer to their cause through “*monstration* and *demonstration*”, are created. Although he does not delineate in detail the difference(s) between the two, he argues that “[...] the monstration effected through the photograph is simultaneously *facial* and *distant*” (ibid., emphasis in original). Both the surficial and the referential character of the photograph are addressed here. As his wording is again very particular, I include the whole fragment here, so as to avoid distorting his argument.

[...] the facial and physical character of the imprint-index makes something appear, but at the same time its characteristic distance removes me from it: it is not some thing that has touched the film but only photons that have touched this thing and the film, thereby only remotely and very abstractly linking both (ibid.).

Van Lier retrieves an experience of the “bifurcation of space (being there, not being there)” from this near-and-distant encounter with what is on the photograph, and this, in turn, leads to a “bifurcation of time” (ibid.). As the painted colour fields already prevent any full view on the photographed landscape, this experience of “not being there” is intensified in my case study: we cannot even access the focal subject(s) of the photographs.

So we can picture Van Elk coming face-to-face with the photographs’ surfaces, and painting many successive layers onto them, sometimes with drying intermezzos. These overpaintings then literally become part of the viewer’s physical space, as they were part of Van Elk’s space in his studio. Visually, the painted additions take over the horizontal reference of the photographed landscape, without ever being absorbed as figurative presentation. The last layer of the drippings, applied in liquid form and allowed to harden while the photographs lay flat on a table, retain a particularly marked three-dimensionality and tactility – generated through the mixture of (visual) fluidity and (dried, material) rigidity. Given the form of the drippings, I argue that this painted abstract relief triggers an experience of spatial immediacy, whereas the photographs underneath can be characterised by their spatial anteriority. Considering the tradition of photography’s close and longstanding theoretical relationship with indexicality, the addition of paint presents here a new indexical referent: the “*having-been-here*” of

the artist. The physicality of the paint and its reference to his movements describes how he leaned over the photowork during composition, his stance that is analogous to the viewer's frontal position when facing it. Whilst we do not share the same space, we inhabit the same hereness as we stand before *Dutch Grey*.

This aspect of my argument calls for a deeper exploration of Barthes's original and widely cited indexical characterization of the photograph: his *noeme* of photography as the “ça a été” – the *that-has-been*. Barthes's early formulation of the photograph as “an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*” is found in his ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ (1982, 44, emphasis in original). In line with Van Lier's conception, quoted above, Barthes's essay names the doubled experience of temporal and spatial awareness that arises when we look at a photograph the “*having-been-there*”, “[...] for in every photograph there is the always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered” (ibid., emphasis in original). In the same passage he explains that photography brought us a “new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority” (ibid.). *Dutch Grey* interrogates this conception because its paint pushes the photographic depiction and surface (to the) back to such an extent that we can hardly speak of the spatial immediacy of photographs here – rather, we are confronted by their spatial anteriority. The photograph's immediacy is overwhelmed by the physicality of the paint additions. And it could shift again, in a prospective future, as the paint starts to crackle or expels crystal efflorescence. This, of course, is what has happened to *Dutch Grey*, as has been studied by Bas Reijers.¹¹

Years later, Barthes adds an interesting nuance to his *noeme* of photography in *Camera Lucida*. He aligns the *that-has-been* with the “Intractable”¹², and refers to the etymological source of its Latin translation “*interfuit*” (meaning it was between). In the context of my understanding of the photographic surface as the pivotal interface between spaces, this is striking. Barthes writes:

The name of Photography's *noeme* will therefore be: “That-has-been,” or again: the Intractable. In Latin (a pedantry necessary because it illuminates certain nuances), this would doubtless be said: *interfuit*: what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred. It is all this which the verb *intersum* means (Barthes 1981, 77, emphasis in original).

Barthes hauls the photographed scene into the viewing space by aligning the spectator's position with that of the camera operator. I argue, conversely, that they do *not* converge because there is a different, ‘extra’ physical distance between spectator and the photograph (or photowork). This would be different if the viewer was looking at a photograph through the viewfinder of a stereoscope, or through a film negative viewer. Through these mediated interactions, the physical environment of the viewer vanishes in the dark and the image alone is backlit. An added distance, interposing between the spectator and the photograph/-work, is the critical difference here. In the earlier essay,

‘Rhetoric of the Image’, Barthes distinguished between the pure “spectatorial consciousness” of viewing a photograph, and the more projective consciousness on which (moving) film largely depends (Barthes 1982, 44–45). He argued here that the “temporal equilibrium” of the having-been-there diminishes the projective power of the image: “[...] the *this was so* easily defeats the *it's me*” (ibid., emphasis in original). During the seventeen years between ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’ and *Camera Lucida*, he revised this understanding of the photograph, coming to believe that it was a phenomenon which had greater projective power than he had asserted in earlier work.

Our conception of the photographic surface as ‘being between’ (not *interfuit*, but *interesse* as it sustains presence now and in the future) holds in view the inaccessibility or, as Barthes would say, the intractability, of the photographed scene: that which was in front of the lens at the moment of capture. We can only witness the photographer's vision in a very distanced way, we cannot emotionally claim to inhabit or share the same hereness with him/her/them. In brief, I do not depart from Barthes's earlier characterization of the photograph as something that portrays a subject's having-been-*there*. The physicality of the photographic print, and the viewer's alignment towards it, determine it as a remote, anterior, and therefore abstracted space. This emerges in stark contrast to the concrete, almost tangible corporeality of the colour drops on the photographs of *Dutch Grey*. Here, the viewer encounters a double inversion: the figurative becomes abstracted and distant, whereas the abstract becomes concrete and present. Still, our perspective on the photowork is limited to its frontal appearance in relation to different times and spaces. How can we complete this vision by including the backface as a real and equal part of *Dutch Grey*'s extraface?

THE BACKFACE AND -Space

Van Elk expanded the notion of the horizon into the third dimension by ‘spatializing’ the flat picture plane of the many photoworks he made between 1984 and 2014 that depict the Kinselmeer, a lake in the north of Amsterdam (fig. 3.16).¹³ He created a series of Kinselmeer water-scapes, each of which used two separate long strokes of overpainted photographs. The first photowork entitled *Kinselmeer* (1984) (fig. 3.15a) was made in the same year as *Dutch Grey* and, despite *Kinselmeer*'s long, stretched form, the two works share some interesting characteristics which place them in direct relationship with one another.

Whereas in *Dutch Grey* the horizontal joint is covered by paint, Van Elk counter-staggers the two photographs of *Kinselmeer*, piecing them together in such a way as to emphasize a horizontal cut. Physically, the two strokes that comprise the image only ‘meet’ at the very midpoint of the central axis of the photowork, while ascending and descending away from one another between the vertical sides of the frame (fig. 3.14). In these photoworks, then, the physical separation of the two photographs literally ‘opens’ spatiality between surfaces, versos, and frame. Thus, the back-and-forth gesture of the counter-staggered mount invites reflection on the spaces that surround the photographic surface – its extraface – while the surface comes to the fore as the ‘in between’.



FIGURE 3.14. Detail of Ger van Elk, *Untitled II (Kinselmeer)*, 2013. Retouched with ink on colour photograph between plexiglass, 47×90×5.5cm. Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

In the 1990s, Van Elk started to use different photographic and framing techniques for his *Kinselmeer* series, however, he retained this practice of reverse mounting the two image halves through the years to come. This aesthetic act opens the space between the image parts, invoking an awareness of the intangible and evanescent character of the horizon as a concrete place between the two expansive elements of water and air. However, the physical splicing of this horizon portrayal does not converge with the natural division of water and land in the photographs, nor does it match the horizon between sky and earth. As with *Dutch Grey*, we can understand this to emphasize the nature of the horizon as a representational convention and perceptual phenomenon. We are preconditioned to perceive the unity of the waterscape, however, it is in fact a composite of two separate images here. Upon closer inspection, the upper and lower parts of the work may even not derive from one single photo, but from two different perspectives, assembled or juxtaposed.

Emanuel Alloa's essay 'Seeing-as, Seeing-in, Seeing-with: Looking through Images' (2011) differentiates between three given modes of vision. Alloa's terms can be useful for us here, as we seek to understand the different spaces of *Dutch Grey* and how they are bundled together in perception to form an all-encompassing whole. Alloa, a philosopher, pays tribute to previous discourses of modes of viewing (artistic) images, as shaped by prominent figures including Ernst Gombrich, Richard Wollheim, and Nelson Goodman, and through subsequent interpretations by Alloa's contemporaries. He makes his own contribution to the tradition in the proposal of a notion and practice of "seeing-with". The second part of his title, 'Looking through Images', refers at once to the transparency claim of images as windows, and to his proposal that images can offer potential visions. The familiar theoretical concept of *seeing-in* disregards the material configuration of the image because it activates a perception that focuses foremost on pictorial space. In contrast, Alloa's *seeing-with* does not single out one formal or figural aspect but rather offers an inclusive mode of seeing. "In other words, we do not only see *in* images, rather seldom *as* images, never *despite* them but always *with* them and *through* them" (Alloa 2011, 186, emphasis in original). Further on, he explains what "seeing-with images" means to him.

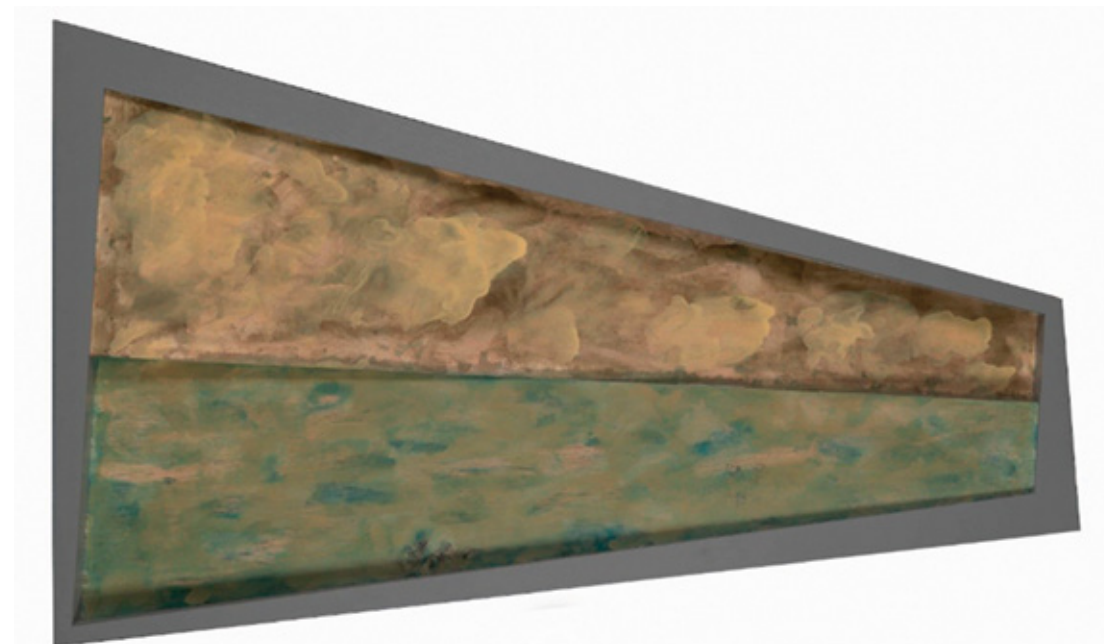


FIGURE 3.15A. Ger van Elk, *Kinselmeer*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, paint, varnish, 104.5×175.5×6.5cm with frame. Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, The Netherlands.

[...R]ather than being neutral surfaces of the beholder's projection, images *generate* gazes that, although never ultimately fixed, are by no means arbitrary. The form of the image, its figural organization, its material ridges, dales and crests, open up a space for potential vision (2011, 188, emphasis in original).

Van Elk's *Kinselmeer* works can generate a gaze that initially perceives classical horizontal waterscapes, in spite of all the artist's gestures of deconstruction: the abstract over-painting; the bisection (or more precisely assemblage) of two photographs; the reprinting of retouched photographs as glossy Cibachromes (in the later photoworks); and the perspectival framing. The unifying force is so powerful that several illusions are sustained in this deconstructed image, though their combination instils an unsettling sense of confusion. At second sight, the viewer becomes more aware of these disruptive elements. Where can our perception alight and rest? The depiction, the frame's perspective, the splice between the photographs? The interplay of these elements interrogates genre, as well as the viewer's perceptual expectations when he/she/they approaches the photowork on the wall.

The spatialization of a flat picture plane is one of Van Elk's artistic concerns, and it creates an experience of reciprocity between pictorial and actual space, as the curators of the exhibition *Broken landscapes: Ger Dekkers, Jan Dibbets, Ger van Elk, Jaap van den Ende* (2014–2015) have argued (Von Berswordt-Wallrabe et al. 2014, 95). But which characteristics can be attributed to (actual) enviroing space, and which to pictorial space? Is this bivalent distinction really viable, or are the elements intertwined to such an extent that we are really talking about another form of intra-action? In the *Kinselmeer* works, the back-



FIGURE 3.15B. Ger van Elk, *Kinselmeer*, 1985. Information on material and technique not available, 185×292×12cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

and-forth bending of the two strokes belongs to the actual space (which is in itself a changing variable). The photowork's divergent angles cause the photographic surface to interfere with the viewer's space (in front), and also with the backspace between photowork and (gallery) wall. As I have shown, the accumulation of material layers in a photowork can be described as its obscured *subsurface*. I turn now to the obscured backface of the photowork: the behind, a mixture of backface and backspace.

The gap along the horizontal centreline of the photowork refers the viewer to the space behind the photowork. As a pictorial and spatial reference, it tempts us to look and think beyond its horizon. Without losing myself in thorny questions concerning what is inside or outside, intrinsic or extrinsic to the *Kinselmeer* works, I argue that the photographic surface would not mediate physically between front-space and backspace of the photowork, if the two strokes did not spatially divide the canvas in this way. So what can be said about this backface and -space of the photoworks and of the photograph? The example of *Dutch Grey*, which has several other photographs on its backface, reveals how new revelations can occur when we flip the canvas. Unfortunately something like this can only happen under the supervision of conservators, either in a storage space or in the atelier, but never in a public space. Often called the *verso*, I use the pun *backface* because it brings connotations of its own potential *as* a face, as it moves into the limelight now.



FIGURE 3.16. Ger van Elk, *Het Kinselmeer (Stompe Toren Bij Ransdorp)*, 1996. Reversal film of ink retouched colour photo on Cibachrome, set in perspex, 76×145cm including frame. Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, acquired with support of the Mondriaan Fund, The Netherlands.

I have already mentioned and analysed the social biography of a (photographic) object (whether artistic, reportage, documenting or vernacular), in the second chapter in the context of *Crowhurst II*. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the material turn in photography studies, this narrative concept has become a subject of particular interest for academics, as has been outlined by Costanza Caraffa in 'Photographic Itineraries in Time and Space', a contribution to *The Handbook of Photography Studies* (2020) edited by Gil Pasternak. The social biography of a photograph is often best deciphered on the backface which could bear, for example, the artist's signature, the photographer's wet studio stamps, captions, a date, or other identifying marks (fig. 3.17). However, many further non-photographical indexicalities can manifest on the verso. Steven Manford, a Man Ray specialist, describes the treasury of forms that he encountered in a book dedicated to the artist's versos:

On the back of a Man Ray photograph one might find: his handwriting, signatures, monograms, grease pencil marks, pricing notations, customs and collector stamps, exhibition labels, dealer inventory numbers, handling, framing, and mounting instructions, glue stains, fingerprints, mount board remains, mount tissue, retouching instructions, registrar's notations, handwritten letters, printer instructions, dedications, directional notations, cropping marks, certifications, random

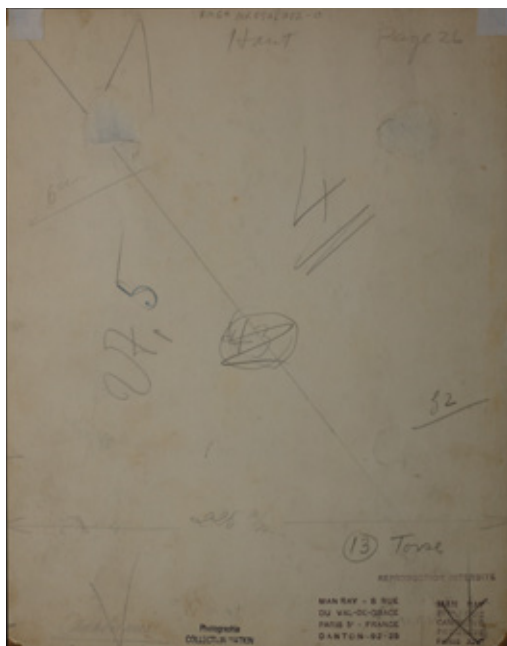


FIGURE 3.17. Verso of a Man Ray photograph of the 1930s.

numbers with circles and dashes, and of course the stamps: originals and copies, lifetime and posthumous, in pink, blue, purple, red, black, bold or faded, or embossed (Manford 2022, unpagged).

This extensive list of traces testifies to the ‘multiple lives’ that a photograph can have as it travels through many hands and spaces for different purposes. This passage is central to Julia Bärnighausen’s dissertation, which studies photographs as travelling objects that circulate through various routes, accumulating traces of their journeys and so retrospectively becoming their own itineraries (Bärnighausen et al. 2019, 33).¹⁴ Unfortunately, the backface is rarely presented to the public in photography exhibitions. I can vividly remember the handful of versos that were included as framed photo-objects in a travelling exhibition on the oeuvres of the two Magnum photographers Robert Capa and Gerda Taro (produced by the International Center of Photography), which I mounted and co-curated in 2009 at the Nederlands Fotomuseum (Rotterdam). These versos caused a personal revelation. To me, the (in)scribed itineraries of some of Capa’s and Taro’s most iconographic images were as mesmerizing as the image content. These surfaced backfaces had an astonishing sense of immediacy. Accumulations of stamps, inscriptions, cropping and retouching notes (written by news agents and editors, if not the photographers themselves), all gave insight into the works’ biographies, and a glimpse into their “photography complex”. This is a term and concept coined by James Hevia in 2009 and I will attend to it in the last section, where I focus on this relational characterisation of the photographic surface as something that inter-faces not only between times and spaces but also with multiple persons (and beliefs).

In 1971, Ger van Elk created another photowork in which he literally represents and disrupts conventions of display by exhibiting a photograph of the backface of Pierre Bonnard’s 1917 painting *L’Estérel* to the public (fig. 3.18).¹⁵ The verso of this historic painting holds a couple of stickers that refer to its exhibition history. In exhibition, Van Elk hung a mirror on the wall facing the verso of the photographed painting verso. Through the tilted, juxtaposed hanging of the photowork, we see in the mirror the reflection of a photographic reproduction of Bonnard’s painting. What, then, do we *see with* (in Alloa’s terms) Van Elk’s *The Return of Pierre Bonnard, 1917–1971* (1971)? We see that the backface, just like the front, is a surface that can offer insights into the encompassing processes of visualization and framing (in the broadest sense). It exposes how a viewer’s interaction with Bonnard’s painting, and by extension other artworks, is framed by the viewer’s expectations and by institutional decisions. Naturally, this often leads to a one-sided view, merely scratching the surface of the artwork. Today, when most images lack a back (a device’s back doesn’t count), I argue that we need to be more alert to, and suspicious of, the “regimes of visibility” to which we are subjected.¹⁶



FIGURE 3.18. Ger van Elk, *The Return of Pierre Bonnard, 1917–1971*, 1971 [Reprint 1999]. Information on material and technique not available, 52.5×60.5cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

An equivalent regime that applies to photographs and photoworks held in archives and museum collections involves the approach to the photograph's surface. Reproductions and digitalisations are seen as valuable alternatives to deteriorating images – and as solutions to overflowing archival in-trays. For almost twenty years now, this perception has been critiqued by scholars in the field of material (photography) studies. Joanna Sassoon's 'Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction', in the edited volume *Photographs Objects Histories* (2004), is one key text (as is the edited book as a whole, and other publications by Elizabeth Edwards). Sassoon explains, that "[i]n this new digital context with its concomitant focus on image content, institutions are redefining the key features of the photographic object" (Sassoon 2004, 196). She refers to Patricia Hayes (known for her contributions to the critical analysis of colonial photography), who claims that this shift in thinking and handling contributes to "a massive dehistoricisation and decontextualisation, which, if it had occurred with documents, would create a massive scandal" (ibid. quoted from Hartmann et al. 1998, 6). Focusing exclusively on the photograph's surface in reproduction or digitalization processes means losing the object's many material and contextual layers, of which the backface is one of the most valuable and potentially informative. Sassoon therefore views the "translatability" of a photograph as highly questionable in her comparison between the photographic object and its digital referent (2004, 198). She comes to the conclusion that a most appropriate understanding is "[...] to consider a photograph as a layered laminated object in which meaning is derived from a symbiotic relationship between materiality, content and context" (2004, 199). In that sense it is never a superficial image, nor a passive object (2004, 210), but a "dynamic object of the present" (Geismar 2006, 556 as quoted by Caraffa 2020, 90). Even when held in an archive or museum collection, it continues to acquire contextual biographical information as it travels back and forth between archival disclosure and public exposure, or between collection storage and management. I will consider this latter example more extensively in the last section, as it arises naturally in connection with arguments here on the backface. The fluid transition between the three sections of this chapter shows how they are open to one another and closely linked.

From the foregoing discussion, it is easy to see that the photographic surface is far from the only mediator between times and mediums, within any process of image transfer (whether digitisation or reproduction). It cannot alone do justice to the complexity of photographic objects. There are many layered accumulations on the backface – inscriptions, annotations, stickers, and stamps – each with its own origin, testifying to different spaces and times. These accumulations can "give a glimpse into the mental and visual 'laboratory' of the art historian" (Caraffa 2011, 32). To Caraffa's art historian, I would like to add the conservator, the registrar, the archivist, or the artist. Picturing the backface of *Dutch Grey*: we see a coloured assemblage of two studio portraits and two fragments of images (of a taxi driver and a taxi window reflecting New York), all joined by a wooden cross for stability (fig. 3.8). We might infer that this verso refers to the artist's laborato-

ry (the process of making the photowork), because this is not typical visual imagery for Van Elk. However, as he plays with conventions of representations, displays, horizons, versos, and rectos, we must remain alert to what we see. The two pairs (the upper taxi photographs and the two portraits) do not even relate with each other stylistically, and so we might assume that the images choices were made for practical reasons. It could even have been a mounting assistant or photo-lab specialist who used or suggested the reuse of these chromogenic prints to back *Dutch Grey* – we simply do not know. Von Waldthausen, in her condition mapping report, suggests a pragmatic explanation: that the back mount of the four chromogenic prints could have been chosen as a stability measure, to prevent the silver gelatin photographs on the front from pulling or arching. Furthermore, three paper stickers on the frame recount the artist's name, the title, year of origin, scanning codes, and technique, and the inventory number is written directly on the wooden frame.

Research has been conducted on photographs that are neither framed nor mounted and where additional information has been placed directly on the back. Studies investigate how these processes might affect the object – and particularly the surface – through ink migration or fading related to glue application. 'Marking Photographs: The Impact of Ink Stamping Practices' (2007), a research report by conservators at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gives a sense of how an ink stamp, applied to mark the museum's ownership of a newly acquired collection of 8,500 (precious) photographs, interacts with the objects. From what I could find, the only negative impact of the application of adhesives to the verso was a result of the application of animal-based glue, used in the mounting of photographs, rather than sticker applications. The damage was caused in places on the surface behind the glued area, where severe image fade occurred (Norris and Gutierrez 2010, 232–233).

There is, of course, a self-evident difference between photographs that were initially intended as documents for scientific research (for art history, archaeology, anthropology, et al.), and artistic photoworks held in art collections. However, the central argument here is valid for all: they are layered objects with a surface, a subsurface, and a backface all telling their biography, which needs to be considered and preserved as well as the other areas.

INTERFACING WITH CHANGING VIEWS

Having considered *Dutch Grey*'s surface (3.1), its sideface and subsurface (3.2), and its extraface (including the backface), what remains for me to consider in this section is the meaning, or meanings, of this photowork as *inter-face*. As I frequently use the term *interface* to describe the photographic surface, I need to clearly define what, precisely, I mean when I use this term. At the very beginning of this chapter I briefly referred to an original definition in Webster's 1882 dictionary: "a surface forming a common boundary between two bodies, spaces, phases", found in Seung-hoon Jeong's book *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media* (Jeong 2013, 10). While this definition resonates with my discussion, it is not my concern here. In his own introduction, Jeong poses several key questions that will structure the book,

two of which are “what is interface?” and “why interface (theory)?”. His responses offer a condensed overview of various interpretations of interfaces. ‘Humanities Approaches to Interface Theory’ (2011), an article by the American book artist and visual (design) theorist Johanna Drucker, offers similar guidelines. Both authors refer to the prevalent application of the term *interface* as a communication boundary in computer science since the 1960s, concerning Human-Computer Interfaces (HCI), or interfaces between hardware and software (Jeong 2013, 3 and Drucker 2011, 1). However, they also introduce many other examples, including the notion of *cultural interface* which corresponds most directly to the general drive of this section.

In the previous two sections, interaction between viewer and photowork was instrumental to our focus on the extraface of the backface and the space(s) it inhabits. As the backface has granted a first insight into the social biography of the photowork, this section will now unfold and expand the photowork’s different relations through its production, presentation, and conservation. Interfacing with many different actors, the photowork is subject to technological advancements, tastes, (systemic) beliefs, decision makers, personal and institutional motivations, among other things. Through these encounters we can see it as an interface that ultimately, at the end of the chain, inter-faces with a viewer, without necessarily revealing the network behind it. Media theorist Lev Manovich’s broad notion of the *cultural interface* points at all kinds of material devices such as books, cinema, or frame culture, that shape our cultural interactions (as described by Jeong 2013, 4). The cultural interface is therefore automatically a social interface. It represents and organizes knowledge, filtering information, generating communication relationships, and influencing our daily lives (ibid.). As such, I want to conceive of the interface of *Dutch Grey* “as a dynamic space of relations, rather than as a ‘thing’”, to borrow Drucker’s characterization (Drucker 2011, 3).

In concrete terms, *Dutch Grey* entered the museum network in the 1980s, when it was purchased by the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. The museum’s *Search the Collection* web page displays it without its grey frame and it is double-tagged here as belonging to the collection of ‘paintings’ and to the ‘twentieth century’ (fig. 3.19). All of the museum’s other works by Van Elk are presented online in close-up installation shots that include a possible frame or framing device.¹⁷ Of these, the photoworks which have roughly the same composition as *Dutch Grey* (over-painted photographs of one form or another) are either attributed to the paintings collection, or to the collection of works on paper – but never to photographs.¹⁸ The online presentation of, or more accurately reference to, *Dutch Grey*, can be considered as another form of interface with which the viewer can engage. This triggers critical questions concerning how this photowork was assigned these visual and textual characteristics. How and by whom is it shaped? And conversely, how does this ultimately influence our relation with this photowork? To highlight the urgency of my point here, I want to include an apt if more general description of interfaces from Drucker:

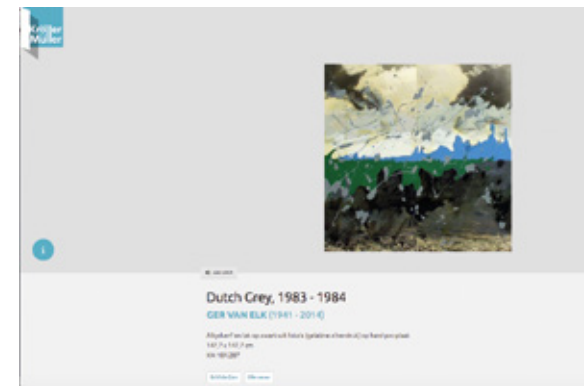


FIGURE 3.19. Screenshot of the “Search the Collection” webpage of *Dutch Grey* by the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands.

The surface of the screen is not merely a portal for access to something that lies beyond or behind this display. Intellectual content and activities do not exist independent of these embodied representations. Interface, like any other component of computational systems, is an artifact of complex processes and protocols, a zone in which our behaviors and actions take place. Interface is *what we read* and *how we read* combined through engagement (2011, 9, emphasis in original).

There may be a simple explanation for why Van Elk’s photoworks are characterised as part of the painting collection, but the decision has disastrous consequences for the photographic material. In the past, (photo)works by Van Elk were perceived as conceptual art, and therefore, logically, acquisitioned by the curatorial department of paintings and sculpture. In the book *Fotografie in het Stedelijk* (2009), which reflects on the history of the photography collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, former curator Hripsimé Visser discusses this conundrum. Her account of the Stedelijk Museum can exemplify the institutional categorization of *Dutch Grey* (and many other works) as painting – as the problem pertains to many museums beyond Visser’s subject. She explains that the Stedelijk Museum aligns its collection policy with the artist’s own conception of his/her/their practice. The intention is to move beyond restrictive modernist categories, to address the hybridity of art forms – the different forms that can present themselves in a single work. Where the artist regards him/her/themself as painter, though working almost exclusively with photographs, his/her/their artworks will be held in the storage space for paintings (Visser 2009, 175).¹⁹ Visser concedes that the museum attached such importance to this policy that it completely disregarded the specific conservation needs of artworks (ibid.). Its rigid policy has led to the serious photographic degradation of some of Van Elk’s photoworks, including the striking discolouration of *Russian Diplomacy*, the case study in my last chapter. Van Elk’s photoworks were (and are still) held for over thirty years in conditions appropriate for paintings, but in no way generative to the conservation of silver gelatin photographs or chromogenic photographs, which demand much cooler storage space.

The Stedelijk Museum occupies a special position as the first museum of modern art on the European continent to collect photography. It started acquiring photographs in 1958, taking direct inspiration from the Department of Photography of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, instituted in 1940. In consequence, photography inhabits an important role at the Stedelijk Museum. There are cooled storage spaces specifically designed for the conservation of photographs. Other art museums, such as the Kröller-Müller Museum, cannot offer this. Collecting photographs is a young endeavour when compared to the collection of other artistic disciplines. Moreover, the scientific study of photographic archives and collections, and the academic discipline of photography conservation, have only really emerged since the millennium – they are still evolving.

The photograph as collectable object is remarkable for several reasons. Here I will pick out the most prominent three. First, as Elizabeth Edwards describes:

Photographs are the only class of museum object that is simultaneously a collectable item (a significant object) and a tool of management (used to record and present objects within the museum from conservation reports to websites), whether we are considering the 1860s or contemporary uses (Edwards in Bärnighausen et al. 2019, 68).

This double presence of photographs within a museum is interesting, as in some cases the status of certain photographs has shifted from categorization as documentation material to categorization as object. Edwards therefore writes of the “fluidity of the collection” (ibid.). In this fluidity, the photograph manifests as something that interfaces with different approaches throughout the years. A Stedelijk librarian, Louis Kloet, was the initiator of the museum’s photography collection – in the beginning, the museum saw their photography holdings as belonging to the basic range of tasks of the library and documentation department (Visser 2009, 104). Kloet initially chose to organize the photographs on card indexes listing the subject-matter(s) and the photographer’s name. Visitors to the reading room would have access to these cards and could use them to request the photograph for study (ibid.). Over time, Kloet collaborated with the museum’s director Willem Sandberg to develop a system in which photographs were mounted on cardboard and subsequently on aluminium plates which could be attached to the exhibition wall with suction cups (2009, 108). Photographs could be stored in the archive or exhibited like this, without needing passe-partouts or other framing media. Nevertheless, this approach involved the collection and exhibition of the photographic *image* – not so much of a photograph as an object. To return then to Edwards’s description of “the museum effect” (Edwards 2019, 70), we can see here how institutional decision-making creates a certain way of seeing the photographs by making, translating, and consolidating them into a particular kind of object (or document). Caraffa warns us of the “uncertain status of photographs in museums: objects? documents? artistic statements? mere information?” (Caraffa 2020, 91), as an epistemological uncertainty that puts them very low on the hierarchical ranking of museum values.

The second remarkable trait of the photograph as collectable object is that a photograph, or more precisely, a photographic image, can pass through multiple lives as it exists across several collections, taking on different dimensions and materializations. One example involves an experiment that was conducted in the context of MoMA’s research project Object:Photo (see also chapter 1). Ten image pairs of duplicate prints were selected from two American photography collections (The Thomas Walther Collection at The Museum of Modern Art, and the photography collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), and carefully compared with each other. Paul Messier’s article ‘Image Isn’t Everything: Revealing Affinities across Collections through the Language of the Photographic Print’ (2014) offers a profound insight (both visual and analytical) into the process and the discoveries of this comparative analysis (fig. 3.20). Most pairs revealed manifold variations: in cropping, colour, size, title, and even dating. One of the researchers’ concerns was “whether or not the paired prints share the same or a substantially different material history, and thus were the product of different intentions on the part of the photographer” (Messier 2014, 2). Messier concludes that

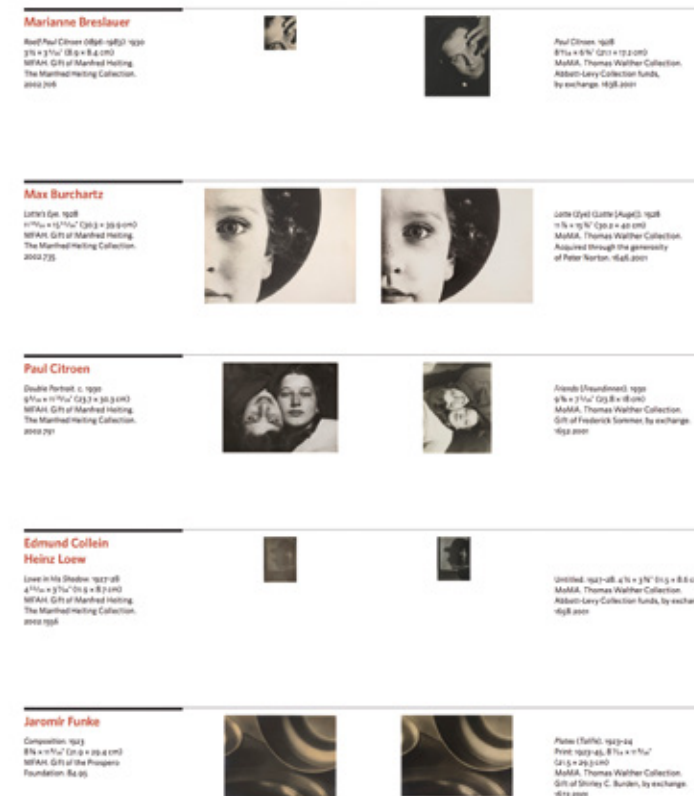


FIGURE 3.20. The prints of five identical or very similar photographs in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (left), and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (right). Shown to scale. In “Image Isn’t Everything: Revealing Affinities across Collections through the Language of the Photographic Print” by Paul Messier, 3. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014.

[...] the basic visual characteristics of a gelatin silver paper can be used to reveal shared material histories of prints across collections. The similarities observed and measured through this work remained discoverable despite impacts of natural aging, deterioration, and possible conservation treatment, all of which can alter highlight color, gloss, and possibly surface texture (2014, 10).

Here he addresses how differing conservational circumstances and treatments can lead to differences between prints that were initially produced to be “similar” objects. These marks refer the viewer to the prints’ different itineraries through spaces and convictions.

The third remarkable feature of the photograph as a collectable object is its ontological potential for (technical) reproduction. The potential to reproduce the image lasts for as long as the negative is available, and often also for as long as there is a photographer or artist, or an appointed proxy, who can give consent. This is the case despite the many considerations that mitigate this potential in the context of collection and conservation management. Monica Marchesi’s dissertation ‘Forever Young: The Reproduction of Photographic Artworks as a Conservation Strategy’ (University of Leiden, 2017) critically analyses reproduction potentiality both theoretically and practically, drawing on her professional background as a conservator. When considering the interfacial character of the photowork in this context, what consequences do protective measures such as those as studied by Marchesi have on the photograph’s itinerary through time and space? Can this itinerary be said to end when the photograph is replaced by a new print? The question confronts us with the vulnerability of the photowork as interface, not solely as material, but also in its engagement(s) with decision-makers.²⁰ Sometimes, a reproduction is realized, as with a photowork that Ger van Elk produced for the Stedelijk Museum, *C’est moi qui fais la musique* (1973), or his photo sculpture *The wider the flatter* (1972, reproduced in 2007), now held in the Kröller-Müller Museum (and critically discussed by conservator Sanneke Stigter in an article ‘To replace or not to replace? Photographic material in site-specific conceptual art’, 2005). In these cases, reproduction techniques differ from the original processes to such an extent that we must speak of a new object with a new itinerary. The ‘old’ discarded photowork, if retained by the museum, continues on its itinerary as an archival referent, hidden from public display. As Marchesi writes, it undergoes a “[...] subsequent demotion of status from artwork to archival reference” (Marchesi 2017, 260). In a coda, she recounts the history of a set of reproductions of works by Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra that originated as chromogenic prints in the 1990s and have now being reproduced as inkjet prints. As part of her practice, Dijkstra often chooses to have the original discoloured prints of her works destroyed in her own presence, however, Marchesi suggests that “[i]n the event of the reproduction within a museum setting, she might contemplate the possibility of the original versions being kept as documentation” (ibid.). Keeping a photowork in the dark of the archive might be preferable to its complete annihilation. But in light of my treatment and appreciation of the photograph as object versus as document, the irony speaks for itself.

These three facets of the photograph as interface, in a network of changing collection and conservation strategies, offer incontrovertible testimony to James Hevia’s *photography complex* as something that extends beyond the photograph’s genesis and past influence to reach into its present and future. Although his argument concerns documentary photographs of the Boxer-Era in China (1900–1901), the photography complex has become a theoretical landmark in the study of photo archives and archived photographs, and it is equally appropriate for photoworks in artistic contexts. For Hevia, the photograph is “a kind of metonymic sign of the photography complex in operation” (Hevia 2009, 81). Any Latourian-inspired actants (human or nonhuman) who contribute to its shooting, production, dissemination, and preservation, are contributors to its photography complex. All these elements of the photography complex become necessary when we seek to extend the (often very limiting) tripartite appellation of the process: photographer, camera, and photograph. They posit “a more intricate set of relationships” (ibid.).

Jeong, in his introduction, suggests that the window can be regarded as “a primal, primitive, precinematic interface that invites the viewer to pass from inside to outside” (Jeong 2013, 5). With photography’s transparency claim in mind, the photograph is often aligned with the window. I would tend to have reservations about this comparison. But thinking of how the photowork (and its surface) mediates between many spaces, times, and relations, it might help to consider it as this window interface. The content ‘behind’ moves with the changing environment and the person who looks at it. Jeong describes the modern view of the window as an analogy to seeing: “[it] sheds light on the physiological interaction between the observer’s body and the street’s commotion” (ibid.). And as Emmanuel Alloa has proposed, the photographic object offers us potential visions. When we *see-with* the photowork, in its all-encompassing appearance, there is always the possibility of an ideal vision, where the viewers discern new horizons – those of the photowork’s very personal itineraries – as they look.

To summarise, then, the image we see on a photograph is not so much a surface phenomenon, but rather the result of our perception of the accumulation of miniscule image particles, stacked over one another on different levels *within* various gelatin layers. This stacking happens across the entire thickness and consistency of the emulsion layer, constituting a material *thickness of field* that creates the image of any and every analogue photograph. The applications that are made to a photograph in a photowork (paint, other photographs, or even (back)mounting) will contribute not only to the photograph’s thickness but also to its temporal layering. While the photograph bears a visible reference to a particular past situation, the hybrid additions trigger other temporalities, ranging from the creation process of the photowork right up to the present moment in which the viewer confronts the work. These temporal strata are always linked to the spaces in which the photowork’s biography is inscribed.

Whereas the surface of a photowork is manifestly unique (like a painting’s surface), the photographic surface is also unique –

even when considering multiple prints from the same negative – as I have demonstrated in the course of this chapter. Both the photograph and the photowork register, interiorize, and exteriorize, all their temporal and local circumstances. The inside was never invisible, but we need visible outer phenomena, such as photographic degradation, to open a more comprehensive perception of photographic sediments. In the next and final chapter, I will suggest how we might adapt our perception to apprehend the clues given by our mutative photographic material.

ENDNOTES

1
See the detailed report ‘*Dutch Grey Condition Mapping*’ by Clara von Waldthausen, June 4 and 6, 2013.

2
This can be read in the third and fourth chapter of Bas Reijers’s Ph.D. thesis: ‘How to Preserve Photographic Artworks for the Future: Chemical and Physical Interactions and Implications for Conservation Strategies’ (University of Utrecht, 2017).

3
Several exhibitions were dedicated to Van Elk’s concern for the horizon, including *The Horizon: A Mental Perspective* at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in 1999, *Search for a Horizon* at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam also in 1999, and *The Horizon and Beyond* in 2015, at Van Elk’s gallery, Borzo in Amsterdam.

4
For further reading on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s take on the phenomenological concept of the horizon, see the section ‘3.2 The Happening of Tradition’ of the entry on Gadamer on the webpage of Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, first published March 3, 2003; substantive revision August 22, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/> (accessed August 7, 2020).

5
Visser, Jeroen, “Ger van Elk, kunstenaar,” 1986, 16:39 to 18:08, <https://vimeo.com/104600912> (accessed December 27, 2020). Framed in a grey-coloured wooden frame, similarities form an association between the two works (same subject, similar materials used), but with the latter, Van Elk is more obviously toying with perspective: he uses an asymmetrical frame. While the overpainted photowork consists of two parallel mounted rectangular strokes of silver gelatin paper, the frame is moulded in perspective. On the right, the width of the frame is much wider than it is on the left. This creates a perspectival impression, as though the viewer was peering via a side-angled view while standing directly in front of the image. It creates an unsettling visual effect by provoking a question over which perspectival reference

point to take: the horizontal line of the Dutch landscape, or the side-view suggested by the framing? It seems impossible to take in both at once – as with the famous duck/rabbit image, initially published in the late nineteenth-century humour magazine *Fliegende Blätter* and later used by Wittgenstein, in which we see either a rabbit or a duck, but never both.

6
Crimp calls for the uncovering of these “strata of representation” for the following reason: “It is in this sense that the radically new approach to mediums is important. If it had been characteristic of the formal descriptions of modernist art that they were topographical, that they mapped the surfaces of artworks in order to determine their structures, then it has now become necessary to think of description as a stratigraphic activity. Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture” (Crimp 1979, 87).

7
The brightening occurs because barium sulphate is present in the form of a fine precipitate that scatters light back through the silver image layer.

8
The layers of a very simplified chromogenic print are three colour emulsion layers (cyan, magenta, and yellow), plus a paper layer (fig.3.7), which is most likely sealed by two polyethylene layers (layers 20 & 21). If not, an overcoat is also added (layer 25).

9
This is not to be conflated with Edward Casey’s distinction between internal and external horizons.

10
Edmund Husserl’s philosophy of images, set out in his lecture series of 1904–5, *Phantasie und Bildbewusstsein*, delineates a tripartite structure of image constitution: the physical image-thing (*Bildträger*); the image-object (*Bildobjekt*), that which represents something; and the image-subject (*Bildsubjekt*), that which is represented.

In his dissertation on the materiality of the image and the body in the artistic practice of Francis Bacon, Marcel Finke has conducted a thorough analysis of Husserl’s theoretical division (Finke 2015, 169–238). His third chapter on Bacon and image theory considers the problematic conception of the image’s duplicity. Finke’s argument leans on Bacon’s practice of drawing inspiration from photographs that he modified (folded, cut, assembled, et cetera), for his paintings. Finke’s treatment uses these fragmented photographs to reveal the practical difficulty of a twofold separation ‘in’ the image, for the sake of theory. He discusses and criticizes the concept of the image’s duplicity, as differently formulated by Hans Belting, Hans Jonas, Reinhard Brandt, Lambert Wiesing, Edmund Husserl, and Richard Wollheim. Finke’s final argument is that the stable image and its unstable material carrier are inseparable (2015, 28). Ultimately, I seek to extend this argument through application to deteriorating photographs.

11
For further reading on free fatty acid efflorescences on *Dutch Grey* and other photoworks by Ger van Elk, see the third and fourth chapters of Bas Reijers’s dissertation ‘How to Preserve Photographic Artworks for the Future: Chemical and Physical Interactions and Implications for Conservation Strategies’ (University of Utrecht, 2017).

12
The other moment in *Camera Lucida* in which Barthes explicitly considers the intractable character of photography is right at the beginning. Barthes here admits that his attempt to theoretically investigate the essence of photography is inherently paradoxical (Barthes 1981, 20).

13
Here follows a selected overview of *Kinselmeer* works, with size and technical details if/ as provided by the collection or gallery, or from the exhibition catalogue *The Horizon, a Mental Perspective* (Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 1999): *Kinselmeer*, 1984, gelatin silver prints, paint and varnish, 104.5×175.5×6.5cm, Museum De Lakenhal Leiden; *Kinselmeer*, 1985, polyurethane paint on b/w photo, in wooden frame,

185×292×12cm, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (fig. 3.15b); *Het Kinselmeer (Stompe Toren bij Ransdorp)*, 1996, Cibachrome rolled in Plexiglass, 76×145×6.5cm, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; *Kinselmeer, Rode wolken (Transparant 1)*, 1997, retouch ink on colour photo on cibachrome between plexiglas, 39×154.5×6.5cm, Rabo Kunstcollectie; *Kinselmeer (Transparent #3)*, 1997, colour on Cibachrome between Plexiglass, 40×155×7cm, SMAK, Ghent; *Kinselmeer*, 1997, Cibachrome between Plexiglass, 100×191.8×9cm, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; *Kinselmeer (Kinsel Sea)*, 1997, overpainted Cibachrome photograph inside plexiglass, 100.5×192×8.5cm (as displayed in the exhibition catalogue of *Broken landscapes: Ger Dekkers, Jan Dibbets, Ger van Elk, Jaap van den Ende*, 2015); *Kinselmeer (Transparant 4) K-97-9T*, 1997, retouche ink on colour photo on cibachrome between plexiglas, 39×154.5×4.5cm, mBochum Vermittlung, Bochum; *Kinselmeer, Stompe Toren*, 1998, overpainted Cibachrome between Plexiglass, 76×145 x 6.5cm, private collection Germany; *Kinselmeer, Stompe Toren, ex’99 1b, K-99-3T*, 1999, retouche ink on cibachrome between Plexiglas, 39×154.5×6.5cm, private collection Amsterdam; *Kinselmeer*, 2000, Amsterdam Museum; *Kinselmeer Watou*, 2000, gouache and ink on Cibachrome, 77×145cm, private collection (sold by BorzoGallery); *Untitled (Kinselmeer)*, 2007, retouched with ink on colour photograph between Plexiglass in two parts, 74×170×7.4cm, Grimm Gallery; *Untitled II (Kinselmeer)*, 2013–2015, retouched with ink on colour photograph between plexiglass, 47×90×5.5cm, Grimm Gallery; *Untitled III (Kinselmeer)*, 2013–2015, Retouched with ink on colour photograph between plexiglass, 47×90×5.5cm, Grimm Gallery; *Untitled IV (Kinselmeer)*, 2013–2015, 47×90×5.5cm, BorzoGallery.

14
Her argument is developed in the second chapter of the open access publication *Photo-Objects: On the Materiality of Photographs and Photo Archives in the Humanities and Sciences* (2019), written with three co-authors.

After *The Return of Pierre Bonnard, 1917–1971*, Van Elk presented some other works in which the back appears to be the front. One of these is *The Last Adieu* (1975), three paintings shown from the back only. As Dutch art historian José Boyens explains in her article ‘Ger van Elk Was Here’, published in the magazine *The Low Countries* (1994, No. 2, 215–222), this was the point from which Van Elk developed a concept of the “sandwich”, which he employed in many works from 1991 onwards (1994, 221).

A brief reference to Camiel van Winkel’s book *The Regime of Visibility* (2005).

This is interesting as it assumes that the frame is not part of the photowork, which is likely to be a mistaken assumption given that Van Elk handcrafted the frame himself. With other similar photoworks in mind (*Dutch Gray*, 1984 and *Kinselmeer*, 1985) including their distinct perspectival frames, I would even argue that *Dutch Grey*’s frame is an “intra-compositional” frame (conceived as part of the work) as Monica Marchesi explains the differences by basing her arguments on the dissertation ‘The Reconfigured Frame: Various Forms and Functions of the Physical Frame in Contemporary Art’ by Ian Geraghty (2008) (Marchesi 2017, 170–171).

One paradoxical exception exists: *Black Landscape (Clermont Ferrand-10 JPG)*, 2008, from the *Conclusion* series. This photowork is tagged only under *photographs*, yet technically/materially it is an inkjet print on linen canvas overpainted with acrylic paint. This means that it is far less sensitive to higher temperature or light than *Dutch Grey*, which of course has silver gelatin photographs as basis.

Visser identifies another reason why an artist who worked with photography might have chosen to call him/her/themself a conceptual artist or painter: for a long time, Dutch state funding excluded (documentary) photography, while ‘art-with-photography’ and film could be endowed with financial support (Visser 2009, 175).

For this reason Marchesi developed a ‘Conservation Stakeholders’ Identification Form’ as part of her research. The intention was “to systematically organize and determine the individuals that are involved or should ideally be involved in the decision-making concerning a conservation treatment” (Marchesi 2017, 303).