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Leiden
The Netherlands

The photographic surface: between substances and spaces

Gräfin von Courten, C.J.V.

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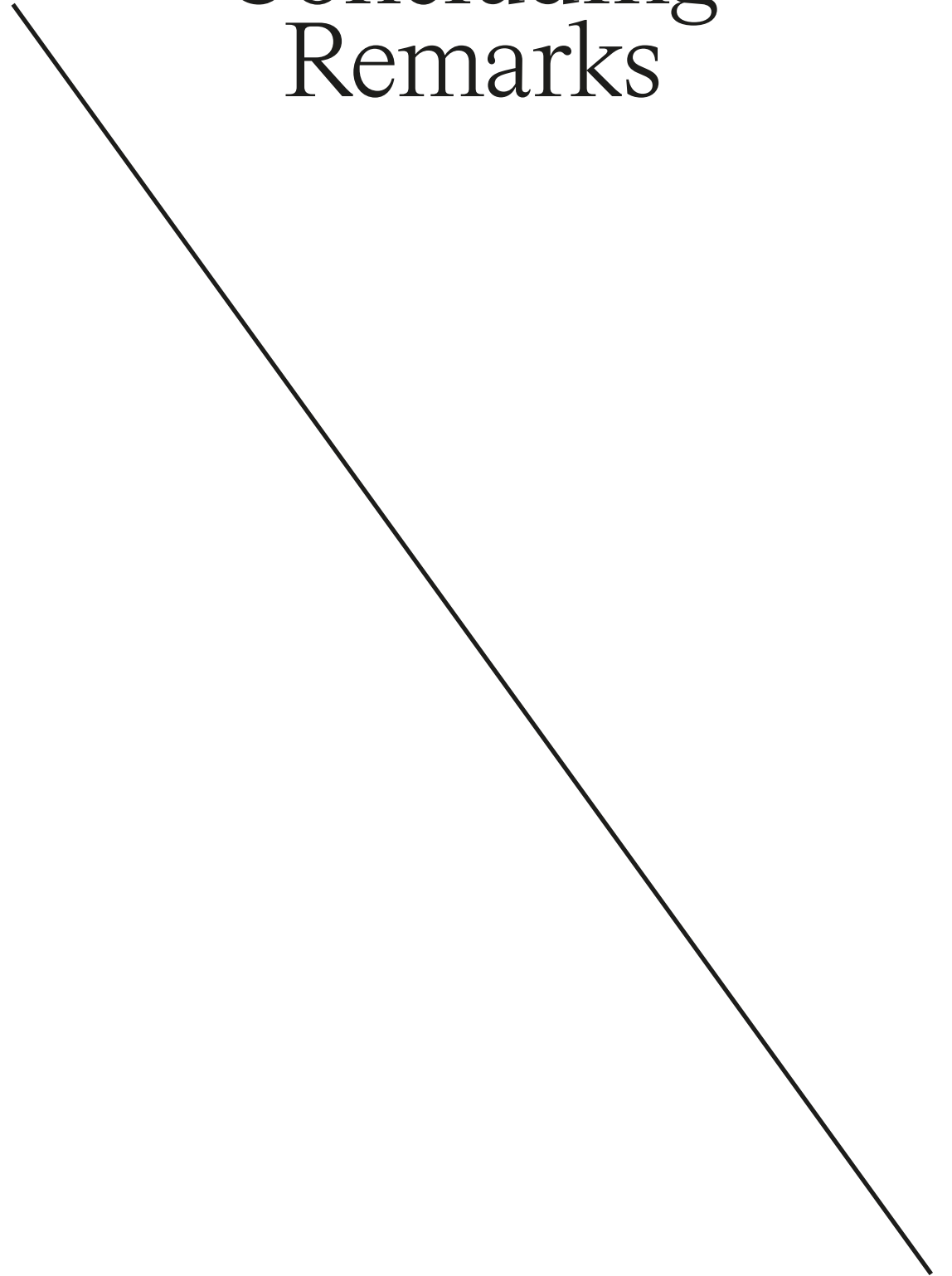
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Concluding Remarks



Photographs are *not* significant surfaces. This study contests the dissertation's opening sentence. To equate images with surfaces in the context of photography, as Vilém Flusser does in his *Philosophy of Photography*, is simply wrong. This dissertation reveals that, if anything, the surface's material *performs* the image – and this is what renders its significance. The performance participates in the photograph's continual movement – of becoming and passing, or appearing and fading – despite the (for the present) static appearance of photographic objects. Making an appropriate response to the conceptual and conservational challenges of the three case studies, then, means establishing a new definition of the photograph, inspired by new materialism, as an object of *becoming*, rather than of being. This is my dissertation's central contribution to the corpus of photo-theoretical knowledge.

Three hybrid photoworks form the core of my research: *Crowhurst II* (2007) by Tacita Dean; *Dutch Grey* (1983–84); and *Russian Diplomacy* (1974), both by Ger van Elk, all painted analogue photographs from the second half of the twentieth century. These three works were the starting point for my study of this wide and varied field of artworks known as photoworks. My intention was to open a methodological pathway for future researchers: I adopted a multi-angled analysis of photoworks, panning back and forth between material, technical, theoretical studies, and the object. The subject's hybridity raises theoretical questions that can throw new light on existing theories.

My first two chapters offered a deep and detailed exploration of the physical and material characteristics of *Crowhurst II*, and of photographs in general. In discovering how the photographic surface does *not* physically resemble the photographed textures, nor does its texture undergo physical change, I was able to conclude that the prevalent theoretical analogies for the photograph – as trace, as footprint, or as imprint – are not apt. Only the composition of the gelatin surface layer changes after exposure and development, and this is why I introduced a new conception of the photograph as *charge*. Without changing texture, the photograph is charged (physically and visually) with the image of the photographed through the workings of light.

Material textures (of the carrier mediums' surfaces) and visual textures (grains or dye clouds) literally mould the textures of the photographic image. They come with meaningful biographical information concerning provenance and maintenance – the story of the photograph. These diverse material forms and indexicalities enrich the subject matter of photographs and bring new insights on the unique nature of original prints – whether or not there is a novel application of the kind that we see in *Crowhurst II*. Intended and unintended marks may be perceived to damage the photographic surface, but they also broaden the content of the photograph as (functional or affectionate) interactions add layers of meanings. These marks of interaction act as physical *indices* that refer to their causes and thereby direct the viewer's attention to the (social) biography of the photograph and the photowork.

Having approached *Crowhurst II* through tactile perception in the second chapter, I came to the conclusion that it is a *haptic photowork*, stimulating an embodied and thereby affected perception within the viewer. This effect stems from the photowork's unprotected

open surface, a haptic display which defies common conservational framing practices and acknowledges the presence of both bodies: that of the photowork and that of the viewer. From here, I explored wider tactile engagements with photographs through moments of creation (in the darkroom), handling, consumption, and affect – all “haptic temporalities” that the photograph shares with different beholders in different environments throughout its existence. The more I looked into these encounters, the more the photographic process appeared as a primarily haptic endeavour, despite the prominence of its visual agency.

As I sought new ways to relate and to conceptualize the invisible that is conjured by the photographic surface, I arrived at a characterization of the photographic surface as a form of *horizon-interface*. A horizon dominates *Dutch Grey*, the case study of my third chapter. In a landscape, horizon is what separates the visible and invisible. It is subject to the position of the person who perceives it and conversely, the person's view is determined by the horizon. I concluded that we cannot characterize the photowork's subsurface as merely invisible, but as a matter of our own blindness. We find redress for this blindness by taking different viewing angles and by deepening our material apprehension of a photograph as multi-layered object.

A photographic image, as it is perceived, is produced by an accumulation of miniscule image particles that are stacked on one another to different levels within various gelatin layers. The fact that this stacking concerns the entire thickness and consistency of the emulsion layers gave rise to my characterization of the photograph's inside as a material *thickness of field* which creates the image of any analogue photograph. My attention to and analysis of this dimensionality (at a microscopic scale as much as on the scale of the whole object) led to a three-dimensional reimagining of another photo-theoretical concept, the *blind field*. Historically characterized as the off-frame – the invisible scene just outside the picture frame – I introduced a new notion of the blind field as part of the photograph's in-frame. This notion encompasses those elements that are not visible to us when we look at a photograph, but are nonetheless present in its depicted depth and its material thickness.

Photography's eidetic impression of a moment frozen in time annihilates our awareness of the object itself as something that is not still. Although the history of photographic inventions can be described as a history of fixing (in the sense of arresting) images, this study, and especially my investigation of the colouration of the final case study, *Russian Diplomacy*, indicates that this aspiration to fixity is never guaranteed. Chemical and circumstantial interplay within and between many factors can bring about change. The photographic surface as *reflecting* as well as *acting* force (re)acts to internal and external processes (and chemical bonds) over the long-term development of the photograph. This can hardly be inhibited, if perhaps decelerated. Hence, one of the key observations: that the surface *performs* the image rather than *becomes* that which it depicts.

The intrinsically processual nature of the photographic surface finds a parallel in processes of meaning creation. The shifting constellations of the photograph's make-up, rooted in the passage of time and in environmental circumstances, affect relations and conser-

vational convictions, and cause them to shift accordingly. A responsive process also comes into play: when cultural and institutional perceptions of what photographic materiality is or ought to be change, this can have physical consequences (via decision-making and treatment) affecting the conditions of individual photographs.

This dissertation is dedicated to a small subset of photoworks – painted analogue photographs made between 1974 and 2007 and in two cases mounted and framed – however, many of my observations apply to other photowork forms too. The Science4Arts research team encountered some of these forms during the search for our central project case studies. Participating Dutch museums listed potential photoworks for us to study. Only a fraction of the photoworks in these collections had the surface applications which the research team was investigating (such as paint, paper, pen(cil), varnish, or stickers). Other photoworks were characterised by unique printing methods (such as Polaroid prints or textiles), or by their mounting, framing, or backing material (think of collages, or photographs glued on textiles, cardboard, aluminium, wood), and there were also face-mounted contemporary works.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for the processual nature of photographs, and for the photographic biography as something that is written in and of the work's distinct visual and material textures, its haptic affective value, and its instability – or more positively, its mutability. This understanding is applied here to a differentiated (material) understanding of a complex photowork, but it is equally relevant to a 'simple' framed chromogenic colour photograph (such as Rineke Dijkstra's prints from the 1990s, held now at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). Therefore my analysis of the case studies also contributes to our ideas about, and understanding of, photographs in general. Ultimately, I believe that an appropriately differentiated engagement with photoworks and photographs will only come about when there is a meaningful shift in our ontological thinking. This concerns all players: the broad public, curators and conservators, academics, and artists. It may be that my ambition is somewhat idealistic. Nonetheless, it only becomes more poignant as we draw closer to a future in which photoworks look set to become (semi-)historic objects.

My distinct point of departure was the analogue photograph. However, future researchers could do important work by extending this investigation (of photographic materiality in its present state) to the digital realm. Yet other areas of research could come to life in the future, given the referential dynamic between photography and painting, which comes physically and visually into play in all the three case studies, and given the ways in which the different ambitions of the two colliding media mingle indexicality and intentionality, therein changing ontological convictions. The double figure of transparency and the opaque, which literally dominates my case studies, could be another subject of extended interest in the future, as could a further exploration of the ethics of conservation and collection practices and policies, through which photoworks could be studied with a focus on the tension between nature (deterioration processes of materials) versus culture (the museum as medium).

The most resonant insight that I take from my decade of research is my growing respect for the complexity of this familiar object, the analogue photograph, and also for humans – sensitive and sensing beings who register all kinds of sensible, visible, and invisible information that lies beyond our awareness, as we encounter photographs in private and photoworks in exhibition spaces. What rests is my profound humility towards the coming into being, the becoming, and the vanishing of all that concerns life, an unfolding and thereby moving process that I have also found in photographs.