The Emblematic Divide

Contemplating Reality, the Imaginary and Perception in Photographic Practices

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Seminar XI*, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1977) recounts the ancient Greek parable of the contest between the Zeuxis and Parrhasios, two artists competing to paint the most convincing trompe l'oeil painting. In the first instance, Zeuxis painted grapes so perfectly that birds flew down from the sky to peck on them. Satisfied with his undertaking, he then turns to Parrhasios and asks him to lift the veil to see the painting behind it – failing to realise that the veil itself is the lifelike painting. Naturally, Parrhasios won the competition. This is not due to any superior technical mastery, but because his painting reveals an interesting conception relating to the very nature of human perception. That is to say, perception is never 'neutral', we never simply see reality 'as it is' – there is always an underlying psychic economy of (unconscious) hopes, fears, and desires which structures our very perception of reality itself.

For the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2012:692), this circulation of psychic mechanisms becomes evident through the act of concealment: "the image/screen/veil itself creates the illusion that there is something behind it… with the veil, there is always 'something left to the imagination'". Indeed, the veil causes us to wonder what lies beyond its surface, it triggers our desires to see that which is hidden. And, since

we are unable to perceive what is concealed, the veil opens up the space for the imagination to fill in this lack. In this sense, the 'gaps' or 'blind spots' in our subjective perception are always to be supplemented by the imagination.

The notion that the imaginary-space intervenes in our perception of ordinary reality has an interesting disposition when located within current photographic discursive frameworks. For the photograph has historically been conceived as an unmediated transparent 'window onto reality'. At the same time, many contemporary artists have adopted the opposite position, "embracing the instability of representation, even its decidedly fictional status", as put by the art historian T.J. Demos (2005:64). The present body of work seeks to escape both camps: the photograph is considered as neither clearly objective nor openly fictional. Rather, the photograph is here conceptualized as occupying a liminal space between the real and the imaginary. The practical components underlying this theoretical exploration include digital photographic prints, small-scale abstract photo-based images hand-printed in the darkroom, and two photobooks. Behind all of these aesthetic strategies, the same basic matrix of inquiry can be discerned: how can the positioning of photographic image in this site of 'inbetweenness' open up the space for new modes of visibility and create new forms of perception of given social realities?

It is from this standpoint that my visual research principally consists of photographs of walls, gates and fences in two disparate social spaces in the city of Cape Town: an affluent suburb at the foot of Table Mountain and a working-class suburb in an area commonly designated as the Cape Flats.
For the curator Okwui Enwezor (2008), the wall is the "emblematic division", the structural feature of South African social landscape. It is for this reason that the crucial point to be made with my photographic practice is neither to describe specific socioeconomic realities nor to produce a comment on the cultural, political, and economic effects of the city's spatial or structural configuration. Rather, the point is, to put it in Rancierian terms, to contemplate the "framework of distributions of space and the weaving of fabrics of perception" (Rancière, 2010:141).

This document is divided into four sections corresponding to different discursive strategies, in which, the intersecting fields of the real and the imaginary are positioned in relation to photographic practices.
In Section I, *The Empty Frame*, I look at the 'politics of representation' and how this discursive framework has

shaped photographic discourse over recent decades and its relevance to contemporary South African photographic practices. From here, I turn to the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell who suggests that there is one fundamental presupposition underlying photographic procedures which has not yet been adequately scrutinised – that is, the assumption that the photographic medium is ontologically linked to realism. As the conditions of contemporaneity are more and more characterised by widespread anxieties and general uncertainties, Mitchell argues that contemporary photographic practices should engage in what he calls 'philosophical realism' – a realism that questions the very coordinates of reality itself. It is from this position that I locate the artist Sigmar Polke. His little-known photographic works are characterised by chemical 'stains', which functions as formal devices enabling him to undermine the unexamined assumptions imbedded in the representations of social realities.

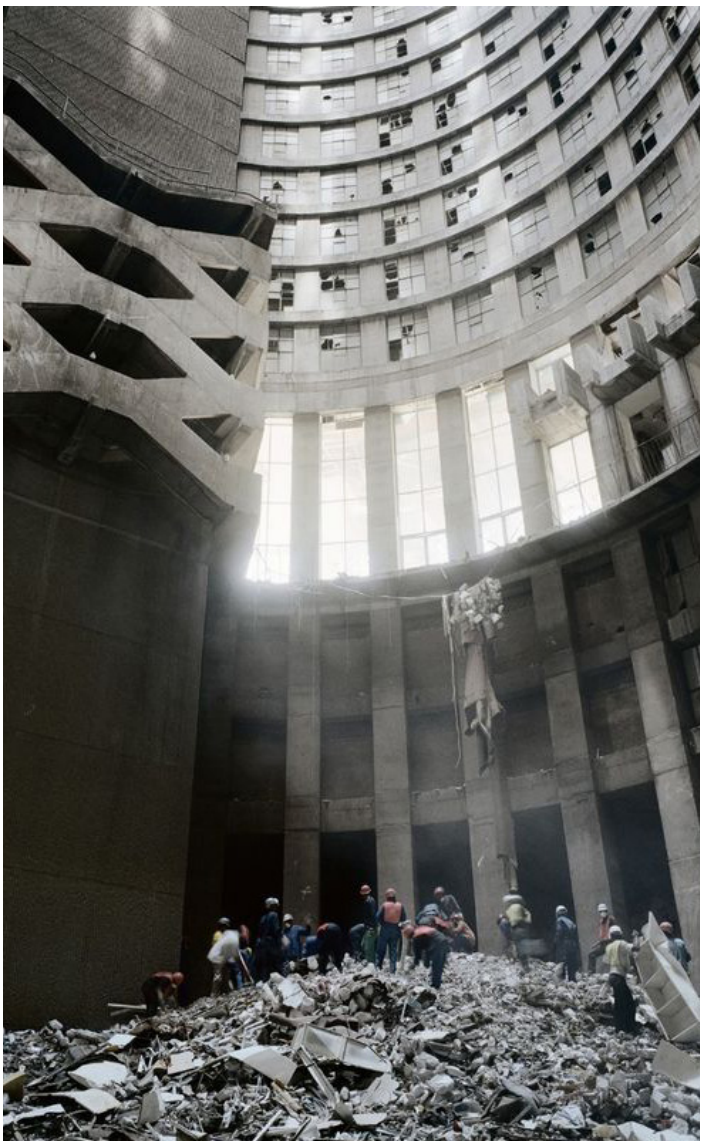
In Section II, *The Invisible Frame*, I consider the window as a metaphor for the photographic image, specifically through the early photographic negatives of windows by the inventor William Henry Fox Talbot. The argument put forward here is that Talbot's photographs of windows lend themselves closer to Romanticist subjective forms of knowledge, rather than Realist accounts of objectivity. It is against this background that I locate Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'optical unconscious'. For the critical theorist, the photographic medium has profound links to psychic structures, in which, photographic processes are animated and shaped by "internal mechanisms of perception" (Smith & Sliwinski, 2007:9). I also touch upon the political consequences of Benjamin's framework, in which, the photograph holds "magical" qualities to see beyond the surface of social reality and reveal its underlying structures (Benjamin, 1972:7).

In Section III, *Modifying the Visible*, I look at David Goldblatt, the photographer *par excellence* who revealed the hidden tensions and underlying structures of South African society. More specifically, I examine the opening photographs in his book *Intersections*, and how they epitomize his approach to 'modifying the visible' through a distinct form of photographic perception. From this point, I expound the formal characteristics and narrative contents of my own body of work presented for this exhibition. Here, walls and fences, or the 'emblematic divisions', are conceived as a kind of veil, a socio-symbolic structure and psychical edifice which divides and excludes, but at the same time, conceals and acts as a screen for the projection of psychic formations (unconscious desires, fears and anxieties).

Finally, in Section IV, *The Excess in Process,* I consider, from a theoretical perspective, the notion of 'process' which underlies the creative act. From the standpoint of the artist Penny Siopis, I examine the potentialities of 'meaning' arising through the very process itself. It is from this position that I locate my two photobooks and contemplate the possibilities of engaging in "a new scenery of the visible and a new dramaturgy of the intelligible" (Rancière, 2010:140)

I

The Empty Screen



Subotzky, M. & Waterhouse, P. (2014) *Ponte City* (detail).

1. The Paradoxes of Documentary Photography

In the essay *Acropolis now: Ponte City as 'portrait of a city'* (2017), the artist and academic Svea Josephy analyses the photographic project *Ponte City* (2014) by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse from the perspective of its visual representation. In this regard, Josephy (2017:80) makes a pertinent point:

> There are very real questions to be asked about the complexities and politics of photographing in South Africa. In this decolonial moment, in this contested space, it is important to think through the complexities of race and class, which are very much present in this project.
> It is important to acknowledge Subotzky's contested position as a white photographer and Waterhouse's situation as a British artist, both outsiders to Ponte and Johannesburg, and what this might have meant in the photographic and archive encounter.

Here, Josephy brings us to the crux of the matter of the politics of visual representation – that is, the premise that documentary images are by no means objective artifacts, but always linked to a specific set of power dynamics.

The problem with the notion that one can adequately and respectfully represent the narratives of a multiplicity of subjectivities was eloquently put by Craig Owens (1985:69) in the essay *The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism*:

> Despite his or her benevolence in representing those who have been denied access to the means of representation, the photographer inevitably functions as an agent of the system of power that silenced these people in the first place. Thus, they are twice victimized: first by society, and then by the photographer who presumes the right to speak on their behalf.

This critique largely resonates within our postcolonial context, in which photography would become widely problematized due to its "weighty legacy of objectification and ethnographic essentialism that permeates the long history of colonialism" (Garb, 2011:305). In his essay *The Uses of Afro-pessimism* (2006:11), Okwui Enwezor argues that this legacy continues to operate today – particularly in the global media – in which, stereotypical, over-simplified and distorted narratives of the African continent have yet to fade away.

As Ponte City would become a projection of the political, social and economic tensions within Johannesburg's recent history – ranging from being an icon for white middle-class aspirations to a dystopian symbol of urban decay, criminality and disenfranchisement – Josephy (2017:80) goes on to ask if

> whether or not the artists have avoided voyeurism in their careful curation of a decaying, post-apocalyptic apartment bloc where people eke out a precarious existence and inadvertently become the focus of an aesthetic object. In its attention to the detail of narrative, archive and photography, has the Subotzky/Waterhouse Ponte project avoided attracting criticism for being yet another example of 'ruin porn'?

Josephy gives a balanced conclusion to these questions: while the Ponte City project creates a "complex and nuanced portrait", it also fails to avoid to "rehearse and reproduce the anesthetization of poverty and 'ruin porn' tropes" (2017:81). By not ascribing to a definite position in this debate, Josephy is not admitting defeat but instead implicitly points to a fundamental truth about documentary (and one could say the same of photography and art in general): that it is not monolithic, but instead filled with inconsistencies,

paradoxes and contradictions. No wonder, then, that the artist Hito Steyerl (2007:304) claims that the fundamental characteristic of contemporary documentary pictures is that it adheres to a 'principle of uncertainty': "the more immediate they become, the less there is to see. The closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes".

The notion that photography is intrinsically paradoxical can therefore be located in the photograph's 'indexicality' – that is, its inherent causative chain to 'reality' – which implies an unmediated and epistemological link to reality itself. It is for this reason that the photograph has historically been linked to a belief system grounded in Renaissance technical and aesthetic sensibilities which emerged with the invention of linear perspective (Galassi, 1982:12). Following Alberti's[1] famous metaphor of comparing a painting to an 'open window', photography would similarly be conceptualized as a transparent 'window onto the world'. At the same time, it is believed that the photograph holds subjective or expressionistic qualities, capable of relaying a depth of inner experience. This assumption follows a "Platonic tradition of thought in which images have the capacity to reveal mystic truths", allowing the photograph to capture an authentic core of social reality – be it a 'human essence' or a 'universal truth' (Burgin & Van Gelder, 2010:1).

In his seminal essay *Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)*, the artist and critical theorist Allan Sekula (1978:862-864) suggested that this contradictory duality (between naïve positivism and subjective romanticism) functions as the twin arcs of documentary's "hermeneutic pendulum": the idea that the photograph possesses any of these characteristics is nothing but a "myth" – a historical construct grounded in mid-nineteenth-century thought.
In his search for a way beyond these 'false polarities', Sekula (1978:862) argues in favor of adopting a mode of 'critical realism' – "a critical representational art … that points openly to the social world and to the possibilities of social transformation". From this perspective, photography is to be conceptualized as "a mode of human communication, a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective experience and expression" (Sekula, 1978:182). Although Sekula has been highly influential in his theoretical contributions to photographic culture, this position has its clear limitations. For is Sekula's call for an "art that points openly to the social world" not homologous with certain modes of 'political art' prevalent today?

[1] The Renaissance author Leon Battista Alberti conceptualized perspectival practices in painting in his treatise *De Pictura*, in which, the act of painting would be likened to opening a window onto the natural world.

What exactly do we mean when we speak of 'political art'? Typically, it is defined in opposition to 'art for art's sake', in which, the aim is to engender a "raised consciousness" or "critical awakening" by challenging the assumptions upheld by hegemonic structures (Rancière, 2007:259). However, for the philosopher Jacques Rancière, there is a fundamental indeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political subjectivization as there is a continuous oscillation in the boundaries defining what constitutes as artistic or political practices (Rancière, 2007:257). As such, he seeks to adopt a more elementary approach to understanding the relationship between the two notions. From a Rancierian point of view, art is deemed to be political insofar as it materializes a "reversal in perspective":

> Art is a work on the distribution of the sensible. Sometimes, it rearranges the set of perception between what is visible, thinkable, and understandable, and what is not. This is the politics of art. (Rancière, 2015)

2. Philosophical Realism and the Stain

In the essay *Realism and the Digital Image*, the art historian W.J.T Mitchell (2015) praises the 'critical realism' proclaimed by Sekula; however, he would nonetheless agree with Rancière's position as he contends that we need to reconfigure the common assumption that realism is ontologically linked to the photographic medium. Instead, he argues that if photography has a 'built-in tendency', it would "tend toward fantasy and spectacle, not the faithful portrayal of ordinary life" (Mitchell, 2015:62). Consequently, he suggests that what we need now is not an ontological but a 'philosophical realism' – that is to say, a realism that hints at "the Real itself", that questions our very relationship to reality and lays bare its phantasmatic coordinates (Mitchell, 2015:64).

Let us turn to the philosopher Slavoj Žižek who can perhaps provide us with an indication of what exactly Mitchell means by 'philosophical realism'. In his discussion of René Magritte's paintings, Žižek makes a distinction between 'realism' and 'post-realism'. He defines realism as "a naïve belief that, behind the curtain of representations, there actually exists some full, substantial reality" (Žižek, 2006:181). 'Post-realism', on the other hand, fits perfectly into Mitchell's notion of 'philosophical realism' as it "begins when a doubt emerges as to the existence of this reality 'behind the curtain', that is, when the foreboding arises that

the very gesture of concealment creates what it pretends to conceal" (Žižek, 2006:181).

Of course, Margritte's artworks exemplifies this doubt, particularly in paintings such as *La Lunette d'approche* (1962). The painting depicts a half-open window through which we see external reality (a partly clouded blue sky). Yet, through the narrow opening, instead of directly accessing reality beyond the window pane, all we see is "nothing, just a nondescript black mass" (Žižek, 2006:182). In other words, behind the veil of appearances, we do not come into contact with a deeper substantial reality, but with 'nothing'.[2] Yet, this 'nothing' is never simply nothing, but a "void gaping in the midst of reality" – an empty space onto which the viewer's fantasies can be projected (Žižek, 2006:184).

From this standpoint, 'post-realism' does not entail that a substantial material 'reality' does not exist. Rather, it suggests that we can never gain full neutral[3] access to external reality as there is always a '"stain, a blind spot" which hinders our full view (Žižek, 2006:17). Since we are already included in the very reality that we perceive, "it is by definition always inconsistent, full of lacunae, which the subject must somehow fill in to create a minimally consistent Whole of a world – and the function of fantasy is precisely to fill in these gaps" (Žižek, 2012:176).

In this instance, fantasy is not to be understood as a "dreamlike illusion that we build to escape reality", instead, it "serves as a support for our 'reality' itself" (Žižek, 1989:45). No wonder, then, that Mitchell suggested photography is closer to fantasy than it is to reality.

[2] For Magritte (in Whitfield, 1992:122), "what one sees through the open window is 'blackness' and not the 'colour black'".

[3] According to Žižek (2009:29), this neutrality extends to our perception of the external reality itself: "There is no 'neutral' reality within which gaps occur, within which frames isolate domains of appearances. Every field of 'reality' (every 'world') is always-already enframed, seen through an invisible frame."

Magritte, R. (1963) *La Lunette d'approche.*

3. Sigmar Polke and The Tension between Form and Content

Here, I would like to argue that a more contemporary artist who has grasped this relationship between photography and fantasy is the German painter Sigmar Polke. He is principally known for founding the movement 'Capitalist realism' with Gerhard Richter and Kondrad Fischer in the early 1960s. However, throughout the 1970s, he travelled extensively to the U.S., Afghanistan, Pakistan, France and Brazil. During this time, he mostly abandoned painting in favor of photography. In her essay *Sigmar Polke's Photo Journeys*, Schmidt-Linsenhoff (2011) points out that, in terms of subject matter, Polke's travel photography followed the standard representational modes of the European gaze found in magazines at the time: the visualization of stereotypes of the foreign, exotic 'other'. She states:

> Polke's beggar series from Cologne and New York and the large format series and individual images on animal fights, tea ceremonies, pot smokers, and bearded turban wearers in Afghanistan and Pakistan are, in choice of motif, perspective, and framing, little different from the documentary photography of social misery and the ethnographic photography of the Orient that were schematically shaped by the end of the nineteenth century. (Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2011:362)

However, to merely dismiss Polke's images as problematic would be to neglect the dialectic tension between form and content, which is a crucial component of Polke's oeuvre.
As elaborated by Charles Haxthausen (1997:193), Polke hand-printed this series by "experimenting with and – in terms of orthodox practice – misusing the chemistry of the photographic process […] by provoking and manipulating photochemical "accidents" in the developing process". By working with very thin photographic paper, which he then folded up to fit into the small developing tray, his images would become veiled by thick stains and clouds almost to the point that the subject matter becomes unrecognizable. For Howe (1996:15), the result of this experimental process, in which, 'accidents' from the unequal dispersion of developer is key, is that Polke's "marginalized subjects occupy a dim and murky space, their existence as transitory as the contingencies of chemical actions".

Against this metaphorical interpretation, Schmidt-Linsenhoff proposes an alternative reading: What if Polke is not simply aiming to symbolically materialise the 'existential contingencies' of his subjects? What if this intense, excessive manipulation of form is intended to obfuscate and thus bring home, *the flaw in the content* – the impossibility to adequately represent the core of another's social reality (Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2011:369)? From this perspective, by introducing a gap or tension between form and content, form does not simply illustrate the narrative content but instead, subtly counteracts it:

> Polke takes the impossibility of adequate photographic representation… as a point of departure, and thus refutes, through the artistic reworking of his own exposures, the medium's documentary claim. The aesthetic irrealization of a social reality – in the sense of the photographic pictorialism of the *fin de siècle* – is directed against the ideology of a naïve positivism in documentary photography. (Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2011:370)

Here, we can link Polke's manipulated photographs with Žižek's notion of 'post-realism' (or Mitchell's 'philosophical realism'). In the book *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek (1997:43) articulates a difference between traditional and modern painting:

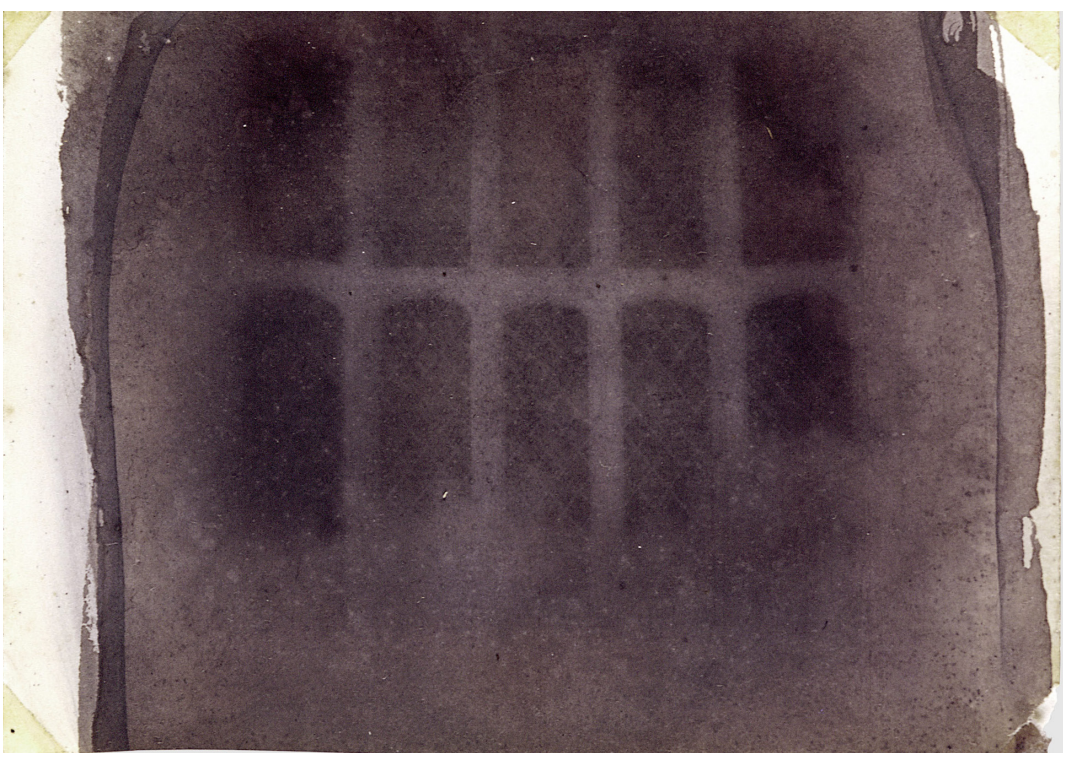
> In traditional painting the stain is limited, located in the anamorphic element (the protracted-distorted skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, etc.), whereas in Van Gogh the stain, in a way, spreads over and pervades the entire painting, so that every element within the frame is a depiction of some 'real object'…

As a result, Polke's photographs can be conceived as thoroughly 'post-realist': the chemical 'errors' not only counteracts the documentary depictive character of photography but can also be perceived as a 'stain' that spreads over the entire photograph, hinting at the 'Real' itself.

Polke, S. (1975) *Untitled (from the Series São Paulo).*

II

The Invisible Frame



Talbot, W.H.F. (1835) *The Oriel Window, Lacock Abbey.*

1. The Window onto the World

Since the very beginnings of photography, the window holds a significant presence. Indeed, some of the earliest photographic negatives in existence consists of a series of pictures of a window, taken by William Henry Fox Talbot in his home in the 1830s.[1] What is peculiar about this series is that it does not consist of photographic views taken *from* this particular window (as in, looking at a scenery beyond the window), but rather consists of images *of* the window itself – or, to be more exact, of the window frame since the windowpane is entirely opaque. Each time, the window is photographed head-on, in which, as Geoffrey Batchen (2002:105) puts it, the image emulates the "entirely flat" and "virtually abstract" characteristics of the "already familiar two-dimensional look of his contact prints of botanical specimens"[2]. This choice of subject matter and technical approach is quite curious, particularly given that the camera was famously conceived by Talbot as a 'pencil of nature'[3] – an apparatus which provides "direct images of the true surface *and* three-dimensional depth of the perceived world" (Jay, 1993:128).

Why did Talbot place such importance on a flat surface which fills the entirety of our vision instead of the three-

[1] *Latticed Window (with Camera Obscura)*, 1835; *The Oriel Window (Lacock Abbey)*, 1835-39.

[2] Talbot's earliest photographic experiments consisted of photograms (or, to put it in Talbot's terms 'photogenic drawings') of botanical specimens. The process entails the placement of a pressed leaf or plant on to light-sensitive paper (as in the paper would be brushed with a solution of silver nitrate) and exposed to the sun (Daniel, 2000).

[3] As described by Vered Maimon (2008:314), *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-1846) by Talbot is the first mass-produced photographically illustrated book.

dimensional space 'beyond'? The answer is perhaps to be located within the historical 'intellectual horizon' in which Talbot was fully immersed. Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-1846), according to Vered Maimon (2008:316), was not merely embedded in a discourse of purely mechanical or chemical procedures based on the "evidentiary structure of positivism or any 'ontological essence' of the photograph". Instead, the book reflected a field of knowledge related to Talbot's antiquarian, classical and philological studies and literary genres of writing (Maimon, 2008:316). To put it another way, in the opposing pole between the Western mid-nineteenth-century intellectual movements of Realism and Romanticism, *The Pencil of Nature* evoked a discursive framework grounded in *subjective* forms of knowledge inherent to Romantic historicism. Within this intellectual horizon, an emphasis would be placed on the individual capacities of the author and on the primacy of emotions in art as "the way to a 'deep' knowledge of the world denied to science" (Burgin, 1982:10).

From this standpoint, the rise of photography can be located in the sense that the unequivocal character of the photographic document to reproduce the visible world does not wholly account for its capacity to generate and organize meaning:

> One advantage of the discovery of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation, but which no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature. (Talbot in Maimon, 2008:316)

Herein lies then the crucial feature of Talbot's epistemological horizon of photography at the very point of its inception: It is the very evidentiary 'essence' of the photograph which 'adds'[4] to the range of human visual experience and "provokes a deciphering beyond any simple perception", as Plissart and Derrida (in Jay, 1993:519) put it in *Right of Inspection*. In other words, in the purely descriptive account of reality produced by mechanically fixating a referent, the photograph need not merely convey coherent and systematised forms of knowledge about reality but can also evoke subjective or imaginative impressions which do not arise in our daily conscious perceptions of the world.

2. The 'Optical Unconsciousness'

It is only against this backdrop that one can fully grasp

[4] In the *Short History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin (1972:7) has drawn the same conclusion as Talbot when observing the "minute details" (which Benjamin calls "the tiny spark of chance") embedded in the photographic image, and 'adds' to it another symbolic dimension: "At the same time photography uncovers in this material physiognomic aspects of pictorial words which live in the smallest things, perceptible yet covert enough to find shelter in daydreams, but which, once enlarged and capable of formulation, show the difference between technology and magic to be entirely a matter of historical variables".

Walter Benjamin's (1972:7) claim that the camera and the eye operate under two separate perspectival modalities:

> It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously… Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious.

The lesson to be drawn here is that the structural gap between the camera's fidelity to external reality and the psychical reality of the unconscious can be bridged by resisting the split between imagination and perception, expression and imitation. Indeed, in his analysis of Merleau-Ponty's *The Primacy of Perception*, the historian Martin Jay (1993:306) suggests that "perception, Merleau-Ponty implied, was intertwined not only with the scientific and rational intellect, but also with the artistic imagination". No wonder, then, Maimon (2008:316) claims apropos Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*, that "the 'natural image' is thus not presented as a proof for the mechanical workings of the mind, but associated with its imaginative powers". Perception, therefore, whether from the vantage point of the eyes or the camera lens, is contingent upon other psychical processes in order for us to 'make sense' of our experience of the world.

From this perspective, the proper interpretive horizon to reading Talbot's windows should neither be formulated at the level of a pictorial syntax of descriptive reality, nor as simple metaphor of a 'window onto the world'. Instead, it is to be located at the intersection between our immediate contact with the visible world and the more thickly textured 'psychic reality'[5] that structures our very approach to perceiving material reality itself. In his essay *A Philosophical Window*, Batchen (2002:102) provides an analysis of Talbot's window images which elucidates this point of convergence:

> The photograph, he seems to be saying, is a window on the world (Talbot's world, in this instance), but not really. It is more like a windowing of that world, a framing of it, an accounting of it. Like this windowing, photography proffers a transparency that is somewhat deceptive. For… we are faced with a system of representation that presents itself as an impossibility; as something both transparent and opaque, both a reflection and a projection.

The window is therefore a space of inherent contradictions, a point of two intersecting worlds, that both separates and

[5] According to René Rousillon (2005:1356), In Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the concept of 'psychic reality' referred to the "force of reality associated with the subject's internal fantasy life, which could oppose and even dominate perception of external reality; it could, in other words, seem more 'real' that reality itself."

unites the outside from the inside, and operates as "a threshold and at the same time a barrier" (Batchen, 2002:103). Much more pertinent, however, is that the window acts both as a site of 'reflection' – as in the window functions as a visual object which can directly 'reflect' or 'allude' to the depth of a subject's inner life – and, 'projection', in which, the opaque window between the visible frame "functions as an empty surface, as a kind of screen for the projection of desires", to quote Žižek (1992:8). What is remarkable here is how one of the very first photographic negatives ever produced can be perceived as a nodal point at which different 'realities' intersect: the objective world of material reality that is directly perceived, the subjective realm from which we express our emotions and innermost convictions, and the 'psychical reality' which contains the representations of the world we develop through unconscious processes.

3. The Politics of Perception

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Allan Sekula (1978:862) argued that the nineteenth-century realist/romanticist binary – which shaped the photograph's 'horizon of meaning' since its invention – is nothing but a "myth". In the introduction to the book *Thinking Photography*, Victor Burgin (1982:10), another artist and critical theorist, expounds this position:

> To a very great extent our ways of conceiving of photography have not yet succeeded in breaking clear of the gravitational field of nineteenth-century thinking: thinking dominated by a metaphor of *depth*, in which the surface of the photograph is viewed as the projection of something which lies 'behind' or 'beyond' the surface; in which the frame of the photograph is seen as marking the place of entry to something more *profound* – 'reality' itself, the 'expression' of the artist, or both (a reality refracted through a sensibility). The surface of the photograph, however, conceals nothing but the fact of its own superficiality. Whatever meanings and attributions we may construct at its instigation can know no final closure, they cannot be held for long upon those imaginary points of convergence at which (it may comfort some to image) are situated the experience of an author or the truth of a reality.

Within this postmodern framework, meaning ascribed to the photographic image derives neither from its existential connection to physical reality, nor from the interiority of the artist. Instead, meaning is always mediated within

differential culturally-determined discursive frameworks, or, as Grundberg (1990:101) puts it, "photographs are no longer seen as transparent windows on the world, but as intricate webs spun by culture". In other words, photographic meaning is always politically overdetermined. Nonetheless, we should add the proposition that the political sphere of photographic discourse need not only be centred at the level of semiotic signs found in photographic images. What if political signification can also be located at the moment a part of reality is 'enframed' by the camera – that is, at the very level of perception?

For Benjamin, it is at the point of conjunction between the coefficients of subjectivity in our perception of 'reality' (instinctual unconscious) and the unique signifying gesture of photography to "grasp what remains otherwise imperceptible to the powers of human sight" (optical unconscious) that the political dimension of photographic perception is to be located (Smith & Sliwinski, 2017:7):

> Moreover, these two types of unconscious [the optical and instinctual] are intimately linked. For in most cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic and the dreamer can be appropriated by collection perception. The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, have been invalidated by film – and less by depicting the dream world itself than by creating figures of collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse. (Benjamin in Smith & Sliwinski, 2017:8)

In order to unpack this complex and almost esoteric statement, let us turn to the analysis of this crucial passage by Shawn Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (2017:9) in order to gain some clarification:

> In this dense passage, Benjamin's speculations begin to take an acutely political turn, although surprisingly, the pivot point is not photography's so-called indexical relationship to reality, but rather its proximity to fantasy. What matters to Benjamin here is photography's ability to capture and circulate the "deformations" and "stereotypes" that make up the psychotic's and dreamer's perceptions. Benjamin is proposing, in other words,

> that "collective perception" is more akin to a shared unconscious fantasy, and, moreover, that modern technology can allow us to access these ways of seeing that are actively disavowed or otherwise unavailable to consciousness. He sees photography's political potential not in its ability to document reality, but rather in its profound link to psychic structures… Here photography becomes a key medium for the circulation of a culture's unconscious desires, fears, and structures of defence.

From this vantage point, we can discern the truly paradoxical dimension of photography: although the photographic image is, as Roland Barthes (1983:196) puts it, "perfectly *analogon*" to reality; it is precisely this characteristic which can evoke the 'collective unconscious perceptions' (or, the range of disavowed beliefs, desires, fears and suppositions) which structures our very approach to social reality itself.
From this perspective, we should reverse Barthes' (1983:196) famous formula that the photographic image is "a message without a code". If we accept Benjamin's thesis of an 'optical unconscious' then we should say that the 'code is in the message' – that is, although the photograph transmits "the scene itself, the literally reality", as Barthes (1983:196) puts it; it is precisely by means of this mechanical transmission that we can come into contact with the distortions which shapes our perceptions of reality of which we are unaware.

III

Modifying the Visible

Goldblatt, D. (2005) *Advertisement, Oaklands, Johannesburg. 20 November 1999.*

Goldblatt, D. (2005) *George Nkomo, hawker, Fourways, Johannesburg. 21 August 2002.*

1. Juxtaposing 'Realities' in David Goldblatt's *Intersections*

How are we to visualize, in photographic terms, the parallel between the 'reality' which we confront through the lens and the 'optical unconscious' which lays bare the disavowed premises of our very perception of 'reality'? The opening pages of David Goldblatt's photobook *Intersections* (2005) provides a possible indication: on the left page[1], there is a photograph of a hand-written advertisement marked *Painter Call Tymon*, located amongst the fallen petals of a jacaranda tree in an affluent suburb; while on the right page[2], we see a street vendor leaning against a towering billboard which displays a painted architectural rendering of a luxury 'Tuscan-styled' residential complex. In terms of content, Goldblatt provides a highly nuanced perspective of the disparate social realities which characterizes the unbridled market economy of contemporary Johannesburg.

But what is crucial for us here is the formal parallel which links these two juxtaposed images – that is, the formal structure of the frame which acts as the focal point of the images' visual arrangement. The two advertisements are in a sense 'enframed': we perceive their contents as an entrance into another 'reality', one that is not immediately continuous (or, more poignantly, even diametrically opposed) with the 'reality' outside the frame.

[1] *Advertisement, Oaklands, Johannesburg. 20 November 1999*, p.6

[2] *George Nkomo, hawker, Fourways, Johannesburg. 21 August 2002*, p.7

Why did Goldblatt decide on these two images as the opening sequence to this body of work which engages in a personal exploration of the post-apartheid South African social landscape? Perhaps, what Goldblatt is trying to demonstrate is that the point of his photographic undertaking does not reside in *delivering* information (about the country's social conditions); it is rather about *questioning* the methodological procedures which determines *how* we perceive that information.

In this sense, the aesthetic strategy of a 'frame-within-a-frame' provides the conceptual coordinates to understanding Goldblatt's photographic framework – that is to say, the capacity of the photographic medium to engage in divergent modes of perception and lived experience, to interrogate forms of seeing and unseeing, and to traverse both physical and virtual (in the socio-symbolic sense) environments. Here, Goldblatt lays bare – again, in a highly nuanced and intricate way – the vertical orientations of power relations (as in the case of the scale differences, both physical and symbolic, between the street hawker and the billboard) and the (unconscious) beliefs, aspirations and drives which determines the structure of material social processes (as demonstrated by the juxtaposition of a multitude of symbolic realities).

Perhaps it is here that we can locate the key achievement of Goldblatt's practice: his capacity to engage in a "cross-currents of ideas, values, ethics, postures, peoples and things", as Michael Stevenson (2005:100) puts it, in such a way that his photographs go beyond what Njabulo Ndebele (in Richards, 2008:252) calls the "hegemony of spectacle", which has all too often characterised South African photography. The problem with the 'spectacular' that is often associated with photographic practices is that it undermines any form of ambiguity or contradiction – or, as Rancière (2010:143) puts it: "There is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world".

From this perspective, it is the very mundaneness of Goldblatt's contemplative vision which allows him to avoid the limitations inherent to the strategies of 'spectacularisation'. In his exploration of the "division, possession, use, misuse" of the land, we are presented with neither overt representations of victimisation, nor any scenes of subjective violence (Goldblatt, 2005:99). There is no underlying humanitarian injunction to empathize with the 'other', nor any implied political program to 'raise consciousness'. Instead, his body of work can be understood as 'political' in a Rancierian sense: art is political insofar as it seeks to 'modify the visible' ("the ways of perceiving it and expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable or intolerable") in such a way that it allows

a reconfiguration of the "relationship between places and identities, spectacles and gazes, proximities and distances" (Rancière, 2007:259-261). It is precisely with regard to this dimension of art's political potentialities that the opening sequence of Goldblatt's Intersections (in which, two fields of 'reality' are juxtaposed with one another) can be linked with the 'optical unconscious' – to engage in a rupture from the patterns of knowledge typically associated with such subject matter and to suggest new constitutive possibilities for perceiving the world.

2. The 'Emblematic' Wall

It is from this position of investigating new possibilities of seeing and knowing through the photographic process that I would like to situate my own body of work presented for this exhibition. The starting point for my visual research is the photobook – that is, it is the tangible parameters of the book which serves as a set of underlying axioms, of guiding principles which determines my photographic procedures. What this means is that my basic practice takes the shape of a stream of continuous perceptions, in which, the photograph functions as only one link in a broader chain (as a opposed to presenting the photograph as an autonomous 'decisive moment'). The reason for this repartitioning resides in my intention to create subtle forms of narrative and meaning through various strategies of sequencing, juxtaposing and layering.
Bearing in mind this conceptual framework, it might seem strange to say that I did not set out with any specific intention or preconceived idea about *what* to photograph. This approach, however, is not unprecedented, as the photographer Jo Ractliffe (2009:62) reveals a similar methodological stance in a letter to the curator Okwui Enwezor: "my general tendency is to work 'in response' to an idea or situation rather than to predetermine things – beginning with something somewhere between contingency and intention".

My initial idea, to put it briefly, was to engage with spaces characteristic of Cape Town's social landscape in such a way so as to rework the frames of perception in which they are typically inscribed. Of course, due to the fact of being an outsider, I was well aware of the precariousness of my gaze. Consequently, it was essential to avoid any pretention of proclaiming transparently objective representations of complex social realities; and, at the same time, carefully avoid any "modes of social exhibitionism that exalt the binaries of

good and bad, black and white, oppressor and oppressed, native and settler", as put by Enwezor (2009:86) in regard to the highly reflexive imagery present in Ractliffe's oeuvre. It is crucial to properly contextualize this last statement as the representation of 'social exhibitionism', according the Ndebele (in Richards, 2008:252), has historically permeated the very texture of the South African imaginary:

> Everything in South Africa has been mind-bogglingly spectacular: the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random massive pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation the ultimate symbol of which was the mining industry; the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations; the luxurious life-style of whites; servants, all-encompassing privilege; swimming pools, and high commodity consumption; the sprawling monotony of architecture in African locations, which are the very picture of poverty and oppression. The symbols are all over: the quintessence of obscene social exhibitionism.

The question here is: does every 'symbol' expounded by Ndebele have to rely on such a gesture of "obscene social exhibitionism"? Is there not another possibility to subtly engender a dialectical tension[3] between content (the ubiquitous symbols analogous with social exhibitionist imagery) and form (the framework which regulates the fabric of our perception in regard to such content)? And is there not, at the very heart of the artistic act, the space to "change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible" (Rancière, 2010:141)? The thematic concerns of this project emerged 'in response' (to use Ractliffe's appropriate term) to these queries without proposing any definite answers.

It is against this background that I began to photograph walls, fences and gates in two diametrically opposed social spaces: the affluent (predominantly white) leafy suburbs located at the foot of Table Mountain and the working-class so-called Coloured suburbs in what is commonly designated as the Cape Flats. The wall is, for Enwezor (2008), without a doubt an inexhaustible leitmotif in South African modes of representation for symbolizing structural and racial divides:

> Everything known to the world as South African was defined by the simple Manichaean scheme of the emblematic division wall, the cut line of irreconcilable apartness, separateness and radical difference. (Enwezor, 2008)

[3] As in the case of the photographic practice of Sigmar Polke discussed in the first chapter.

Consequently, with regard to my photographic practice, the crucial point to be made is neither to produce a commentary on specific social realities nor to deliver a judgement on the city's spatial and socio-symbolic mechanisms through the visualization of inequalities. Rather, the point is to focus on matters of space, territories and borders which delineate symbolic and structural fields of perception, knowledge and conditions of possibilities. It is for this reason that my photographs are about the walls, fences and gates *themselves* – both as material objects and as discursively constructed objects of ideological investment.

3. The Threshold between the Real and the Imaginary

The dividing structures which I've photographed[4] fill in the entirety of the image. With regard to the photographs of walls, there is no 'beyond' or 'other side' which can capture the viewer's gaze. Consequently, the walls act as a kind of obstacle to our perception, operating within a liminal space between the visible and invisible, the imaginary and symbolic, the indexical and virtual.

Walls create divisions and distinctions, exclusions and inclusions, and, in this process, there is always one side of the wall which will be concealed. In this sense, walls function in a similar way to a veil – they cause us to wonder what lies behind them as if there is a hidden (or traumatic) truth that is covered up and waiting to be revealed.

From this standpoint, walls should not only be grasped at the level of a socio-symbolic structure which enforces societal divisions; they can also be conceived as a psychic edifice predicated on the circulation of a whole range of unconscious fears, anxieties, secret desires and disavowed beliefs.

In her bodies of work *Terreno Ocupado* (2007) and *As Terras do Fim do Mundo* (2011), Ractliffe photographed Angola from a point of view that "represents part reality and part mythology" (Enwezor, 2009:91). What is notable about these two series is the inclusion of photographs of murals painted onto walls in dilapidated buildings. The faded and bullet-riddled paintings represent the myths of a revolutionary past and effectively contextualize the rest of her photographic imagery within the realm of a fictive, mythical landscape.

In a similar way, in my photographs of walls taken in the suburbs of the Cape Flats, there are paintings which

[4] In this sub-chapter, I am referring to the photographs to be placed on the gallery walls for the exhibition. Most of these photographs were made with a 35mm point-and-shoot camera (Contax T and Olympus Mju 1) with black and white film (Kodak T-Max 400 ISO). For the two square images, I used a Yaschica 124G with Ilford Delta 400. All of these images (except the small-scale handprints) were scanned on a Hasselblad Imacon Flextight X1 and printed on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Baryta.
There are two essential technical (and aesthetic) features which need to be mentioned: the high amount of grain and the soft edges of the image's boundary. The grain is due to the small size of the negative and the high ISO, which becomes more pronounced the larger the image is blown up in size. There is an element of aesthetic preference to this approach, but, more importantly, a pocket-sized camera was more appropriate to capture streams of 'conscious perceptions' rather than singular 'decisive moments'.
With regard to the broken edges, this is the natural effect produced by the scanner (when scanning the negatives). I've decided not to crop them, again, for aesthetic purposes, but, above all, it is my hope that this strategy can emphasise some of my fundamental theoretical concerns (with regard to the liminal bridge between the real and the imaginary, and the positioning of the photographic image in this site of 'inbetweenness'.)

permeates their surfaces, transposing them into allegorical structures. On one specific wall, there is a painted scroll entirely devoid of any content. Just as Talbot's (or Magritte's) opaque windows can be conceived as a blank screen for the projection of fantasies (of what lies 'beyond' the windowpane); the bare scroll can operate as a site of projection, as a complex form of palimpsest in which the viewer's imagination can fill in the lack.

The contextualization of photographic meaning through the juxtaposition of imagery (that can be viewed as 'part reality and part mythology') is another strategy[5] that I directly employ: The photographs of walls, gates, and fences taken in the verdant landscapes of the affluent suburbs[6] are to be juxtaposed with photographs of paintings which were taken inside the homes of residents from a suburb in the Cape Flats. These paintings depict idyllic scenes which hold visual qualities that are uncannily akin to the 'real' landscapes. Through this juxtaposition, the aim is to re-examine the boundaries between 'reality' and the fantasy space, and allude to an interstitial space in which the two can exist in tandem[7].

Underpinning these two moments, there is nonetheless a fundamental social tension operating 'between the lines', an antagonism that is not openly depicted but is implied by the very juxtaposition of these two social spaces. Consequently, there is a radical disjuncture, a kind of "primordial repression", to put it in Zizekian terms, in this symbolization of disparate social imaginaries (Žižek, 2006:101).
It is in this fragile space between the dislocation of two 'external' and 'internal' worlds that my small-scale photo-based images[8] are to be positioned. Dispersed onto the gallery walls in rhythmic patterns, these intimate images can be loosely divided into three categories: pink images[9] filled with chemical stains and unstructured abrasions, forest imagery awash with gestural mark-making[10], and rectangular geometric abstractions[11] of various colours and tonalities.

The first two categories can be conceived as an iconoclastic gesture, a re-articulation of darkroom printing methodologies in order to produce new aesthetic orientations and effects within the parameters of analog photography. From a theoretical standpoint, what we encounter here is a kind of 'return of the repressed' – an abstract formation which stands for the social tensions and complex social realities that cannot be adequately represented; a re-emergence of the repressed in the guise of ethereal "apparitions", which fills in the "gap of what cannot be symbolized" (Žižek, 2006:101).

[5] This strategy refers specially to the curatorial procedures for the present exhibition.

[6] A few of these photographs are intentionally blurry: For Van Gelder and Westgeest (2011:60), "blurredness evokes another kind of perception" as it "stimulates associations and moods rather than a rational reaction". Moreover, blurry images relate to what Merleau-Ponty terms 'phenomenological reduction', which suggests that "familiar phenomena have to be interrogated from a critical distance and reflection" (Van Gelder & Westgeest, 2011:60).

[7] My main visual references here are, of course, Goldblatt's opening photographs in his book Intersections (which was discussed in detail above) and Rene Magritte's La Condition Humaine (1933), which also incorporates the thematic concerns of a 'frame-within-a-frame'. In this case, a landscape painting is placed on an easel in front of an open window. The painting appears to be perfectly contiguous with the landscape outside, except for a thin unpainted narrow edge of the canvas which obtrudes the complete transparency of the painting. With regard to this uncanny scene, Magritte is, according to Allmer (2019), "alert to how the complex processes of perception and conception interact to produce our cognition of reality, and understands that external realities are products of internal processes of perception and conception." In other words, Magritte's painting encapsulates the idea that our very perception of external reality itself is, in a way, always transformed, distorted even, by internal psychic procedures.

[8] All of these images were hand-printed in the darkroom through various experimental

With regard to the third category, the minimalist arrangement of the square shape refers to, of course, Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) – the basic representation of the void, gap, or stain, which hinders our full view of reality and reappears as the nondescript black mass between the open windowpanes in Magritte's *La Lunette d'approche* (1963). This is the elementary 'empty surface', the blank screen onto which we can project our inner space, the 'frame-within-a-frame' which operates on the threshold between reality and fantasy. It is my hope that the inclusion of these non-objective photo-images can effectively contextualize the rest of my work within such a conceptual disposition.

Moreover, it is from this symbolic constellation that I would like to locate two square photographs of a wall with a large window-like opening. What we perceive through these 'windows' are out-of-focus commonplace scenes in the Cape Flats. A possible reading of this blurry visual field which is entirely 'enframed'[12] is that we, the spectators, perceive these scenes as "minimally spectral", as acquiring a "dreamlike quality"; as if we are encountering on a screen a "magic, immaterial apparition from another world" (Žižek, 2016:187).

Finally, a few words on the long photographic sequence of the concrete fence, riddled with bullet holes and filling in the entire field of the picture plane. Through the gaps of the fence, we perceive the ubiquitous landscape of the Cape Flats. Here, on a meta-reflexive level, this material (and psychical) edifice operates as a spatial (and symbolic) marker of exclusion. What this means is that the fence symbolizes the inexhaustible traces of social divides, but more importantly, it symbolizes the perceptual barriers to accessing these social worlds in direct realist modes of representation. To put it another way, the fence delineates the structural impossibilities of adequately depicting complex social realities from the standpoint of objective reality. And, last but not least, it underlines the very obstacles (the gaps, stains, and blind spots) to our perception of (social) reality as a whole – the fundamental tensions between the visible and the invisible at the very core of our perception; the "invisible frontier" that "separates the fantasy-space from ordinary reality" (Žižek, 2016:187).

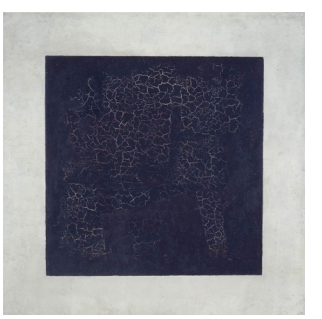
procedures (such as the use of unorthodox chemical manipulations and gestural incisions onto the surface of the photographic paper).

[9] The process of making these pink prints will be discussed in the following chapter.

[10] This effect was achieved by scratching directly into the negative with thin woodcutting tools.

[11] These images were produced without the use of any negatives: I would place a wooden frame onto the light-sensitive paper (in order to block the light from reaching the borders paper and create the shape of square) and then expose the light-sensitive paper to the sun (in order to attain soft pink tonalities) or the enlarger (for the greys and blacks). At other times, I would place a wooden square onto the photographic paper as I exposed it to the light (in order for the middle of the image to remain white, and allowing its frame to take on various colours and tonalities).

[12] Again, in a similar way to Goldblatt's billboards or Magritte's 'painting-within-a painting'.



Malevich, K. (1915) *Black Square.*

Ractliffe, J. (2007) *Details of tiled murals at the Fortaleza de São Miguel, depicting Portuguese explorations in Africa (1 & 2).*

IV

The Excess in Process

1. An Openness to Process

In his discussion on the recent paintings of Penny Siopis, art critic Sean O'Toole (2018:203) notes that writing and thinking about artistic production within a South African context too often focuses on the 'iconicity' of the artwork – that is, on the content represented, the medium specificity and purposes or messages intended to convey. Consequently, process – described by O'Toole (2018:204) as "that messy, indeterminate and often contingent set of procedures" – and dialogue surrounding its importance in the economy of artistic production too often becomes overlooked and elided. The question that immediately arises here is: but why is process important and why should it be a point of focus? The answer that I aim to argue for, and one that is central to my creative production, is not that process is more important than meaning, but rather that meaning can be located in the process itself.

Before we can begin discussing a possible interconnectedness between meaning and process, it is first necessary to establish what exactly we mean when

we speak of process. In her paper *Shame in the House of Freud* (2010:239), Siopis argues – in a similar vein as O'Toole – that although it is vital to focus on "'textual' interpretations of art which focus on meaning", one should also attend to a "work's specific mediations, its materialities and other 'formal' qualities". Is the creative process not precisely at the heart of these three qualities – that is, the continuous mediation between materiality, formal qualities and the negotiation of positionalities (whether personal experience, theoretical concerns or social conditions of production)? This interplay is clearly evident in O'Toole's (2017:9-10) reading of the experimental work of Jared Ginsburg, in which, the object of his oeuvre arises by

> …improvising physical solutions to questions, problems and obstacles of his own making […] whether engaged in making a sculpture or negotiating the tradition of canvas painting, Ginsburg's itinerant aesthetic is undergirded by his need to know how a thing works in its physical form.

Here, O'Toole links Ginsburg's investigation of the medium's materiality to the idea of the artistic process as a form of mediation – or to put it in O'Toole's terms, a series of problems and their controlled resolution. What is fascinating about this assessment is that this link between artistic process and working through problem solving is by no means a new phenomenon. Indeed, the British sculptor Henry Moore (in Ecker, 1963:284) described the sources of his "sculptural problems" as follows:

> … I sometimes begin a drawing with no preconceived problem to solve, with only the desire to use pencil on paper, and make lines, tones and shapes with no conscious aim; but as my mind takes in what is so produced a point arrives where some idea becomes conscious and crystalizes, and then a control and ordering begins to take place. Or sometimes I start with a set subject; or to solve, in a block of stone of known dimensions, a sculptural problem I've given myself, and then consciously attempt to build an ordered relationship of forms...

What we can ascertain from Moore and Ginsburg is their

specific mode of qualitative thought – that is, thinking *in* the particular qualities of the artwork's materiality and formal qualities through a problem-solution continuum. Here, the emphasis is not, as is so often the case, placed on the expression of emotive qualities or 'inner conflicts' but rather on experimentation through an awareness of elements or prospects within a range of limitations or constraints (self-imposed or not) with regard to some intended order or temporal resolution. The lesson to be learned here is that the creative process is, up to a certain point, intimately adhered to as a lack of specific pre-defined conditions in determining the manifestation of the work. To put it another way, the artistic act relies on a degree of *openness* – or as the philosopher Luiz Camillo Osorio (2006:576) puts it: "an openness to the strangeness of the not-known, the not-yet-formalised". Osorio links this openness to a passage in the essay *Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects* (1969) by the artist Robert Morris, in which he states that

> process refocuses art as an energy driving to change perception… What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes. (Morris, 1969)

If we agree with Morris' statement, then indeterminacy, unpredictability and openness not only serves to qualify the creative process but also functions as its *objective* – that is to say, to 'discover new perceptual modes'.

2. When Meaning 'Manifests'

At this point, the question we should ask ourselves is how is this understanding of the creative process linked to meaning within an artwork? Again, Osorio (2006:576) indicates a possible approach when he claims that it is through "excess" that there is a "possibility of experiencing meaning in the artistic act itself". What exactly does he mean by this? In what way can meaning derive through excess? Osorio bases this claim on a passage in the essay *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence* by the phenomenological philosopher Maurice

Merlau-Ponty, in which he states:

> …language is not at the service of meaning, nor does it yet govern it. There is no subordination between them. Here no-one commands and no-one obeys. What we wish to say does not appear in the absence of words, as pure meaning. It is simply the excess of what we live over what has already been said. (Merleau-Ponty, in Osorio, 2006:576)

The important point to take away from this passage is the idea that meaning does not simply arise from the realisation of a series of grammatical sequences, but can be viewed as its 'excess'. In similar way, one can point out the manner, in which, meaning attributed to materials employed in artworks follows a similar logic: the material never simply refers to itself, there is always an 'excess' which follows it – that is, the material's social, cultural or political connotations all factor into how that particular material is to be understood. And can a similar logic not apply to the creative process as well? Let us return to Siopis, who suggests that process can be grasped precisely in this sense:

> The process is not just about getting a formal effect. The correlations between what I do here physically and my philosophical and political interests in agency, subject/object and figure/ground distinctions, opacity, immanence, viscerality – it all happens experientially in the work. (Siopis in O'Toole, 2018:205)

Siopis eloquently highlights this 'excess' that we have been discussing: although the process functions as a means to achieve a 'formal effect', this is by no means its sole objective. Her philosophical and political concerns all come into play in a very specific way – they are not *demonstrated* by the process but, in a sense, *manifest* from within the very process itself, as its 'excess'.

3. Chemical Procedures as 'Excess' in *The Empty Screen*

We are now in a position to conceptually relate this idea of 'meaning in process' to my own body of work. The photobook *The Empty Screen* was produced entirely from prints handmade in the darkroom[1]. It is loosely sequenced into three sections, spanning a gap in place and modes of perception, and yet, aims at an interweaving of narrative threads through a recurrence of motifs and an emphasis on formal strategies of production by investigating the image-object's materiality . It is this final aspect that we shall discuss in further detail. For what lays at the heart of these 'formal strategies of production' is, of course, process. But first, it is necessary to recapitulate the contents of the book.

The first section consists of a series of photographs taken along the walking trails within a suburb at the foot of Table Mountain. We see, from a distance, the stately homes within the 'suburban refuge', surrounded by wilderness and devoid of people.
In the mid-section of the book, we enter the forest, into nature in its full splendour. It is at this point that my process becomes heightened in visibility and presence. In the darkroom, I scratch the negative or the photograph itself, and manipulate the image through various chemical procedures. Visceral gestures of mark making and chemical stains erupt into the indexical representation of reality, gradually overwhelming the entire image itself.
Finally, in the last section of the book, we depart from the tension that exists between liminal nature and the sheltered suburban fantasy, into an interior, domestic space. These mundane photographs of paintings, coffee mugs and stove tops were taken inside the homes of residents from a working-class suburb in the Cape Flats. The formal qualities in this series stands apart from the previous sections mainly through a substantial increase in contrast. This not only renders visible but even exaggerates the scratches on the glass, which I placed over the photographic paper when printing in the darkroom.

These two narrative spaces are linked by the present moment as emblems of vast social disparities.

[1] The photographs which constitute the book were first printed in the darkroom on resin-coated paper. They were then scanned and digitally printed onto three types of paper: Munken pure, Fabriano academia and Hahnemuhle sumi-e. Finally the book would be bound with a perfect binding. The use of multiple types of paper determines the tactile qualities of the book, but, much more importantly, it emphasizes the sentiment that we are traversing a plurality of 'worlds' (both concrete and symbolic).

Nevertheless, my intentions with this book are not to simply reveal marginal spaces or entrenched power structures in a moralistic or didactic way. Neither is my goal to provide some privileged insight or 'meditation' on the socio-economic conditions of the city. Rather, the genesis of this photobook stems from a theoretical inquiry: how can my philosophical and political concerns 'happen experientially in the work', to paraphrase Siopis – that is, from within the process itself.

In his book *Less Than Nothing* (2012), Žižek notes that there can be subtle tensions between form and content: form has its own dynamic – it does not always simply narrate or illustrate the content, but can also counteract it, even subvert it. Žižek (2012:306) argues that the reason for this tension often lies in the fact that something is always 'repressed' from the content: "the very gap between content and form is to be reflected back into the form itself, as an indication that the content is not all, that something was repressed/ excluded from it."
What is important to me in making these photographs is not what is shown, but rather, in what has been *omitted* (as in, the overt references to social excess or misery, for example). The 'repressed' – that is, all the socio-economic, cultural and political tensions embedded in the very notion of juxtaposing these two disparate social spaces – is reflected back into the form, and even into my very process itself.

What, indeed, is the nature of my process? It principally consists of a series of abrasions and incisions into the materiality of the image-object. These gestures were, in a sense, made 'blindly'[2] onto the unexposed paper in the darkroom. Sometimes I would flick some water or shellac onto the paper, as through experimentation with various substances, the paper would react in unexpected ways once placed into the photographic chemistry. I would then expose the photographic paper for a few seconds to the sun and then place it directly into the fix, skipping the developing process entirely. The final result consists of subtle pink images filled with improvised white scratches – at times with hues of purple from the shellac, and, at other times with softer pink tonalities from the water. In other

[2] The red safelight was my only source of light, as a result, it was almost impossible to see the results of my mark-making until after I developed the paper in fixative photographic chemistry.

instances, I would scratch directly into the negative and then expose it onto photographic paper in a traditional manner.

Despite the intimacy of their small sizes, there is nonetheless something inherently unsettling to these experimental images, particularly with my gestural mark-making, which, to paraphrase Siopis, has no pictorial reference, nor formal effect intended. It is rather a 'manifestation' of energy (rather than a 'release' as this term often has therapeutic undertones), one that is fuelled by a general sense of confusion and dislocation. The scratched marks appear as something that cuts through, troubles, and disturbs the order of things. And the chemical stains from the shellac and water erupt as violent outbursts or traumatic encounters, shattering the indexical assumptions of (photographic) reality. And it is in this sense that the process becomes symbolic and meaningful in and of itself – it produces an 'excess', which, in our case follows the structure of a Freudian 'return of the repressed'.

4. Transferring the Imaginary onto Reality in *The Invisible Frame*

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Jo Ractliffe's approach to photographing the Angolan social landscape contained a distinctive perceptual modality: she sought to blur the established relationships between documentary and fiction, history and myth, real and imaginary. The following passage from one of her letters to Enwezor illustrates this endeavour:

> Many times I felt as if I were entering a world that was simultaneously post-apocalyptic and medieval – *Mad Max* meets *The Canterbury Tales*. Some of this may have to do with my imaginings, or the strange contradictions in the built environment – Portuguese, Russian, Cuban, and now all the new oil high-rises. But I was very aware of the past within the present, as if what I was looking at was a screen for something else. And this is what I've wanted to work with in these images. (Ractliffe, 2009:65)

Here, Ractliffe correctly senses the elementary dimension of the screen: the level at which the fantasy-space becomes a part of ordinary, everyday reality; the threshold at which another imaginary dimension becomes perceptible. But what is important for us here is Ractliffe's sentiment that this is "*her* imaginary more than anything", as put by Onyewuenyi (2016:7). It is in this self-reflexivity that we can ascertain that Ractliffe was not simply attempting to transpose the Angolan landscape (with its social, political and historical complexities) into the realm of an affective construct (in the sense of conveying an 'internal' subjective experience of the place). Rather, her practice involves a personal investigation into the possibilities of reworking of the modalities for perceiving the world – one that oscillates between the discursive frameworks of social contemporaneities and fictive, mythical narratives, in such a way that her images avoid "the simplifying edicts of documentary literalism" (Enwezor, 2009:95). It is precisely this strategy of re-articulating ways of seeing, of reframing a given sense of reality that embodies, what Rancière (2010:141) calls, "the labour of fiction":

> Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture the given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated. This might be called the labour of fiction, which, in my view, is a word we need to re-conceive. 'Fiction', as re-framed by the aesthetic regime of art, means far more that the constructing of an imaginary world… it involves the re-framing of the 'real', or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.

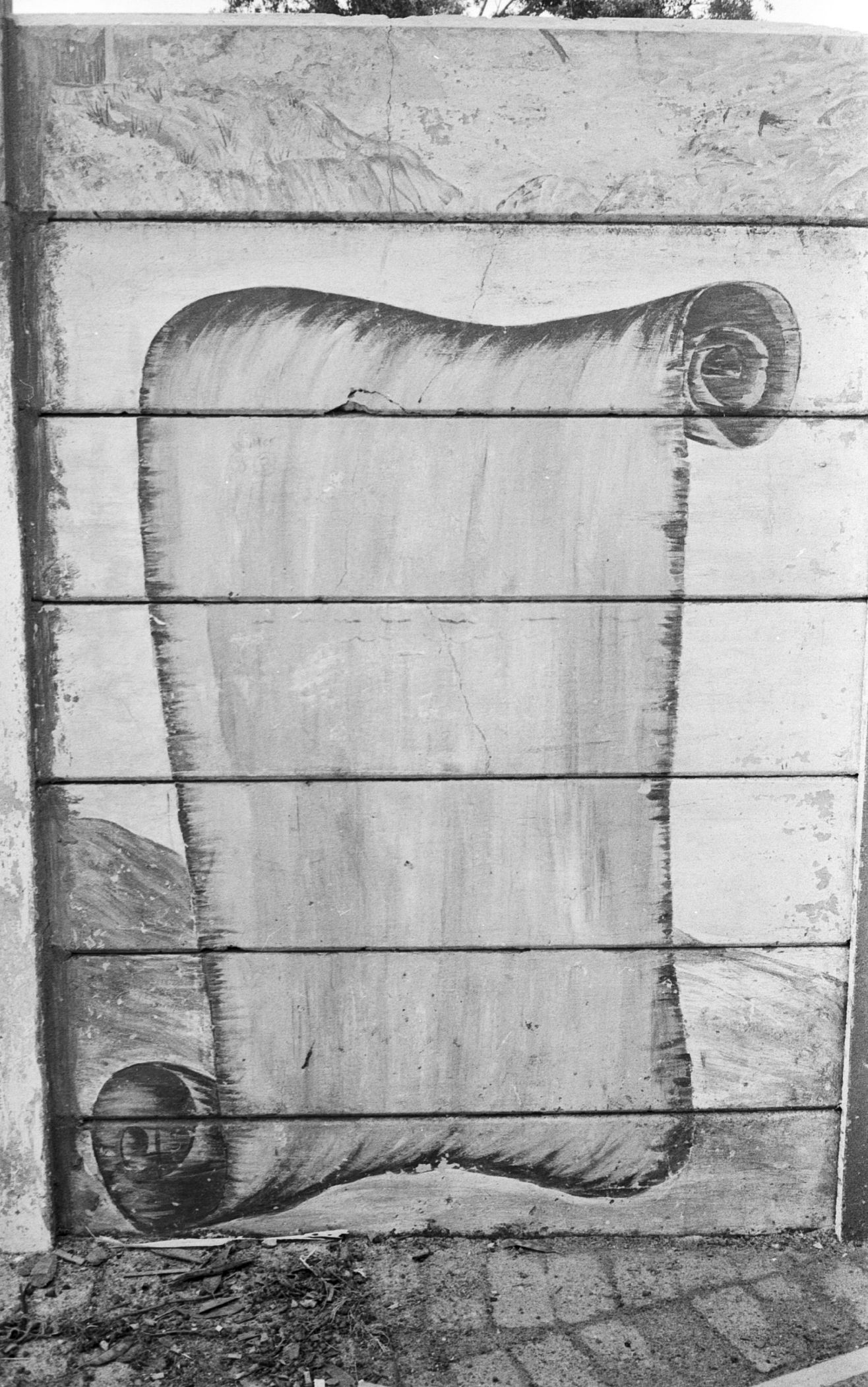
It is from this conceptualisation of fiction that I would like to locate the book *The Invisible Frame*. Made up entirely of acetone transfers onto Arches paper, it involves multiple layerings of a mixture of my own photographs and of found imagery[3].

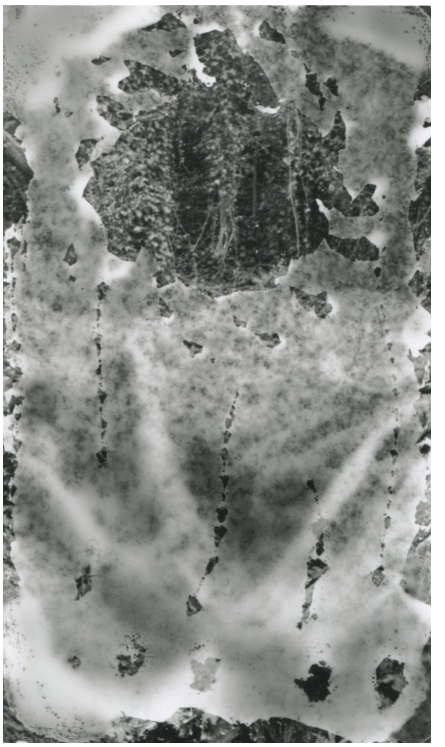
The initial process consists of photocopying all of my resources to be transferred. Then, in the printmaking studio, I would position the photocopies over the paper in the press, on top of which I would place two sheets of newsprint soaked in acetone. Using significantly more acetone than is necessary, the result is that the solvent 'stains' the paper as it is rolled through the press, engendering an overall grey wash onto the paper. This wash becomes more pronounced (and darker) after each time I layer the paper with another image. Finally, the book would be bound with Coptic stitching and fitted into a slipcase.

The process of layering and sequencing was mostly instinctual – it consisted of a mix of contingent groupings and considered associations with regard to formal qualities and thematic contents. The overall aim was not to produce any cohesive or self-evident narrative. Rather, the book functioned as an experimental exercise in exploring new connections between signs and imagery, and new trajectories in forms of visibility and patterns of knowledge. In this sense, the point is not to simply create an imaginary world but to blur the perceptual coordinates and open up a multiplicity of meanings – that is, to "extricate" the social contents from their documentary identity in order to give them a fictional or symbolic cast (Rancière, 2007:266).

With the book to be located in front of the photographs of walls (covered with allegorical paintings), it is my hope that this strategy of re-contextualizing photographs of two disparate social worlds can "change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and feasible" (Rancière, 2008:11).

[3] The found imagery principally consists of visual references related to my theoretical investigations: the paintings of Magritte, scientific diagrams on perception, architectural schematic representations of doorways, gates and fences from the Victorian era, and Italian Renaissance drawings which are emblematic of Western notions of perspectival principles, along with other forms of imagery and philosophical texts.





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