Black Hole Theatre

By

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Abstract

This supporting thesis outlines a series of photographic works that attempt to map out and explore the physical surfaces of photographs and the spaces of interaction that open up when we encounter an image at the photograph's surface. Many of the works draw heavily on the analogy of a black hole as a phenomenon which pulls in information from the world around it and forever preserves and conceals that information. Other works examine the kind of encounters we have within this space of interaction, using the physical photograph as an object to express self-reflectively and theatrically some of the ways in which photography functions. The works are discussed speculatively in terms of their relationship to modernism, minimalism, concrete photography and the theatre, citing relevant works from other artists where appropriate.

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Methods and Methodologies

The methods and methodologies used in the conception and production of much of this work are not strategies that I have or would have previously turned to in my practice. The work I am attempting to realize is thematically connected to that practice in that it emerges from a similar set of motivations and questions; however the manner in which it has been has been brought into the world is, in some ways, markedly different. As a photographer, the idea of materiality was never a major concern for me. My practice has extended to map-making and some public art, but notions such as surface, shape, texture and morphology, had never been part of my thinking about photography. The idea behind the work was always primary; its physical characteristics were often peripheral. This current work has been largely process driven. I experimented with material photographs and attained material results. The content of the photograph is, I believe, only a minor contributor to the work.

This whole enquiry began with an accidental discovery. While making rubbings of various surfaces in my studio with a view to fabricating a three dimensional installation I noticed that items like picture frames, my computer screen, photographs, postcards and magazines yielded virtually no detail at all. I found it interesting that surfaces which have the potential to take us visually to different places contain no detail in and of themselves. In my readings, many writers and theorists spoke about the surface of a photograph as being the site or location of the image (Flusser 1986). This led me to query the physical characteristics of photographic surface — largely through tactile means. I made rubbings of photographs; I took imprints of them in wax and made block prints by rolling ink on their surfaces and then pressing them on paper. In every case, the action yielded nothing, save the marks made by my own hand and the effects of time on the photograph itself. This prompted me to think of the surface of a photograph in a more conceptual way.

It has been written that a photograph can be a liminal space, a conduit to a past reality of memory and representation (Dados). Thinking about the surface as a space where a kind of transaction occurs between viewer and image and revealing it to be, physically speaking, a featureless void, a vacuum even — waiting to be filled, was I thought, a profound and poetic way to look at photography.

The act of mapping the surface of the photograph through rubbings, printings and impressions also had the interesting side effect of deleting the image itself from the final product and I discerned a palpable tension between what could be seen in the parent photograph and what was

visible in its offspring. This tension lead me to two conclusions — that juxtaposing the resulting image with a brief textual explanation of what was in the original heightened that tension by partially presenting the viewer with whatever information he or she was missing; and that introducing this information into the experience prompted him/her to perceive the existence of something behind or beyond the image. The circumstantial evidence of this information in the recording of the surface that carried it and the impossibility of accessing or seeing it ultimately lead me to think of the event horizon of a black hole.

This process spawned the creation and presentation of the works *Album*, a salon style hang of an eclectic group of framed rubbings and imprints of photographic media; and *Sagittarius a**[1], a large painted flat black circle on a glossy white wall, (a basic caricature of a black hole), in the interim exhibition in 2015. This enquiry also prompted me to seek out the cctv monitor that comprised the readymade work *Ghost in the Machine*, shown in the same exhibition.

From this midpoint in the program, the project evolved in two ways, culminating in the two works that I showed in the graduating exhibition. The first work, *Black Hole Cluster* is a direct hybrid of two of the works in the interim exhibition, *Album* and *Sagittarius a**. *Black Hole Cluster* is a series of 12 framed photographic prints made using a pinhole camera. The camera was purpose made to accommodate different apertures and with an adjustable focal length so that the image circle could be projected within the edges of the paper inside and yield a range of different projection effects. The photograph was then deliberately overexposed to the point where, when developed, any image recorded was lost within the density of black on the paper. The resulting series of 5" x 7" photographs depicted perfectly black circles of differing diameter and with varying edge detail, from crisp to blurred. These works were placed on the wall flanked by a label which contained a brief description of what the camera witnessed in each exposure.

The second work, *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* emerged out of an extended period of material experimentation with the photograph. In *Album*, the acts of rubbing printing and impressing the photograph were an attempt to explore the characteristics of surface. The next logical step was to proceed beneath that surface. I began to peel away at the layer of emulsion that sits atop certain kinds of photographic paper. At first it was just peeling back corners of the photograph, but soon I was using a scalpel to isolate specific areas within an image and removing those

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[1] Sagittarius a* (Sagittarius a star) is the name of the super-massive black hole located at the centre of our galaxy.

parts to reveal the rough texture of the paper beneath. Experimenting, I peeled back whole skies, graphic elements within the image, negative space and anything I thought might make for an interesting mixture of composition and texture. However, while I liked what I was doing, it always appeared to me to be the same gesture replicating itself over and over. Then, while looking back through my archive of images I stumbled across a series of photographs I had taken 12 years perviously. These photographs, consisting formally of black lines against a white background had rested at the edge of my consciousness for over a decade, periodically coming into view to be considered for one project or another but always receding back out of sight, never to be actualized — until now. The photographs amounted to a personal exercise in composition, a collection of images I had captured while walking about as a way of keeping my eye in practice at a time when I was not using my camera often. I realized that these images had great potential when combined with this new technique; there were a lot of them — therefore allowing for a whole body of work, they were all of the same subject — and therefore cohesive, they were graphically diverse — and therefore absorbing; moreover, their qualities spoke to a very basic, very fundamental type of photography — predominantly black and white (though some had the merest hint of tonality) and graphically, just lines on a background — stubbornly two-dimensional. As I began to peel off sections of the white background and play with composition, I started to think of these images more and more as fundamental building blocks of photography. They spoke in terms of elemental composition — but in moments also revealed themselves as landscapes, as architecture, and as natural phenomena. From then on I perceived that whatever this collection of primal images was doing, was projecting outward to embrace a greater photographic discourse. I began to cut through the photograph, making small incisions — at first along the edges of lines where they would be hard to notice; then I started cutting sections away from the photograph — and then I bent one. My motivation for doing this was compositional but as soon as I did it, I realized that this was a far more significant gesture. Here was an image which was steadfastly two-dimensional, transforming itself into a three-dimensional one. As I saw it there were two things happening here. The first was sculptural, which I will address later. The second was that the photograph as "object" was mimicking the behaviour of the photograph as "function". When we look at most photographs we perceive a flat space bearing a composition that tricks the viewer into seeing depth and dimensionality. This is how many photographs operate in the world. In this new work, the previously flat, two-

dimensional composition was becoming three dimensional. In this way, the physical photograph was behaving as a kind of analogy of photography itself.

Peeling back the top layer of a photograph, cutting bits out of it and bending it are sculptural acts. We often encounter photographs that are bent and torn, in fact most new photographs are not flat — as freshly printed paper has a curvature to it — yet we don't interpret these kinds of photographs as sculptural so I felt that as long as the work could be perceived primarily as photographic and as long as the deformations were not too elaborate, that the viewer would be able to relate to the work as photography and not as a sculpture. I will address later whether I think this approach was successful or not.

One way of anchoring the work in the realm of photography was through the use of titling. *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* was chosen as a means of emphasizing its photographic origins and as a way of communicating a sense of universality; *Vols 1-4* was a reference to the four vitrines used to display the work. Originally, my preferred presentation strategy was to frame the pieces individually and hang them, but I had also been considering vitrines as another institutional method of photographic display. The vitrines won out as I felt that a group of glass topped cases would speak taxonomically about the work — referencing the way cases in a natural history museum might. To this end I fabricated four bespoke vitrines. Each was designed to hold six, five by seven inch works, side by side in a line. The works were allowed roughly four to five inches of breathing room on all sides. Of the twenty-four works on display, one-third were three dimensional in nature and had to be supported on concealed platforms fabricated from balsa wood sheets and small pegs so that they could express themselves spatially. For consistency, I made the decision early on in the process to place all of the images, three dimensional or not on the same kind of platform. This however, seemed to have the effect of veering the work back toward the realm of sculpture. In an attempt to mitigate this I made the vitrines with a single horizontal glass surface supported by four solid sides — in an attempt to compel the viewer to look more or less straight down at the work. This limited the way a person could interact with them spatially. Finally, the vitrines were painted to approximate a fifty percent grey colour. This again, was a direct reference to photography but it also kept the vitrines' colour from interfering directly with the work's compositions in a way that black or white would.

The fact that the work is housed in four identical cases allows for a certain degree of flexibility in display. I had intended to create an arrangement where the viewer could walk around and

between the vitrines to create a kind of immersive experience but due to the constraints of the gallery where the graduating exhibition was staged, I ended up placing all four in one continuous line that complimented the long narrow space I had been allotted. The line of vitrines was flanked on one wall by the grid of 12 frames that comprised the second work, *Black Hole Cluster*. This arrangement, I felt, allowed each work to speak for itself but also permitted a kind of dialogue to exist between them.

Context

Right about now roughly 1.8×10^{16} miles from here, the light from our sun, reflected off the newly founded edifices of the great civilization of the Indus Valley is being received and recorded through the surface of an object. It is an object so profound and mysterious that it cannot be perceived by the human eye. It occupies a space intelligible only by higher mathematics and the observable effects it has on the world around it. This object, V616 Monocerotis is, at 3000 light years distant, the nearest known black hole to the Earth.

A black hole is an area in space where gravity's pull is so strong that even light cannot escape (Dunbar). Structurally, a black hole is composed of a singularity, a mass that is infinitely dense which occupies a volume that is infinitely small; and an event horizon — a volume in space shrouding the singularity, within which all matter, energy and information it receives from the world around it remains forever trapped and concealed. One of the many things that theories of black holes fixate on is the subject of information. In theory, information cannot be destroyed, so within every black hole should exist the information of all the things it has absorbed over time (Hawking). The question suggests a model which could be applied metaphorically to photography. That is to say, it posits the existence of a surface beyond which lays a trove of information (previously observable in space and time), which is now permanently obscured.

A camera is an object that occupies a space in the world. It exists for one reason — to facilitate the recording of some aspect of that world. Within the camera is a surface which receives light and chemically or electrically records it. The place where this happens is at the surface. Later, when it is time to engage with the recorded image, this encounter between viewer and viewed occurs, once again, at the surface. The camera witnesses and records.

Arguably, the most common example of this, at least in colloquial use is in photographs depicting people. When we take a photograph of a person, a group, or figures in an environment we are recording their likeness, yes — but we are also recording other factors that have contributed to that likeness. If I make you smile and take a picture of you smiling, what has gone between us also exists in that picture — and as long as the image exists, that information persists in the world, there, and yet not there at the same time.

There is of course, a certain poetic licence in this example, but there is much poetry in abstract and empty spaces and perhaps this is an interesting way to think about the surface of a photograph. While every photograph contains, within its emulsion or embedded in its pixels a particular, discreet image, the surface, where that image meets our gaze is perhaps, a universal one, not bounded by inches or centimetres but infinite in its possibility. Consider again, the surface (event horizon) of a black hole. It is in itself (and by definition) invisible — yet it exerts a powerful force on the world around it. As objects are drawn closer, they come under the influence of its extreme gravity. They are pulled, squashed, squeezed, bent, torn,

sundered — and once sundered are rubbed up against themselves again creating strange and exotic new versions of themselves. Perhaps this elemental process also speaks in some small way to the act of looking and in particular, looking at an image that exerts itself — one which causes us to change, empathize, emote, adjust, react or reveal.

A photograph is a way of seeing the world, a markedly human way of looking but also a result of the world revealing itself. It is an object, an idea, a referent, a signifier, a trigger, a reminder, a document, a deceiver and a teacher. Its existence in the world permits a momentary liminal space that is activated when viewer and image are drawn together. Within that space, strange and interesting things can happen and yet between the poles of stimulus and response and the immense noise of everything that falls in-between, there exists a great silent gulf whose existence is palpably real but whose surface we may never breach.

The Works

Many practitioners, writers and theorists of photography site the surface of the photograph as the place where the image exists and where the photograph and viewer encounter each other in a meaningful way. In his book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* (Flusser, 8) Vilem Flusser proposes that, "Images are significant surfaces. Images signify — mainly — something 'out there' in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions). This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as 'imagination'. It is the pre-condition for the production and decoding of images".

In a more recent book, *The Concept of Non-Photography,* the philosopher Francois Larouelle writes, "Myriads of negatives tell the world, speaking in cliches among themselves, constituting a vast conversation, filling a photosphere that is located nowhere. But one single photo is enough to express a real that all photographers aspire one day to capture, without ever quite succeeding in doing so. Even so this real lingers right there on the negatives' surface, at once lived and imperceptible. Photographs are the thousand flat facets of an ungraspable identity that only shines — and at times faintly — through something else." (Larouelle, 142).

Writer and cultural thinker Nour Dados postulates that, "The photograph throws up the threshold as a possibility and a challenge, but do we ever really pass the threshold of the photograph […] to reach that other place? Where is it that we expect to go when we do? Perhaps we think photographs will allow us access to the paths of memory, to the scene of a crime, or that they will take us on a voyage to a distant place, to visit sites of cultural significance, or on a promenade down the avenues of history. But how does one enter and leave a photograph and where do we go when we do?" (Dados).

These quotations, describe photography and the photograph, eloquently and in objective terms but all three go on to allude to some other less easily defined aspect that characterizes the photographic process. Flusser speaks about imagination as a way of describing the translation of the observable world on to a photographic surface. Larouelle suggests that the world presents itself through an incalculable multitude of surfaces which simultaneously somehow, veil that self-same presentation and Dados writes of a threshold, a surface through which we may potentially pass to go somewhere else. We might look at these descriptions as a transaction, a filter and as a passageway. We might also conflate the three ideas and examine this characteristic of photography

as a kind of space. One could very loosely refer to Henri Lefebvre's *Social Production of Space* (Lefebvre) and describe a photograph, or more particularly the surface of a photograph, as a sort of intermediary space which exists to facilitate a certain mental or social process; but if the surface of a photograph is a space, then surely it boasts specific characteristics that require description. How might one go about mapping photographic space? This question was the starting point for the multiple components that make up the work *Album*.

Fig. 1: Ross Kelly, Album, 2015. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Photo: Ross Kelly.

The act of making pencil rubbings, block prints and impressions of various photographic surfaces (photographs, negatives, polaroids and slides) is an attempt to map out through tactile means, the physical confines of an otherwise invisible space. All of these actions have the side effect of erasing any trace of the image depicted in the parent photograph. As such they amount to

a distillation of the site where viewer and image meet and where the relationship between the two is built. There are two notable by-products of this distillation, however. Firstly, in the case of the rubbings, the hand of the maker is exposed — as viewing the very specific markings on the paper, points to the actions of a third party. Secondly, any marks, blemishes, creases etc that are in the original photograph are replicated in the copy — which preserves a sense of photographic object-hood. Neither of these things are, in themselves, problematic. When we look at a photograph, we are projecting something of ourselves into the process of understanding it, our history, our education, our culture, our mood; so we leave something of ourselves within that space of interpretation. Those thoughts and feelings are now part of the image's story, fleeting — and perhaps forever invisible to all, but nonetheless part of the reality of that photograph's past, present or future existence. That existence is given further testimony to by imprints of the folds and creases of the photograph's physical occupancy of the world; evidence that it has been encountered before — and probably many times before. As Eduardo Cadava and Gabriela Nouzeilles write in their introduction to the book, *The Itinerant Languages of Photography* — "like postcards, which often bear photographs and therefore evoke the itinerancy of images in general, photographs are moving signs that, travelling from one context to another, carry any number of open secrets. These secrets are simultaneously exposed and veiled, post-marked and yet full of dormant, unexpected meanings, waiting to be viewed and read in the future." (Cadava and Nouzeilles, 17).

There is an old saying — you never know how much you miss something until it's gone. The act of presenting a viewer with a work that is intelligible as a series of photographs while negating the content that they would normally expect to witness, elicits a sense of loss or denial. This has the potential to manifest an experience that runs a little cold, like walking through an ancient graveyard where the names on all the tombstones have been erased by a thousand years of wind and rain. *Album*, however, with its eclectic palate, morphology and media referents is supposed to speak to a kind of vernacular photography that is prevalent in the lived experience of family photo albums, instant photography, flickr and facebook. A warm and familiar genre that welcomes spontaneity, engagement, levity, curiosity and satisfaction. Emphasizing this, an infographic was added to the work which outlined the positions of the various renderings on the wall and provided a brief explanation of what was depicted in their parent images; for example, "2. A finely dressed couple stand side by side facing the camera on a set of steps. The steps lead up to the entrance of a red brick building". The descriptions are not intended to be leading or to elicit a given

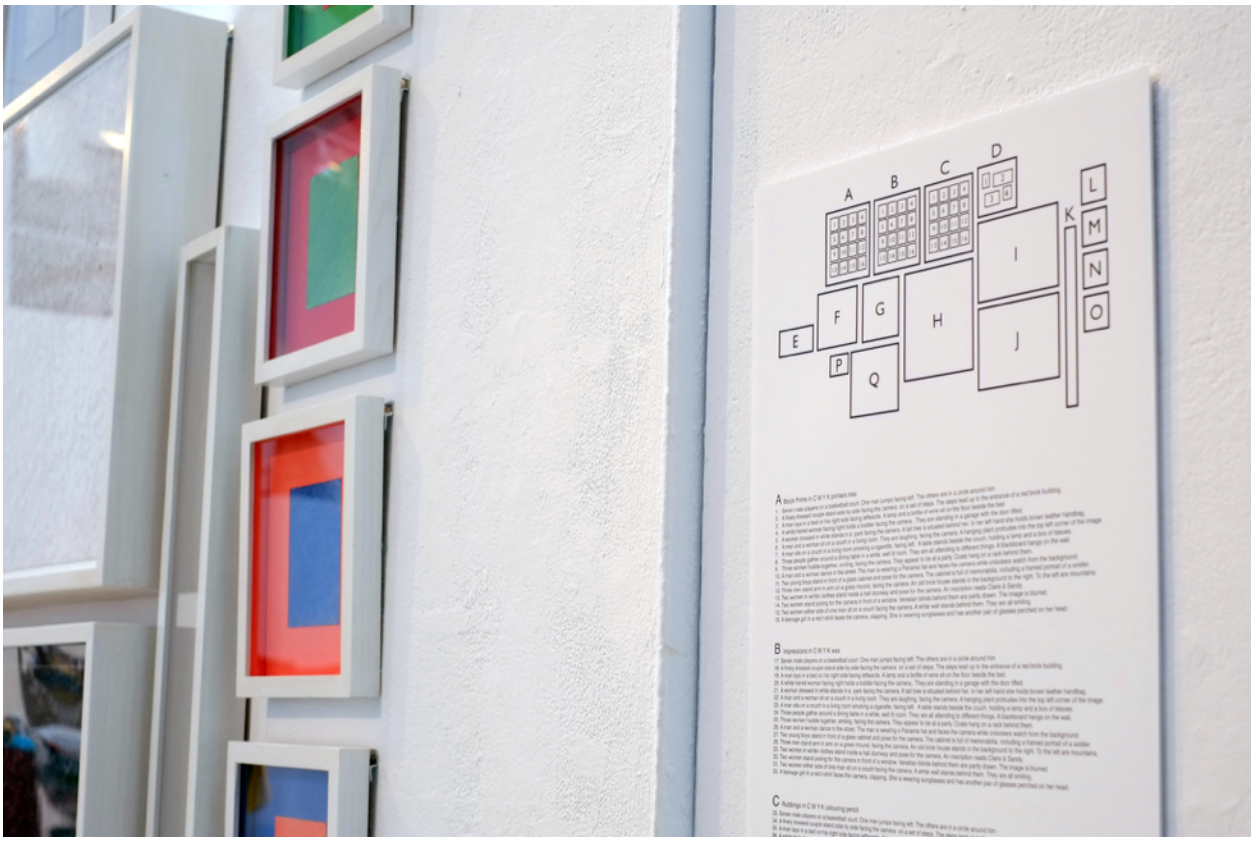

Fig. 2: Ross Kelly, Album (detail), 2015. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation at Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Photo: Ross Kelly.

response, more to assert that a specific set of information underpins each image. The declaration that this information exists, but that one is not permitted to witness it first hand, injects a tension into the work that equates to a kind of tease. One possible (and desirable) result of this is that the viewer may then project his or her own version of events onto the relatively void surface they are looking at, thus consciously activating the space in the absence of the parent image.

One might draw attention to the works of two other artists which, arguably, act through a similar mechanism. The American artist Liz Deschenes' series of green screen works reference photography as object and also as window (Karapetian). Drawing upon the movie industry's use of the green screen technique in creating special effects backgrounds and cinematic sequences, Deschenes presents us with a seemingly void space that is yet, pregnant with the potential for depiction. In its simplest application, the green screen technique involves the use of actors playing their roles against a green backdrop. Later, a computer generated setting for the scene is added to

Fig. 3: Liz Deschenes Green Screen 4, 2001. Double laminated inkjet print (Front: UV lamination, back: Duratran material). 71 x 183 inches (180.3 x 464.8 cm). Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

the footage — replacing the green space behind the actors with some otherwise fantastic and unrealizable location. Thus, the green screen is a surface infused with the promise of latent imagery. Interestingly, although Deschenes' green screens work on similar principles to the rubbings and imprints of *Album*, and are an compelling presentation of image space as empty void, they speak more about the future potential of image space — in much the same way as an unexposed

negative or sheet of photographic paper might.

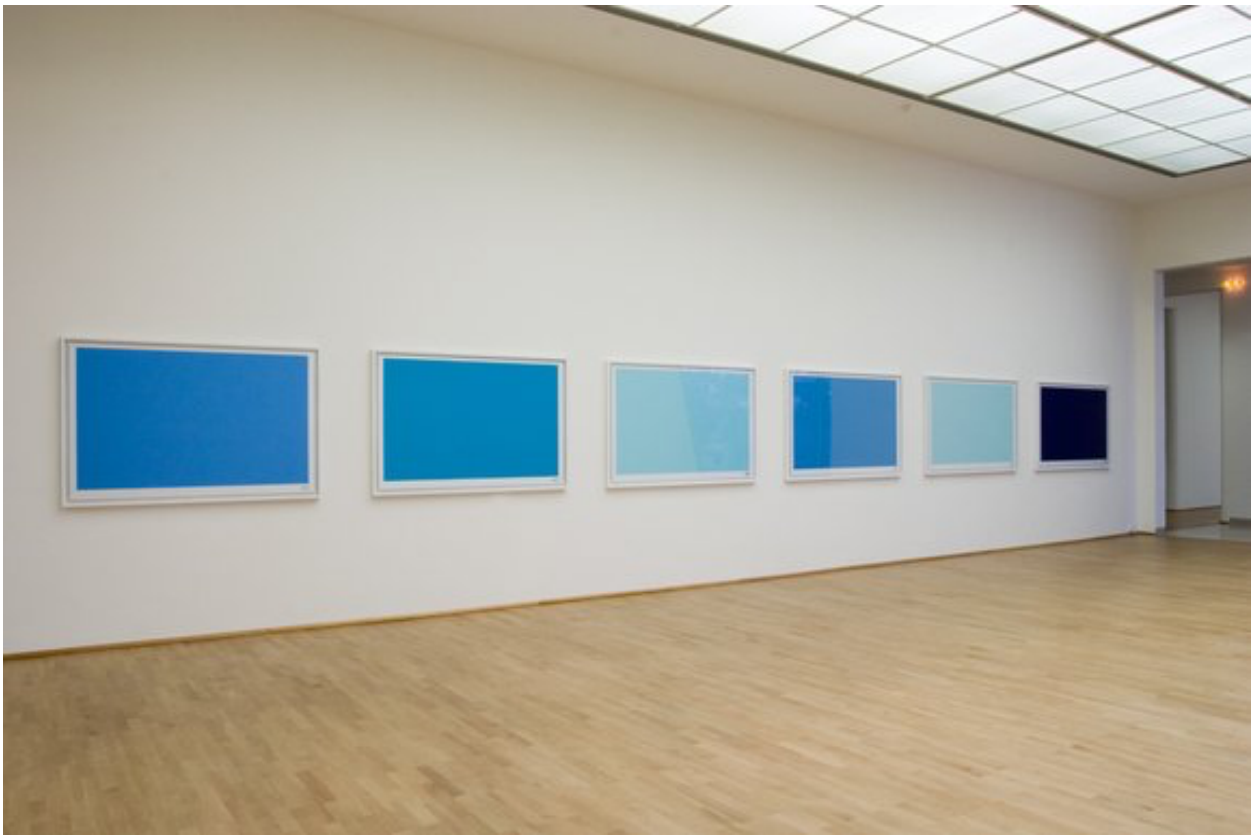

Fig. 4: Walid Raad, Secrets of the open sea (install), 1994-2004. 6 inkjet-prints, framed; wall text each 121 x 184,5 x 5 cm Installation at Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt am Main, © The Atlas Group, Photo: Axel Schneider

The work of Lebanese artist Walid Raad however, presents a more similar example of how *Album* functions. His work, *Secrets in the open sea* comprises six of an original twenty-nine photographic prints found in a box buried in the rubble of a bombed out building in Beirut (Respini, Raad et al. 70). Due to the qualities of the material and the environmental conditions, the prints had all turned different shades of blue, completely concealing the original images depicted in the photographs. The six photographs were sent to a laboratory in the United Kingdom for analysis and in each case a feint, latent black and white image was recovered. The final work contains the six blue images reprinted in their original dimensions of 111 x 173 cm along with a small, faded thumbnail depiction of the original image, situated in the lower right-hand side of the photograph's margin. In this case, the thumbnail acts in the same way that *Album*'s infographic and textual descriptions do

— albeit in a much more straightforward and less opaque manner. The blue monochromatic surface is a blank void that has consumed the photograph's original image, which now dwells within it — imperceptible by the human eye, unaided by modern technology. In a darkly poetic twist, research revealed that every person depicted in the original images had drowned, died or had their bodies recovered from the waters of the Mediterranean sea between 1975 and 1991 (Respini, Raad et al. 70). Thus the fate of the photographic likenesses of these poor souls mimics reality and they remain, forever submerged in a sea of a different blue.

Fig. 5: Ross Kelly, Sagittarius a* (install), 2015. Light and the absence of light. Installation at Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Photo: Ross Kelly.

On witnessing this work in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, six months after exhibiting *Album*, I was made to ponder the second work I showed in the interim exhibition *Sagittarius a**. I had intended for this work to be a kind of foil for *Album*, as it directly references a natural

phenomenon (a black hole) which I felt, presented an interesting way of understanding the kind of void yet charged surfaces I was exploring.

As a companion for *Album* I was interested in the muscular physical presence of *Sagittarius a** in the space — how that might encourage an embodied experience in the viewer; and also in what it brought to the conversation. But as a work in its own right it had several shortcomings, chief among which was a lack of any direct connection to photography, the area which was the focus of my whole enquiry. Months later, encountering Walid Raad's *Secrets of the open sea* prompted me to revisit both *Album* and *Sagittarius a**, to see if there might be a way to succeed with one work, where, perhaps two had fallen short. When I was formulating the original premise for *Sagittarius a** I had flirted with the idea of using liquid photographic emulsion as a way of making the circle. Ultimately I chose paint and tried to avoid that as a distracting issue in the work by listing "light and the absence of light" as the materials on the label. Returning to this as a possible strategy I struggled with the idea of how to make an acceptable circle using this medium — until I realized I could use the natural image circle of the lens to project a perfect circle on the support. This quickly lead me to adopt a purpose built pinhole camera and regular black and white photographic paper. The work which emerged finally, was a kind of hybrid piece which drew on the characteristics of both *Album* and *Sagittarius a**. The pinhole camera recorded a series of unique images resulting in an eclectic collection of photographs. These photographs were obscured from the viewer due to the build up in the density of black on the paper. Moreover, this extreme density and the fact that the image was engulfed by a black circle are direct references that help the work draw upon the analogy of the real world black hole which suggests how the work itself operates. *Black Hole Cluster* also borrows the textual component of *Album* in that it employs an extended label describing the position and content of each photograph in the hang. In this way, both works hinge on the tense space that is created when a viewer is presented with a void image in the knowledge that that void contains information which cannot be accessed.

There is something about photographs that begs to be remembered, whether it is Walid Raad's *Secrets of the open sea*, *Album, Black Hole Cluster*, the false memories of Liz Deschenes' green screen works or even the 24 photographs of *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* which sat dormant for over a decade, periodically emerging into the world, always dismissed but always persisting at the edge of thought. Photography itself is perhaps a real world symptom of our own human need to remember. Indeed, for many photographs it is the only reason that they exist at all.

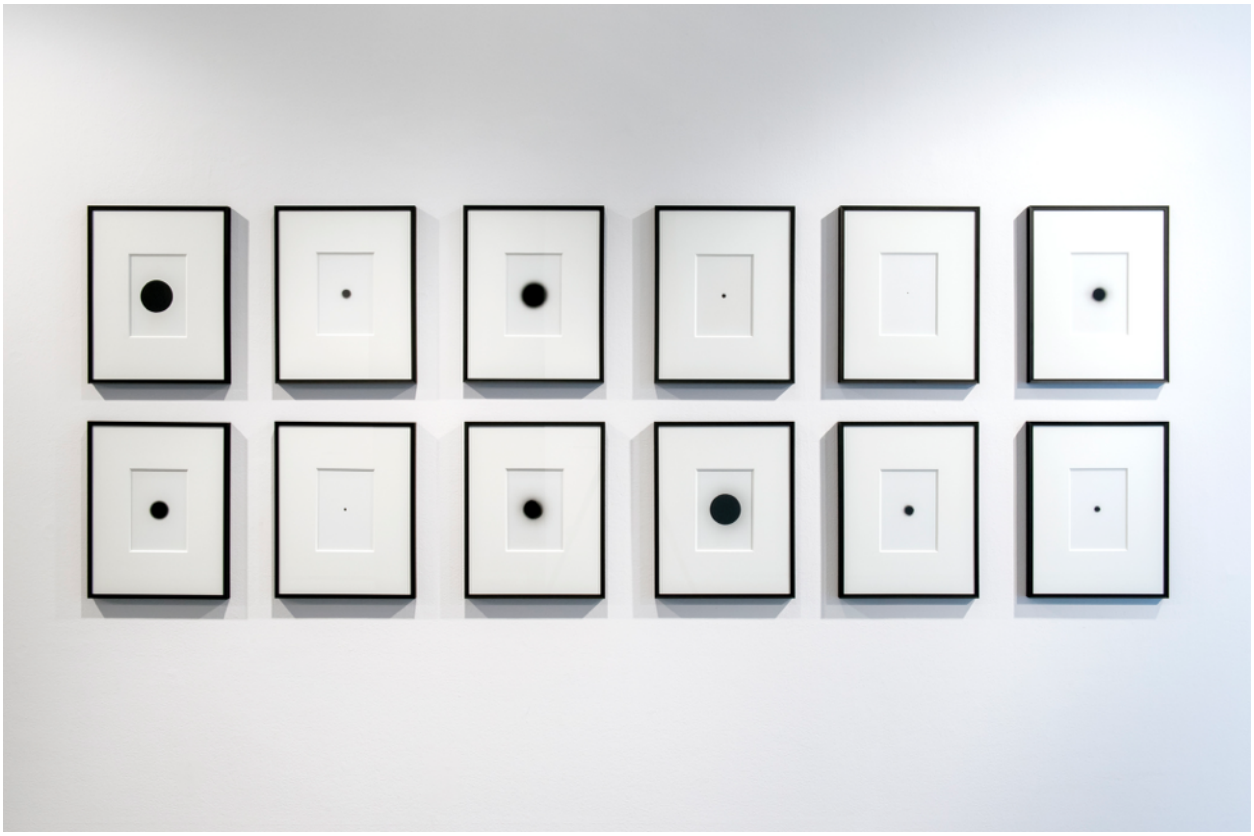

Fig. 6: Ross Kelly, Black Hole Cluster (install view), 2016. Overexposed silver gelatin prints. Installation in Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Photo: Scott Massey.

Perhaps that is why we are perturbed when we are confronted with an image which has been erased or which has consumed itself. This imperative for images to remain in the world is illustrated by the last work shown in the interim exhibition of 2015. Unlike the other works discussed in this paper, *Ghost in the Machine* is a readymade, a found object. It is an old cathode ray tube surveillance monitor that has a distinct image burned into the rear of its screen — a common occurrence in cctv monitors that record an unchanging scene over many years of use. When switched on, the screen displays the ghostly backlight image of a large window and the barely perceptible traces of a room's interior, an eerie shadow from it's inaccessible past. The screen-burn is a remnant, a symptom of the system's normal functions as it recorded and re-recorded over the years, memorizing and re-memorizing the same scene in one endless closed loop. Very slowly, electronic information leaked from the system etching a barely recognizable shadow of itself in the physical world. Now that shadow is the only evidence that this image ever existed. Even then, what took place within this room is lost to us as only its primary physical characteristics remain; less an image

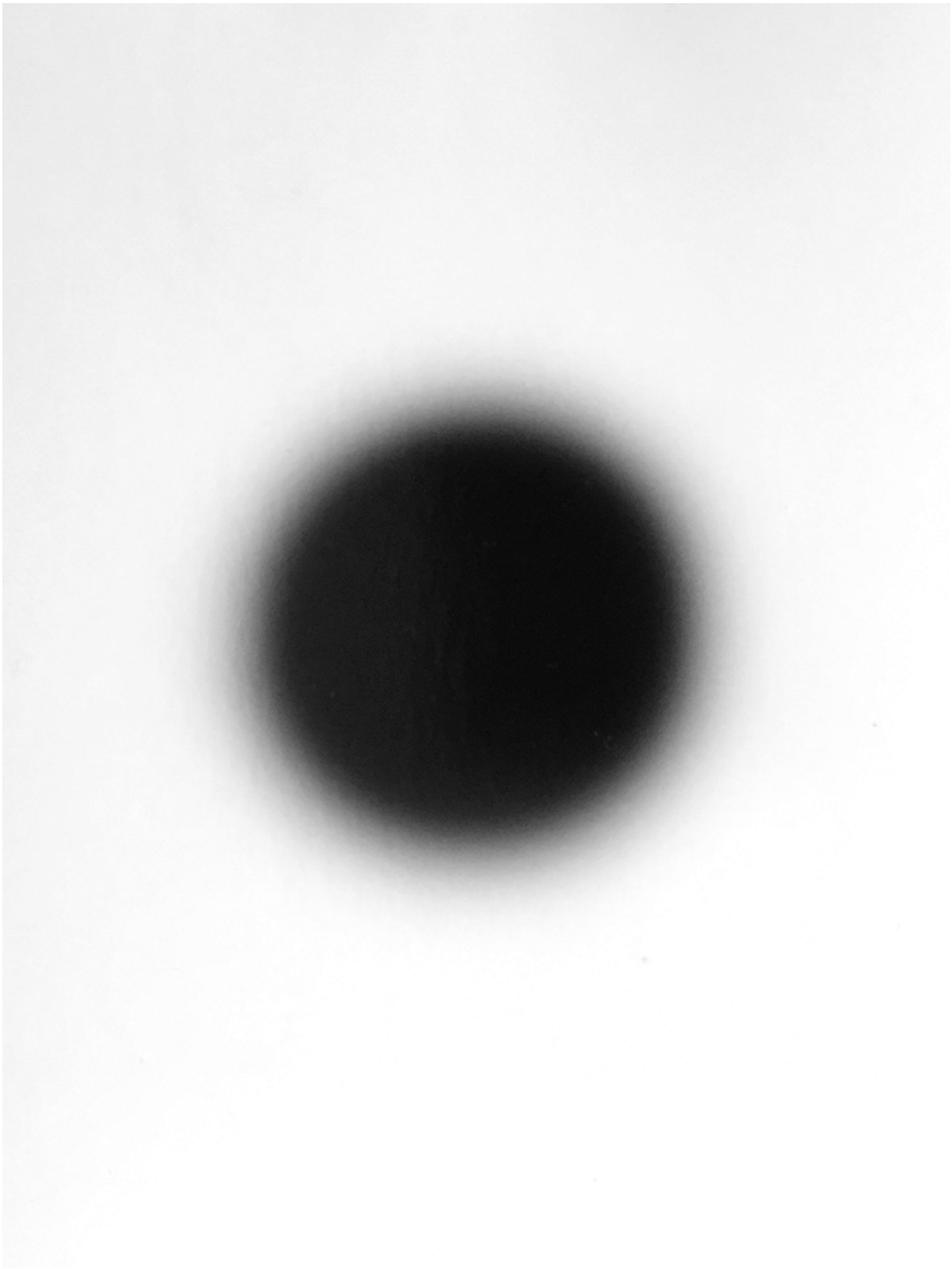

Fig. 7: Ross Kelly, Black Hole Cluster (detail), 2016. Overexposed silver gelatin print with accompanying description: "Downtown Vancouver from the balcony; 20 second exposure". Photo: Ross Kelly.

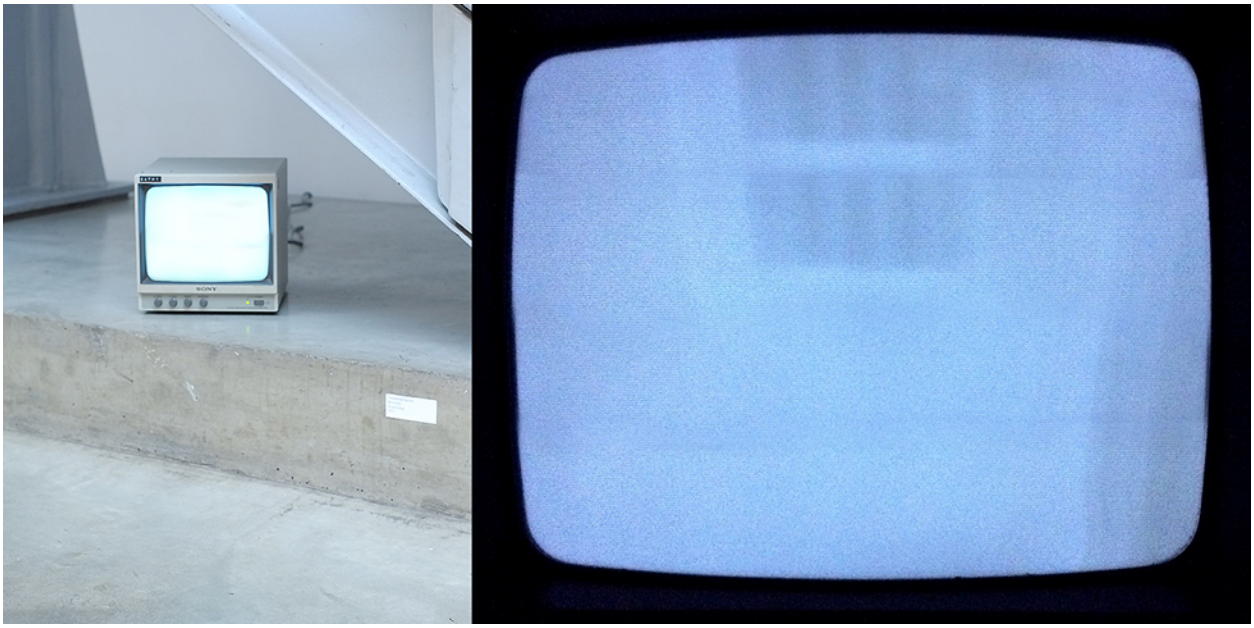

Fig. 8: Ross Kelly, Ghost in the machine (install and detail), 2015. Readymade (9" cctv monitor with screen burn) Photo: Ross Kelly.

in its own right then an empty frame for what took place in this space over endless hours, days months and years. The original data had no value outside of its specific function, leading to its systematic erasure. Indeed, the very process of closed circuiting involves constant deletion, both in the normal working of the machinery and in the steady physical degradation of the magnetic tape. The screen burn is a kind of eulogy to an exhausted species of imagery that had no physical form and no visible source. Just an electromagnetic charge rooted in the subatomic depths of some invisible unknowable quantum world.

Black holes are also citizens of this world and as such they inspire debate, mystery, frustration and even spirituality. The unfathomable physical forces they generate cause the laws of nature to break down and strange things happen to objects that get too close to their surface. I found that trying to understand the idea of photographic surface generated similar feelings. A photograph is such a small thing and yet, at the same time, it has the potential to allow for an infinite set of possibilities, all of which realize themselves at the photographs surface.

While the works *Album, Sagittarius a** and *Black Hole Cluster* all dwell on or at the surface of the photograph, the second work in the graduating exhibition, *Encyclopedia of photography Vols 1-*

4 starts to excavate beneath that surface in attempt to interrogate what may dwell there and how a photograph operates once we access that space.

In his popular book *The Nature of Photographs*, (Shore 1998) the acclaimed photographer Stephen Shore outlines some of the very basic characteristics of the photograph. On a physical level, a photograph is flat, has edges and is static; it does not move. It is an object; it can be stored, traded and repurposed. It can be construed as a work of art or utility. Photographs depict an aspect of the world whose formal attributes are determined by a range of physical, chemical and optical factors (to this I would add environmental and computational). A photograph incorporates time — the photograph translates a four dimensional space onto a two dimensional plain representing a fluid (temporal) world on a static surface. Further to this Shore proposes a mental aspect to photography, incorporating both the psychological model a person builds upon each viewing of a photograph and the photographer's own worldview — which prompts the selection of themes, settings and editing criteria.

Literary historian and philosopher of technology Dan O'Hara crystallized this phenomenological explanation when he said,"what photography takes as its origin and object is human perception, human vision; that is the thing it simulates, not the world, or rather it simulates the world as humans see it…" (O'Hara 2012).

In her recent book *The Miracle of Analogy Part 1*, (Silverman) Art Historian and cultural theorist Kaja Silverman returns to a very early interpretation of the photograph as being something that we receive from the world rather then something that is taken. It is the world leaving its imprint on paper which itself becomes an analogy of the world.

There are a thousand definitions of photography and a thousand notions of what a photograph is and does. Most of these explanations have a grain of truth to them, and to be sure, photographs do many and multiple things at once. The aim of *Encyclopedia of photography Vols 1-4* is not to define photography as such, but to situate a number of photographs in a such a way that they illustrate collectively some of the inner workings of a photograph, or some of the things that photography does. According to Greys Anatomy of the Human Body (Grey 1858), anatomy — " may be studied by two methods:(1) the various structures may be separately considered—systematic anatomy; or(2) the organs and tissues may be studied in relation to one another — topo-

graphical or regional anatomy".

Fig. 9: Ross Kelly, Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4 (detail), 2016. Peeled archival inkjet print. Photo: Ross Kelly.

In many ways, *Encyclopedia of photography Vols 1-4* is an anatomical investigation. The works constituent photographs are probed and skinned; dissected, examined and presented under the light. The work itself can be interpreted systematically or indeed, topographically and it is aimed at better understanding the functioning of a much larger whole.

This is not a work of concrete photography (although it is) and it is not a modernist work (although it kind of is). While neither modernist tradition, or painting were part of the works genesis, its appearance and the themes it explores do warrant an acknowledgement of modernism and a brief discussion of how the work overlaps.

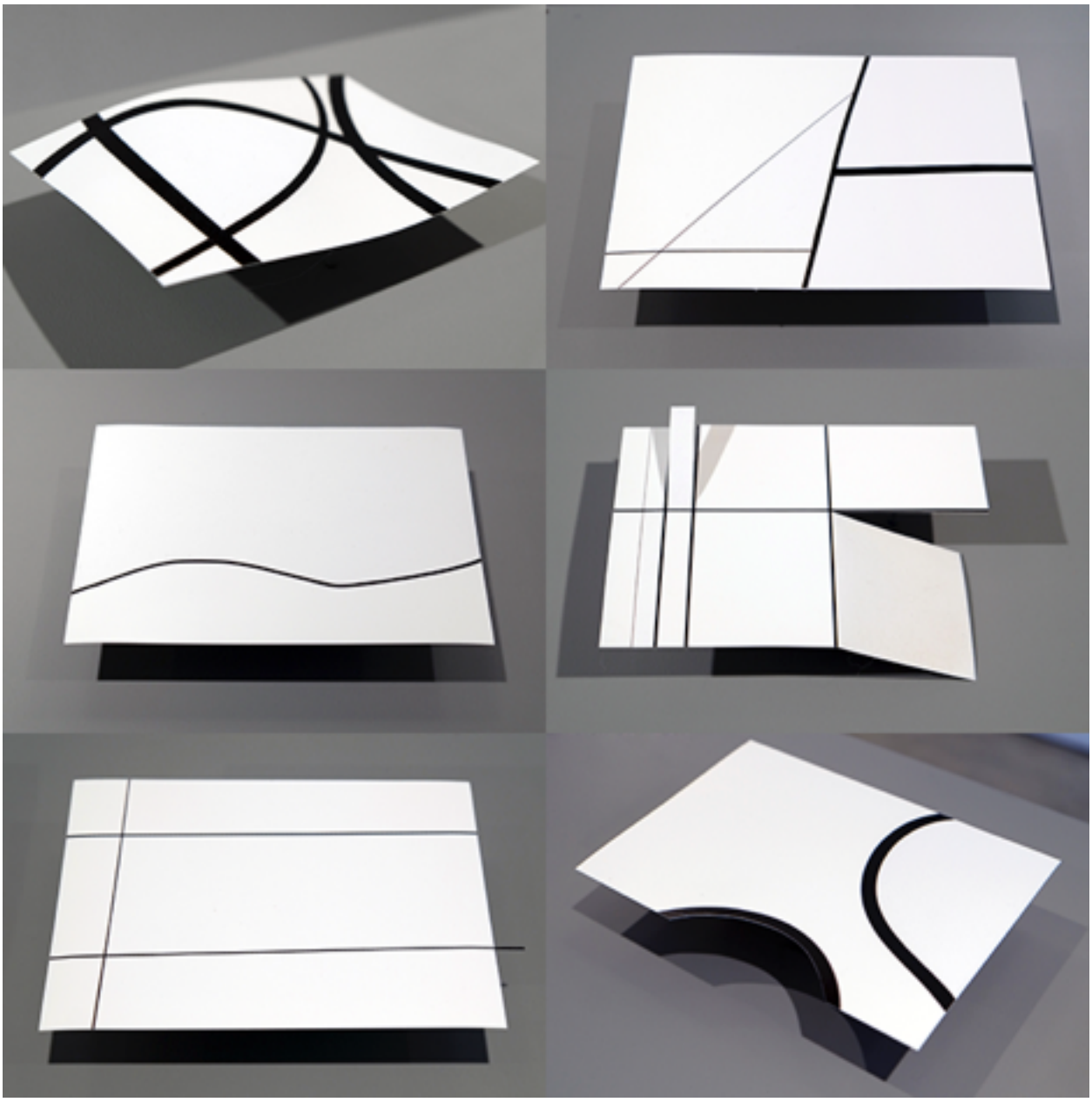

Fig.10: Ross Kelly, Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4 (multiple details), 2016. Peeled, cut, folded and collaged archival inkjet prints. Photo: Ross Kelly.

In the noted work *Concrete Photography* (Jager, Krauss and Reese), Gottfried Jager describes concrete photography as "a form of fundamental artistic self-examination and self-reflection that aims to foreground it's very own conditions". Jager assumes concrete photography to be a subdivision of photography — similar to documentary photography and also as a subdivision of concrete art — similar to concrete painting or poetry. He goes on to say, "It's works are pure photography: not abstractions of the real world, but rather concretions of the pictorial possibilities contained

within photography". Concrete photography is universally comprehensible because it foregoes all relation to symbolism and does not stand for any external reality (Jager, Krauss and Reese, 15). Jager goes on to make a careful discrimination between concrete and abstract photography. He says the two are in opposition as an abstract photograph can trace its origins back to some form in nature whereas "everything that is concrete is only itself " (Jager, Krauss and Reese, 19). This would seem to disqualify the photographs in *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* as they are certainly referents of objects in the real world and therefore must be considered abstract photographs. Jager also claims that concrete photographs are not a semantic medium (Jager, Krauss and Reese, 15). Examined systematically, these photographs do not appear to signify anything in particular, indeed, they do not. However, when studied topographically there does seem to be a kind of dialogue going on, as cumulatively they form a lexicon for the possibilities or potentialities of photography itself. This would seem to root the work firmly in the camp of abstract photography. However, returning to Jager's initial definition of concrete photography as "a form of fundamental artistic self-examination and self-reflection that aims to foreground it's very own conditions"

Fig.11: Ross Kelly, Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4 (install), 2016. Peeled, cut, folded and collaged archival inkjet prints. Installation in Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Photo: Ross Kelly.

(Jager, Krauss and Reese, 15), enables us to come to a different conclusion. When looked at topographically, the individual photographs, the conversation between them and the context in which they are displayed, constitute a work in photography that certainly aims to foreground its own conditions, and in this way it can claim to be concrete.

Many of the characteristics of this work, flatness, space, the frame, the cut have been written about and explored exhaustively in numerous commentaries on modernism and in particular in the discourse surrounding modernist painting. Aesthetically, this work would seem to owe the tradition of modernism a substantial debt. In his famous essay *Modernist Painting*, Clement Greenberg talks about flatness, and frame as being two qualities which are unique to painting (and now photography) and which would go on to preoccupy modernist art for decades."The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment—were treated by the old masters as negative factors ...Under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly" (Frascina and Harris 308-314). In the numerous constituent photographs of *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* may be found likenesses to the compositions of Mondiran and his dedication to finding harmony and balance in line and space; in the assertion and investigation of underlaying support in the bare canvases of Morris Louis, in the gestural and temporal cuts of Lucio Fontana, the folded three dimensional modernist sculptures of Anthony Caro and even some of the symbolic gestures in early Jackson Pollack works. In actuality, one may see countless art historical precedents in these photographs and while there is some crossover in technique, gesture, form and meaning between some modernist works and *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4*, these connections are largely circumstantial (at least in the works conception and execution). Nevertheless, moving forward, it may be useful to refer to some of the writings on modernist painting to explore individual aspects of these works.

There is one way in which this work is decidedly modernist. According to Greenberg, "The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself..." (Frascina and Harris 308). Jager echoed this sentiment in his statement that concrete photography (itself related to modernism) "foregrounds its own traditions". Thus we have in hand a work which in appearance might be one of abstract photography and in which we also discern some of the concerns of modernist painting; but in actuality it is a work of concrete photography (which functions in some ways like abstract photography and mod-

ernist painting alike). When examined topographically, as a whole however, it speaks in a different tongue; and that discourse relies on the languages of analogy and theatricality.

It seems that modernism, like heavenly bodies, exerts its own particular gravity on the art world and compels us at this juncture to acknowledge the work of acclaimed scholar and critic Michael Fried. Fried suggested in his seminal essay *Art and Object-hood (Harrison, Reid et al, 835 - 846)* that minimalist art is theatrical and for all intents and purposes, cannot be considered art in and of itself. According to Fried, this is because it requires the presence of an audience in order to express itself as art. Another way of saying this is that the object does not transcend itself on its own merits and without human activation it remains, essentially just an object. Fried's assertions are relevant here because most of the works presented in this thesis could in one way or another be interpreted as minimalist and *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* in particular could be interpreted as theatrical… but not *that* kind of theatrical. Fried's ideas are palpable in *Black Hole Cluster,* but become less relevant after the introduction of the textual explanations reducing the viewer's license in terms of narrative. To be sure it invites participation and projection but only to fill a pre-existing void which itself both defines and sits at the heart of the art experience. It is not something that is just a series of objects or photographs. Indeed, it bears representations of things which could barely be considered objects at all and is, in this respect, transcendent. *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* could also be considered minimalist, at least when considered in its constituent parts — or in anatomical terms, systematically; but when taken as one work, It can be argued that it is neither modernist nor minimalist… but it is certainly theatrical. *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* is a series of photographic works. These photographs are also, in one way or another, spatial actors with unique and distinct personalities (the vitrines could also be perceived as a kind of stage). The photographs act individually and cumulatively to present a bigger picture, a wider story. If read… the title and the description compel the viewer to acknowledge what they see before them as photography and yet it is not a very familiar kind of photography. There is a theatrical term to describe this kind of phenomenon. The German playwright Berthed Brecht coined the word, *Verfremdungseffekt* (which literally means distancing) to describe the act of presenting the audience with characters and situations with which they could not easily identify (Uhde). A similar concept from the field of literature is Victor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* or enstrangement (Jestrovic). That is to say, taking something which is familiar and presenting it in a strange way, such that the reader has to approach it from an unfamiliar angle. In this way an author may revitalize a

thing which may otherwise have been perceived as a cliche. Distancing and estrangement are useful ways to look at what *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* is doing. In many ways, photographs are cliches both as objects and in terms of their content. Placing them in an environment and directing them to behave in unexpected ways presents an enstranged scenario where the viewer can find new avenues into a very well worn subject.

The Uk-born, Los Angeles based artist and photographer Walead Beshty's photograms are a useful referent for *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4*. Beshty takes sheets of colour photographic paper and folds them in various ways, making them three dimensional. He then exposes them in the darkroom using coloured lights shone from different angles to create a randomly generated many hued composition on the paper. The

Fig.12: Walead Beshty , Three-Sided Picture (CMY), March 25th 2010, Irvine, California, Fuji Crystal Archive Super Type C, 2010 Color photographic paper 40 × 30 in 101.6 × 76.2 cm. Artsy.net

overlapping colours and interlocking folds create an image and indeed an object which appears to be abstract but which is actually (using Jager's definition), concrete. The work directly references its own creation, and the processes of its own creation. It is not theatrical in Fried's assertion of the word. As photographs go, it certainly calls attention to itself as an object, but it also asserts its own memory that does not rely on an audience to manifest as real.

Another UK artist, Abigail Reynolds makes interesting use of similar strategies employed in *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4.* In her series of works titled *The Universal Now,* (Reynolds??) Reynolds cuts, layers and folds three dimensionally, photographs and images in and from books often exploring how the world is mediated through pictures. Reynolds' works highlight how photographs can be constructed assemblages of things, how they can be collaged, how they express themselves dimensionally, how there is something behind an image — that is both related to it and which may be made palpable; and how a photograph, if not indeed photography, can be a palimpsest.

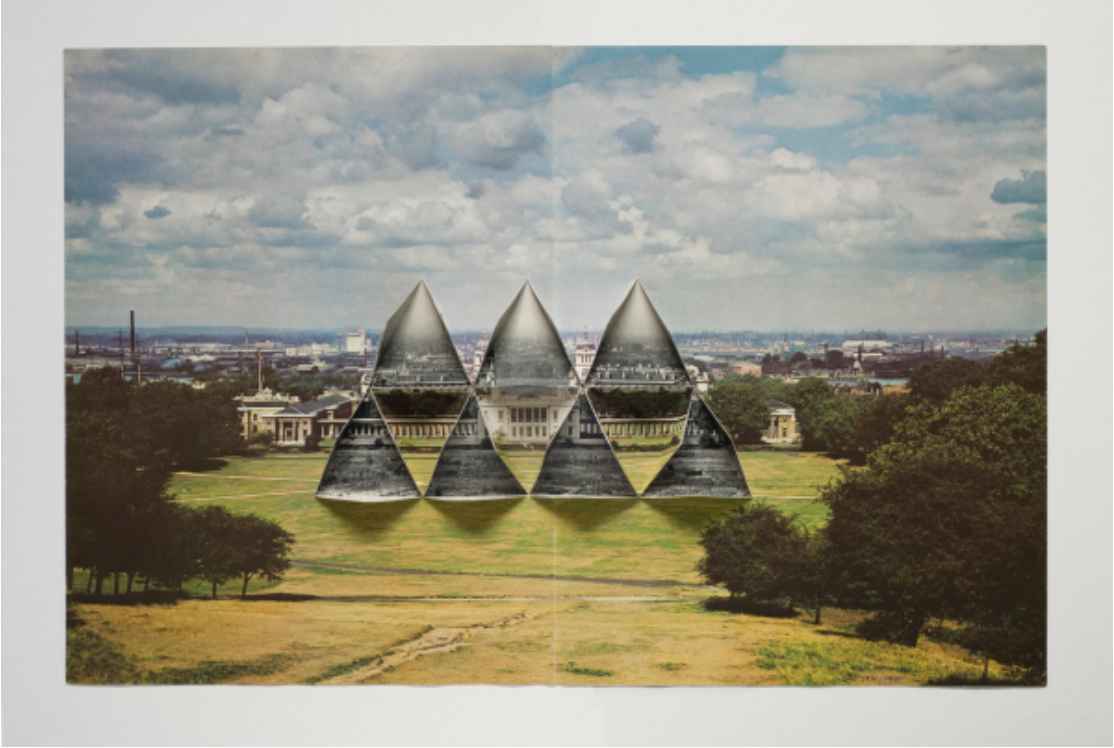

Fig. 13: Abigail Reynolds. Greenwich 1971/1950. Book pages cut and folded, 41.5 x 26.5 cm. Artists Website

The works of both Beshty and Reynolds call attention to photography itself through their behaviour in the world. Their stance and expression tell a story and proclaim a doctrine, if not an

ideology. In Beshty's case the mechanical processes and formal qualities of photography are key in posing core questions about photography itself. Reynolds work speaks more to the psychology and linguistics of the art. In both cases, the work is behaving in some ways as a theatrical object. So too is *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4.* It's various affectations are a nod to meaning, erasure, dimensionality, illusion, construction, layering, depth, and countless other ways that photography works its magic in the world. It's range of modalities and compositions suspends the viewers critical faculties and misleads him/her into musing upon architecture, on landscape on natural forms and on language, even though the indexical images on which this work is based have nothing whatsoever to do with any of those subjects. It is a chameleon. As a self referential work of photography, the many facets of *Encyclopedia of Photography 1-4* behave in a way that is analogical to the subject of photography itself. Essentially they speak to what photography is and what it can do.

Conclusions

The basic creed of this work is that photography as a visual system, expresses itself at the surface of a photograph and that encountering a photograph opens up a space of engagement. Much of the work outlined here has been conceived and developed in the gravity of a metaphorical black hole. The information within a black hole resides within an imperceptibly small surface and yet the scope of that information is potentially endless. Photographs too, express themselves through the merest sliver of surface, often confined by very modest dimensions and yet they open up worlds to us. Real world black holes speak, both to the very large and to the very small. The supermassive black hole *Sagittarius a*,* at the centre of our galaxy is roughly fourteen million miles across, but the singularity at its centre is infinitely tiny. In science we have the theories of general relativity which we use to understand phenomena that exist on a large scale and quantum mechanics to understand things that happen below the atomic level. Both of these theories illuminate realities and behaviours that seem weird and counterintuitive to the layperson. In human terms, these poles of the very large and the very small are abstracts. We cannot really understand either of them; but grappling with the abstract often takes us to strange and quirky places where the laws governing our normal thoughts and actions break down and unexpected things happen. The surface of a photograph, as Larouelle proposed, is infinite and somewhere during this process of trying to figure out what it was, I fell through it.

Material processes governed the making of almost all of the work supported by this document. Based on my previous works, that in itself was an unexpected response; and applying myself to something as small and specific as a 5" x 7" photograph repeatedly, over and over while trying to grapple with how vast this little thing in my hands was, pushed me further down this unforeseen road. In the presence of the enormous gravity of the idea of photographic surface I began to bend and fold and peel and cut and combine; destroying and transforming one kind of matter into another.

Photography itself is a universe of vastly distant poles. O'Hara says it is a distinctly human way of looking at the world, yet according to Silverman, it is the world revealing itself to us. In a way, the work outlined in this thesis charts out two other poles of photography. *Black Hole Cluster* plays with the kinds of things that photography conceals from us, which are yet very much a part of the photograph and of how we interact with it; while *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* re-

veals, making no attempt to hide its subject which is there for all to see. It acts, indeed, it method-acts, its existence constantly and permanently embodying and projecting its own character traits, professing "this is what I am and this is why I am what I am".

Photography as a subject is so broad and at the same time so specific. The gulf that exists between the positions of O'Hara and Silverman's assertions of what photography is, is immense. Both are tenable positions and yet each seems to contradict the other — in a similar way to how the general relativity of the vast and the quantum mechanics of the tiny break down in each others presence; and yet the infinitely vast and the infinitely tiny can both coexist within the realm of the black hole, a realm which, like photography is just weird.

Critical Reflection

Generally speaking, I feel that the choices made in the display and in the positioning of the work in the gallery space were valid , although framing the images which comprise Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4 and placing them on the wall is a strategy I would consider for different iterations of this work, specifically as a means of further avoiding sculptural comparisons It has been discussed in critiques of the work that one way of possibly avoiding a sculptural reference is by placing the images which don't have dimensional alterations (ie those that are flat) directly on the floor of the vitrines rather then on elevated pedestals. As approximately two-thirds of the work is flat, it would skew the read away from three dimensionality as well as propose an interesting undulating pattern in the vitrines.

The position of labels is also something which revealed itself to be critical — in particular when the title or materials listed are important in decoding your work. In the case of *Encyclopedia of Photography Vols 1-4* I think viewers had an aesthetic experience but that it was not immediately apparent that the items in the vitrines were photographs — and without reference to the title, I think that the implied subject and enquiry of the work was much more opaque. Possible solutions to this would be putting the title in the vitrine itself or mounting it on a small plinth beside the work. In the case of *Black Hole Cluster* I think the extended labels should have been on a support equal in size to the frames used (14" x 11") and positioned within the grid of the hang (or perhaps even framed themselves). This would have the effect of giving the images and the text equal weight within the work, which I think reflects what I was trying to achieve more accurately.

In future iterations of this presentation I would also find a way to secure the legs of each photo display tray to the bottom of the vitrine to avoid slippage and repositioning. This was particularly important on the opening night of the exhibition as my work was in a high traffic area. Gallery wax has been suggested as a possible solution to this.

Lighting is another concern, in relation to the avoidance of glare on the vitrine's acrylic tops and also in using directionality to bring out the differences in the surface in the work. For the most part this seems to bee a question of balance and compromise, although it has been suggested that by putting lights in the vitrines this dilemma could be avoided altogether.

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