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THE FIRST IMPRESSION ON YOUR SKIN



As I am writing this paper, I press the letters on the keyboard. Letters, punctuation marks: all small plastic rectangles arranged in a familiar way in front of me. My hands resting on the laptop's aluminum exterior. It feels colder than the plastic rectangles. I look from time to time at the pixels lighting up on the screen. What are pixels actually; what are they made of? I know the screen contains glass, electricity is needed, and the other elements I would have to look up. I do not know which matter makes up this familiar object. Yet it is in my hands every day.

As you read this, you too are looking at some form of matter. Maybe at a screen just like me, or maybe at this text printed on paper. Paper that once was a tree, black ink that once was coal.

*No it is not easy to write. It is as hard as breaking
rocks. Sparks and splinters fly like shattered steel.*

Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

7	ABSTRACT
9	INTRODUCTION: AN OVERSTRETCHED CANVAS
17	A GOOD MORNING IN THE HOTSEAT
23	WHY MATTER MATTERS
25	THE IMAGES ARE CRUMBLING
30	THE HAND THAT FEEDS
33	FERMENTING FEELINGS
35	THE DOMINANCE OF THE EYE
37	EYE SEES WHAT I SEE – HOW THE FOCUSED GAZE WORKS
38	EYES WITHOUT A FACE
42	NOTHING TO SEE HERE
47	THE BODY IS A CAMERA
49	SEEING EYE TO EYE
53	WE ARE MATTER SWIMMING IN AN OCEAN OF MATTER
57	THE PERIPHERAL GAZE
59	INK AND WORDS
60	SPILLING MY GUTS
63	THE WORLD TOUCHES US
71	LEAVE ROOM FOR DESSERT/AFTERTHOUGHT
75	THANK YOU
76	REFERENCES

ABSTRACT

I set out this research paper with the intention of better understanding the agency of matter. At the level of matter we are all equal: everyone and everything consists of matter. As an artist, I work with the intention to contribute to knowledge creation. As an ecofeminist, I worry about our extractive relation with matter.

I wanted to research how content comes out of the material not just through it. How as an artist one can cooperate with the embodied knowledge of matter, creating work with matter in its deepest sense. Specifically in image-making, I sought to overcome (or circumvent) the objectifying gaze of the lens.

Later on in this research I repealed making a distinction between the knowledge of the artist and the embodied knowledge of matter. It is precisely this way of looking at reality – separating human from matter – that is so deeply instilled in us and that hampers our understanding of ecology. What this research mostly brought me was a renewed understanding of how we look (quite essential for a visual artist). And rather than falling into an aversion of sight as being too “one-dimensional” and dominant compared to our other senses, I discovered

our vision still has largely untapped, forgotten or perhaps undervalued potentials. These potentials lie within what I would like to coin “the peripheral gaze”. It is at the outskirts and at those distant horizons that I believe great insights lie.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERSTRETCHED CANVAS

There is a certain roughness that contrasts with the delicate teaware. I imagine how his worn hands must have felt against the smooth porcelain. Then he picked up a brush and started with large strokes. Why would someone paint a teaware while living in ruins?

The painting takes place in Poland 1946. The allies have won the war, but the country is completely ruined. Poverty and devastation are ever present, so is the trauma of war. My grandfather (image 1), schooled at the Moscow Academy of Arts before the war, has returned from the battlefield in Germany and decides to paint a warm and homey scene: a porcelain teapot and a cup standing on a table covered with a tablecloth (image 2). The painting has warm colors and earthy undertones. His impressionist way of painting evokes a feeling of calmness, the lines are not rigid, and you can see the strokes of the brush. His aim is to capture an everyday scene with a certain ease, not too worried about accuracies of depiction. But what perhaps always intrigues me the most about this painting was the way it was made and in what circumstances.

My grandfather used to make his own canvases- even when materials were hard to find. The canvas is stapled roughly along the edges of the frame, with the material slightly unfolding in between each nail. At the upper right corner, the canvas material is not long enough to fully cover the edge. He had to make it work and tried to stretch the canvas to its fullest potential. I wonder where he got the wood from.



Image 1
My grandfather Lech
Baginski in Łódź 1946.



Image 2
Untitled painting, by
Lech Baginski, Łódź
1946.

I know paint was hard to find. All these materials complement the story of the scene, of the place where it was made, of the person who worked with them. They have their own content, that they communicate regardless of what my grandfather's intentions were. I wonder whether the origins of the materials played a role in him choosing the scene. He was mainly an impressionist landscape painter.

This was made in a time when resources were scarce and expensive. It was also made in time where import/exports to/from Poland were limited. Most likely the materials are local. Regardless of my grandfather's intentions, the matter of this canvas communicates a certain narrative as well. There is a roughness and austerity that speaks through it.

In this research paper I start with the intention of understanding better the agency of matter. At the level of matter we are all equal: everyone and everything consists of matter. As an artist, I work with the intention to contribute to knowledge creation. As an ecofeminist, I worry about our extractive relation with matter. I want to research how content comes out of the material not just through it. How an artist can cooperate with the embodied knowledge of matter, creating work *with* matter in its deepest sense. In the diagrams below I envision this removal of distinction between form and content as marked by the dark overlap (image 3). This is 'the sweet spot' that I want to tap into and have also been (subconsciously) seeking in my (cameraless) photography experiments in

the past years. I sought to overcome (or circumvent) the objectifying gaze of the lens.

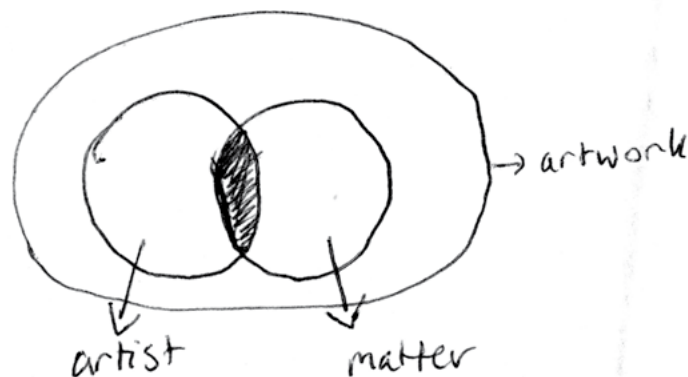


Image 3
How the knowledge of the artist and the embodied knowledge of matter make up the artwork.



*"A very good morning.
Humanity is in the hotseat.*

Today, the World Meteorological Organization and the European Commission's Copernicus Climate Change Service are releasing official data that confirms that July 2023 is set to be the hottest month ever recorded in human history. We don't have to wait for the end of the month to know this. Short of a mini-Ice Age over the next days, July 2023 will shatter records across the board.

[...]

The consequences are clear, and they are tragic: children swept away by monsoon rains; families running from the flames; workers collapsing in scorching heat.

For vast parts of North America, Asia, Africa and Europe – it is a cruel summer.

*For the entire planet, it is a disaster.
And for scientists, it is unequivocal – humans are to blame.*

All this is entirely consistent with predictions and repeated warnings.

*The only surprise is the speed of the change.
Climate change is here. It is terrifying. And it is just the beginning.*

The era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived.

*The air is unbreathable. The heat is unbearable.
And the level of fossil fuel profits and climate inaction is unacceptable."*

These were the UN Secretary General's Opening Remarks at the Press Conference on Climate in July 2023.¹

I wonder whether violent language like this makes the problem bigger. Just as with photographs depicting war suffering, I doubt whether words like this enhance our empathy and make us act. Art critic and poet Charles Baudelaire (FR, 1821-1867) made the claim of desensitization by the horrors in the news in a time when there weren't even images in newspapers.² Philosopher Roland Barthes (FR, 1915-1980) stated a similar opinion in his essay "Shock Photos".³ Art critic Susan Sontag (USA, 1933-2004) examined the moral and emotional impact of images of war, violence, and other forms of human suffering, considering how they can desensitize viewers, if not engaged with critically.⁴

Perhaps a new way of communicating the urgencies of our time is needed, because we in modern Western society need a new system to relate to the world. A system that is less based

1 Guterres, António. "Secretary-General's Opening Remarks at Press Conference on Climate Secretary-General." *United Nations*, United Nations, 27 June 2023, www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-07-27/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-press-conference-climate#:~:text=No%20more%20excuses,.very%20worst%20of%20climate%20change. Accessed 9 Feb. 2024.

2 Baudelaire (1860) quoted in Sontag, Susan. (2019). Regarding the pain of others. Penguin Books. p. 82.

3 Barthes, Roland. (1997). *The Eiffel Tower, and other mythologies*. University of California Press.

4 Sontag, S. (2019).

on extractivism and exploitation. My research explores whether such a new system lies within viewing the world differently, an ontological exploration to describe what we consider as reality. What can be accepted as knowledge about reality? How is knowledge about reality produced? And what role can photography play in relating to the world less exploitatively?

When thinking of viewing the world and what we know of it- naturally images come to mind. And with images we mostly mean photographs, as we are bombarded with photographs every day. Photographs made with lenses. Lenses that imitate the human eye and therefore instill and confirm our humancentric outlook at the world.⁵ At the core of this anthropocentric view is a binary divide between subject and object, human and non-human (Nature), which translates into conventional photographic visual language. The conventions I confront here generate disengaged distances with others and the world. The conventions which claim to see everything – by being attached nowhere.⁶ This detachment is not only present in photography. In fact, it has crept up into most of the scientific and academic discourse.

5 The point of view is determined by the lens, which is positioned as an extension of the human eye—although it could more accurately be described as the eye's constriction, or "tunneling". Zylinska, Joanna. *Nonhuman Photography*. The MIT Press, 2017. p. 31.

6 Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Routledge, New York, 1991, p. 191.

The concept of what “the human” entails is in flux.⁷ To make any difference for our fragile ecosystem, photography has to enable a perspective that bridges divides– that unifies vantage points and that allows for meanings in between. I propose the classical feminist strategy of *reclaiming* as a starting point in my research. With this research I want to explore ways of reclaiming the vision in order to seek alternative ways of seeing and restoring a gap of embodied subjectivity. My concern is not to provide answers but rather to create openings for future visual stories still to be told.

WHY MATTER MATTERS

7 I reference here to the discourse of the more-than human being, in which we acknowledge that even our human gut consists of a micro-ecology on its own. E.g. Seal, Rebecca. “Unlocking the ‘gut Microbiome’ – and Its Massive Significance to Our Health.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 11 July 2021, www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jul/11/unlocking-the-gut-microbiome-and-its-massive-significance-to-our-health. Accessed 9 Feb. 2024.

In 1989, four days after the wall fell, we travelled through Berlin to Warsaw. Our car was packed with presents for a family we had not seen for years. Some of whom I had never met. Or probably I did, but I did not remember as I met them when I was an infant. We stopped twice during our journey. Once to stay overnight in the very last village still on the West-German side. This overnight stay came very soon, nowhere near half-way the journey we were making and made the distance we would have to cover on the second stretch disproportionately long. It seemed my parents were both procrastinating the return to Poland and still facing a deep distrust (and probably trauma). They were delaying to lift the iron curtain; not quite sure what they would find there. Our second stop was literally at the Berlin Wall. I was 8 years old and understood that this wall was something of great importance. Sprayed with graffiti, for large parts already demolished and with lots of people around it. Wall-peckers were chipping away pieces of the wall, and some were selling them right by its side. Capitalism had entered the stage. My dad took two pieces of the wall with him. They remained on

his desk- for the rest of his life. A very tangible piece of matter that shaped so much of our lives.

Human shapes matter and matter shapes human. Today scholars realize that modernity has created a binary split between human/matter, nature/culture, subject/object, social sciences/natural sciences and by doing so avoided the implications of the relationality and interdependence of all of matter.⁸

“New Materialism” is an umbrella term for a broad range of scholars that responds to the need for a more entangled understanding and does so by attending to matter as a key component of events, lives, and worlds. New materialists examine the materiality of humans and nonhumans alike, from rocks to our bodies. They share a number of common beliefs: the human is merely one form of being amongst others; no being necessarily bears more value than another; agency is slippery and distributed; and power slides across various spatiotemporal scales, from planetary and even cosmic terrains to ordinary life.⁹

New materialism has been particularly relevant in addressing the crises instigated or intensified by anthropogenic climate change. Many hold that the understanding of life and matter throughout Western thought has enabled

8 Conty, Arianne Françoise. “The politics of nature: New materialist responses to the anthropocene.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 35, no. 7–8, 11 Oct. 2018, pp. 73–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418802891>.

9 Idem.

humans to catalyze the ecological disasters of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. New materialism rejects fantasies of human mastery and affirms the entanglement of humans with others (be it nonhuman animals, plants, minerals). They emphasize that what we do to the earth is what we do to ourselves. New materialism aids in the expansion of care and concern beyond “the human”.

The crumbled pieces of the wall reminded my father of the struggles he had overcome. They were tokens of mind-matter substances. Just crumbs of something that used to be so powerful. Pieces of concrete with highly symbolic values. Walls have a reoccurring theme of power in history – the Chinese wall/the Iron wall/ Israeli separation barrier/The Trump Wall. Some of these are crumbling, others are kept on being protected as if they were valuable items in themselves. Similarly, humans have a tendency to hold onto fixed ideas even if they no longer serve them. And to bring it back to ecology, if we humans are anthropocening ourselves out of existence, it does beg the question of whom these ideas do serve in the long run.

I see a similarity to how we deal with the idea of photography. Art critic John Berger (UK, 1926–2017) has famously defined photography as “a sight which has been recreated or reproduced”.¹⁰ But whose sight are we talking about here? Mostly the Western patriarchal gaze – regardless

10 Berger, John. *Ways of seeing*. Penguin Classics, 2018.

of the author. Artist Wangechi Mutu (KE, 1972-) reflects on this gaze using collages, films, sculptures and installations. She shows the rhythms and chaos of the world and our often damaging or futile efforts to control it. In her series “Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumour”, Wangechi Mutu uses 19th century medical diagrams as a basis for portraiture (see image 4). The original illustrations, symbolic of colonial power, suggest a wide range of cultural pre-conceptions: from the ‘superiority’ of European ‘knowledge’ to the classification of nature (and consequently race and gender) into genealogical hierarchies. The portraits depict female figures—part human, animal, plant, and machine. I see this as one example of work that reclaims the vision and allows for alternative ways of seeing within the spectrum of photography. Quite literally using crumbs of images to construct a narrative.



Image 4
“Tumours of The
Uterus”, Wangechi
Mutu, 2004.


"Did you eat something that didn't agree with you?" asked Bernard. The Savage nodded. "I ate civilization."

Aldous Huxley, *A Brave New World*

Coming back to my grandfather's painting, one cannot perceive it without noticing the roughness of its material. (image 2 on page 13). In that sense the material narrates a story that is quite different from the depicted scene. The crooked canvas tells you about the hard times in post-war Poland, the depicted scene says something about calmness, being home and perhaps a sense of pride or faded glory? I wonder whether my grandfather chose the scene with this juxtaposition in mind. There may not have been enough food, but there was fancy teaware reminding us that once things were different. That we were not always poor amongst ruins. I have witnessed this kind of stories in many Palestinian homes in West-Bank refugee camps. The large keys hanging on the wall of their make-shift huts, telling you that once they belonged to the rich and powerful living in big houses with big doors that needed large keys to be opened.

Humans create narrations by using matter. Our ancestors created cave depictions with earth pigments and blood, artist Asad Raza (USA, 1974-) uses soil components, writer Virginia Woolf (UK, 1882-1941) wrote on paper with a pencil made of wood and graphite. Apart from the stories and concepts they convey through their work, matter narrates certain stories itself. The same depiction of the teaware on a perfectly neat canvas would narrate a different story than my grandfather's painting does. The rusty heavy key of the Palestinian family on the wall made of metal sheeting tells a different story than it would were it polished and hanging from a wall of a brick house. Matter holds narrative. This is a continuous process of which we are sometimes consciously aware. Subconsciously we always receive this information. Sometimes we might even amplify the matter's narration. The way artist Giuseppe Penone (IT, 1947-) constructed a sculpture with and in a living tree is quite a literal example.¹¹ The way the tree grows, changes the artwork. He casts molds every several years of the tree. The artwork continues to live, the molds are registrations of the process. He cannot control how the work will evolve over time. Positioning the tree as giving life to the art work, Giuseppe Penone, references to the origin of the word


11 Penone, Giuseppe. "Trattenere 6, 8, 12 Anni Di Crescita (Continuerà a Crescere Tranne Che in Quel Punto) (To Retain 6, 8, 12 Years of Growth (It Will Continue to Grow Except at That Point))." Giuseppe Penone, giusep-penone.com/en/works/1368-trattenere-6-8-12-anni-di-crescita-continuera-a-crescere-tranne-che-in-quel-punto. Accessed 4 Mar. 2024. Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.



“matter”; an extension from Latin *materia* “woody part of a tree, material, substance,” derivative of mater “mother”.¹² Matter shapes human literally as we are also made of matter and in a continuous flux or respiratory and metabolic exchange.

12 “Matter Definition & Usage Examples.” Dictionary. Com, Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/matter. Accessed 4 Mar. 2024.

FERMENTING FEELINGS




Perhaps one of the most intimate relationships we have with matter is through food and the fluids we consume. We are part of nature and part of a cycle. We consume, transform and excrete matter. And one day our bodies themselves will fully decompose into other forms of matter. Feminist writer and cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis (CA) sets out a similar perspective; how we are bodies of water. She writes; “As bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation. For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves.”¹³ Similarly, some of the matter (nutrients) of our food remains in our body, other micro-entities exit. So we are part of all that is around us and in a constant flow of exchanges- whether through internalizing through our mouth, our ears, our noses, our eyes, or other parts of our skin. The fact that our consumption of images influences our wellbeing has been widely researched.¹⁴

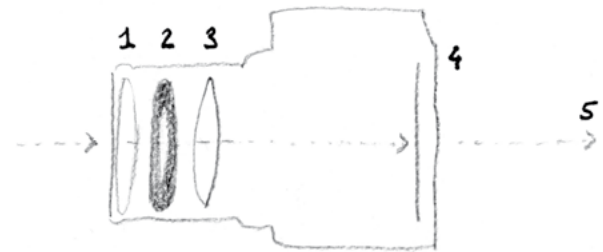
13 Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. p. 2.

As matter is not separable and not fixed, is there a way of photographing that can show the interrelatedness? Taking into account that whichever photographic method is chosen, it too consists of matter of some type. The medium is the message¹⁵— and its matter is part of that same message.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE EYE

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- 14 See e.g. Bij de Vaate, Nadia A.J.D., et al. "The impact of seeing and posting photos on mental health and body satisfaction: A panel study among Dutch and Japanese adolescents." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 148, Nov. 2023, pp. 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107906>.
- 15 McLuhan, Marshall. "Vol. 1 (2008): Marshall McLuhan's 'Medium Is the Message': Information Literacy in a Multimedia Age." *MediaTropes*, 9 Mar. 2008, mediatropes.com/index.php/Mediatropes/issue/view/174. Accessed 3 Mar. 2024.

EYE SEES WHAT I SEE
— HOW THE FOCUSED GAZE WORKS



1. First, light passes through the cornea (the clear front layer of the eye). The cornea is shaped like a dome and bends light to help the eye focus.
2. Some of this light enters the eye through an opening called the pupil. The iris (the colored part of the eye) controls how much light the pupil lets in.
3. Next, light passes through the lens (a clear inner part of the eye). The lens works together with the cornea to focus light correctly on the retina.
4. When light hits the retina (a light-sensitive layer of tissue at the back of the eye), special cells called photoreceptors turn the light into electrical signals.
5. These electrical signals travel from the retina through the optic nerve to the brain. Then the brain turns the signals into the images you see.

Image 5
The camera dissected.

*Eyes without a face
Got no human grace*

Billy Idol

The image of a starving polar bear on iceless land made quite a stir when National Geographic published the item in December 2017.¹⁶ The horror of seeing another being dying in such a violent way was answered by tone-policing about the accuracies of the article. It caused the National Geographic to make the following statement: “National Geographic went too far in drawing a definitive connection between climate change and a particular starving polar bear in the opening caption of our December 2017 video about the animal. We said, “This is what climate change looks like.” While science has established that there is a strong connection between melting sea ice and polar bears dying off, there is no way to know for certain why this bear was on the verge of death.”¹⁷ I guess the

16 Gibbens, Sarah. “Heart-Wrenching Video Shows Starving Polar Bear on Iceless Land.” *Science*, 7 Dec. 2017, www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/polar-bear-starving-arctic-sea-ice-melt-climate-change-spd. Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.

polar bear had not been interviewed to question what brought him into this state.¹⁸ An “updated” version of the story appeared in the August 2018 issue of National Geographic magazine. In the article titled “Starving-Polar-Bear Photographer Recalls What Went Wrong” the photographer is quoted: “Perhaps we made a mistake not telling the full story—that we were looking for a picture that foretold the future.”¹⁹ I wonder whether conventional photography can tell the full story.

I am not questioning whether journalism should be based on facts. But some things cannot be made factual. And that is where I exactly see the role of art; to help us imagine and explore things that science (and journalism) are often not yet able to communicate. Images like that of the polar bear should make us shudder would it not be for our complicity. Yet, suppose that we are looking at it the wrong way. Suppose it is not a problem of climate change as a “hyper object” that is difficult for us humans to relate to²⁰, but rather a matter of matter. Not using the tools, materials and mediums

17 Mittermeier, Cristina. “Starving-Polar-Bear Photographer Recalls What Went Wrong.” Magazine, Aug. 2018, www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/explore-through-the-lens-starving-polar-bear-photo. Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.

18 For more on animal communication see; Meijer, Eva, and Laura Watkinson. *Animal Languages: The Secret Conversations of the Living World*. John Murray, 2020.

19 Mittermeier, C. (2021).

20 Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

in a way that helps us understand our reality and our place in ecology. Always interrelated, always in flux.

Our everyday lives are filled with a mind-boggling number of images. The philosophers Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Sartre have criticized that the culture of modernity prioritizes sight with negative consequences.²¹

Sartre was especially outspoken about the negatives of vision to the point of oclurphobia. He has described 'the objectifying look of the other, and the "medusa glance" [which] "petrifies" everything that it comes in contact with'. Sight dominance is ever more present now that we can consume images of spaces from all over the world almost simultaneously. These images construct a flattened reality. We are all just one click away from photographs of a war or a dream holiday destination.

Not only time and space are compressed; most of the images we consume are on flat smooth surfaces.²² Surfaces that often have no relation with (or can even contradict) the very thing depicted. And conventional images visualize the world by focusing on certain fragments – assuming that what we see is both coherent and equivalent to reality (image 6).²³ This altogether instills a binary divide between subject and object, human and non-human (Nature).

21 Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Eyes of the Skin*. Wiley, 2007, p. 21.

22 Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *How to See the World*. Pelican, 2015.

23 Idem.

The conventions I am confronting here generate disengaged distances with others and the world.²⁴

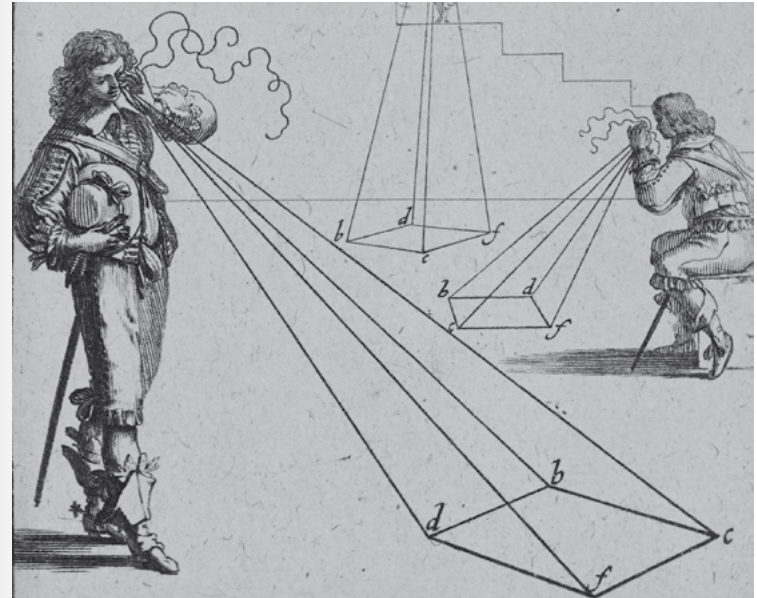


Image 6
The focused gaze in a neat diagram. Abraham Bosse: "Perspective" [detail] (1648).

24 Haraway, D. (1991). p 191.

It seems that if matter is placed upright in a straight sturdy structure (e.g. a wall or a pillar), it has a lot more perceived power than when it holds the shape it usually does in nature: without right angles, crumbled or fluid, and ever-changing. There is a whole school of phallic architecture dating since ancient Babylon to current times (e.g. skyscrapers). The same goes for fixed matter; carve something in a stone and it will most likely outlive you. Inevitably over time all matter changes. Wood rots, stones crumble, images decay or simply vanish in a fire. Yet within the lifetime of a human being certain changes of matter are difficult to perceive. These changes operate more on a deep-time scale of time and therefore we sometimes forget of their existence. Perception of reality is directly linked to the perceiver.²⁵

Photography also holds a sturdy reputation, used in journalism and science. Photographs, also called “mirrors with a memory”, sometimes seem to float between the actual and the

25 Shevchenko, Olga. “‘The Mirror with a Memory’ Placing Photography in Memory Studies.” *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 282–283.

virtual.²⁶ Suggesting that photographs could make memories last forever and that photographs are some reflection of “truth” (what actually happened). Yet all photographs obviously also consist of matter. And in fact, photography’s materiality is linked to capitalism, mass-consumption and pollution.²⁷ Its past is additionally linked to factory farming.²⁸ Those Kodak moments are imprinted on animal remains and have left highly polluted areas behind in the world.²⁹ Photography’s digital form relies on electronics and platforms that are equally problematic.³⁰ Nothing digital exists without the physical. Data server centers are actual buildings in need of cooling water and electricity, occupying land that holds no room for other biodiversity any longer. It is as physical as the underpaid data labelers in Kenya or India training AI and the e-waste accumulating in landfills.³¹

26 Barthes, R. (1997). p 8.

27 Povinelli, Elizabeth A. “Fires, fogs, Winds.” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 32, no. 4, 18 Nov. 2017, pp. 504–513, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.03>.

28 Idem.

29 Formwalt, Zachary. “An Industry and Its Irreplaceable Medium.” *Zachary Formwalt*, 2022, www.zacharyformwalt.com/An_Industry_and_Its_Irreplaceable_Medium.htm. Accessed 25 Feb. 2024.

30 E.g. Carruth, Allison. “The Digital Cloud and the Micropolitics of Energy.” *Public Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 339–364, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2392093>.

31 Marsh, Sarah. “Half a Billion Cheap Electrical Items Go to UK Landfills in a Year, Research Finds.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 Oct. 2023, www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/12/half-a-billion-cheap-electrical-items-go-to-uk-landfills-in-a-year-research-finds.

Natural materials that are handled by hand – paper, stone, metal and wood – allow our vision to penetrate their surfaces and enable us to become convinced of the actuality of matter. These materials show their age and history, as well as the story of their origins and their history of human use.³² All matter exists in the continuum of time; the overstretched canvas of my grandfather's painting shows how it was made and that it is aging. Machine-made materials of today – perfectly even-textured glass, enameled metals, paper and synthetic plastics – tend to present their smooth surfaces to the eye without conveying their material essence or age. The same goes for photography, whether it is the smooth surface of a gelatin print or the oddly smooth image generated by AI. These glossy images show a certain ageless perfection that is unrealistic in this messy world. They do not tell anything about their troubled origins. A smoothness that also visualizes our rigid notions of purity and ethics. An unattainable standard of either good or bad that makes us feel powerless instead.³³ As Astrida Neimanis shows for water – but the case could be made for the rest of our ecology- these smooth imaginaries directly impact how we treat Nature – as something we are not part of (an ultimate purity once tainted, lost forever), how we think it should serve us (limitlessly), and what we

32 Pallasmaa, J. (2007). p. 31.

33 Shotwell, Alexis. "Complexity and Complicity: An Introduction to Constitutive Impurity." *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 1–20.

think we can make it do (anything we need).³⁴ And as scholars Åsberg, Braidotti, Haraway, Jackson, Neimanis and Shotwell all stress in their own ways, a feminist posthumanism is a deeply ethical orientation.³⁵ The kinds of ontologies it advocates – connected, indebted, dispersed, relational – are not only about correcting a phallogocentric understanding of our reality and ourselves, but also about developing imaginaries that allow us to relate differently.³⁶ Images to accompany these new imaginaries could be helpful.

34 Neimanis, A. (2019). p. 20.

35 For a good introduction to the subject see: Åsberg, Cecilia, and Rosi Braidotti. *Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*. Springer, 2019.

36 Neimanis, A. (2019). p. 11.



You don't understand music: you hear it. So hear me with your whole body.

Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life*

As a child I loved rainbows and gas stations. We travelled a lot during my childhood and car parks and gas stations form an essential part of my childhood memories. The smell of gasoline has something addictive to me and I was mesmerized by the colorful metal-like patterns created by the oil films on the road. “Slick images” is what artist and researcher Susan Schuppli (CA) calls images of anthropogenic disasters such as oils spills. “Slick” because the images are photogenic, yet all that glitters is not gold. Slick because these images are no longer capable of being contained within the picture planes of conventional camera systems but rather are captured through a variety of other tools (e.g. satellites, underwater cameras, the image-making characteristics of oil itself). According to Schuppli slick images are not representations of an oil spill but “oily images”. “Oily images that not only grasp our attention but grasp at us — that claim us as part of them”.³⁷

Our experience of the world is based on information obtained through five senses. Though our current culture is visually dominant, we obtain information in various forms. There have been studies showing even our skin is capable of distinguishing certain colors.³⁸ We store information about the world in our body. In that sense our body is a photographic camera. Recording the outside world, making us witness, registering memories.

He made photos of our first trip together, to Lithuania. These were photographs composed with love. Carefully selected moments by a sensitive eye. A roll of film is not endless nor cheap for two students. But towards the end of our journey, in a coastal town in the north, he realized there was no film in the camera. The photographs existed in our minds, in our bodies.

He offered me his window seat on the train. I was heading to a photography exhibition in Paris. He was heading to the south of France to visit a friend. He asked me if I could help him

37 Schuppli, Susan. "Slick Images: The Photogenic Surface of Disaster." Research Online, Goldsmiths, University of London, 29 Apr. 2020, research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/17470/1/Slick%20Images-Schuppli.pdf. Accessed 10 February 2024.

38 Pallasmaa, J. (2007). p. 10.

find the right connecting train. I watched him take his cane in his right hand and then felt his other hand on my right shoulder. We walked swiftly through the crowds, his hand gently pushing against my shoulder. I asked him if we could take the stairs to a platform below, he said it wasn't a problem; he would know when to take a step down by the lowering of my shoulder. His camera was not broken.

Based on the information it obtains the body produces knowledge. Whether all of these forms of knowledge can be captured within a current existing methodological framework is questionable. Humans (like everything else) always partly constitute and are partly constituted by that which they experience.³⁹ We are an inseparable part of what we know and what we experience.

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (FR, 1908-1961) was a key thinker of both phenomenology and embodiment, and his work represents one of the most thorough philosophical attempts to understand what it means to be embodied in the context of a shared world. Merleau-Ponty rejects the dualisms that usually categorize humanist understandings of embodiment, and instead describes a body that emerges from various exchanges and connections to other

39 Manning, Erin. "Against Method." *The Minor Gesture*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016, pp. 26-44.

bodies, whereby bodies are always intertwined with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, what we can know about things resides neither in theory or in our imaginings; it emerges in the unavoidable overlapping of body and world in a lived experience that is somewhere, sometime, and somehow all at once.⁴⁰

Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment asserts that the body is not an object we possess, but rather an inherent aspect of our being. Our existence is intertwined with our bodies, and we only perceive the world because we live as bodies, perceiving the world as an extension of the ways our bodies exist. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty not only serves as a valuable resource for shaping a post-human comprehension of corporeality but also provides a means to reconnect with the body by tapping into the resources of our bodies and their diverse forms of experiential knowledge. Merleau-Ponty states that "nature outside of us must be unveiled to us by the Nature that we are...We are part of some Nature, and reciprocally, it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us".⁴¹ Because of our human impact on ecology ("Nature"), I propose to listen more carefully- to listen with our whole bodies.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith, Franklin Classics, 2018. pp 198 -203.

⁴¹ Idem.

WE ARE MATTER SWIMMING IN AN OCEAN OF MATTER

Sight is essentially a haptic sense. Even the transparent cornea of our eyes is overlaid by a layer of modified skin.⁴² Our perceiving body registers objects and others. We perceive these objects in space, our skin being the boundary that connects and contains. By touching an object, it does not "stand apart" from the untouched objects, that is why philosopher (AUS, 1955 -) speaks of our bodies "haunting" a space, or why anthropologist Tim Ingold (UK, 1948 -) writes that we swim in "an ocean of matter".⁴³ And humans are not exceptions; we ourselves consist of matter.

When we perceive reality, we are matter experiencing matter. And there are certain frameworks that we take as a given. Astrida Neimanis gives the example of jellyfish floating weightlessly at a depth of 30,000 meters to reflect on

⁴² Idem.

⁴³ Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006. pp. 25-30. and Ingold, Tim. "Materials against materiality." *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 14, no. 1, 4 Apr. 2007, pp. 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1380203807002127>.

gravity, as symbolized by the return to earth at death, in shaping our consciousness.⁴⁴ Had we evolved in the water, floatability would have given rise to an unimaginably different metaphysics. A similar thought exploration is described by Tim Ingold; if we were moles our world would consist of corridors and chambers rather than artifacts and buildings. It would be a world of enclosures whose surfaces surround the environment instead of detached objects whose surfaces are surrounded by it.⁴⁵

The ecological psychologist James Gibson (US, 1904 - 1979) explains about our perception of reality in his “theory of affordances”. In his view, the environment consists of surfaces that separate substances from the medium. The composition and layout of surfaces constitute what they afford. To perceive them is to perceive what they afford and these *affordances* are relative to the perceiver.⁴⁶ A surface of support means something different to a human being than to a water bug. The relativity of *affordances* illustrates how close and personal our relation with our environment is. This close relation creates meaning and emphasizes embodied knowledge, relative to the environment. Observing this, is perceiving with our whole bodies.

44 Neimanis, A. (2019). p. 57.

45 Neimanis, A. (2019) and Ingold, T. (2007).

46 Gibson, James. “The Theory of Affordances.” Brown University, 2017, cs.brown.edu/courses/csl37/readings/Gibson-AFF.pdf.

Furthermore, we naturally orient toward certain objects. This translates into the stories we tell, the perspective we take. We move toward and away from objects, depending on how we are emotionally and physically moved by them. The objects that we direct our attention to together shape a narrative about our life. Other objects, and spaces, are pushed to the background of our attention; they remain in our peripheral vision.⁴⁷ Yet this peripheral vision is essential to our lived experiences as well.⁴⁸ It places us in the world, helping us navigate our reality. Together the focused and peripheral visions form our sight, one of our senses. Our bodies are our point of perspective.

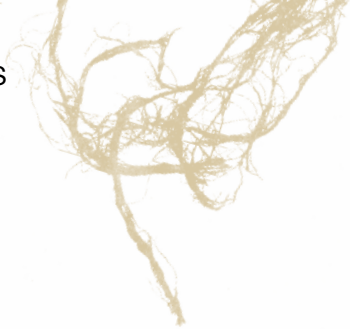
When we perceive reality and try to make sense of it we are inevitably making sense of ourselves as well. That is why the Cartesian subject-object division is problematic and not realistic. It reinforces existing power structures and our extractive tendencies. The same structures and tendencies that brought us in the current ecological crisis. To view the world through a subject-object division was seen as the objective rational way- yet with our current knowledge it is rather *irrational*.

47 Ahmed, S. (2006). pp. 26–29.

48 Pallasmaa, J. (2017). pp. 10–11.



"he see the words and not the ink" writes Tim Ingold.



There are foreign objects inside my body. The surgeon says they can never be removed or else I risk my knee falling apart again. Metal plates and screws by now absorbed by bone material. Basically, part of my bones. Are these objects still 'foreign'? Meanwhile, my body is growing something 'foreign'. Something potentially dangerous that needs to be removed. My body's tissue – yet it needs to be taken out.

My Nikon camera remains untouched lately. The focused gaze of the lens feels too limiting to show what our body perceives. We are currently so used to this “centered” way of seeing, it both describes and conditions our perception. In our perception of space, the peripheral and unfocused vision play as much of a role as our focused gaze. A focused gaze confronts us with the world, a peripheral vision enfolds us in the world.⁴⁹

All the senses including vision are extension of the tactile sense, the senses derive from touching- even the transparent cornea of our

49 Pallasmaa, J. (2017). pp. 10-11.

eyes has a layer of skin tissue. When we make something out of matter – for instance when you draw an apple- the apple is simultaneously in your hand and inside your head; the imagined and projected physical image is modeled by your body.⁵⁰ So again, I ask; how does the concept of 'foreign' apply?

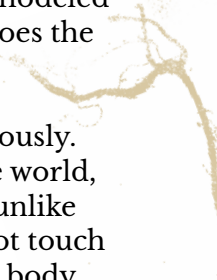
Our bodies move and change continuously. Through touch we contact the outside world, the space and entities around us. But unlike looking without being seen, you cannot touch without being touched. In a sense, the body can be defined as 'something touching which is touched'.⁵¹ The touch both connects and differentiates us from the other. What is inside, what is outside? What is 'foreign'?

Asli Hatipoglu is an artist that works with fermentation processes. In one of her works, she sets up a microphone close to a large container of brewing kombucha. As a visitor you can talk/sing through the microphone. In any case, your mere presence will affect the fermentation process of the kombucha. What is inside/what is outside? What is 'foreign'?

The kombucha brewing in the exhibition is not stable. Each day its fermentation continues. Unstable media are playful as they transfer their consumers to another realm or space or

50 Gibson, J. (2017).

51 Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Taylor and Francis, 2014. p. 155.



mentality than that of mortality, of ordinary life.⁵² They entail transient, time-based, once-only processes. They seek to touch. To question what is inside/what is outside? What is 'foreign'? Stable media reinforce a subject-object division; it is clear what is inside and what is outside. Orderly and useful for some narratives, yet not for narratives that are created and happen while they are told. A reenacted touch is never the same.

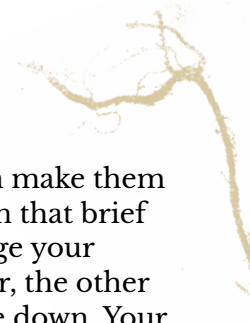
By making consumers of unstable media part of the process, art can be viewed as "a way" and not as an object. And in this aspect lies art's knowledge-creation power.⁵³ Touch opens to other ways of thinking. It does not assure resolution; it opens new questions. New questions can lead to new understandings of our reality.

In touching oneself, one is simultaneously both subject and object of touch, a template for experiencing oneself as subject and object of intentions, feelings, and motivations, or intersubjectivity.

So at this point I am rethinking why make a distinction between the knowledge of the artist and the embodied knowledge of matter as I did in the introduction on I6 (image 3)? What is inside, what is outside? What is 'foreign'?

52 Mulder, Arjen. "Unstable Media." V2_ Lab for the Unstable Media, 22 Mar. 2023, v2.nl/articles/unstable-media. Accessed 10 January 2024.

53 Manning, E. (2016). pp. 26–44.



"You slightly squint your eyes, then make them big! Trying not to focus just yet.... In that brief moment of non-focus you can judge your work and see how others see it.... Or, the other option is to look at the work upside down. Your grandfather did that a lot." my mom said while looking at my sketches in a very funny way. I immediately thought of an upside-down tea set. I told her to stop, worried she might damage her seventy-two-year-old sight. As funny as it looked, without knowing my mom was referring to what I would like to coin "the peripheral gaze".

"*Superior resolution for breathtaking detail*" is how Phase One cameras are advertised. These are the world's most expensive digital cameras and the first with 151-megapixels. Sharpness is a much-appreciated characteristic in the field of conventional photography. Sharpness of the perspectival gaze. Yet I propose to explore whether all that sharpness of image creates sharpness of thought. Perhaps it makes us myopic, too preoccupied with our own human-centric worlds. Like Narcissus, staring at our own reflection in the water or the selfie on our

screen. Breathtaking details indeed – all the pollution our behavior is extruding is leaving us breathless.

This “peripheral gaze” is not new and has been explored in art before. Joseph Turner's paintings carry forward the Baroque era's departure from the picture frame and a fixed vantage point. The Impressionists discard boundaries, balanced framing, and perspectival depth, while Paul Cézanne aims to make “visible how the world touches us”.⁵⁴ Cubists abandon a single focal point, revive peripheral vision, and enhance haptic experience. Abstract painters reject illusory depth to emphasize the painting itself as an iconic artifact and autonomous reality. Land artists blend the work's reality with that of the lived world. And many more examples can be listed here. These artists progress from modernity by freeing the eye from Cartesian perspective.

The same progressions can take place for photography. Given the fact that photographs constitute the main visuals we consume each day, the impact of changing how we view (and thus depict) the world can be huge. It entails a fundamentally different approach to what currently is considered to make up “a good photograph”.⁵⁵ Below I give some suggestions

⁵⁴ Pallasmaa, J. (2017). p. 35.

⁵⁵ E.g. Irving, Robert. “The Basic Components of a Good Photograph.” British Academy of Photography, 1 Mar. 2018, www.baph.co.uk/blog/the-basic-components-of-a-good-photograph. Accessed 29 February 2024.

on what the “peripheral gaze” can mean in photography.

FROM REPRESENTATIONALISM TO PERFORMATIVITY

Traditionally, photography is deeply connected to the concept of representationalism, as it involves capturing and presenting visual representations of the world. However, as many visual theorists have explained before, the degree of objectivity or subjectivity in the representation can vary based on factors such as the photographer's choices, post-processing techniques, and cultural context.

The peripheral gaze takes a step away from representationalism (the separation between a representation and the “thing” to be represented). As representationalism holds matter at an artificial distance making it passive, fixed, and mute, in need of an external system like culture or history to complete and complement it.⁵⁶ We are always engaged in a relationship with the world. Our interactions (or better said “intra-actions”) with matter consist of mutually performative relationships between humans and other matter. Seeing is not believing but something we do: a kind of performance.⁵⁷ Performativity pertains to the notion that phenomena are co-constituted (or co-performed) by human and non-human actors alike. We are not outside observers, nor the only inten-

⁵⁶ Conty, A. (2018).

⁵⁷ Mirzoeff, N. (2015). p. 15.

tional agents in the world, but we are always interactively responsible for co-creating what is. Acknowledging performativity, rather than strict representationalism, means to allow matter as an active participant in the world's becoming, causing boundaries to be continuously reworked.⁵⁸ One way of seeking performativity in photography can be through letting go of the control of the human photographer. To create circumstances where materials can co-perform, rather than conditions in which they are used. Looking with a peripheral gaze means seeing which materials are co-performing the photograph. As an example- to put it bluntly, from a peripheral-gaze viewpoint gelatin silver prints of beautiful nature have a contradiction: dead pig or cow is in the image as well as polluting chemicals.

OUR BODY IS OUR CAMERA

The peripheral gaze stems from allowing photography to be a process rather than an outcome or product. Photographs themselves are part of a way to 'knowledge-creation' and not objects. Photography is a set of relations both outside and inside our body. These relations happen both on a conscious and subconscious level. It is partly visual, but can entail other forms (e.g. text, performance, moving image, unstable media). It entails seeing with our whole body. It includes a combination of our focused and our peripheral visions.

58 Skågeby, Jörgen. "The Performative Gift: A Feminist Materialist Conceptual Model." *Communication +1*, 2013.

Thus, also how and where photographs are presented influences how they are perceived by the peripheral gaze. Looking with a peripheral gaze at an exhibition on "ecological art" sponsored by a big automobile brand evokes certain questions.⁵⁹ How do we find unity in a term like "ecology" if it houses BMW? Here BMW enters our emotional and aesthetic world of experience through the door of "ecology". This creates tension- how to position this presence that like everything else is interconnected? It would be easy to criticize BMW for hypocrisy, yet in the current state of affairs we are all implicated, interconnected.

WITHOUT FRICTION NO SHINE

The peripheral gaze aims not to follow the subject-object divide and it respects our interrelatedness with matter in and around us. When we distinguish "objects", we can only describe these objects by making intentional divisions in the world through tools (e.g. conventional photo cameras). These divisions make these objects as what they are.⁶⁰ To give an example, a microscope enables us to see molecules. It is with the help of a tool such as a microscope that we can divide the world around us in molecules.

59 Girst, Thomas. "BMW Art & Culture Will Exhibit 'the Pigment Change' by Almudena Romero, Tenth Winner of the BMW Residency, at Paris Photo Fair." *BMW Group PressClub*, 2012, www.press.bmwgroup.com/global/article/detail/T0355912EN/bmw-art-culture-will-exhibit-the-pigment-change-by-almudena-romo-tenth-winner-of-the-bmw-residency-at-paris-photo-fair?language=en. Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.

60 Skågeby, J. (2013).

This both shapes the world we live in and how we depict it.

Sontag explored how photographs can influence the way we understand and interpret events, sometimes distancing us from the actual experience by presenting a mediated version of reality.⁶¹ In general, media do not mediate as much as they separate.⁶² A peripheral gaze is conscious of these dynamics at play and how the tools we use shape what we depict. Artist Gabor Osz incorporated a peripheral gaze when he turned bunkers into camera obscuras.

In line with glitch feminism, the peripheral gaze views errors (or glitches) as much needed corrections to a structured system of patriarchy and extractivism.⁶³ Errors can be stains, unsharpness, or unconventional compositions. Leaving room for ambiguity, makes us guess the meanings and removes us from an all-knowing position in which we master all that we see.

THE PERIPHERAL GAZE — CONCLUSIONS

Most of all the peripheral gaze means letting go of viewing photography as a form of freezing time or as world making. It entails fundamen-

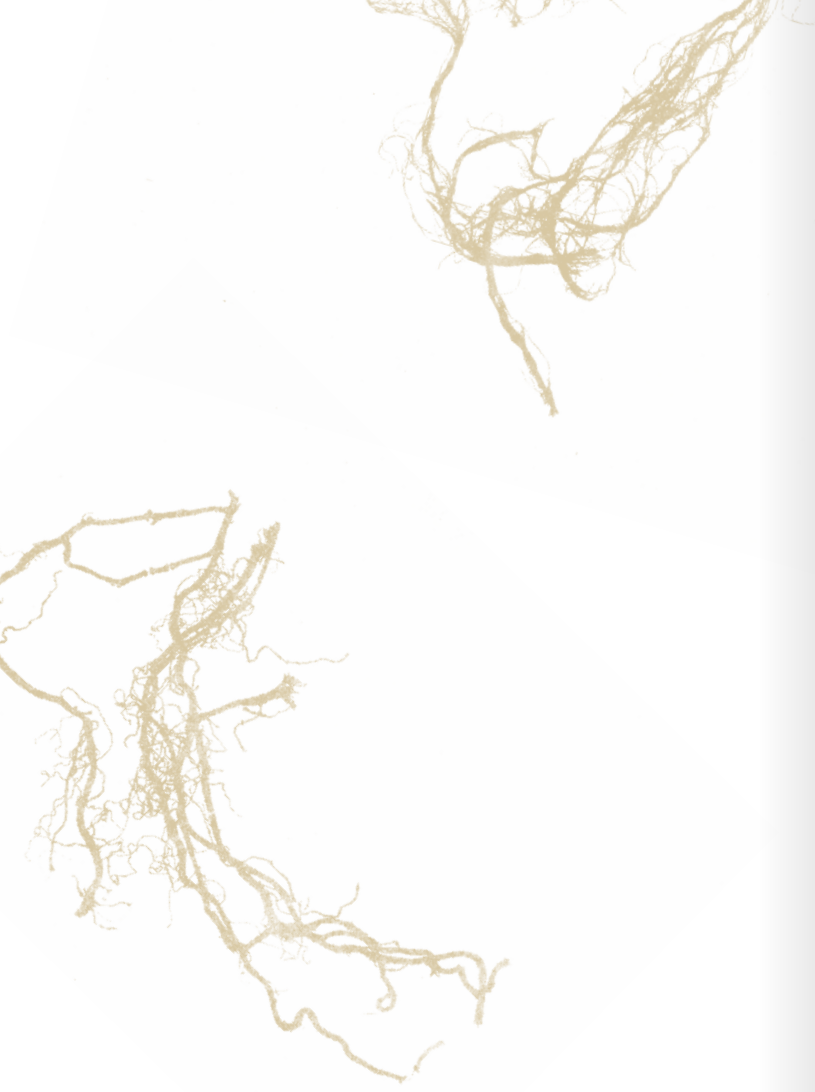
tally rejecting the idea of “grasping” reality. This grasping (whether of the past/death or of the current world) is an anthropocene way of thinking in which the human still remains the center-point that is in control. Thus, the peripheral gaze is both concerned with the materials of which the photo is made, the visual elements in the image itself, the author, the viewer as well as the site of circulation. It is the gaze of interconnected matter.

61 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Penguin, 2019.

62 Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007. p. 132.

63 Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso, 2020.





The pieces of the Berlin wall told a very different story than when it was a one-piece wall. In this research I explore how it is possible to reclaim photography. To go to its essence and let its elements contribute to knowledge creation. Concepts like this do not solve the problems we face today, but they open possibilities for other ways of being in this world.

This paper aims to open discussion on what photography can be.

To let it be more ambiguous,⁶⁴ making us guess its meanings,

like we are still guessing what we know about reality.

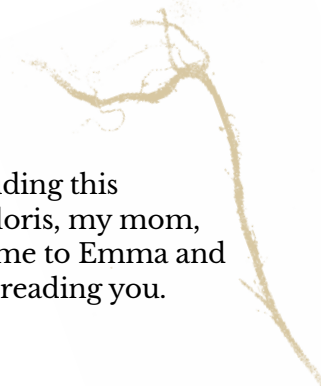
To employ a peripheral gaze that is both focused yet also embodied.

And most of all, to let it touch us,
as we touch it.

⁶⁴ And more ambitious.



THANK YOU



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anna andrejew

THE FIRST IMPRESSION ON YOUR SKIN

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Our vision has untapped, forgotten or perhaps undervalued potentials. These potentials lie within what I would like to coin "the peripheral gaze". It is at the outskirts and at those distant horizons that I believe great insights lie. It is the gaze of interconnected matter. At the level of matter we are all equal: everyone and everything consists of matter. Looking with a "peripheral gaze" means seeing which materials are co-performing the image and seeing the ecological interconnections.

